

TALES FROM THE
NEW EARTH

A. F. Lima

This is a work of fiction. Certain long-standing institutions and places are mentioned, but the characters involved are wholly imaginary. With the exception of public figures, any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental.

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For Naomi.

"keep [your] eyes, not on the things seen, but on the things unseen. For the things seen are temporary, but the things unseen are everlasting." — 2 Corinthians. 4:18.

"By focusing on things unseen, I can experience in my mind what perfect life will feel like in paradise. It reminds me that my present circumstances are temporary and that my future is bright and everlasting." — Rachel Adams

The stories published here are just fantasies, works of fiction, the fruit of our imagination. No matter how hard we try, the New World to come will always be much better than we can imagine. I hope you enjoy fantasizing about this Fantastic New World with us.

A. F. Lima

PART ONE

Wake Up

"Hey, Sleepyhead. Wake up," said a familiar voice out of a still blurry unrecognizable face.

"Marcel, is that you?" Levi asked.

"Yes, it's me, my friend. How are you feeling?"

"A little bit lightheaded. Are we in a hospital?" he rubbed his eyes while still trying to see through the blur.

"Not exactly. Can you sit up?"

"What do you mean, not exactly? How long have I been out?"

The blur was slowly going away. The room was not like any other hospital room Levi had seen before. It felt more like a single-bed studio apartment from the future. The objects and furniture could easily have come out of a sci-fi movie set. Indirect lighting coming from inside the walls enhanced the

room's modern and futuristic ambiance. Everything was white. The walls, the little sofa by the bed, the small table with four chairs across the room, the flower vase, the water bottle on the table – all white. Marcel approached, holding a cup of water, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"For quite a long, long time, my friend. Here, drink some water," Marcel said.

Levi sat up, and his vision cleared completely. Feeling lost, he still tried to figure out where he was. He looked at himself, which made him even more confused. He was dressed in some hospital clothing for patients. He might have been in a coma for a long time, but he certainly didn't feel like he was waking up from a vegetative state. His eyes focused on Marcel now. He looked different.

"What did you do to your face? Did you get Botox or something?" Levi asked.

"Come on! Put this on, and let's eat something. You must be hungry." Marcel said, handing Levi a pair of sneakers, jeans, and a NASA t-shirt.

"Seriously?" Levi said, holding the t-shirt.

"What?" Marcel shrugged.

Levi went to the bathroom to get changed. "What!" Levi shouted in shock at what he saw reflected in the mirror above the sink.

"What's the matter?" Marcel smiled, having a pretty good idea about what the matter was.

"What happened to me? Look at my face!" Levi said, not believing what his eyes were seeing. The wrinkles on his face were gone, just like all the other imperfections that used to be there. "I look at least twenty years younger. How did that happen?" he asked, realizing that his body had also changed. He wasn't that sedentary middle-aged guy anymore. He

looked fine and fit.

"Let's go, Levi. A lot more has changed while you were asleep," Marcel said while leaving the room.

"What? Wait? What! How long have I been asleep exactly?" Levi asked, leaving the bathroom and running after Marcel into the corridors. "Please, don't tell me that we were subjects in some kind of cryogenic project...oh, wow!" Levi paused, with an upward tilt of the chin, astonished by the view from the hall. "Look at this place. Seriously, man! Where are we?"

"Come on. I want you to see for yourself," Marcel said while getting into the glass elevator. The trip going up revealed a massive breathtaking underground structure. The elevator then emerged from the ground and opened its glass doors.

"Here we are, my friend. Welcome to the Future."

They got out of the elevator into a vast two-story lobby with glitzy chandeliers, polished marble floors, and an impressive glass facade, which seemed to be the reception area of this place still unknown to Levi. Coming out of the elevator, looking through the glass facade, he could see the city outside. He walked past the receptionists behind this long, uniquely shaped tree trunk reception desk, where people lined up on what seemed to be a particularly busy day. Levi was dazzled by what his eyes saw on the other side of the glass wall. The image was familiar to him but not quite like he remembered it. "Is that the Brooklyn Bridge? Are we in New York?" Levi asked.

"New York indeed," Marcel replied. "Welcome home, my friend. Come on. We don't want to be late for dinner. We have some special people expecting us. They can't wait any longer

to see you again."

They stepped outside the building. Levi stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, looked in all directions with his mouth wide in awe. Everything was very green. There were trees and all sorts of plants everywhere you looked. Trees were climbing up, coming out of, standing inside, or crossing through buildings. The scene made you feel like New York had been moved inside a forest. You could even spot what used to be considered wild animals, walking or flying around, jumping between trees, as if that environment was home to them just as much as it was to us.

In contrast, there were no more cars, motorcycles, trams, buses, or any other 21st century ways of transportation. The usual urban noise, with the sounds of car horns, people always in a hurry, the subway train rolling underneath one's feet, was gone. No more airplanes were flying over, no more idling diesel trucks, city buses along with clanking jackhammers, and ambulance sirens, no more smell of burning fuel, decomposing garbage, or any of the other stink odors typical to the big cities. All that had given way to sounds of birds singing, water babbling down a stream, leaves rustling in the wind, and occasionally you would hear some roars, quacks, trumpets, and other sounds from friendly creatures living close by. The air was so clean and pure that you could almost taste its freshness. Smiling people walked by, moving along at a pace that indicated no hurry at all.

Few buildings were sky-high. Like the underground building where Levi woke up, most office buildings seemed to have grown deep down instead of up high. That made the vision of the Brooklyn Bridge emerging from a green ocean of trees, with no tall buildings competing for attention, even more awe-inspiring. But the famous historic bridge was no

longer a highway for fossil-fueled vehicles. The asphalt was replaced by what looked like tubes. And, instead of cars, glass pods flew through them.

"Levi! Wake up! Right here," Marcel yelled from a nearby transport station a couple of meters away from where Levi was standing still, barely breathing from amazement.

"This can't be New York, man! What happened?" Levi said.

"New York is a very different place now. Most buildings of the Old World were partially or completely destroyed in the Final War. The Brooklyn Bridge is one of the few monuments around that survived. Here comes the next pod. Let's get this one," Marcel said.

"Old World? Final War?" Levi asked.

"Sorry. Long story," Marcel said, getting into the pod after its white translucent doors slid open in front of them. "No worries. I am going to tell you all about it later."

"Later? How about now?" Levi said before he stopped and exclaimed. "No! Is this?" He stepped inside the pod, impressed by its high-tech futuristic look. "Is this a Hyperloop?"

"Yup," Marcel replied. The Hyperloop was one of the main transportation systems used in the New Earth. It consisted of a system of tubes through which a pod could travel free of air resistance or friction. It worked with electromagnetic propulsion, using principles of aerodynamics and electromagnetism. The entire system functioned as a generator, producing and storing environmentally sustainable electric energy. "That's the one," Marcel continued. "You can travel the whole world on it. Mostly underground, but when traveling on the surface, the views can be breathtaking," he said. Levi was speechless, not believing that he was about to travel in an actual, fully

operational, Hyperloop.

The pod floated through the city. Levi sat down, looking through the window with his mouth still open. The colossal top and side windows allowed him to scan the outside. He was pointing and inquiring about anything and everything his eyes could see. Levi was overwhelmed and behaved like a little child in a toy store while moving through a somewhat different future highway. He was born in that city. He used to know it like the back of his hand. But now, so much had changed. He got excited in the rare moments when he could recognize a place, an old building, or a street that brought him straight back to his childhood. Marcel tried to answer each one of Levi's questions with as many technical details as possible to please the curious scientific mind of his best friend.

"I missed you, man!" Marcel said, sharing Levi's excitement for a moment.

"Really? I thought you would enjoy not having to cope with me any longer. Freedom, at last, no?" Levi replied, clearly joking.

"Of course not. I have waited a long time for this day."

"When did you become so sentimental?"

"I just missed my buddy. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Oh well, that depends. Are you going to kiss me now? I'm not much of a kisser or a hugger, for that matter, and you know it."

"Ha-ha. Funny. You're right. I should have enjoyed your absence while I could," Marcel said, slapping Levi affectionately on the back of his head.

Both laughed, picking at each other just like the old days, making others in the pod look and smile at them. The lady on

the other side of the pod showed interest.

"You guys seem to be having fun," she said with a smile.

"My friend here was just resurrected today!" Marcel proclaimed.

"Oh, wow! Welcome back. Congratulations," everyone in the pod said, standing up and coming to greet Levi. Surrounded by them, he felt like a celebrity, getting all that attention and love from those total strangers.

"Thank you, thank you. You are all very kind. Thank you," Levi said while receiving congratulatory hugs and pats on the back. "Thank you. Happy to be here. Excuse us for a moment, please." He walked away from the people, pushing Marcel to the side. He looked at him and asked, whispering, "What is happening? Do you know these people?"

"Not personally. No. Why?"

"Wasn't that a little bit odd?"

"They understand what it means to be resurrected. They are happy for you."

"What do you mean I was 'resurrected'? Do you mean, like from a coma or something?"

"Not exactly."

"So, how exactly?"

"Well, you'd better sit down," Marcel said.

Yesterday

The bar was called SAX Lounge. It was the hottest place in town. Places like this were very popular in the Old World. The SAX Lounge had a 60-foot-high ceiling reminiscent of an Italian opera house. Two floors bedazzled with everything from nine ornate chandeliers to inlaid medallion tabletops evoking images of Versailles. The staff served food and drinks while performing choreographies, where ballet meets burlesque, meets Cirque de Soleil. A place where all the good-looking people in town came to have a good time. That evening the venue was closed for a private party. But Marcel was a regular, well acquainted with all the staff. His connections helped them to crash the party. It was not the kind of place Levi would go for a drink. No place would fit this category anyway since he barely went out or drank, for that matter. But Marcel felt at home and convinced Levi to try to have fun at least once in his life.

They had been best friends for a while now. They started

working at NASA on the same day. Two rookies, both pretty intimidated by the whole thing, they had many reasons to hit it off and so stuck together from the beginning. Marcel Williams was also from New York; he had graduated in physics from Cornell University and then specialized in astrophysics. Handsome, 6-foot-tall black guy, and reasonably fit for a geeky physicist; Marcel had always been a ladies' man. He never cared much for long and stable relationships. His loyalty was reserved only for science, the New York Yankees, and his buddy, Levi Adams.

The music was loud, the place was packed, and Marcel was beyond drunk. Levi had maybe two or three more than he should, but he was still trying to be the responsible one by not losing it altogether.

"Come on, man! Loosen up," Marcel said, fighting gravity, bouncing in all directions, having a hard time keeping himself steady. "Let's meet some girls."

"Look at yourself. You are too drunk. Nobody wants to meet that," Levi said, with a serious face.

"Oh, yeah? Watch and learn, ma-man." He turned around and hit on the first girl he saw. "Did it hurt?" Marcel shouted at the blonde in red to his right at the bar.

"What?" the girl replied, not understanding the question.

"When you fell from the sky. Did it hurt, my angel?" Marcel mumbled at her with small eyes and a big smile.

"Really?" the girl answered, trying not to laugh.

"Get lost!" demanded a man who was the shape and size of a wardrobe made of muscles. He seemed to have come out of nowhere and pushed Marcel away. "She is with me," he said menacingly.

"What are you pushing me for, monkey? Let the lady choose who she wants to be with."

"*Monkey?*" screamed the angry Nephilim with closed fists moving rapidly towards Marcel's face. Levi pushed Marcel aside before the monster's jab reached him. Brave, maybe, but a stupid move. Now the big guy was coming to get him. And he was not alone. He had brought his gym buddies with him. While Levi was trying to run through the sea of people crowding the place, Marcel was still trying to get up, not an easy task when your world is spinning, and you see everything double. The bodybuilder's gang cornered Levi; it seemed to be the end for him. They exchanged punches, but fortunately, security stepped in before too much damage was done. Levi and Marcel were kicked out of the party. Marcel couldn't stop laughing, but Levi didn't find it funny at all.

Levi was from a humble background, the only child of a family of immigrants. His father's dream was for his son to graduate university, find a good job, have a beautiful wife, and eventually give him many grandchildren. Sadly, his father passed away when Levi was only a little boy. The first tragedy of many to come in his life. Levi left New York to attend the University of Chicago, which he attended on a scholarship as a young man. There he met his wife to be, Anne Castle, who was also graduating in physics. Right after graduation, Levi and Anne moved to Maryland together. They married and lived intensely in love for eight extremely happy years until the next tragedy struck. Anne was five months pregnant when she lost their baby. Shortly after that, Anne was diagnosed with cancer, which eventually killed her a few years later. Another part of Levi died with her that day. Many years had passed since then, but one could still see the pain in his eyes. Only Levi's Mom and his best friend Marcel were sometimes capable of making him smile, but not that night.

"What you did in there was stupid," Levi said, holding his

arm close to his body. His right shoulder hurt, and he was limping. He felt like, once the alcohol and adrenaline levels went down, he would find out that those drinks had cost him much more than a black eye.

"I am so sorry. I didn't mean for our night to end up like this. But, you have to admit, you were a freaking fighter in there, man! Don't you feel alive?"

"I feel pain, you idiot!"

"Come on. Was it really that bad? You have to do crazy stuff sometimes, Levi. Life is too short, and you have to live it to the fullest while you can."

"Exactly! I have better things to do than to hit on girls and pick fights in bars. Give me the keys, you knucklehead. You're not driving."

"Okay, Mom," Marcel replied.

Levi drove Marcel home making sure he got inside. It was still a forty-five-minute drive to his house. He was tired and groggy. He started to think that he should have spent the night at Marcel's, but he was far too angry to stay.

He kept driving. His eyes were getting heavier. His head kept falling. He managed to stop for the traffic light, which seemed pointless since there was not a soul around. The traffic light finally turned green. He started moving slowly when suddenly, strong blinding lights traveled through his left side window, and the deafening noise of screeching tires screamed his head off. A big heavy, flatbed truck appeared in a flash and hit Levi hard. Driving over eighty miles an hour, it crossed the red light, crashed into Levi's car, and carried him for over a hundred yards before it came to a complete stop.

* * *

"Then," Marcel continued, "after you took me home, I started to feel really sick. I had drunk too much, even by my standards. I threw up everything I had had that night and passed out right there in the bathroom. Sometime later, I woke up with my phone still in my pocket, ringing non-stop. It was the hospital. They had found the car's license plate on what was left of the car. I tried to clean myself up a little, called a taxi, and headed to the hospital. Once I got there, they told me what had happened. When the ambulance arrived at the scene, you were already dead."

"Dead!" Levi gasped. He sat down quickly, suddenly feeling dizzy.

"Yes," Marcel said with a low voice. "Everything was smashed and burned with the explosion that followed the crash. They needed someone to identify the body. I had to take a good look at you before I collapsed. I couldn't believe that you were gone. I couldn't stop thinking that if I had not taken you with me that night, you would not have died that day. But now you were dead, and it was entirely my fault."

"Dead?" Levi asked, staring at the floor with his hands on his head.

"I had to break the news to your Mom. That was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life." Marcel sat by Levi's side. "I couldn't cope with the pain. Losing you brought back memories of the death of my parents. And I dealt with it in the only way I knew how. With drugs and alcohol. Deeply depressed and tired, pretty soon, I was unemployed, and things were going from bad to worse."

"Dead?" Levi asked quietly, almost to himself, raising his

head and staring at the window.

"Then, your Grandpa came to the rescue. Your Mom lived with your grandparents Jacob and Rachel back then, but they never accepted your Mom's hatred towards me. They never saw me as responsible for their grandson's death. Every other week Jacob would come to visit me in DC. Sometimes Rachel would come too and bring along some friends to help me clean my house, which at that time was one big filthy mess. The fact that they had so many friends, young and old, always puzzled me. In the beginning, I was resistant. I didn't want to see or talk to anyone, but Jacob never gave up on me. It took a while, but we became good friends."

"What do you mean by *dead*, exactly? You mean *dead, dead*, as in not living?" Levi interrupted, standing up, looking confused.

"They were in their late seventies when they convinced me to move back to New York," Marcel continued in a more positive tone. "I sold my house in DC and rented a small studio in Brooklyn. As you know, Jacob and Rachel were very religious. They became even more religious after you were gone. They dragged me to their religious meetings several times. Then I finally understood where all those friends came from. In time, I started enjoying the meetings too. Their beliefs and teachings gave me peace, hope and helped me a lot in those difficult times."

"Wow," Levi said, dazed and numb.

"It was there where I met June, a wonderful and devoted woman to whom I got married a few years later. I then found a job as a professor at Brooklyn College, bought a house close to work, and started rebuilding my life. We were very happy and doing great when the twins came along. Many times, I wished you were there. And now, here you are. Back from

the dead."

"Man!" Levi exclaimed. He took a breath and tried to compose himself. "Okay, listen," he continued, holding Marcel by his shoulders. "I'm so sorry that you had to go through all that. I know how hard it was for you to get over the trauma of losing your parents. I can only imagine how hard it was to deal with death once again," he continued, looking Marcel in his eyes. "Are you saying that you were friends with my Grandparents? Became a religious man? Married? With twins? Who would have ever guessed that Marcel Williams would settle down one day, become a father and a preacher? I guess anything is possible, right?"

"Yes. I guess so," Marcel grinned.

"But more importantly, tell me this." Levi paused for a moment before he shouted: "I was dead?" he asked, now shaking Marcel by the shoulders. "Crashed and burned? What about this body? Am I a robot under this skin?" he kept asking. "How did they transfer all my memories to this body? Do we finally understand how consciousness works? And, what year is this? Where exactly are we in the future?" Levi kept throwing more and more questions at Marcel, who could not help but smile.

"So good to have you back, brother," Marcel said, unable to contain his happiness.

Aliens?

"Honey, I'm home," Marcel called out, looking for his usual welcome party.

"Someone left the door open," Levi said, sounding worried while walking into Marcel's place, quite impressed with the interior of the house, featuring an open layout. A spacious kitchen, integrated into an inviting dining area, and a green terrace connected to the vast yet cozy living room.

"Usually, we don't close it. We always keep it open, actually."

"Don't you worry about someone breaking in? Don't you have one of those security systems that scan your eyeball, recognize your voice, and read your face, like in those futuristic movies?"

"No, we don't," Marcel replied as if that was a ridiculous question to ask. "We don't need these kinds of things here in the New Earth. *'The former things have passed away,'* my friend," he said, quoting the ancient book.

"What do you mean, you don't need 'these kinds of things?'"

"Why do you think we would need security?"

"What kind of question is that? For obvious reasons. To protect you from the bad guys?"

"I see. The bad guys you are referring to, they don't exist here. No crime. No badness. As I said, no need for security systems."

"Impossible!" Levi exclaimed. "Even if we are now one thousand years into the future, humans will always be humans. You can't change their natural inclinations, can you? What kind of technology would cure humans of evil?" he asked.

"All good questions, my friend. You will have your answers soon enough. I promise. Please make yourself at home. Where is everybody?" Marcel asked, looking around the house.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Two beautiful little girls came running down the stairs. Each had an astonishing macchiato skin color and long curly hair, framing an oval face, pointed chin, and green-colored almond-shaped eyes. Their dark skin was a heritage from their father, seasoned with an Asian look, just like mom.

"Hello, my princesses," Marcel said, hugging and kissing the two little dolls.

"Where is Mommy?" he asked.

"She is upstairs." The girls answered in unison as they usually did.

"Sarah, Naomi, I would like you to meet Uncle Levi. He is a good friend of Daddy."

"Hello, Uncle Levi," they said again in unison.

"Hello, Sarah and Naomi. You are two beautiful girls, did

you know that?"

"Thank you, Uncle Levi."

"Okay, girls. Go upstairs and tell Mommy that Daddy is home."

"They are so cute. How old are they?" Levi asked.

"Sarah is eight and Naomi six."

"They look so much alike. I thought you said you have twins."

"I do have twins, but they don't live with us anymore."

"What happened?"

"They grew up. The twins have their own families now. I will show you some family pictures after dinner. You must be starving."

"Wait! Do you have grown-up children? How old are you anyway?"

Sarah and Naomi were back with their Mommy. "Hi honey, you are home already? I was just getting the rooms ready for our guests tonight."

"Hey, babe. We just got here," Marcel replied. "So," he continued. "June, this is Levi. Levi, this is my wife June."

"Hello, June," Levi said. "It is so nice to meet you. Thank you for marrying my friend, by the way. There was a time I thought he was a lost cause."

"Very witty, confirming all stories," June said. "The pleasure is all mine, Levi. I feel like I've already known you for years. Marcel has always talked about you. And your grandparents have good stories too. They are good friends of ours."

"Do you mean you were good friends with them?"

"No. We still are very close friends. They will be here in a minute to have dinner with us. They are very excited to see you again. Marcel, did you not tell him?" June asked.

"June?" Marcel said, disappointed. "It was supposed to be a surprise, remember?" he whispered.

"Marcel, my grandparents are still alive?" Levi asked. "They were quite old last time I saw them. Are they in the same program that brought me back from the past?"

Ding, dong. The doorbell rang.

Little Sarah and Naomi ran to the door, overexcited.

"Uncle Jay! Aunty Rachel!" yelled the girls, jumping up and down at the young couple standing in the doorway looking just as excited as the children.

"Hello, girls. Wow! You get bigger and prettier every day, don't you?" Uncle Jacob said while getting a long and warm hug from the young ladies.

"Hey! What about me?" Aunt Rachel said, fishing for some love too. "Come here, you two." A big wave of hugs and kisses was now coming Rachel's way. "These are for you," she said, handing over two fancy wrapped packages to the girls.

"Gifts!" they cried out, even more excited than before. Another round of hugs and kisses took place before the girls ran inside, eager to rip open the packages and find out what they had gotten this time.

"Hi Marcel, how are you doing, my brother?" Jacob asked with tenderness in his voice.

"I'm doing great, Jacob. Thanks. Today has been a very special day. Look who I have here with me," he said while Levi approached slowly, looking at the visitors. They looked familiar though he was not sure who they were or why their expressions suddenly changed from smiling faces to complete awe and amazement.

"Hello, I'm Levi," he said, not knowing how to react to their marvel at seeing him.

"Yes, of course, you are," Rachel said, and not able to contain herself any longer, she hugged Levi like a mother hugs her child.

"Sorry, do we know each other?" Levi said, beginning to feel a little uncomfortable and awkward.

"It's us, son. Your grandparents," Jacob said, unable to hold back the tears of joy at finally seeing his grandson once again, a long time after his fatal accident. "We were longing for this moment, for so long."

Levi stared for a moment at Jacob and Rachel, carefully analyzing their faces, and couldn't deny the fact that Rachel looked just like his mother in her youth. And Jacob reminded him of old pictures of his grandfather as a young man. Levi was stunned by different emotions and mixed feelings of confusion and joy. After some hesitation, Levi was moved to wrap his arms around Rachel and hug her back. Jacob joined them in a family embrace.

They had never had such a wonderful time before, the Adams and the Williams. The food was delicious as usual, and the company couldn't be better. Sarah and Naomi were always a great show to watch. Naomi, very bright and eloquent, liked to tell stories. The way she talked and acted like a grown-up was adorable and amusing. Sarah played a variety of instruments better than many adults. Her fantastic performance with the violin followed dinner. The smile and sparkle in the eyes of Jacob and Rachel would not leave their faces. Levi couldn't fully comprehend how happy his grandparents were at that moment. He was more curious and puzzled than anything else. He was dying to ask how they were looking so young. How weak, tired, decaying bodies could turn into strong, healthy, and rejuvenated ones. He wasn't sure if it would be appropriate to flood them with

questions during dinner, so he decided to wait for the right time until Jacob stood up and said: "Levi, come with me for a moment, please. I want to give you something."

"Yes, of course," Levi promptly responded, standing up in one rapid movement, anxious to finally have some questions answered. He followed Jacob, walking outside through the front door.

"I believe this belongs to you," Jacob said, handing Levi a book. Levi opened it, and immediately his eyes filled up. It was the photo album of his wedding day. "I was looking forward to giving it to you since we got the news you would be resurrected. I know that this is one of the few things you have ever owned that you really cared about. So, I thought you would like to have it back. Anne would have liked that."

"I haven't seen this in a long time. I remember when I asked my Granddad- I mean when I asked you – to keep it safe for me. Thanks."

"I can understand that it is weird for you to see your Grandpa with a thirty-something-year-old appearance. I'm guessing this day went all the way up to the first place on the chart of the craziest and most exciting days of your life, right?"

"I still believe that this is all a dream and that I can wake up at any moment now. But I'm not sure if I want to."

"It might be hard to wrap your head around it, but I can assure you, this is no dream."

"If I am not dreaming, how do you explain all this?"

"Do you remember when you were about eight years old when I gave you your first telescope?"

"How could I ever forget? Definitely, one of the top five most exciting days of my life," Levi said with an enthusiasm that made Jacob laugh.

"You were always fascinated by the stars. I remember when we used to go camping together, you were absorbed with all the things you could see in the skies with your little telescope. Then you asked me if there was someone out there looking back at us. Do you remember that?"

"Did I say that?" Levi asked, smiling at the mental picture of himself that small, asking such a profound question.

"Yes, you did. You always believed that there was someone out there. Someone intelligent. Much more intelligent than we are, looking at us. Well, you will be pleased to know that you were right."

"Aliens?" Levi asked, perplexed.

"Well, If you mean intelligent beings, non-human, then yes."

Levi expelled his breath sharply, "I knew it!" he shouted like he had made a scientific breakthrough right there. "Don't tell me that we have discovered life on other planets. Are you kidding me? That is amazing. Do you know if our telescope helped with the discovery?"

"We didn't discover them. They reached out to us," Jacob answered.

"Are you serious now? I can't believe it. How did it happen? Tell me everything."

"You are going to get to know everything about it at school. We have a special program for people that came from the past, just like you did. It will help you to understand everything and get you up to speed."

"I would love that. When do I begin?"

"Soon."

"About the aliens. Tell me more about them."

"For now, I can tell you this. They are the ones responsible for you being here, back from the dead. And they were also

responsible for making your Grandpa look amazing again," Jacob said with a big laugh.

"You do look amazing, Jacob, I mean, Grandpa. Sorry. I will have to get used to it."

"Don't you worry, son. You will."

Lazarus I

It was a beautiful new day of spring in the New Earth, and today not only the birds were singing. Levi never felt so good. He woke up earlier than anyone else and started to make breakfast for everybody.

"I hope you guys like pancakes."

"Wow! Someone woke up in a good mood," June said, walking down the stairs accompanied by her two little girls who were ready for school.

"Pancakes!" the girls shouted.

"Uncle Levi, I love pancakes," the oldest said.

"Do you? Maybe I can teach you, and we can make some pancakes together; what do you think about that?"

"I want to make pancakes too!" the youngest shrieked as she jumped on Levi's neck.

"All right, all right!" Levi mumbled, finding it difficult to speak because of the two girls hanging on his throat.

"Okay, girls. Let uncle go. He needs to finish our pancakes,"

June said.

"Are we having pancakes?" Marcel asked, coming down the stairs joining the party in the kitchen. "What is the occasion?"

"I don't know. Ask Levi," June answered.

"I'm just trying to be a good guest," Levi said. "Okay, everybody. Here come the pancakes," he continued while serving everyone. He then took his seat and was ready to have a bite when Marcel interrupted him.

"Levi, I would like to say thanks for the food."

"Oh, Okay. You're welcome," Levi replied. Marcel, June, and the girls giggled at Levi's response.

"No. I appreciate you making breakfast, of course. But what I mean is that I would like to say a prayer thanking God for the food before we eat, okay?"

"Oh, all right. Sorry," Levi replied, blushing a little and putting the pancake on his fork back on the plate. "I forgot you are a preacher now. Please, go ahead," he said.

Not long after breakfast Marcel and Levi were on their way. They got out of the pod upon arriving at their destination, and Levi recognized the place right away.

"Hey, this is the building where I woke up, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Marcel answered.

"Wow. It looks amazing. I was so taken aback by everything else that I didn't realize how beautiful it was." Levi admired, now noticing the bold building sign letters in the facade.

"'Lazarus I.' Why is it called Lazarus I?"

"Are you familiar with the account of Lazarus?"

Levi squinted his eyes and rubbed his forehead, trying to think of any Lazarus story he could remember. "Help me out

here. Should I know this?"

"Right. Of course not. Never mind," Marcel continued. "This is one of the hundreds of other complexes around the world. We call them 'Resurrection Centers.' In these centers, thousands of people are brought back to life every day, just like you were."

"Really? Every day? That's a lot of people. I wanna ask why, but I guess you are going to say that this is one of those questions I will learn the answer to at school, am I right?"

"You are a fast learner, aren't you?" Marcel grinned.

"So, let me ask you this. What are we doing here? Do I need a check-up or something? I thought we were going to school."

"We are going to school. This complex also holds the classes for the resurrected ones," Marcel said while entering the lobby of the building.

"Stay here in the line to talk to the receptionist. They will give you more instructions."

"Wait, wait. Where are you going?"

"I have to keep going, or I will be late."

"Late for what?"

"For work."

"Do you work here? How come you don't tell me those things, man? What do you do here?"

"I teach some of the classes. Don't worry. You'll be fine. See you later."

"Hey, wait!" Levi yelled, but Marcel did not pause or look back. "Seriously?" he muttered.

The group of people that would form Levi's class was gathered in the lobby, waiting for instructions. All of them were from the same generation. There was a significant cultural and background diversity among them, with one

thing in common. They were all intellectuals: doctors, authors, specialists in their respective fields of expertise. One of them approached Levi and introduced himself.

"Hi, my name is Lee."

"Hey. I'm Levi. How are you doing?" Levi responded.

"Hard to say. Physically I look like a million bucks. I mean, I woke up here, and strange things have happened with my body. I'm not sure if you know what I'm saying."

"Oh, yeah. I know what you mean."

"But I never felt so lost in my life. Not really sure what happened. It seems that these classes we have to take will reveal everything."

"That's what I've been promised too. What have you learned until now? How long have you been 'resurrected'?"

"I woke up two days ago. I don't know much. But I have experienced some crazy, strange things; I mean, did you know they have found a way to reverse aging?"

"Yup! My grandparents look younger than me."

"No kidding?"

"I kid you not."

"Wow," Lee said. "Anyways," he continued. "I'm a biologist, or should I say I was? Never mind. Anyways, I am specialized in wildlife, and used to write for magazines like National Geographic, for documentaries on Discovery Channel, BBC; you know. Yesterday they took me to some kind of park where one of my biggest dreams came true. I always wanted to be able to play with big wild cats, you know. I mean, I have been studying African lions my whole life and being able not only to pet or touch them but to hug, run and play with them? Oh, my God! I can't describe it."

"That really sounds amazing. I have experienced some surreal moments myself. I'm an astrophysicist, and I was

flabbergasted with the mapping of our whole galaxy. I almost died again, from a heart attack this time, when I learned they had made contact with extraterrestrial intelligent life. Can you believe that?"

"Really? The whole galaxy? Aliens? Wow! I have to say. I love the future. But right now, I feel like a small child, a little bit disoriented and confused. So many questions. How did we get here anyway?"

"Exactly. That was my first question. But I didn't get a clear response to that yet. I hope we will find some answers here."

After receiving electronic tablets, they got a quick tour of the complex. It had six floors going up, hosting all administrative offices, and ten levels going down, which held different departments, mainly the resurrection and the educational center. Access to the Resurrection Center was not granted to them just yet. It was lunchtime when their tour was finished. Levi's class joined the other students at the dining hall and some of the people who worked there. The room was immense and would easily fit and feed over one thousand people. And that was just one of the dining halls in the complex. Before the meal was served, the overseer of 'Lazarus I' gave a brief speech welcoming one and all to their new lives in this new world, which over the past two days, all students in that room had a glimpse for themselves. He reassured the big crowd of resurrected ones that they would have satisfying answers to their questions, and he wished them the best, hoping that they would enjoy learning, discovering, and exploring in this fabulous new journey ahead of them. The overseer was eloquent and inspired confidence. From where Levi was sitting, it was impossible to take a good look at the person speaking until he realized

the man was being broadcast to all the various monitors spread throughout the hall. The face on the monitor nearby seemed familiar to him.

"Wait. I know him," Levi said to himself. "He worked at NASA, didn't he?" he kept staring at the screen, trying to remember. "No?" It finally came to him, but he couldn't believe it. "Is that, Mike? The janitor?"

The first lecture would take place that afternoon. Right after lunch, the one guiding Levi's group through the tour also showed them to their classroom and passed on the few last instructions regarding the program. Levi's class numbered forty-five individuals, including him. They all took their place in the two-hundred-seat auditorium, shaped like a large indoor amphitheater. The minutes passed, and the class started to become anxious and impatient. The ambient sound of people murmuring was abruptly silenced by doors slamming open when the instructor suddenly barged in through the podium's right side entrance. Absolute silence followed his arrival. Like everyone else in the room, Levi was expecting to be taken aback by what was coming. But he was in for a special treat.

"Good afternoon, everyone. Sorry, I'm late. My name is—"

"Jacob?" Levi mumbled, surprised.

Once the class was over, Levi ran down from his seat to meet Jacob at the stage. He wasn't the only one. They all had a lot more questions to be answered.

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen, that is all for today. Make sure you are here tomorrow at the same time for more," Jacob said, dismissing the class.

"That was great. Since when are you a professor?" Levi

asked.

"Hey, son! I hope you liked my little surprise."

"I was not expecting to see you here. That was a nice surprise, indeed."

"I know that our introductory lesson today may have raised more questions than it answered."

"Oh, yeah! My head is still spinning," he gasped.

"I'm glad you liked it," Jacob smirked.

"The video about the origin of the universe was fascinating. Back in 'my days, I remember studying something called the Loop Quantum Gravity theory, which was a much better explanation for the origin of the universe than the Big Bang Theory. But what you guys have presented here today; it's genius. So beautiful and elegant. It is quite humbling to see how far we were from what seems to be the truth."

"Yes. We all learned a lot since then," Jacob said.

"It all makes sense, but still. It's very hard for me to believe this whole 'Creator of the universe' idea. That a super-intelligent being exists and is personally interested in the lives of insignificant humans to this extent? And I think I'm not the only one having a hard time believing. You got yourself a tough crowd here, Jacob."

"Believe me. I know."

"By the way, you really got me with the 'aliens' story, didn't you?"

Jacob smiled. "I told you, you were right about the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial beings. I just thought it was too soon to tell an astrophysicist from the 21st-century that the extraterrestrial beings in question were actually the Creator himself and his son."

"Good call," Levi said. "But still, you must understand that

I will need more than a reasonable explanation, right? I mean, I am a scientist. I will need some hard evidence here."

"I expected no less from you. Be patient and keep an open mind. Today was just day one. Buckle up, son. We haven't even started yet," Jacob replied.

Final War

That evening the Adams were hosting dinner. Sarah and Naomi loved to visit them. They had an extraordinary house. It was a large wooden structure built in the trees. The small transparent cylindrical elevator would take you all the way up to the top of the trees. Its doors would then open to the large veranda with branches coming in and out of it. Monkeys, birds, and other little animals were constant and welcomed visitors. There was a small but powerful observatory room on the roof, the girls' favorite place in the house.

"Come with us, Uncle Levi. Let me show you my favorite star," Sarah said, dragging Levi by the hand as soon as they arrived.

After dinner Levi, Marcel, and the girls went back to the observatory to look at the stars. Levi had many things on his mind. A lot had happened that day. He was still trying to wrap his head around some of it, but one thing, in particular,

was bothering him.

"Hey, Marcel," Levi said. "Do you remember Mike from NASA?"

"Yes, of course. You met Mike today, right?" Marcel responded as he was finished calibrating the telescope for the girls to look at the Eagle Nebula. Their favorite star-forming region. Or as they like to call it: 'their favorite nursery room for baby stars.'

"Seriously? No way! Is the director Mike? Mike, the janitor?"

"Yep! He is not a janitor anymore. He is my boss now."

"No kidding? How did that happen?"

"It's a very nice story. But I will let Mike tell you himself. Maybe we should try to arrange to meet him tomorrow, what do you think?"

"Can we? I would like that."

"Yes, of course! He is a pretty busy guy, but I am sure he will be pleased to make time for an old friend."

"That will be great," Levi said excitedly. "Mike explained something about different classes," he continued. "Some are faster than others. I seem to be in a slow class. I don't get it. In my class, we have some pretty smart people. Are the faster classes only for geniuses?"

"Ha-ha," Marcel laughed. "No, no. It has nothing to do with how smart you are."

"So, what then? My class will take months to finish, while some shorter classes will take just a few weeks. Why can't I take a shorter class?"

"Well, some people from our generation, and generations before ours, knew back then what the future would be like, and they expected to be resurrected to live in the world we live in today. So, they already had a pretty good idea of how

things would work. Pretty much all their expectations for this time have come true."

"Really?" Levi asked. "How did they know that?"

"Remember when we used to say that religion was a waste of time? Even after those famous neuro-scientists had suggested that there was some kind of evolutionary advantage to faith because people with faith tended to be happier and live longer?"

"Yes, I remember. That paper was hilarious."

"Well, that is why you are in a slow class."

"What?" Levi asked.

"As it turns out, one of those religious groups had accurate knowledge of what would happen in the future. When they are resurrected today, they are introduced to a system they already knew would exist, based on what they learned in the Bible. You don't have that kind of knowledge because you were never exposed to it. That is why you need more time to finish your resurrection school program."

"Wait. Did you say Bible? Does it mean that, by the end of this course, I should convert to some kind of religion?"

"Not at all. There is no religion to be converted to. Religions ceased to exist with the Final War. What we have now is a whole new system, a family-like society that happens to be overseen by the Creator himself. And it is not a matter of believing or not anymore. It is just how things are. The purpose of the School for Resurrected Ones is to introduce you to this new system and help you to integrate and to be a citizen of this new world."

"Let me see if I understood. Are you saying that the entire world is ruled by an extraterrestrial being claiming he created everything in our universe? And that he arranged the writing of this 'book' to tell his creation what would

happen in the future? Is that right?"

"Not exactly. He didn't claim anything. He has shown us. But, yes. The Bible was the media used by him to convey his message to his creation."

"A book, really? Why not something more dramatic, clear, evident? Like, maybe showing up in a huge spaceship, I don't know. The '*take me to your leader*' sort of thing."

"He was only interested in those that were earnestly seeking him. The people's responses to the Bible's message exposed what kind of person they were. If they were humble, true seekers, the Creator would reveal the secret hiding in his word. If not, it didn't matter how much they would read the Bible; they would never get its true meaning. Like in *steganography*, you know? That technique of hiding secret data within a non-secret, ordinary text?"

"Okay?"

"Well, maybe not the best example, but yes. Something like that. Where you can only read and understand the secret in the message if you have a key. That key was given by the Creator himself to those that were genuinely searching for the truth. The Bible called this key the *helper* or *holy spirit*, the Creator's active force.

"So, you say there is no religion. But it all sounds too much like Christianity to me."

"Okay. Maybe you can think of it like this. Remember how many theories for the origin of the universe we used to have?"

"A few dozen? String theory, loop quantum gravity, causal dynamical triangulations, internal relativity...." Levi kept going.

"Yeah, yeah," Marcel stopped him and continued. "Now, imagine that one of them was proven to be right."

"Then, that one would not be just a theory. It would be the description of reality."

"Exactly. The same with religion, you could say. There were so many of them. Each one with its own theory. But imagine one of them was right."

"Are you saying Christianity was right all along, and now it is not just a religion. It simply is the truth about reality? Is that what you are saying?"

"Not Christianity per se. Inside Christianity, there were hundreds of different religions. But one small group of true Christians did have the key, the accurate understanding, given by the Creator. And they were the ones used by him to found the New Earth."

"Wait. We are not in charge of our planet anymore?"

"Well, we were never in charge, my friend. But if you mean there are no human governments; you would be right. Our government, called the New Heavens, is made up of non-humans, established in the spiritual realm. Here on Earth, we have its representatives that lead the people by following the heavenly government's instructions."

"Wait, wait. 'Spiritual realm'? 'Heavenly government'? Now you lost me."

"Don't worry; everything will be explained in your class at Lazarus. You just need time."

"I will probably need more than a few months then."

"I know it is hard. Everything is so different, from what for you was just a few days ago. Having questions is normal, and it is important to ask them. But try to be patient and take your time. Meanwhile, enjoy yourself. You are in the future, man! Have you realized that? You are a time traveler of sorts," Marcel said with a smile.

"Oh yeah. Not even *Doc Brown* would believe that."

"*Doctor Who?*" Marcel smiled.

It was already late when Rachel showed her visitors to their rooms. While Marcel and June were getting ready for bed and Rachel was reading stories to the girls, Jacob and Levi looked at the stars in the observatory room.

"Jacob, can I ask you something?" Levi asked.

"Of course, son. What is it?" Jacob replied while looking through the telescope.

"What happened to Mom? I was expecting to see her today."

"I see," Jacob said. He walked away from the telescope and sat on the sofa. "Sit down with me for a minute, son," Jacob requested. Levi complied and sat beside him.

"If Mom died after me," Levi continued, "she was supposed to be back by now, right? Following the whole thing about *'the last will be first'* principle we learned today."

"Very good. You were paying attention," Jacob replied. He paused for a moment before he continued: "But this principle doesn't apply to my daughter."

"No? How come?" Levi asked, surprised.

"Martha could have been here with us today. But she turned that chance down."

"What? Why would she do that?"

"Why indeed," Jacob sighed. "Well, let me tell you what happened," he continued. "Humankind was on the verge of self-destruction back then. When it happened, and people saw the *'signs in the sun, moon, and stars,'* some thought it was an alien invasion. Like those depicted in old sci-fi Hollywood movies, you know? But soon, it was clear to everyone. That was no alien invasion. It was the Creator's army taking over Earth's control from his spiritual enemies.

"The Final War?" Levi asked.

Jacob confirmed with a nod.

"Did you say '*spiritual enemies*'? I thought that the Final War was a battle between aliens and humans?"

"No. God's spiritual enemies were the ones manipulating human governments, influencing them to attack his people on Earth. God's army fought the war against his powerful spiritual enemies."

"Extraterrestrials fighting over Earth's control? Sounds like an alien invasion to me."

"God's spiritual enemies were controlling the world for millennia already. If anything, the Final War was a rescue mission, to put an end to God's enemies' control over the Earth and save his creation from destruction."

"But, human governments were not really aware of this control, were they? They didn't know they were fighting against the Creator himself. Well, not really; I mean, as you said, they were being manipulated, right?"

"Aware or not, human governments and world leaders have never cared about God. Many rejected the fact that a Creator even existed, as you probably remember. And those that professed to believe in God showed complete disregard for his word, using it as a tool to control others and advance their own selfish interests, actively choosing to ignore his will. By doing that, they put themselves on the side of God's spiritual enemies, and in the Final War, all of them came to know who they were fighting against."

"And, anyone that didn't support the Creator was automatically against him? Is that it?"

"He didn't want anyone to be destroyed. But he would not allow anyone to keep destroying his creation either. Time has proven that humans simply cannot solve their problems

without his guidance. So, essentially, yes. People had to decide if they would accept God's rulership or not."

"Okay, grandpa. Not sure if I understand all of that, but what does this have to do with Mom? Mom believed in God, right? I was never sure of his existence, so why am I here, and she isn't?"

"Right. Well, as a family, we believed in a god, as you know. But so many of the things we were taught made no sense, and our religious leaders could not provide us with satisfying answers. That always bothered me. I then decided to search and find the answers to my questions myself. I read all the so-called holy books and researched all the main faith and belief systems at that time. That only added to my frustration with God and religion in general. Until, one day, I met someone who offered to answer my questions using the Bible. And indeed, he did. Through my Bible study, I finally found what I was looking for. I also learned that the God I believed in and the one who created the universe were not the same. Before the Final War started, the God I learned about in the Bible had provided a spiritual place of refuge for those seeking him. He used human representatives to warn all *peoples, in every land, tribe, and tongue*, about his upcoming war, just like it was foretold in his word. Your grandmother and I decided to trust and follow those human representatives. We joined them and took refuge in his earthly organization, but Martha didn't. We tried our best to help her. She even studied the Bible with us for a while. She had the chance to also learn about the true God, join his people, and accept his rulership. But as I said, she refused it. Sadly, your mom died in the Final War, my son; I am sorry," Jacob said. Levi was speechless. "You didn't have this chance," Jacob continued. "That is why he brought you back to life so that you could have that same opportunity, you

see?" Levi remained without words, absorbed in his thoughts but showing no reaction.

They sat there quietly, gazing at the stars for a while when finally Levi spoke: "Strange."

"What is it, son?" Jacob asked.

"I don't feel angry or sad about Mom. That's strange, right?"

"Don't worry, son. Soon, everything will be revealed to you, and all will make sense."

After another long pause, Levi continued: "What took him so long, though? To take back Earth's control, I mean. Didn't he care about what was going on here before?" he asked.

"That is a good question. One of the many questions I had too," Jacob replied. "We are going to talk about it in class soon. Can you wait until then?"

"Sure," Levi agreed.

"Meanwhile, I would like to show you something."

"What is it?"

"Something I asked Marcel to set it up for me," Jacob said, standing up and showing Levi to the telescope. "Take a look. Do you recognize that?"

Levi looked through the telescope and asked: "Is that...? Wait! Is that James?"

"Cool, huh? Your telescope made some important discoveries centuries ago."

"Wow! Are you serious?"

"Yes. And tomorrow, you will have access to all information about this and pretty much anything else through the device given to you."

"Ah, all right. I was wondering when we would be able to explore those tablets."

"Yes, I know," Jacob said with a grin. "There is a lot to be

learned, but be patient. Enjoy the process. There is no need to rush or to hurry anymore. From childhood, you always had a curious mind, and you pursued knowledge tirelessly throughout your entire life. I truly believe you are going to love it here."

"I have a feeling you are right," Levi said with a smile, which soon was followed by a sigh while he was glancing at the stars. "I just wished Mom would be here."

Jacob wrapped his arm around Levi's shoulder and said: "Me too, son. Me too."

After a moment of silence, Levi asked: "What about Anne? She died before me. Is she still coming back?" he asked.

All Things New

Marcel and Levi arrived at Brooklyn Central Station ten minutes before the next pod to DC. It was the weekend, and Marcel decided to take Levi on a trip. Back in the 21st century, a trip from New York to DC would take approximately two to three hours by plane, without counting the endless hours of hassle at the airports. Now, with the Hyperloop system, the same trip took only forty-five minutes. The Brooklyn Central Station was impressive. It was bigger than many airports in the Old World. You could take a pod to any part of the world from there. But, in many ways, it was nothing like an airport. There were no custom or boarding controls. There was no need to book in advance or buy a ticket, to carry a passport or any other personal identification for that matter, even if you were going overseas. It worked pretty much like the also extinct train and metro systems, just much faster, efficient, and environmentally friendly.

After arriving at the Greenbelt station in DC, they got on one of the local pods that took hundreds of people every day, mostly families and school children, to visit NASA. While they were approaching the complex, Levi seemed a little disappointed and, at the same time, marveled at the scenery. He found it odd to see so many people milling around. A vast crowd, coming and going, made Levi feel like they were going to an amusement park on a national holiday. NASA was unrecognizable to him. The main big white box building with blue stripes, with the NASA logo at its top-right corner; the life-sized space telescope and rocket models; the red and yellow tulips decorating the front garden by the welcome sign; all that was gone. In their place, a massive crystal domed building, monumentally ascending from the ground surrounded by an open field with trees and beautiful gardens. The infrastructure and design of the dome reminded him of old NASA projects of domed cities on Mars. But the image in front of him challenged Levi's imagination. They got out of the pod, and Levi felt another shock when he caught sight of the welcome sign, which now read: "Welcome to the Space Flight Museum."

"Where are we?" Levi asked. "This is not NASA, is it?"

"You are right," Marcel replied. "This place is not the Goddard Space Flight Center anymore. Not as you remember, anyway. Most NASA buildings were turned into museums. This building is one of them."

"Are you saying that NASA does not exist anymore?" Levi asked apprehensively, realizing that nothing was quite like it used to be.

"NASA's history exists inside this museum. But NASA, the government agency in charge of science and technology, that had to do with airplanes and space, no. That NASA is long gone," Marcel replied.

"What do you mean?" Levi asked now with frustration in his voice.

"You are going to understand what I mean in a minute. The answers are inside that building. Let's go. I'm anxious to show you everything. You'll like to see how things changed since your last project."

"I can't wait," Levi said, as excited as an explorer sent to discover a new world.

Levi's last project at NASA was the *James Space* telescope, which was going to be the world's most powerful infrared space telescope ever built. Among other expectations, it was hoped that the telescope would help scientists understand the formation of stars and planets and have direct imaging of exoplanets. Levi's telescope optics research would make it possible to see planets that would otherwise be obscured by the glare and diffraction from the orbited star. Levi died before *James'* launch. He was curious to know all about its accomplishments.

It was already dark when Levi and Marcel headed to the exit. The museum was about to close when they finally decided to leave. Walking out of the building, Levi became unusually quiet and introspective. He had a lot to digest. He had just learned that the launch of the *James* telescope was a remarkable success. In a few years of orbiting the Sun, *James* had contributed to several revolutionary discoveries, including confirming the existence of planets located outside our solar system. Levi was introduced to the projects that followed its findings. The next step was to send a probe, powered by space radiation, with the mission to study these so-called exoplanets. The probe was, in reality, a small spaceship able to deploy shuttles, crewed by robots, to land on these planets and explore its surface. The museum's

observatory functioned as a telescope where Levi could visualize the exact location of the probes. Levi's mind was racing. One could almost hear his brain working until he gave words to his thoughts, finally breaking the silence.

"Okay, I understand that you guys are not exactly in a hurry to find a new planet to call home, since this one is looking pretty good, after the whole transformation, getting rid of pollution, nuclear threats, and everything else. I heard you when you said that these current space projects are driven by pure curiosity without a specific agenda. And based on the present data, it seems that we don't need to colonize other worlds for any practical reasons, not until our Sun starts to die anyway. But, here is what I don't understand. Why is there no government interest in investing in space programs anymore? I mean, all space initiatives are being completely carried out by space enthusiasts, individuals' private efforts, volunteers in their free time? Seriously?"

"Well, as you said, we live in a completely different world now. With the New Earth, our priorities changed. For a long time, all resources and efforts were directed to the reconstruction of the planet. After cleaning all the trash from the old Earth, we focused on rebuilding. So, space programs had to take the back seat."

"I see," Levi said, but still not sounding satisfied with the answer.

"Besides," Marcel continued. "What made governments invest in space programs in the first place?"

"Military and technological advantage... yes, but not all of it was purely political interest, and you know it," Levi answered.

"Yes. I know. Today we continue to study and explore, and

New Earth's heavenly government supports and encourages this pursuit of knowledge. But its support is not financial if that's what you mean by 'investing.' The concept of money itself exists only in history books now and"

"Wait, wait. What? No money? How?" Levi asked, astonished, just when he thought nothing else could surprise him at that point.

"You might have noticed that we haven't used money once. Not for transportation, food, or for the museum, right?"

"Yes, but I just thought you had a different way of paying for those things here. Maybe with a chip in your arm or something? I don't know."

"No. No chip and no money."

"So, how do you pay for stuff and buy things then?"

"This is the beauty of it. You don't."

"How did you guys manage that? Are we back to using some kind of barter system?"

"Not exactly. It works like this," Marcel explained. "Everything is done through collaboration. Every single adult person on this planet works different assignments as a volunteer, and all his needs – food, transportation, housing, and everything else are provided for without charge."

"Come again?" Levi asked, with eyes wide open, not entirely sure if he had heard it right.

"Imagine that we need a new building," Marcel continued. "We have machines, facilities, and people with skills to design and make every single building block for this project. People are assigned to the project by a New Heavens' representative, who organizes and leads it. They get together, get the project done, and go home. After the project is finished, they take a vacation or wait for the next assignment. Meanwhile, if they need food, they go to food

stores and simply take what they need. If they need clothes, they go to a clothing store, and again they are free to have whatever they like. Of course, there is only so much you can take every time. But it is ensured that everyone's family has their needs covered."

"And what if I need a house, furniture, electronic devices, or — I don't know — a truck?"

"For a house, in most cases, it will be provided by the government. You can choose an available existing building or choose an available piece of land to have your house built there. We don't use cars or trucks anymore, as you might have noticed, but if when you say 'truck,' you mean heavy-work machinery, you can just borrow whatever you need from the government's building department. As for furniture, electronic devices, and the like, it works the same way as for clothing and food."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"Of course, there are a few rules and principles that make this system work for everyone, but don't worry, you will...."

"Wait. Let me guess. School?"

Marcel confirmed with a wink and a smile.

For The First Time

The Sun was shining, the wind breathed calmly, and the heat was an irresistible summer invitation to enjoy what would be an unforgettable day in Levi's life. He enjoyed sitting on his balcony and spending breakfast time looking at the Brooklyn Bridge. After a few days of staying as a guest at Marcel's, he moved to his own place, provided by the New Heavens' housing program for resurrected ones. He got a charming apartment facing the old bridge—a place where he loved to be. In the past months, he had lived through new experiences worthy of a lifetime. As a good scientist, Levi savored every single moment of his real-life time travel story. It was not exactly the time travel out of his beloved science-fiction books, but undoubtedly, much better. A couple of weeks after he started the School for Resurrected Ones, he was also assigned to his first job in the New Earth. He had been working part-time at the Central Transport Station. Every Monday and Tuesday after school, he would be responsible for cleaning the pods. On Thursdays, he

would join the maintenance team, getting training on the pods' technology. After his graduation, Marcel and Jacob continued Levi's training. Levi had been enjoying his lessons, and now, almost one year after his resurrection, he had become an entirely different person. Physically he was now the host of what he considered to be a supernatural strength. Levi loved to go for a swim in the ocean. He could hold his breath for minutes on end. Exploring underwater and playing with marine life was like discovering a new world altogether. Mentally he felt like he had a supercomputer between his ears. He could read books as fast as his eyes could move. Sometimes he would get in a pod and travel to the African continent, the Amazon forest, or the North Pole. He was happy to explore and experience all the things he had been learning in books. He also had his projects. He was exploring the power of his recently acquired super-genius level of mental abilities. He was working on a possible way of transportation using quantum entanglement and a plan to explore the universe without leaving Earth, using an interface mechanism that would allow humans to control a robotic version of themselves sent into deep space. At the same time, he was trying to figure out how to build a house for eternity, completely autonomous, with its own system and cycles. A home that would be alive just like the Earth is *alive*. Emotionally he had evolved. Being before self-centered, self-absorbed, he was now honestly and earnestly interested in other people, fully involved with his community, and actively working for the peace, union, and wellbeing of the ones around him. But it was on the spiritual level that he made the most drastic change. Before, there had been no spiritual level for him at all. Slowly he was becoming more and more aware of his spiritual needs.

* * *

"In our last session, we talked about how to use our 'power of discernment' based on principles to think as the Creator does. By looking at things from the Creator's perspective, our society today tries its utmost to do things and make choices and decisions that resemble his way of thinking. So far, what impressed you the most about how we do things today different from what you were used to?" Marcel asked.

"I'm still amazed by the fact that everything works without money," Levi said. "The way greed and social inequality were eliminated by taking money out of the equation and building a cooperative global society without borders is surreal to me. And how everyone is provided with everything one needs. That makes it easy to abide by the most important laws in place: *'love God and love your neighbor.'* I can see how that would make lawyers obsolete. Just as doctors are since no one gets sick or old anymore. And..." Levi kept looking for words but seemed not to find them. "Well, you know. I'm still blown away by the whole thing, to be honest," he finally said.

"I can see that," Marcel acknowledged and smiled.

"And," Levi continued. "Do you remember how I struggled to reconcile the idea of living forever on Earth with the fact that stars tend to blow up with time?" Levi asked.

"I do," Marcel responded.

"Well, that doesn't bother me anymore," Levi said.

"I'm happy to hear that. And, why not?" Marcel asked.

"Well," Levi continued. "I think we are pretty sure now that Earth is really unique. We didn't find anything like it in the entire visible universe yet, right?"

"Right," Marcel confirmed.

"What if our Sun is as unique as our Earth?" Levi asked.

"Go on," Marcel requested.

"You know when sometimes we build things to last just a few years? Some things are meant to be single-use. But when we build homes, we usually tend to build those to last. If our Sun is as unique as the Earth, maybe there is something about it, or about our prime real-state in the universe, that will allow our Sun to keep burning forever."

"Interesting," Marcel said with a grin. "The Creator indeed promised that the Earth would never be destroyed. I look forward to the day he will reveal to us all the works of the universe, and then we will have all our questions answered. But I do like the way you think, my friend," he said and continued. "Remember when you asked me about security systems?"

"Yes. Of course," Levi answered. "I now understand why they don't exist here."

"And why is that?" Marcel asked.

"There is no motive, means, or opportunity for crime. That's why!" Levi affirmed. "No one can steal because there is no money or anything like it. There is no fight over power since the Creator is in charge of everything, and no one has more power than the other. People have perfect brains: meaning, no crazy ones killing for some insane reason. Everything is shared, making no sense to accumulate material things. So, yes. 'Fire can't burn in the oxygen-free vacuum of space,' can't it?"

"Indeed, it can't," Marcel replied, pleased with Levi's comments.

"It is pretty amazing, isn't it?" Jacob asked.

"Amazing?" Levi replied. "It's more than amazing. I don't think I have words to describe what it is," he continued.

"Do you want to give it a try?" Jacob asked.

"I mean, even how the planet changed, right," Levi

continued. "How some before inhospitable places on Earth are now oases where human life can flourish. It is simply unbelievable."

"Human life keeps flourishing, for sure," Marcel said. "And some might still be concerned with overpopulation in the future. What do you think about that?" he asked.

"Well," Levi said. "If my family grows too big for my house, I can build another one, right? I'm guessing the Creator can easily do the same?"

"Huh. Interesting," Marcel replied.

"It is very nice to hear you express your feelings like that," Jacob said. "I can imagine how everything is still so fascinating to you. This New Earth has been my reality for a while now. But for you, just a few months ago, you existed in a dying world. We get used to good things quickly, don't we?"

Levi nodded in agreement.

"This fantastic new world is only possible thanks to the intervention of our Creator," Marcel said.

"And today, we have more good news for you, Levi."

"Good news? For me? What good news?" Levi asked.

"Do you remember our lessons about the resurrection, how it works, and who is resurrected?" asked Jacob.

"Sure. Of course, I remember. I'll be forever grateful for this provision. What about it?"

"Well, here comes the good news. I just got confirmation."

"What confirmation? You are killing me here."

Then finally, Jacob announced emotionally. "Anne is going to be resurrected!"

"Anne?! My Anne?" shouted Levi in disbelief.

"Yes, Levi. Anne will be back soon," Jacob said, unable to hold his tears of joy any longer.

Levi was stunned for a moment just before collapsing in

tears. He cried as he had never cried before. Jacob stood up, took Levi by the hands, and raised him up, giving him a big hug. "I'm so happy for you, my friend," Marcel said.

"Are you sure?" Levi asked, still in shock.

"Yes, son. Yes!" Jacob assured him.

"And there is more."

"More?"

"You were assigned to be her assistant. Just like Marcel was your assistant, you see. It means that you will have to be there when she wakes up. You will be the first person she will see coming back."

"Oh, I don't know what to say," Levi said, wiping his tears away.

"She will wake up in a couple of weeks. That is why I would like to prepare you to serve as her assistant. It involves a few things you have to know. Can we start going through them today?"

"No! Really?" Levi said, hugging Jacob again. "I can't believe this. Thank you so much. Thank you."

"Don't thank me," Jacob replied. "I'm not the one deciding who is going to be brought back to life."

"Yes, of course," Levi looked up and prayed for the first time.

Until Death Do Us Part

A light blue colored the horizon. Not even one small white spot could be found across the sky that day, hundreds of years ago. A soft and gentle breeze blew the summer heat away from the skin. The waves were shallow and barely made any sound when they touched the shores of Bayville, Long Island. It felt just like another day in paradise. But for Levi, that day on the beach wouldn't be like any other.

"How are you feeling, brother? Are you nervous?" Marcel asked.

"Nervous? Of course not," Levi said, struggling to get the knot of his tie right.

"Really?"

"Can't you see I am freaking out?"

"Well, if you decide to go ahead with this, you might never be able to get out of it. Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Marcel with a straight face.

"You're joking, right?" Levi replied.

Marcel broke down laughing, unable to keep his act up. "Come here. Let me help you with that. You can't even tie your own tie."

"Hey!" Jacob said, opening the door abruptly.

"Haaa!" Levi jumped back at the scare Jacob had just given him. "Don't scare me like that, Grandpa!"

"Are you guys ready yet? It's time," Jacob said. He turned and left, completely ignoring Levi's overreaction.

"Okay!" Levi took a deep breath and said, "Let's do this."

They had decided to make it a small occasion for family and friends only. They were all gathered in this beautiful house by the beach, where you could hear the waves and smell the ocean. White chairs were placed on the green grass, facing the water, under the refreshing shade of palm trees. The view was astonishing with the sunset. The skies were changing color, from a yellow-brown palette to a vibrant orange-red, when Levi went out and walked through the aisle between the chairs. He greeted everyone present with a smile, moving slowly towards a friendly face waiting for him under the flowering pergola.

"Hi, Grandpa. Thanks for doing this."

"Hi, son. My pleasure," Jacob replied.

Suddenly, musicians came out of the house—four violinists dressed up as if for an opera performance. Coming down through the corridor, they played while walking in Levi's direction. They arrived in front of the gathered guests, placing themselves at the pergola's sides. They stopped playing for one second. All those present stood up and turned around, fixing their eyes on the entrance of the house. The violins began their music again while the most breathtaking woman walked through the door, provoking sighs and whispers from the audience.

"There she is," Levi said.

Anne Castle was the most beautiful girl Levi had ever seen. No doubt, the most pretty one in the whole University of Chicago where they first met. She was almost as tall as him. Her hair shone lights of gold each time the sun looked at it. Her lips were intoxicating, and her blue-green eyes were nothing less than hypnotic. Falling in love was inevitable. Two years after moving to Maryland, Levi and Anne decided that they would like to spend the rest of their lives in love with each other.

"Hi, there," Levi said when Anne finally met him under the pergola.

Anne came closer, and with a kiss on his ear, she whispered, "I love you."

* * *

"That was the best day of my life," Levi said with a smile given to him by his memories of that day. He kept turning the pages of their wedding album. "Remember the rusty old Ford Escort we had? The car was falling apart, even had a hole in the floor, remember that? But somehow, I loved it."

"I do," Anne confirmed from the white sofa vertically placed beside Levi's armchair. "We squeezed all our friends into that thing and headed to City Hall for our civil wedding. You drove like a lunatic, almost killed us all, and we still almost didn't make it on time."

"Oh yeah. We were never very good at being on time, were we?"

"Running late even for our wedding," Anne said. Both kept

laughing at those memories until tears ran down their faces.

"Those first couple years were a lot of fun," Levi said. "Remember how we used to make people jealous of how happy we were together?"

"Yes. I felt bad for our friends sometimes. We just couldn't help it."

"We had a great time. It just ended too soon," Levi said, changing the tone in his voice. "The dream became a nightmare very fast." Levi paused and put the album down on the white coffee table. "After you got sick and left me, life made very little sense without you. Not a single day passed by that I didn't think of you."

Anne looked at Levi. They locked eyes for a moment. Then, she picked the album from the table. Anne kept turning the pages in silence for a while until she stopped and took one of the pictures out. "I love this one of you and Jacob. Is he here?"

"Yes. Jacob is outside, with Rachel waiting for you. You are going to stay with them for a while," Levi said. He moved towards Anne and sat by her side on the sofa.

"I'm not coming home with you?" Anne asked, holding Levi's hand tightly.

"Would you like that?"

"You are my husband, aren't you?" Anne said, touching Levi's face, still amazed by how young he looked.

"Actually..." Levi paused, confronted with the new reality. "No. I'm not."

"Oh, I see. 'In sickness and in health, until death do us part,' right?" Anne asked, retracting her hands from Levi's face and moving an inch away from him. "Are you married to someone else now?"

"No," Levi replied while touching the tips of Anne's long hair. She looked so different from the last time he saw her.

Then, all her hair was gone after chemotherapy. But now, her hair was as beautiful as the day he met her for the first time.

Anne smiled, pleased with Levi's answer. Moving closer to him, she held his hands, looked deep into his eyes, and in her typical sweet way, she asked, "Would you marry me? Again?"

"Do you really want that?" Levi replied, carefully teasing her.

"I don't know," Anne said with a haughty yet jocular tone. "Maybe I should consider my options, right? From what you told me, it seems that things are a lot more interesting and very much improved here in the future. And, I mean, look at my new me. Who knows what a girl like me might find out there, huh?"

Levi was beyond happy. Being able to laugh with Anne once again was a dream come true for him. "I missed this. You have no idea how much I missed you."

"And I would love to hear all about it," Anne said with a grin.

"Come on. Let's go," Levi said, standing up and offering his hand to Anne. "Let me introduce you to the future."

"The future," Anne gasped. "I was brought back to life in the future! How crazy is that? I want to know all about the technology that made it possible. How does it work? Did my parents pay for this? You couldn't; I know that much. You were a broke astrophysicist. How could you, right? Right?"

Fast and Slow

Levi worked many months on the design of his house since he had graduated from the School of Resurrected Ones. He wanted to build a house for eternity—a house mimicking the Earth's systems. One that would be able to self-maintain, self-regulate, and would last forever. Looking at the 3D model, when seen from above, you could not see the house. As in perfect camouflage, the house's roof would be covered by plants, merging with the local vegetation. You would have to take a closer look to see the domes spread out through its surface. Seen from behind, it would appear to be an elevation in the ground like a small hill. From the front side, it would look like the hill was sliced in half and had its interior dugout. Put simply; it would be one big two-stores-down cave with a massive glass facade, domes on the roof for light and ventilation, cloaked in green grass and trees. It was a very peculiar house, but Levi was happy with his creation, and today he had received permission to build it in a beautiful area in the middle of the Wallkill forest. Anne was

in love with the house, and Levi was excited to tell her the good news about the permit. Once they started dating again, Levi often hosted dinner for family and friends together with Anne. That evening Levi invited his grandparents, Lee – his old friend from his School for Resurrected Ones, and Lee's girlfriend, Avy.

"So, Anne. Tell us about school. How are you enjoying it?" Rachel asked.

"Yes. How are you coping with Jacob as your instructor?" Levi asked, teasing Jacob. Jacob raised his eyebrow and looked at Levi in mock-disapproval and grinned.

"No. Of course, Jacob is great," Anne replied to Levi's teasing. "I'm having lots of fun. My only problem is to collect pieces of my brain from all the mind-blowing moments every single day. It is just, wow."

"It's crazy, right?" Avy added.

"Yes, I mean," Anne continued. "The trip to the Old World Museum, seeing all the events that took place before the end of the world as I knew it, that was...."

The 'Old World Museum' told the story of humankind from the first human beings to the last days of the old system of things. The building was many times bigger than the ancient Louvre. The ground floor of this building was a vast botanic park featuring plants of all kinds from all over the world. Some specimens previously extinct were now back. The rich diversity of color, forms, shapes, and fragrances made this garden an absolute wonder. The exhibition rooms of this museum were underground, as were many of the other public buildings and offices that Anne had seen. It had four main divisions. Sector one told the history of humankind from the perspective of human rulership, from the first human world power to the last one. The second

sector told the same story from a human technological standpoint. The third presented it from the angle of nature. And the fourth, from God's point of view. All divisions were interconnected by virtual reality, allowing the visitor to have all four different perspectives in one unique and multi-sensory experience. As part of Anne's School for Resurrected Ones' curriculum, Jacob was then taking her class through the last days of the old system under the rule of its last world power.

"Wait, wait," Levi interrupted. "Are you guys already doing the field trips to the museums? Isn't that supposed to happen towards the end of the course? In my class, it took us months before we had these trips."

"Oh, yeah. You're right. I remember," Lee said, confirming Levi's recollection.

"He-he," Rachel giggled.

"What?" Levi asked. "Don't tell me they changed the curriculum?"

"No. No change of curriculum," Jacob answered. "It just happens that Anne is attending a different class than you guys did."

"What do you mean?" Lee asked.

"Well," Jacob said. "Do you remember that we had different groups and..."

"Wait a minute," Levi interrupted again. "Are you saying Anne is in a faster class than I was? But she was also a non-religious scientist. Why is she in the faster class?"

"Yes, I wasn't religious," Anne responded, "But I was a spiritual person; I mean, I had my spirituality."

"What? Since when?" Levi asked, perplexed by not knowing that about Anne.

"Remember when I got my diagnosis? When we learned

that I had cancer?"

"Of course, how could I forget."

"It killed me before it took my life," Anne continued. "It made me question the meaning of everything. I couldn't accept what was happening to us. I needed answers. Something that would help me cope with the things we were about to face together. It was then that I reconnected with God."

"I had no idea. How come you never told me this?" Levi asked.

"You know why," Anne said. "You always were a secular-minded person. For you, there were only reason and science. I didn't want you to think less of me because I had chosen to believe in a Creator."

"I'm so sorry, Anne," Levi said, holding Anne's hand across the table. "I had completely forgotten that I used to be like that."

"It's okay. Nothing to be sorry about. Back then, we didn't know any better."

"And, that is why Anne is attending a faster class," Jacob said. "The condition of Anne's heart and her predisposition to spiritual matters seemed to have played a rule in her qualifying for it."

"Huh," Lee reacted like he had understood something.

"That explains a lot," Levi said. "You were so strong. And, now I know why. Proud of you, babe."

"I love you too," Anne said.

"Oh, you guys are so cute," Avy said.

"I have a question," Lee said, killing the moment. "What is the difference between the slow and fast classes, exactly?"

"The introduction to the Creator and his creation is kept short. That is the main difference in the faster classes. And,

you might remember, that was a big chunk of your curriculum."

"Sorry for the hard time we gave you, Jacob. And thank you for being so patient with us."

Yeah, sure. Lee said to himself.

Avy was born in the New Earth, as were her parents. She was fascinated by the School for Resurrected Ones and everything else about the past and its history. Avy had many questions about Lazarus and was excited to talk to Jacob about it. After dinner, they kept talking at the table while Anne and Rachel had a conversation in the kitchen. Meanwhile, Levi and Lee were outside on the balcony. Lee looked uneasy. Something seemed to be bothering him.

"Hey, man," Levi said. "Avy looks to be a nice girl. But what about your ex-wife? I know she was resurrected around the same time as Anne, right? What happened?"

"Susanne? Yes, around the same time, but she attended an even faster class yet, I think. She is done with school already, while Anne is still visiting museums."

"Oh, wow. Really?"

"Yes. I didn't quite understand that before, but today all made sense after Jacob's explanation earlier. She was really into her spirituality when we were together. She was all about the Bible, loved God, and – yes, she was the real deal, I guess.

"Are you serious?"

"Yup."

"Huh, I didn't know that. How is she doing?"

"She is fine. We talk. But I don't know, man. You and Anne seem to be doing okay, but don't you sometimes think that she is a completely different person? That you don't really

know her?"

"Sometimes. But, all the new things about Anne are awesome. She did change, but for the better," Levi said, looking at Anne talking to Rachel in the kitchen.

"I see. Yes, for us, it didn't feel the same as it does for you guys. We talked and everything, but we are okay with the fact our marriage has ended in death. Besides, Susanne has changed too much, you know?"

"No, I don't. How do you mean?"

"Like, she has become obsessed with everything about this system. The heavenly government, the spiritual realm, she is fascinated by the whole thing. Before, animals were her life. Now, all she cares about is public service. She has even volunteered her free time to work in public building projects, helping at Lazarus, and this and that."

"What is the problem with that?"

"Hey, I love this place, okay? I truly appreciate being here, and I am as grateful as the next person. But, I don't know, man. She is so involved with it. I guess it was just too much for me?"

"She has different interests than you. Is that it?"

"You could say that, yes."

"She isn't really obsessed about it, is she? No more than you are obsessed with the animal world anyways, right?"

"Probably not." Lee grinned. "But, you know what I mean. It wouldn't work. And we are okay with that."

"I understand."

"And, to be honest, it is not only Susanne that changed. Everything is so different. Sometimes I really miss some of the things from the Old World."

"Really? Like what?" Levi asked, a bit concerned with Lee. He had never spoken like this before.

"You know I love big cats. I've studied lions my whole life. Here, I keep studying them, and I feel like I don't recognize them anymore. They are not the animals I fell in love with. For example, they can still eat meat, but catching them doing so is as rare as seeing an old man these days, right?"

"A little exaggerated there, but okay. I understand what you're trying to say."

"And by the way, we don't age and die, but animals do? Why is that?"

"Um-hum," Levi kept nodding and listening.

"I mean, look at Jacob. How old is he? Two hundred? Three hundred years old? I don't know. My animal friends live longer now, right? But, eventually, they get old and die. Why? Why can't they live forever as well?"

"I see." Levi tried to understand. "Are you saying that they are living creatures just as we are, and they should have the same rights? Is that what you are saying?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"What about plants?"

"What about them?"

"Well, they are also living creatures, aren't they? Should plants live forever as well?"

"Plants are different from animals, my friend."

"Yes. So are we, right?"

"Yeah, okay. I just feel for the animals, I guess. That's all."

"I have a friend at work that I want you to meet. He used to work on a project in the Old World that studied and protected marine turtles. He traveled the whole planet following them and put together several books about his research. Beautiful work with all that is there to be known about marine turtles. He has an entirely different opinion and a fascinating view of the changes in animal life. I think

you would enjoy talking to him."

"Yes, sure. I would like that."

"Nice. I will set it up."

Anne was still very impressed with what she had seen and learned at the Old World Museum. The tour helped her understand what sort of person was given a chance to live again, like herself, and what kind was not. Her parents were millionaires, big shots in the gun industry, and very influential in politics. When the world declared war on religion, it was a great opportunity. More guns needed to be produced to fight terrorists, as religious people were then labeled. And, of course, it would not be a fair fight if the enemy would not be able to fire back, which meant more demand for their product. But, when religion was finally down, many realized they had just killed their goose of golden eggs and lamented it. Anne knew her parents, and she had never agreed with their nationalist values and their capitalist way of life. She was at peace with the fact that her parents didn't make it into the new world. But, Martha, Levi's mom, was like a mother to Anne. She still struggled to understand why she was not there. She wanted to know more about what happened.

"What about Martha, Rachel?" Anne asked. "I know the short version of the story. But can you tell me more about what happened to her?"

"This is really important for you, isn't it?"

"I need to know."

"Okay, Anne. If you must know. I will tell you what happened," Rachel said. "After Levi died, Martha lost her faith," she continued. "None of her idols were able to protect Levi, she thought. We tried studying the Bible with her, but

she was convinced that religion was a complete waste of time. As you learned at the museum, once the governments of the world turned against religion and made it illegal, she felt vindicated and saw her hate against religion justified. In time, many were persuaded to believe that religion was the source of all humankind's problems. Religion became the nations' common enemy. More and more people became fierce opposers of religion, and Martha was one of them." Rachel paused and took a second. Anne got closer and put her arm around Rachel.

"It didn't take long until she turned on us," Rachel continued. "We tried everything we could to help her. To reason with her, but she would not listen. Right at the beginning of the attack on religion, when the time came for us to hide and get ready for what was yet to come, we still tried to help her. She said she had changed her mind and would join us. We agreed to meet her. When we arrived at the appointed place, the police appeared out of nowhere and took us into custody. As I said, practicing any religion was against the law at that time, and we were sent to prison. She betrayed us, her own mother and father." Rachel took another break. There were no tears, but it was still hard for the words to come out.

"Oh, Rachel. Really?" Anne breathed, incredulous at what Rachel was telling her.

"That was the last time I saw my daughter. We tried everything. There was nothing else we could have done," Rachel said.

"I had no idea. I'm so sorry, Rachel. I can't imagine how hard it was for you," Anne said, hugging Rachel. "But, thank you for letting me know. It helps a lot."

"Don't worry, child. I know," Rachel replied with a smile.

"Can you tell me more about what happened after that? How was it for you right before the Final War?" Anne said, eager to know more.

"Okay. Let me see. So, after we got arrested," she continued.

Fantasize

"Where am I?" she said, waking up in an unknown place. Her heart raced for a minute, but then it calmed down after she studied the bedroom again. She had never been in that room before, but somehow it looked familiar. "What is this place?" she asked herself. The room was spacious and had a fresh smell of lilies, her favorite flowers. The decor of the room was also her favorite. The rustic charm of the wisteria wallpaper, the gently worn furniture, and the charming antiques made this room feel and look like the house of her dreams. She loved the weathered textures, the warm color palette, and the touches of natural beauty. She stood up and went to the double doors adorned with airy curtains that allowed plenty of gentle light to filter through. She pulled back the curtains, opened the door, and stepped onto the balcony. "Wow," she said, barely holding herself together from excitement.

The scenery with rolling hills, woods, and the open countryside was breathtaking. She closed her eyes and

smiled at the pleasant feel of sunbeams touching her face. She took a deep breath. The air was so pure; she could almost taste it. With her eyes closed, she delighted at the orchestra of birds singing, wind whistling, trees shaking, horses trotting. "Horses!" she exclaimed, opening her eyes and looking excitedly to see the team of horses on the ridge. She loved horses. The horses ran down the hill, moving towards a group of people in the valley. She focused on their faces. "No!" she breathed. "It can't be. Is that?" She could not believe her eyes. Unable to wait any longer to finally meet them again, she turned back inside and looked for a change of clothes. She found some in the closet and looked for the bathroom.

She entered the bathroom already undressing, moving fast, when she saw something in a flash, from the corner of her eyes. She froze. She turned slowly and faced the mirror. "Oh," she gasped in shock, almost falling back stunned by the image. She touched her skin, her hair, her face. She stared at herself for a moment. "Is this really happening?" she asked.

Her heart started pounding. She finished getting dressed, left the bedroom, and ran downstairs. She suddenly stopped in awe. This was the house of her dreams. That confirmed her suspicions. She now knew where she was. She ran toward the door, went outside, and ran in the direction of the people. She increased her speed with every step, moving faster, hardly touching the ground. She could feel her muscles hammering. A white horse approached and ran alongside her. In one move, she jumped astride his back. She rode swiftly. Her hair danced in the wind, and the trees became a blur while she passed them by. She was almost there, getting closer to where the people were. They looked dumbfounded when they saw her. Jumping in a single move without stopping, she touched the ground running, and then

she finally jumped into the arms of her beloved ones. The tears of joy ran happy and free. "I love you so much," she said. "It is so good to see you...."

"Rachel, Rachel. Wake up. Were you dreaming again?" A female voice shouted, followed by sounds of tapping against metal bars.

"Meditating," Rachel replied, opening her eyes gradually.

"Oh, yeah. Meditation. Of course." The voice said. "Here, look what I brought for my favorite jailbird," the voice said, pushing some loose pages over the metal door.

"What is it?" Rachel asked.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Is this? The Bible?"

"Quiet, woman!" the voice demanded in a loud whisper. "No need to advertise it to the whole penitentiary." The voice continued, "Well, just a few pages. I couldn't get the whole book. They are making a point of destroying them. I will try to get you more pages if I can."

"Thanks, Sidney," Rachel said with a joyful tear running down her cheek. "You are my favorite jailor."

"You are welcome," Sidney replied. "Now, give me the positive thought for today?" she asked.

"keep [your] eyes, not on the things seen, but on the things unseen. For the things seen are temporary, but the things unseen are everlasting."

Rachel quoted the scripture from memory and continued to explain it. "By focussing on things unseen, I can travel outside this prison's walls. I can experience in my mind what perfect life will feel like in paradise. It reminds me that my present circumstances are temporary and that my future is bright and everlasting."

"That is a nice one," Sidney, the jailor, replied. "I have to go now. When I come back with your rations, you can tell me more about this paradise of yours, okay?"

"Of course, Sid. As always, it will be my pleasure."

* * *

"Wow, Rachel," Anne sighed. "Really. What a story."

"And that was how I survived my days in prison," Rachel said.

"Recalling scriptures and fantasizing about paradise?" Anne asked.

"Singing my favorite songs and constantly praying also helped. Sidney was a provision from God. The answer to my prayers. I have never treasured anything so much as I treasured those few Bible pages." Rachel said, moving toward the window. She stared at the view outside and continued. "I knew those pages came from Him."

"Really? How could you be so sure?"

"They contained my favorite scripture."

"Seriously? Which one was it?" Anne asked, joining Rachel by the window.

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor governments nor things now here nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor any other creation will be able to separate us from God's love that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Rachel quoted the scripture while gazing at the horizon. She then turned to Anne and continued: "Romans, chapter eight,

verses thirty-eight and thirty-nine. Only He knew how much I needed that. Nothing could separate me from His love. And I was never alone."

"That is incredible, Rachel," Anne said. "But what about your dream house?"

"What about it?"

"Don't get me wrong. Your house here is amazing, but it's not exactly the cottage with the rolling field of green and horses of your dreams, right? Aren't you a little bit disappointed that things are different from what you had thought they would be?"

"Of course not. You can try to imagine and fantasize about how God is going to bless you, but what he gives you always exceeds your expectations. I could never have imagined this," Rachel said, pointing to the world outside. The view of the forest from the top of her house tree was no less than stunning. "And one day, we will have our cottage in the fields with many horses. But, I am not in a hurry. Are you?" Rachel asked, turning back to the living room and walking towards the kitchen. The kettle informed them that the water was boiling.

"Why not have it now? You could if you wanted it, right?" Anne asked, following Rachel to the kitchen.

"Maybe. But what we want now is to be close to Lazarus, help with the Resurrection Center and the School for Resurrected Ones. We still have some work to do until we can experience perfection for eternity. After this work is done, we will still have centuries, millennia, to enjoy and satisfy all our desires. As I said, I am not in a hurry." Rachel paused, and holding the teapot; she asked, "Tea?"

"Yes, please," Anne answered. "Living for eternity. I still can't fully wrap my mind around it."

"It is hard to change your mindset regarding time. I remember it took me a while to see things in decades and centuries instead of in days and weeks. And when I'm thousand years old, I will probably have to adjust my mindset again," Rachel said with a smile before she offered, "cake?"

"Yes, thanks," Anne replied.

"All right. How did you enjoy your preparation for our study?" Rachel asked.

"I enjoyed it very much. I know I shouldn't feel like this, but I still think I am not ready for baptism. I mean, I don't want to disappoint my Creator, you know. But, at the same time, I'm sure I want this."

"That is a commendable feeling, Anne. It means that you take it very seriously. Let us talk about it. I will say a prayer, and we can start, okay?"

"Okay," Anne agreed.

Perfect

Pipa was the name of a village located in the northwest region of this land, once called Brazil. In the New Earth, countries and borders were things of the past, and the world was not divided into nations anymore. There were only continents, regions, towns, and villages. This region of the land was extremely rich in natural wonders. Its dunes, sea, mangroves, lagoons, wildlife, typical fruits, and tropical climate would give you a deeper understanding of the meaning of the word 'paradise.' The turquoise-green clear and warm waters of the Atlantic Ocean washed its sandy beaches. Its mild temperatures made this little corner of the planet a perfect nursery room for several specimens of animal life, including marine turtles that choose this place for spawning. The study and protection of the marine turtles used to be the job of Jose Carlos, a marine biologist born in this small village.

Levi worked with Jose in the Hyperloop pods maintenance

team. He spoke with him about Lee and his love for animals. That weekend Jose invited Jacob, Rachel, Levi, and his friend, Lee, to join him and his family on a visit to his home village. In the past, leaving New York by plane, the flight to Pipa would take about twenty hours. Now, the same trip took them only a couple using the Intercontinental Hyperloop System. A considerable part of the journey consisted of crossing the North Atlantic Ocean underwater. The translucent nature of the pods' roof and windows allowed its passengers to be astonished by the magnificence of marine life every single time. During this incredible submarine voyage, whales, sharks, fish of all kinds, and many more aquatic animals could be seen.

"Mom, Mom. Look!" Jose's youngest eight-year-old boy said. "It's a blue whale, look!"

"Wow. Isn't she beautiful?" Jose's wife replied.

"She is huge!" Jose's twelve-year-old son added. Jacob and Rachel were fascinated by the children. Levi had made trips underwater before, but he was as excited as were Jose's boys. So was Lee, amazed to see a blue whale that closes for the first time.

When they arrived, Jose took his guests to his parents' house. They lived by the beach close to a famous bay called "The Dolphins Bay." Every day, dolphins would visit the bay to enjoy dinner and play with the locals. The bay had a concave shape surrounded by high walls of white-colored soft rocks, with its top covered by a dense green of trees and brown bushes. Its waters were deep, warm, and crystal clear. Its waves could be high sometimes, but that day they were quiet and shallow. The access was challenging, protected by the tides and the shore of rocks. But the bay itself had a plain, clean, and white sandy beach. Jose provided everyone with snorkels and took them for a swim

in the bay. Their perfect bodies allowed them to stay underwater for minutes on end. The dolphins would take them all the way to the bottom of the bay and back. Lee joined his new dolphin friend in a hunt, chasing a school of fish trapped in the bay. He held him by the fin, and with impressive speed, they cut through the fish. Jumping over the waves with fancy acrobatic moves, the dolphins looked like they were having as much fun as were Jose's guests.

They decided to spend the night on the beach. The full moon illuminated the night, turning the beach into silver, where the fire kept them warm. Jose played the guitar; his wife sang with a fabulous voice while Rachel and the children danced around the fire. Levi sat close to Jacob. He was concerned about Lee and needed Jacob's help.

"I'm so glad to see Lee enjoying himself. He has been a little bit negative lately," Levi said.

"I have noticed. People wake up here from a completely different reality, and some just need more time to adapt than others," Jacob replied.

"I don't know many people that struggle as Lee does. That concerns me."

"Do you know how his spiritual routine is?"

"Lee is studying the New Rolls now, and he is getting the same education as I am. That is what worries me. Lee has a perfect body and a perfect brain, just like everybody else does. Why can't he appreciate the wisdom behind the laws and changes of the New Earth as others do?"

"We all have perfect bodies and perfect brains, but we are not yet perfect."

"Are you referring to the one thousand years-time period leading to perfection?"

"Yes. Perfection is relative. Having perfect physical bodies

does not make us perfect. Not in a complete sense, anyway. Just like a child born on the New Earth has a perfect little body, but he is not ready," Jacob said, smiling at the boys trying elaborate yet inelegant moves in their attempt at dancing. Jacob then continued. "A baby needs time to grow and develop to reach his full potential. We might have perfect bodies now, but we are all going to need every one of those one thousand years to grow to maturity."

"I see," Levi said, looking at Jacob and then back at the children.

"The perfection we should strive for is closely linked to our spiritual growth, only possible by strengthening our relationship with our Creator. And we know already that many will not get to that kind of perfection."

"The Final Test?" Levi guessed. "Some are not going to make it, right?"

"Remember what is written? *'Now as soon as the 1,000 years have ended, Satan will be released from his prison, and he will go out to mislead,'*" Jacob started quoting the scriptures.

"*'The number of these is as the sand of the sea.'*" Levi completed the quote, grabbing a handful of sand and then watching it fall from his hand while he let it go.

"Yes. Think about Adam and Eve. Even though they were perfect, they still allowed their hearts to be deceived. And what about the perfect angels, perfect spiritual creatures, that decided to follow Satan? In the same way, during the Final Test, people will be perfect humans, but not all of them will be perfect mature spiritual persons, with a strong bond with their spiritual father."

"I hope my friend passes the test," Levi said, looking at Lee joining the children dancing around the fire.

"We all need to make sure we are ready for it. It's a

personal choice that we all have to make. You did well by introducing Jose to Lee. Jose is a mature brother. He is going to be a good influence on him. And Lee has a good heart. Let us not give up on him."

* * *

The next day, Jose took them to a spot where the marine turtle laid their eggs. It was the perfect time to visit. That day the eggs hatched, and they could witness hundreds of tiny marine turtles run from their nest to the ocean. After another diving session, this time swimming with the turtles, Lee fell in love with them too. He spent the rest of the afternoon by Jose's side. He would not leave him for a second. At some moments, they looked like they were having a deep conversation. Other times, they would emerge from somewhere laughing as if they were childhood friends.

"You know what, Lee?" Jose said. "Enjoying nature like this is amazing, isn't it? Did you ever dream of one day being able to interact with animals like that? Being able to communicate with them, understand them, feel our connection to the planet and with all other forms of life in it. I'm telling you. This is the real life. A life worth living forever, don't you think?"

"I have to agree with you," Lee answered, staring at the ocean with grave eyes. He then faked a smile.

"What is the matter?" Jose asked.

"When I was a child, my dream was to become a vet. I liked the idea of helping them. But soon, I realized I wasn't cut out for the job. I can't stand to watch an animal die. You

know some of the dolphins and turtles we swim with today by name. Does it not bother you to know that they will have to die while you get to continue to live forever?"

"As you said, I know many of these animals well. It feels like they are part of my family. And in the beginning, I also had to ask myself the same question. But, after I had my own children, I realized something about creation."

"What was it?" Lee asked, turning towards Jose.

"Look at them," Jose said, looking at his boys playing on the beach. "Can you tell they are my children?"

"Are you kidding? The resemblance is undeniable. The oldest has even your funny way of walking."

"The way I lean to one side, you mean?" Jose asked for confirmation. Lee answered with a smile. "Yeah. I got that from my Dad. Runs in the family," Jose said, making them both laugh. Jose continued. "So, you can tell they are my children by the way they look, even by the way they walk. One could say that they were made the same as me, in my image, right? That's why they look so much like me."

"Yeah," Lee said, agreeing but hesitant.

"We, humans, we are creators ourselves. We build houses; we make our children's toys; we manufacture all kinds of tools and machines. For example, at work, we have intelligent machines for lifting heavyweight and digging tunnels. Some machines are intelligent enough to build and assemble all the underwater tubes in the Continental Hyperloop System. I have worked with some of these machines for years. And I have to be honest with you; we get attached to them. But, do you think I have the same connection with this intelligent machine as I have to my sons?"

"Of course not. That would be ridiculous."

"It would, right?" Jose continued. "Why do we build houses, toys, tools, and machines? It's not for the sake of making things. We create them with a purpose. Everything we build is for our benefit and the benefit of our children and our children's children."

"I can't argue with that, but I still can't see the point."

"The Creator made you in his image. That makes you his son. If everything we create is for our children's benefit, for what purpose was everything else around us created then?"

"God created it for us?"

"For his children's and their children's benefit. We don't build machines to last forever. But wouldn't you give eternal life to your child if you could? Well, he could, and he did."

"Okay," Lee said, still not convinced. "Machines are built with a specific purpose. What is the purpose of animals, then? For food, looking pretty, and breaking our hearts when they die?"

"As a biologist, you understand how vital animals are for sustaining life on this planet. So, yes. Our survival is strictly linked to their existence, but I think they are here also to teach us a vital lesson."

"What lesson is that?"

"Well, they make me think about the kind of love the Creator has for me."

"How so?"

"You know the love you have for animals? What do you expect in return from them?"

"What do you mean? I can't expect anything from them."

"Why not?"

"Because they can't really understand or conceptualize what would constitute an equivalent way of paying me back?" Lee said in a sarcastic tone. "I don't know, man."

Mainly because I love them unconditionally. Seeing them happy makes me happy, and that is enough for me, I guess."

"We are so small and limited before God. We would never be able to pay back what he has given to us. But that fact does not stop him from loving us. Out of love, he went to great lengths to give us the life we have today. This is the kind of love the Creator shows toward us."

"Huh," Lee thought out loud.

"And, what if someone or something would threaten your beloved animals' existence? How would you feel about it?"

"I would do whatever was in my power to protect and save them."

"You feel like this about animals. How would you feel if your own children were being threatened?"

"I don't have children, but I can imagine that I would want to eliminate the threat even more."

"What do you think the Final War was?"

"Was God eliminating the threat?" Lee said, unsure of his answer.

"Well, think about it," Jose said, standing up. "One thing is for sure." He continued moving towards the water. "Creation teaches us a great deal about its Creator. And animals are great teachers."

"Huh," Lee gasped, appreciating Jose's point.

To make that memorable day even more unforgettable, Jose took the group to a lake where the river meets the sea. From the top of the cliff, they watched the sunset—a masterpiece of lights and colors as they had never seen before. Lee was not with them on the cliff. He was down on the beach, saying goodbye to his new friends in a last swim.

After the sunset, they headed back to Jose's parent's home. Dinner was almost ready. Jose's mother was serving her

specialty that night. For her guests, she made breaded lobster with fried cassava, a typical dish from their region. She explained that they usually eat a plant-based diet. But that day was no ordinary day, so she had decided to make something special. Lee hesitated at first. But to be polite, he agreed to taste the lobster. After that, he couldn't stop eating.

The Kingdom Hall, the place used to worship the Creator, was located at the center of the village, a thirty-minute walk from Jose's parent's home. Once the meeting was over, the whole congregation got together at Jose's house for more good food and music. Levi had never seen Lee so happy.

The Attendant

In the Lazarus Centers, hundreds of people were brought back to life every day. People were resurrected according to the period they lived in. The righteous ones were awakened before their unrighteous contemporaries. The righteous ones were those that knew and served the Creator before they died. They were loyal to him and to his earthly organization that preached the coming of his kingdom rule. The unrighteous ones were those that didn't know the Creator and were given a chance to learn about him.

It was assumed that a person that lived thousands of years before the Final War would be in shock if he was resurrected in this new world. To avoid this person feeling confused and lost, new Lazarus Centers were built with 'Adjustment Environments.' These environments mirrored the conditions of the person's time. Clothing, architecture, climate, everything looked and felt just like the person's previous reality. He would be welcomed in a familiar setting

by one of his contemporaries and be slowly introduced to the future. At that moment, the Lazarus Centers worldwide were still working on Phase I of the resurrection process, which involved the resurrection of people from just a couple of centuries before the Final War. That day people were already lining up at the reception desk. It was going to be another busy day at Lazarus I.

"Good morning. Welcome to Lazarus I. Do you have an appointment?" said the attendant at the reception desk.

"Good morning, Brother," said the next one in line. "My name is John Martin. I got this assignment," he said, handing a small glassy card to the attendant.

"Okay, John. Let me check it for you," said the attendant. "Oh, yes. Welcome, Brother Martin. You are helping us with cleaning today, right?" he asked to confirm the information shown on his translucent monitor screen after scanning the glassy card.

"Yes," John replied with a big smile.

"Great! Please, brother, take the elevator and go to the first floor. Once you get out of the elevator, look to your left, and right away, you will see the cleaning department's reception. Ask for Brother Ivanov, Paul. He will give you more instructions, okay?"

"First floor, get out, turn left, Paul. Got it. Thanks."

"I thank you, Brother. Have fun," said the attendant. "Next, please." He requested.

"Hello Brother, good morning," said the lady next in line approaching the desk.

"Hi. Welcome to Lazarus I. Do you have an appointment?"

"Yes," she said before bursting into tears.

"What happened?" asked the attendant.

"Sorry, Brother," said the man accompanying the crying

lady. "We came to welcome our daughter. Here, this is our assignment card," he continued giving the attendant his card. "She is scheduled to be resurrected today."

"Oh, wow. Congratulations!" Exclaimed the attendant, overly excited, making some turn their heads. "Oh, sorry," he said, now almost whispering. "It's my first day. I still get too excited."

"That is all right," the man replied. "We can't get over it either."

"Yeah. That is correct. I can see it now," said the attendant getting confirmation on his monitor. "Congratulations, Brother and sister Lima. Indeed. Your daughter is going to wake up today."

"Oh, my Brother," sister Lima said, leaning over the reception desk and giving the attendant a big hug. "You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this moment."

"This is a special day, right, sister Lima?" the attendant said, hugging her back. "Look. Normally I request someone to accompany the families to the Resurrection Center. But, my shift is almost over now, and if you don't mind, I would like to take you to your daughter myself. Is that okay?"

"Yes, of course, my Brother. Thank you."

"Okay. Give me a minute."

The attendant finished his shift, and someone else took his place at the reception. Brother and sister Lima were accompanied by their other children and some of their close friends. The attendant led the group to the elevator and pushed a button on the panel. The elevator closed its transparent doors, and it started to move down. For most of them, this was their first time inside the Resurrection Center of Lazarus. The descent unveiled a colossal high-tech white

structure. It looked like going down through a giant beehive made of steel, glass, and lights. Family Lima and their friends were amazed by the view. The attendant got a thrill every time he went down those floors. That tour always brought back good memories that made him grin whenever he thought of them.

"The Resurrection Center has a total of ten floors," the attendant said. "The other Lazarus Centers have different configurations, but here, the floors are divided between righteous and unrighteous. As you can imagine, we need more floors dedicated to the resurrection of unrighteous than righteous ones. Every floor has hundreds of individual welcome rooms. Sorry. I can't give you the precise numbers. I am not the one normally doing the tours. Did I mention this is my first day?" The group kept staring outside, showing no reaction to the attendant's question. "Anyhow," he smiled at them and continued. "Every welcome room has an 'Awakening Room,' where the person wakes up, and a waiting room, where family and friends gather to wait and finally welcome the resurrected one. And, here we are. The Nursery Floor," the attendant said, exiting the elevator and walking straight ahead.

"A nursery floor. Of course," Brother Lima said.

"Yes. Your daughter Lidia was only four months old when she died, right?"

"How do you know that?" asked sister Lima, surprised.

"It showed in her record," the attendant replied.

"I still can't believe this is happening," Brother Lima said.

"I never doubted," Sister Lima said. "I always knew my Creator would bring my daughter back."

"Our Creator has a great memory. And he is always eager to make us happy, isn't he?" said the attendant leading them

through the corridors passing by many windows. Every window showed a welcome room decorated as for a child's party, full of people celebrating the resurrection of babies together with their parents. The group got mesmerized by every window, making it hard for some of them to keep up with the attendant's pace. "Now, welcome to Lidia's welcome room," proclaimed the attendant. Family Lima and their friends were overwhelmed with emotions once they saw the room. It was all decorated. There were balloons, baby girls' toys, and signs saying: 'Welcome, Lidia.'

"That is just amazing," Brother Lima said.

"Do you like it?" asked the attendant. "It's nothing fancy. Just something small. This is our way to share in your joy. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" sister Lima said. "I love it!" she exclaimed and hugged the attendant again. This time the whole group joined them in a big family hug.

"Thank you so very much, son. Sorry. What is your name again?" Brother Lima asked.

"My name is Levi," the attendant replied.

"Hey, Levi. Over here," Marcel said, waiting in Lazarus' busy lobby. Levi waved at Marcel, moving through the people towards him. "You are late, man! Hey. What is the matter?" he asked, noticing that Levi had been crying.

"Do you ever get used to it?" Levi asked.

"Many resurrections, huh?"

"Gets me every time," Levi replied.

"Who is the sentimental one, now?" Marcel said, teasing Levi. "It's amazing, right? It's hard not to get emotional. But, you get used to it," he said while putting his arm around Levi's shoulders. They walked together to the building's exit.

"Hey, bro! Let's celebrate your first day at your new assignment."

"Yes. Sounds like a plan," Levi replied with a smile.

"I will take you to a special place today. You are going to love it. I know this Brother that loves cooking and having people over. He built a sort of inn where he enjoys spoiling his guests. We got to meet him on our last family trip riding horses in the mountains. He is a super nice guy. And his food is, how can I describe it?"

"Let me guess. 'Perfect?'"

"Ha-ha. Yes. Obviously."

"All this because I got a new assignment?"

"It's not just any assignment. This is Lazarus I. Pretty good for a 'freshman.' Freshman. Got it?" Marcel said, joking.

"Not funny," Levi replied with a blank stare.

"Besides," Marcel continued. "We didn't get the chance to celebrate your baptism properly. Just me and you. Isn't that right, Brother Adams?"

"Oh, yeah. That is true."

"Not to mention your big day coming up, right? How are you feeling? Are you as nervous as the first time?"

"Not yet. Getting there, though," Levi said.

The New Assignment

They had been fighting their way through the bushes for hours. "Let's keep moving. We are almost there now," the father said, trying to keep his nerves under control. He knows the soldiers are approaching, and the Final War is near.

"Are you sure this is the way?" the mother asked.

"Yes. Look," the father showed her a piece of paper. "We just passed these checkpoints here. According to the instructions, we should now keep moving north, and we will be there in less than one hour."

"Dad! I am hungry," one of the twins said.

"And I am tired," said the other one.

"Okay, girls. Let's take a break," the mother said.

The father took out his backpack, grabbed two cereal bars and a bottle of water from inside it, and handed them over to his children.

"Here, girls. Eat something," the father said. Then, he

turned to his wife and spoke softly, being careful not to be overheard by the girls. "We have been deep into the woods for hours. Who thought of this plan to meet out here in the middle of the forest? It makes little sense, don't you think?"

"Do you remember when the brothers warned us, saying that the instructions would not make sense at first? Just like when Moses fled Egypt with God's people and...."

"...and they took a route that got them trapped between mountains and Pharaoh's army when the sea was opened, and they survived. Yes, yes. I remember that. I love that story too, but...."

"Calm down, baby. We are going to be alright."

"Okay. You're right. I just don't like to be out here with you and the girls."

"Don't worry. We have all we need in our go-bags. And, as you said. We are close to the meeting point now. We will be fine."

"Okay, then. Let's continue," the father said when suddenly the cry of some startled bird focused his attention in that direction. Something was coming through the bushes. "Quiet!" he demanded with a whisper. "Do you hear that?" The mother held the children and made them silent. The sound approached slowly, carefully, coming from the same direction they had come.

"Quick! In here," the father said, leading them into a hole in the ground behind the bushes. They flattened themselves down inside the hole and, through a veil of leaves, almost as dense as a green curtain, the father watched. The sound was from boots crushing the vegetation beneath them. Soldiers in black moved through the woods like skillful hunters. There was no way to know how many there were. The children were scared. The mother covered their mouths, closed her

eyes, and started praying silently. One soldier stood a few meters from where the family was hiding. He paused, almost on top of them, dropped to his knees, and studied the ground. The soldier shook his head several times as if he was confused. The father held his breath. The soldier's eyes scanned the ground and were moving their focus toward the family. But the eyes of the soldier, the only thing not covered by his black mask, stopped before they found them. The father's instinct was to run and lead the soldier away, but he didn't have to. Inexplicably, the soldier moved away, blind to all the clear trails leading to the family's location. The crashing sound of the forest under his boots faded away with every step.

"I think he is gone," the father said.

"What about the others?" The mother asked.

"How in heavens did they miss us?"

"Heavens all right. God made them blind."

"Okay, girls. I think it is safe to come out now. Let's keep moving."

* * *

"Then," Marcel continued. "We got to the meeting place where the brothers were gathered together. Later that day, the soldiers that were looking for us finally found our camp, but they were too late. When they got there, the sky suddenly opened. And the most bright light came from the heavens. A loud sound like thunder echoed through the forest, and almost like in the blink of an eye, they and everything else that was bad in the world was gone. We had a seven-day

party, celebrating and thanking the Creator for our new life, a new beginning. The beginning of the New Earth."

"Heieij," Sarah and Naomi cheered.

"I love this story so much, Dad," young Sarah said.

"Me too. Me too. Again, Daddy. Again." Little Naomi requested persistently.

"That is enough story for today. Time for bed," Marcel said, covering Sarah with her favorite blanket and taking Naomi in his arms to her bed.

"Dad?" Sarah said.

"Hi, sweetie."

"When are we going to visit Nathalie and Misja again?"

"Soon, baby, okay?"

"Soon when?"

"What about this summer year?"

"Really? Promise?" Sarah asked excitedly.

"Yes. Would you like that?"

"I would love that."

"It's a deal, then," Marcel assured her. He kissed the girls goodnight, turned the little lamp off, and left their room, closing the door behind him.

"The same story again?" June asked from her bed when Marcel entered the room.

"Every time," Marcel answered. "They love this one with their older sisters in it," Marcel replied, joining June under the bedding.

"Imagine how much they are going to enjoy learning all the details of how it really happened," June said, putting her book away and turning off the lamp on her nightstand.

"It's almost time for Naomi to study this at school, right?" Marcel said while turning off the light on his side of the bed.

"Yes. She will turn ten next year. Can you believe it?" June replied.

"We will be in our new assignment. Do you think the girls are going to like it?"

"To be in one of the best spots on the planet for stargazing, where their older twin sisters happen to live, in the so-called *land flowing with milk and honey*? Huh, let me think," June answered with a smirk.

"You're right. The girls are going to love Israel," Marcel agreed.

"It is now so different from when we visited that region for the first time. Still, in the Old World, remember?"

"I do. That night stargazing in Mitzpe Ramon was beautiful."

"I loved that you asked me to marry you that day under the stars," June said, kissing Marcel gently.

"That was very romantic, right?" Marcel kissed June back. June nodded yes.

"Are you excited to move there?" Marcel asked.

"I still can't believe we got this assignment," June replied.

"Sarah asked about Nathalie and Misja again today," Marcel said.

"She will love to be around her sisters again. It will be good for her and Naomi as they grow up."

"Definitely," Marcel agreed. "I'm excited too. I saw the project of their Lazarus extension. The drawings of the new section for the First Century resurrections look amazing. I have to show you."

"Can you imagine?" June said. "Meeting John the Baptist in the flesh?"

"It's still going to take a while, of course. But I better start working on my list of questions for him now," Marcel said,

making June smile.

"I haven't felt this tired for a long time," Marcel said, stretching arms and legs followed by a long yawn. "What a great party that was, right?" he said, moving deep under the sheets.

"Oh yeah. It was a beautiful wedding. Levi and Anne were so happy. She looked astonishing, didn't she? I loved her dress. So bright and colorful."

"Funny how Levi managed to be more nervous than the first time."

"I know the resurrected ones are free to marry again with someone else, but I love when they decide to stick together and remarry. So beautiful."

"Yes. I never doubted that Levi and Anne would remarry. I'm so happy for my friend. I'm going to miss them, June."

"Me too, baby. But it will be only a few decades. It will pass in a heartbeat. You'll see," June said, giving Marcel a comforting hug."

"We will have to visit them quite often now. Especially with the baby coming and all," Marcel said.

"Baby? What, baby?" June asked, sitting up straight.

"Ahaaa," Marcel mumbled, realizing he had spoken too much. "Didn't you know?" he asked with a plastic smile.

"Know what?" June said, leaning towards Marcel with threatening almond eyes.

"Okay. I'll tell you, but promise you will not freak out, okay?" Marcel said, straightening himself up and holding June's hands.

"Tell me what, Marcel?" June said, being serious this time.

"Okay. Here it comes," Marcel paused before he announced. "Anne is *expecting*."

"What!" June yelled.

Expecting

The yellow New York cab stopped in front of the giant golden gate featuring an intricate design of leafy ornamental scrolls. Families living in colossal mansions were a common thing in the Old World.

"It's me," she yelled from the backseat of the cab to the guard in the guardhouse by the gate.

"Oh, welcome home, Miss Castle," the guard said.

The golden gates opened slowly as the yellow cab entered the premises. The short trip along the driveway was designed to impress its visitors—beautiful gardens with an imperial-style landscape. Bushes and hedges were shaped in the form of swans, deer, and other wild animals. Marble sculptures of Greek gods led the way. Dense wood guarded the surroundings. The cab drove around the fountain and stopped at the steps of the mansion's main entrance. The view of the mansion was awe-inspiring. Its French Classicism style made you feel like you were visiting a palace

in France.

"Wait here," she said to the driver and got out of the car with difficulty, carrying only her bag and blazing anger. The stairway posed even more challenges before she got to the massive front door.

"Good afternoon, Miss Castle. What a pleasant surprise," the butler said, welcoming her by the door.

"For crying out loud, James. How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that? Where is Mom?" She inquired.

"Sorry, Miss Castle. I'll announce your visit at once."

"No need, James. I will do it myself. Where is she?" she demanded impatiently.

"Sorry, ma'am. Mrs. Castle is in the study, ma'am."

She climbed up the stairs as fast as her blood pressure allowed. She got to the upper floor and burst into the study.

"Anne!" Mrs. Castle exclaimed, startled by her daughter's abrupt entry. "What is this? Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Mom, please tell me that it's not true," Anne demanded.

"What are you doing here? Where is Levi? Did you come from Maryland by yourself?" Mrs. Castle asked, concerned.

"Mom, you have to promise to tell me the truth, okay?"

"What are you talking about, sweetheart? Calm down. You shouldn't be exerting yourself like that in your condition. It is not good for your baby."

"I'm pregnant! Not sick!" Anne replied before she suddenly felt dizzy and weak.

"Oh, my goodness, Anne!" Mrs. Castle said, running towards Anne and catching her before she fell. "James! James! *Help!*" he screamed.

"What happened, madam?" James asked, rushing into the room.

"Call the doctor," Mrs. Castle said.

"No, no. I'm fine," Anne said, trying to sit up.

"The doctor is on his way, ma'am," James said.

"Please, James. Leave us alone," Anne requested. "I need to talk with Mom."

"Anne, stop it. You will hurt your baby," Mrs. Castle reprimanded her

"No. I have to. It's important. I'm fine," Anne asserted, standing up with her mother and James' help and sitting in the chair across the table. "Thank you, James. But now, please," she requested.

Mrs. Castle nodded, and James left the room, closing the door behind him.

"What is so important that you had to put your pregnancy at risk like that, Anne? Have you lost your mind?" Mrs. Castle asked.

"Just promise to tell me the truth, Mom."

"The truth about what?"

"Is it true that you and Dad are selling guns to terrorists?"

"What?" Mrs. Castle yelled, moving a step back. "What nonsense is this now, Anne? Who told you that?"

"The FBI, Mom. The FBI."

"What do you mean, 'the FBI'?"

"An agent contacted me yesterday at my home, asking questions. He told me that if I didn't cooperate with their investigation, he would put me in jail as your accomplice. Tell me, Mom. Why is the FBI investigating us? What is going on?"

"FBI?" Mrs. Castle mumbled, turning pale. "I have to call your Dad."

"Oh, no! So it's true," Anne said in dismay.

"Anne, what did he say?" Mrs. Castle said, holding Anne

by her shoulders. "You have to tell me exactly what he said."

"He said something about an international criminal organization made up of powerful people and that you and Dad were involved. He said he has evidence to put all of us in jail. But, if we come forward and give him the information he needs, he could give us a deal and put us in witness protection." Anne continued. "So, it's true, isn't it? You guys are selling guns on the black market."

"Yes. It is true," Mr. Castle said, entering the room unexpectedly.

"Dad? No!" Anne screamed, bursting into tears. "Why? What have you done?"

"You don't understand. It had to be done. I can explain," Anne's father said.

"I can't believe this. It is true, and you just confessed it."

"Anne, let me explain."

"No, no, no!" Anne shouted and stormed out of the room. "I don't want any explanation. I'm pregnant. I'm getting married. I will not go to prison because of you."

"Anne, calm down, please. You will hurt the baby," her mother urged.

"Come back here, Anne," her father demanded. "No one is going to prison."

"I know I'm not. Not so sure about you," Anne said, taking out an audio recorder and playing back the recording.

Anne: *"So, it's true, isn't it? You guys are selling guns in the black market."*

Mr. Castle: *"Yes. It is true."* Anne stopped the recording.

"Anne, please!" Anne's mother fell on her knees and begged.

"Anne!" her father called out, raising his voice and losing his temper. "Give me this tape. Nobody is going to prison. I

promise you."

"No. I am taking this to the feds, now!" Anne said, running down the stairs. Her father ran behind her and forcefully tried to take the audio recorder from her hands. They struggled. She fought back, not letting go of the recorder.

"Take your hands off me!" Anne yelled. Her father let go of her. She tripped, fell down the stairs, and hit the bottom of the stairs unconscious.

* * *

"Next thing I know," Anne continued. "I was in a hospital bed with Levi by my side, holding my hand in tears. That day I lost my baby. And I never saw my parents again," she said while moving the roller with blue paint on it, up and down the wall.

"Anne, I'm so sorry," June said.

"That is okay," Anne replied.

"What about the FBI agent?" June asked.

"Never heard of him again," Anne said, putting the roller down and grabbing a chair.

"Anne, it must have been very difficult for you. I can't even imagine it," June said while resuming painting the white wall across the room.

"It's all in the past now," Anne said. "What matters is that I will have my baby back," Anne said, sitting in the chair by the window and looking at Levi and Marcel working together outside.

"That is amazing. How are you feeling?" June said, putting her brush away and sitting beside Anne.

"You know. When I learned about our Creator and got to know him personally, I knew he could bring my child back. I was twenty-two weeks pregnant when I lost my son. I loved him so much. And I never really stopped thinking about him until the day I died. But, God is so loving and good that I don't have to miss my baby anymore. Just a few days before our second wedding, I got the confirmation. I will have my son back. I have never been this happy, June." Anne said, getting emotional.

"Wow. I'm so happy for you," June said, getting closer to Anne and holding her hands. They shed tears of joy for a moment.

"Auntie, Anne!" Sarah came in shouting.

"Hi, my dear. Come here," Anne said, hugging young Sarah.

"Daddy said your baby will be resurrected?" Sarah asked.

"Well," Anne hesitated for a moment looking for words to explain the situation to a child.

"So, you have to go to Lazarus? Can I come too?" Sarah asked.

"No, baby. I don't have to go to Lazarus," Anne responded.

"Sarah, darling," June said. "Remember the story of Mary. Jesus' mother when he was on Earth."

"Yes," Sarah answered.

"Remember how Mary got pregnant with Jesus?"

"Yes!" Sarah replied, excited because she knew the answer. "God put the baby in her belly."

"Exactly. Auntie Anne's baby wasn't born yet when he died. God can put the little baby back in auntie's belly, and he will grow, and this time he can be born," June explained.

"Really?" Sarah asked, fascinated.

"Yes. Really," Anne confirmed.

"But you don't have a big belly, auntie Anne. How do you know you have a baby?"

"I don't have a belly yet, Sarah," Anne replied with a smile. "But, I'm sure God is going to give a big belly soon."

"How do you know that?" Sarah asked, puzzled.

"Remember when you learned at school about our Kings in heaven?"

"Uh-huh," Sarah confirmed, nodding *yes* and said: "One hundred and forty-four thousand."

"That is exactly it. Very good," Anne said. "Before going to heaven, they lived on Earth, right? Remember how they knew they were going to be kings in heaven?"

"God's active force made them sure," Sarah replied.

"Wow, well done!" Anne said, impressed. "Exactly. They were convinced. They had no doubt, right? In the same way, I'm also convinced. I have no doubt."

"Are you sure it wasn't an angel that talked to you about your baby? Mary talked to an angel, you know?" Sarah asserted. Anne and June broke down in laughter.

"Yes. You're right, baby. She did talk to an angel," Anne said.

"Does he have a name, Anne?" June asked.

"We chose to call him Matthias."

"Beautiful name, Auntie!" Sarah exclaimed. "What does it mean?"

"It means '*Gift of Jehovah.*'"

PART TWO

Fun and Games

"What an amazing view," Matthias said.

This was one of the most beautiful places in the New World. The place featured the most stunning mountain landscapes, vertical walls, sheer cliffs, and long and deep valleys. The blue skies invited you in, and the soothing breeze urged you to stay. The colors and aroma of spring flooded your senses with joy and awe. The place's natural beauty had a magnificent variety of shapes and forms everywhere you looked. Rocky pinnacles and tall towers, contrasting with crags and plateaus' plain surfaces, all exquisitely sculpted by time. At the horizon, mountains stood tall as peaks with interceding canyons. In some places, they rose alone, and in others, they produced vast and spectacular facades with their feet covered with pine trees touching the emerald crystalline waters of an alpine lake nestled deep in the mountains. The peak was called the Castelletto Della Busazza—one of the highest peaks in the

Dolomites region. That was the first time Matthias visited that place. But, the Dolomites seemed to have become Mark's favorite place in the world. And something appeared to be unique about that spot.

"Thanks for coming, bro," Mark replied. "It's nice to have someone to share this with."

"You sound like you have no friends besides me," Matthias said.

"I do have friends, of course, but not all of them like to do what I do when I come here."

"Really? And what exactly is that? Hiking?"

"No. They are okay with hiking," Mark smiled. Mark was what you would call a geek or a nerd if you came from the 21st-century. He was not much of a sports guy. Just like Matthias, Mark was fascinated by all things ancient. He was a walking encyclopedia when it came to 21st-century trivia. They used to collect artifacts and to spend hours exploring all kinds of topics about the Old World.

"So, what then?" Matthias asked.

"It is an ancient sport. The most thrilling of all sports," Mark said, excited. "Nothing for the faint-hearted, as people use to say. But don't worry. You don't have to do it if you don't want to," he said.

The most thrilling of all sports? Which sport could it be? Matthias wondered. Besides going hiking now and then, Mark didn't leave his lab much. "Okay. What sport is it, then?" Matthias asked.

"Come with me," Mark said, moving towards the edge of the cliff. "Look down there," he instructed.

"Wow! That is really high," Matthias stated the obvious, looking down from a 3.000-meter peak.

"Have you ever heard of BASE jumping?" Mark asked.

"BASE Jumping?" Matthias exclaimed, with eyes shouting, looking at Mark in disbelief. "No, no, no. What? Is that your sport?" Matthias asked incredulously. BASE jumping was a recreational sport practiced by some adventurers in the Old World. The acronym stood for four categories of fixed objects from which one can jump: building, antenna, span, and earth. In that 'sport,' people simply jumped from a fixed object such as a cliff, and after a freefall delay, they deployed a parachute to slow down their descent and land. That was the first time Matthias heard Mark talking about it.

"I have personally designed these parachutes with artificial intelligence," Mark continued, turning around and getting his camping backpack. He opened it and took out a small black bag. He pushed a button, and the thing lighted up. "It calculates everything on my way down; altitude, wind, obstacles, everything. All I have to do is jump and enjoy," he explained enthusiastically. "At the exact right time, the parachute opens and guides me to a safe landing. It will be the most exciting thing you have ever done in your life so far. Wanna try?"

"No! What? No! Isn't this against the law or something?" Matthias asked in shock at the idea of jumping from a cliff. He had heard rumors about some youngsters doing risky things for the adrenaline rush, but he had no idea that Mark would do something like that.

"Actually, no. We would not be breaking any law. I triple-checked."

"Huh," Matthias gasped, surprised to know that.

"Besides, you are eighteen, right?" Mark asked.

"No. I am nineteen now," Matthias corrected him proudly. Mark was a few years older than Matthias. They were best friends growing up, but Matthias wasn't always involved in

Mark's life after he turned eighteen.

"So, you are an adult, huh?" Mark said, rumpiling and tousling Matthias hair like he used to do. Matthias pushed Mark's hand away and replied with a smile.

"So? What do you think?" Mark asked.

My Mom would kill me if I did anything like this, Matthias said to himself.

"Come on, Matthias! It's going to be fun."

"No way, man! If anything goes wrong, there is no way we can survive this."

"I am telling you! Artificial Intelligence parachutes! I have done it hundreds of times already with the guys from North. It's one hundred percent safe. I guarantee. I would never put someone else's life in danger. Especially not yours. You are my best friend."

Guys from North, again? Matthias asked himself. He had heard that Mark was hanging out with the young ones from the northern district. Matthias had never met them. They were quite popular among the young ones but didn't score very high with the mature ones. He thought Mark was done with them. He was mistaken.

"Look!" Mark said. "I brought this one, especially for you. It is my best one. As safe as it can get."

"I don't know," Matthias replied.

"You don't have to do anything. The parachute does everything for you. You just have to jump. Jumping from here is beginner's stuff. But I promise you. After you try this, you will be looking for higher places to jump in no time. Like a big boy," Mark smirked.

"I don't know, man. I don't think this is a good idea," Matthias said. He had heard stories about how, in the Old World, technology broke all the time. It's wasn't like that at

all on the New Earth. But still, jumping from a 3,000-meter cliff was just insane.

"Come on, Matthias! I thought you were different from the others," Mark said.

"Different? Different how?" Matthias asked.

"Never mind. Look. Let us do this. I will jump, and you just watch from here, okay? I will prove to you that it is all fine and safe. Once I land, you can choose. You can jump too, or you can wait for me here. I will come back for you, and I'll take you home—no big deal. No pressure. It's up to you, okay?"

"That is stupid. No way I'm going to jump. No way!"

* * *

"What is the big deal, Uncle? Honestly, I don't see what the problem is," Matthias said. He ended up jumping. His parents weren't too happy when they found out. They tried to reason with him without success. Not knowing what else to do about it, his parents asked Marcel to talk some sense into him. Matthias loved Marcel, and he always got to him. They went for a long walk that afternoon.

"Okay," Marcel replied. "Have you thought about the consequences?" he asked calmly.

"We were just having fun. What is the problem with that?" Matthias asked.

"I understand you want to have fun, my son," Marcel said. "But, BASE jumping? Seriously?" he asked, still skeptical.

It was the most exciting thing I have ever done so far, Matthias thought with himself. He and Mark had jumped a couple of

times again that day. Mark had to ask Matthias to stop, but he wanted to prove Mark wrong, with whatever he meant about him being like the others.

"What made you believe jumping from a cliff would be okay?" Marcel asked.

Well, if you are taking the necessary safety precautions, what is the problem, right? Matthias thought but didn't verbalize it. Then, he finally said: "We were not breaking any law, Uncle. Mark has been practicing this 'sport' for a while now. And nobody has ever gotten hurt."

"So, more people are doing this with you two?" Marcel asked.

Oops. I think I said too much. Matthias said to himself. After his debut in the Dolomites, Mark took him to jump together with his friends from the Northern District.

"Yeah. The first time in the Dolomites, it was just Mark and me. But for a while now, we are jumping with the guys from the North," Matthias answered. Marcel looked surprised.

"Ah. But I thought your parents said..."

"The guys are not that bad, you know? They are really not. They work hard on their assignments. But in their free time, they just like to play as hard as they work."

"Hmm," Marcel just nodded. "Your friend, Mark, he asked you to jump, correct?"

"Yes. So?"

"You didn't want to jump, did you?"

"I was just afraid. Then Mark went first a couple of times, and he made it back safely every time, so I concluded that I would be okay too," Matthias said. "It felt good to have the respect of the other boys." After those jumps, Matthias and Mark were even invited for exclusive gatherings by the young ones from the Northern District, and he liked that.

"I understand," Marcel said. "And now? What is the plan? Keep going back to the Dolomites to keep jumping?" He asked.

"The Dolomites is for beginners. We are looking for other places to jump now," Matthias replied.

"Places like?"

"Well," Matthias said. "There is this Meru Peak in the Himalayan Mountains. It is a drop of over 21,000 feet from peak to bottom. The guys are also considering jumping over this volcano. But Uncle, before you worry, let me tell you. The volcano is not even active, okay?" *I think*, he thought.

"Hmm," Marcel only nodded. They reached the bench on the top of the hill after a long walk. "My son. Please, sit here with me for a moment. Let me tell you a story," Marcel said. Matthias complied. "After your dad died," Marcel continued, "on the next day, I went back to the same bar where we drank together for the last time. I kept coming back there every single night after that. At first, I thought I was trying to drink the pain away, but eventually, I realized that I was secretly hoping that the booze could do to me what it had done to my friend.

One day I bumped into an old friend. We talked over coffee, and he invited me to a party at his place. Meeting new people seemed to be a good idea. At the party, everyone was nice and friendly. With time they became my friends too.

One night we went out for drinks together, and I was back to that infamous old bar once again. I was having a good time when a wave of sadness suddenly hit me as it had never hit me before. My old friend noticed that something was wrong. He listened attentively. It felt good to let it all out. He said he also felt sad sometimes. He told his story. He then said he wanted to share something with me. Something that would help me, too, he said. After that day, it didn't take long

until I became a drug addict. From there, things started to spiral down, and soon enough, I hit rock bottom.

Until grandpa, Jacob came to help me. He helped me to get to know Jehovah. And Jehovah gave me a family and true friends that helped me get back up. They supported me through my darkest days and helped me find real joy and happiness.

My point is this, son. Our friends can be genuinely interested in us, and they might honestly want only our best. But even if all of them have good intentions and good motives, not all of them have what we really need. They will try to share what they believe is good for us—always exerting a measure of influence on how we think and on what we do. It's up to us to choose how we want to be influenced. We want to choose the kind of friends that will help us be more like our Creator.

Today, you might think it's not a big deal to trust your life in the hands of a machine to have fun, but you know how artificial intelligence still has its limitations. You might think you are not risking your life, but you do not show the proper respect to it either. Today it's jumping off a cliff. What is it going to be tomorrow? What can that kind of thinking and attitude lead to? Have you ever stopped to think about how Jehovah feels about all this? Isn't he also your friend?"

"I understand, Uncle. You are right. But, it is hard to say 'no' to my friends, and, you know. I want to be part of the group, I want them to like me, and it's nice to be the 'cool' one like Mark is."

"You are so concerned about not disappointing Mark and being accepted by his friends. What about disappointing Jehovah and letting your parents down?"

"Okay, Uncle," Matthias said. "I see what you mean. It's

just..." he hesitated for a moment. "I love spending time with the congregation. Taking part in the construction projects with you at Lazarus is always very fun. But," he paused again, and his eyes found the floor. "Sometimes, I just want to feel the excitement and the thrill of being alive. That's all. I guess jumping gave me some of that feeling."

"I understand that. I have also been your age once. A couple of hundred years ago, but I still remember," Marcel said empathetically. "Tell you what," he continued. "Do you want to experience some real fun and excitement? Your dad knows a few people I want you to meet."

* * *

A few days after his little talk with Uncle Marcel, Matthias was about to have the best day of his life yet.

"Oh, yeah! That is what I am talking about!" Matthias said.

"Okay, boys! Let's do this!" the captain exclaimed. "Let us take this beauty for a dive," he yelled from the bridge, pushing buttons on the screen and typing commands on his control panel. "Marcel! Checklist!" The captain shouted.

"Okay. Rig for dive," Marcel yelled back, strapped at his chair, and checking the 3D gauges of all instruments on his dashboard.

"Dive, dive, dive," Brother Jacques Cousteau replied, also checking graphics on his screen and pushing buttons. The lights were on. The walls and roof of the vessel were transparent. The inhabitants of the underwater world approached and passed by the vessel as they were there to welcome them.

"Pressure in the boat, green board," Brother Jonah said in

reply. Yes. Jonah, the one swallowed by the big fish. He was also doing his thing on his own dashboard while waving to a blue whale pass by right on top of them.

"Six fi-yiv feet," Brother Jacques confirmed, with a big grin on his face, appearing to be the only one that actually understood what all those marine terms being shouted meant. He gave the signal, and they were then all set and ready to start their journey.

"Request speed," Brother Jules Verne cried, playing along. They could hear the roar of the engines warming up, and brother Junes appeared to be ready to 'punch it.' Matthias looked outside and saw a school of fish cruising right through them, followed by playful dolphins and other marine animals he had never seen before.

"Take her down," the captain gave the command, and they started to get velocity moving downwards.

"Oh, man! Oh, man! This is really happening. Twenty thousand leagues under the sea, for real? I have never been that excited," Matthias said.

"Neither have I," Mark said, a little bit apprehensive. He then made a conscious effort to relax and said, sounding sincerely appreciative: "Thank you for including me, Matthias."

"Don't thank me. It was my dad's idea," Matthias replied. Mark smiled, pleased.

"Are you guys ready?" The captain asked.

"Yes, Mr. Adams. We are ready!" Mark shouted in response.

"Go easy on them, Levi," Marcel said.

"You want excitement?" Levi asked rhetorically. "I will give you excitement," he said. "To the bottom of the Earth, here we go!"

Collision Course: Part I

The clicking noise of locks unlocking was followed by the airy *whoosh* sound of the hibernation capsule decompression when its doors were opened. "Cycle one-one-nine-eight completed," Levi said, sitting up and checking the monitor at his right side. He unplugged himself from the tubes connected to his spacesuit and stepped out of the hibernation capsule.

"Okay, girl. Let's see how we are doing today," Levi talked to the ship, entering the spacecraft's cockpit and sitting in the pilot's seat. He studied the graphics on the dashboard and went through the usual checklist. All systems were fully operational, and the spacecraft was still on course. "Okay. All looking good here," he continued. "Ninety-nine-point eight percent of our journey completed—estimated time for arrival; two months and four days to reach the final destination. Two more cycles, and we will be landing," Levi said, tapping the screen and pushing buttons on the

dashboard.

Levi stood up and left the cockpit. He crossed the hibernation room and entered the medical deck. "Okay. Let's check how we are holding up so far," Levi said, putting on the oxygen mask, connecting his suit to the machines, and hopping on the treadmill. He started walking and then running while controlling his vitals on the monitor.

A few minutes later, he finished his check-up and went to the ship's observatory room. It was a small, round, glassy room with a chair in the middle. Looking through the windows, he could see space, vast and dark. He sat down and entered commands in the chair's control panel. "All right! What do you have for me this time?" Levi asked. In front of him, the walls turned into a big screen showing data and images collected from outer space since Levi's last hibernation cycle. He moved his fingers over the control panel again, and the view of the whole Alpha Centauri star system was now on display spinning in its elliptical orbit. The image also showed his present location. He stood up and stepped closer to the screen. By moving his arms in the air, he zoomed in on the image, focusing on Alpha Centauri A and B, the two main stars of this system. He paused and contemplated their beauty for a moment. Then he moved his arms again. Pitching the air, he located Proxima b, a planet orbiting the red dwarf Proxima Centauri. He stopped again before moving his fingers once again. "There she is. My little Blue," Levi said.

BLU-E-2.0b was a planet Levi had found and named about one hundred and fifty years ago. He had not been able to confirm its existence before. The light from the two main stars of this triple star system tended to blend, obscuring the planet's wobbly signal from Earth. But now, it was right there, and it was beautiful. Levi stood still in awe, staring at

this small blue rock orbiting the star Alpha Centauri A. "After all these years, I can finally take a good look at you. No one believed I would get this far. Neither did I," Levi said.

* * *

"You want to do what?" Marcel asked, not believing his ears.

"I want to build a spaceship. What is so crazy about it?" Levi asked.

"Build a spaceship by yourself and go search for a planet you're not even sure it exists, in a star system four light-years away from here? Did I miss anything? Everything about it is crazy, Levi," Marcel said.

"Well, not exactly by myself. I would have help. I have already figured out the math and mapped out the whole course. We just need to build the ship now," Levi said.

"We? Who is 'We'?" Marcel asked.

"Come on, man! I need you. It would be like old-times, remember?"

"Of course, I remember, but...."

"We are explorers by nature," Levi interrupted. "What is the point of having perfect bodies that never get sick or decay, and super brains, that can figure out anything if you can not use it to discover, learn, and explore creation? Wasn't that one of the reasons why we were giving eternity in the first place?" he asked.

"All right, but space exploration now? Are you done exploring Earth yet? Why don't you focus on your home first before you go out searching space for new worlds?"

"Space travel has always been my dream, and you know

that. Now, we have the time, the skills, and the resources to do it safely and much more efficiently."

"I know, but...."

"Since the Final War, we haven't done anything on space exploration yet. We haven't sent anything into space other than the Cleaners. We have cleaned all the space junk in Earth's orbit and much of the trash in our solar system. That was a fun project to do, right?"

"Yes. That was fun."

"So, why not go just a little bit further this time? I'm not talking about exploring another galaxy. I'm talking about dropping by the neighbors. Alpha Centauri is just around the corner. And with my improvements to the infusion propellant's design, we would travel at an average velocity of approximately 13,411 km/s. Which would mean...."

"It would mean that instead of four light-years, we could make it on one hundred or so years," Marcel completed. "What about communication?" he asked.

"It would be instantaneous. I'm trying to figure out a way to use gravitational waves. It's still just a theory, but I might be able to run some experiments soon," Levi answered.

"Interesting," Marcel said. "What about your quantum-communicator? Couldn't we just use that?"

"Not for that kind of distance," Levi answered. "As you know, entangled particles are easily disturbed by their surroundings. The slightest interaction with the environment readily diminishes their entanglement. I found a way to strengthen the entanglement to overcome particle loss on Earth, but not in space and...."

"And with gravitational waves," Marcel picked up. "You can run tests right here on Earth, and if it works, you would have no problems with interference, not here nor anywhere,"

he said, finishing Levi's sentence.

"Exactly!" Levi confirmed.

"We would be working in our free time?" Marcel asked.

"Right," Levi confirmed. "Just like any other hobby. We are not getting old; we are not in a hurry. No time pressure, no deadlines. For the love of learning. What do you say? Are you in?"

* * *

"Cycle one-one-nine-nine completed," Levi said, unplugging himself from the hibernation capsule tubes and stepping out of it. He went through the customary routine—the same one for every completed cycle. First, the spacecraft's main systems full check-up, followed by his own whole-body check-up and collected data analysis.

Levi was in the observatory room, studying the landing plans one more time. He must have gone through them a thousand times by now. He was in the middle of a landing simulation when the screen started glitching, the lights began to flicker, and then everything went dark for a moment before the lights turned red and the alarm started sounding: "*Warning! Warning!*"

Levi jumped out of the chair and ran into the corridor. He arrived in the cockpit and saw the words '*Power Failure*' being flashed intermittently on the dashboard. "Power Failure? What happened, girl. Talk to me," Levi spoke to the ship while moving his fingers through the dashboard. "Battery level, high?" Levi said while reading the data on the screen. "How come I don't have power for main systems? Unless," he

paused before rebooting the system. "You've got to be kidding me," he said when the system was back online. The new data on the screen read: '*Battery Level: Critical.*' "I can't believe that. Was I getting wrong readings all this time? How did that happen?" he asked himself, getting nervous. "Wait," he said, taking a deep breath. "It doesn't matter now. Right now, I have to focus on finding and fixing this problem before I run out of power, and everything goes dark here."

Levi touched the screen a couple of times again, and the complete diagnosis of the power generator was displayed on the dashboard. "The space radiation receptors are working fine," he said. "They are generating electricity as they are supposed to, but the batteries are not being charged," Levi continued, running now a diagnosis of the batteries. "Oh, no. This is bad. The batteries are not only not being charged, but something is draining their power out, and...." Everything went dark before Levi finished the sentence. Every single light and system went off. The ship started drifting away from its course, the artificial gravity centrifugal engine stopped, and the oxygen supply was cut off. "Oh, great!" Levi exclaimed, starting to float in the cockpit cabin with zero gravity. He turned on the flashlights in his suit and looked for his helmet. "Now I'm doomed," he groaned, putting the helmet on. "Ah, Levi! How on 'space' are you going to get out of this one, buddy?"

* * *

"You want your ship to be able to generate its own power," Marcel said. "Back in the day, we used solar panels to

generate electricity. But, in deep space, you will not always have a sun-like star around, right?" He continued, going downstairs into his lab in the basement.

"Right," Levi replied, walking right behind Marcel.

"What other sources of energy do you find in abundance, anywhere you go in space?" Marcel asked.

"Hmm... I don't know. Galactic cosmic rays?" Levi guessed.

"Exactly. Space radiation," Marcel said, turning on the lights and walking to the table in the middle of the room.

"You want to use space radiation as a source of energy?" Levi asked, looking at the different materials lying on the table.

"Yes," Marcel answered. "We can turn space radiation into electricity to power the spacecraft. We could build the whole ship using this material I'm working on," Marcel said, handing Levi a small square-shaped tile. "It would not only convert radiation into electricity but also shield the ship's interior from it."

"Cool! How does it work?" Levi asked.

"The concept is simple. The material is made of carbon nanotubes packed with gold and surrounded by lithium hydride. Radioactive particles that slam into the gold push out a shower of high-energy electrons. They pass through the carbon nanotubes and pass into the lithium hydride from where they move into electrodes, allowing current to flow. You load the material with radiation and unload an electric current."

"Sounds promising," Levi said. "How are we going to test this thing? Getting our hands on radioactive material is not as simple as it used to be."

"We don't need any," Marcel answered. "I'm perfecting it to

be ultra-sensitive. So sensitive that it could work with sunlight radiation. Then, all we will need is some days of good weather."

"Wow. That would be amazing," Levi said.

"What about the engine? Are we going to be able to test it any time soon?" Marcel asked.

"Hey, boys. Dinner is ready," June yelled from upstairs.

"Okay, love. We are coming," Marcel answered. "Every time you guys visit, my wife cooks something special. You should come over more often."

"I would love to if we didn't have to cross half a planet to visit you. When are you guys moving back to New York, man?" Levi asked.

"We still have a lot of work to do here in Israel. Not sure if we will ever move back to New York, my friend."

"Marcel?" June called him again.

"Coming," Marcel replied.

Collision Course: Part II

"Okay, okay. No reason to panic. I can do this," Levi said, entering engineering. He got to the electrical room and flashed the torch at the connectors and cables inside. "I built this thing. I can fix it," he said, scanning the installations and trying to slow down his heart rate. He got to the batteries. "Batteries are responding normally. What could be draining their power?" Levi asked himself. "All looks fine. I don't understand. Wait!" He paused and looked outside through the window. "Only one thing could be causing the power drainage... Cosmic dust."

Cosmic dust travels space at high speed. When it slams against the spacecraft, the dust vaporizes and ionizes the ship—and itself. That generates a cloud of ions and electrons, traveling at different speeds. That electrons' movement creates a pulse of electromagnetic radiation, causing damage to the ship's electrical systems. Levi's ship had its own electromagnetic field protecting it from most of the cosmic

dust and other space debris cruising into it. But after one hundred years traveling at an average velocity of 4.5% the speed of light, it seemed that some of this dust made its way through its shield. Now, Levi needed to get rid of the dust and look for other possible damage to the ship. Wearing his complete spacesuit, he got ready for his first spacewalk ever.

Levi felt like a child visiting an amusement park for the first time. He jumped from one side of the ship to the other, attached only by a safety tether. "Whoop. This is fun. I should go for a walk more often," Levi said.

He stared at the dark, crouched a little getting impulse, and dove into the expanse. He flew free for a while until the tether stopped him. He adjusted his visor to the infrared vision mode, and suddenly space wasn't so dark anymore. His visor detected the infrared waves and rendered them into beautiful images unveiling a breathtaking masterpiece of colors and forms that could not be seen before. He stood there in awe, contemplating the magnificent view of an alive and active universe. The infrared waves also revealed the location of stars Alpha Centauri A and B, pulsing far away on the horizon, leading the way to Levi's final destination.

After taking a moment to marvel at creation, Levi turned off his infrared vision and went back to work. "I'm almost finished here. Just one last leak to fix, and we will be on our way," he said, trying to grab his tools, but his hand failed to respond. "Aah! What is going on?" Levi said, trying to move his fingers. "My hand! Its paralyzed. I can't move it," he said, scared. "I have to get back inside. Ah! My leg!" he exclaimed. "I can't move my leg! What is happening?" Levi said, panicking, pulling the tether, and moving as fast as he could to get back inside the ship. He struggled. His whole right side was paralyzed now. With one hand, he kept pulling the tether, moving closer to the hatch. A few meters from the

hatch, his vision went blurry when he suddenly blacked out. He was then floating in space, still attached to the ship by the safety tether.

* * *

"Hey guys," Anne said. "It is so nice having you here."

"We were looking forward to visiting you for a long time now," June said. "I have missed your talents, Anne. The food was amazing as always."

"Oh yeah. It was delicious," Marcel said.

"Oh. Thank you, guys. You are welcome," Anne said.

"And it is great to be in New York again. Sometimes I miss the old times when we served together in Lazarus I," Marcel said.

"Yes. Me too," Levi said. "Talking about old times, have you seen the last data from our good and old telescope?"

"No. What has *James* seen this time?" Marcel asked.

"He had new images of BLU-E-2.0b," Levi answered.

"What a stupid name for a planet, Levi," Marcel said, teasing him.

"Marcel," Anne said. "This is all Levi talks about now. And the only thing he does in his free time is to build his infamous great spaceship. Can you talk to him, please?"

"I'm right here," Levi reminded Anne, sitting right beside her.

"It's what? Ten years or so now that you guys have been working on this ship? Can't you guys take a break of a few years or something?"

"She is right, Levi," Marcel said. "We should just take a

break. Maybe when we come back to it, we can improve one or two things before the launch.

"But we are so close now," Levi said, protesting. "Two more years, and we would have everything ready."

"This is what you said two years ago," Anne said. "I want to take a seven-year vacation of everything and go someplace new we haven't been before."

"You haven't been to space before. How about that?" Levi asked.

"Ha-ha," Anne faked a laugh. "I'm being serious, Levi."

"We are going to Patagonia next year for two years. Why don't you guys join us?" Marcel asked.

"Seriously, man?" Levi frowned in disapproval.

"Oh yeah. That is a great idea," Anne said. "I have never been to Patagonia before. Such a beautiful place. So much to learn, to explore. All things you love doing, babe," she said, looking at Levi with a big smile.

"Jacob and Rachel are also planning to join us there for a few months. I heard they served there last century. They know everything about it," June added.

"Sounds great, guys," Levi said. "Okay, babe. Let us join them."

"Really?" Anne asked with excitement in her voice.

"Yes. Really," Levi confirmed. "They go next year, right? And we meet them there the following one. If I focus, I can finish the ship in one year instead of two. And we can go to Patagonia for as long as you like. What do you think?" Levi asked.

Anne responded with a look that Levi knew well.

"What?" Levi shrugged.

"Who wants dessert?" Anne asked politely while standing up.

"I would love some," Marcel replied.

"I will help you with that," June said, standing up and joining Anne in the kitchen.

"What are you doing, man?" Marcel asked Levi when the two of them were alone at the table.

"I just want to finish it. That's all. We are so close," Levi answered.

"What is the rush? You have all the time in the world. Besides, it's not good, my friend. Anne is getting tired of it."

"I know, I know," Levi said. "But, we are so close," he repeated.

"No, we are not. I'm taking a break from our little project. And I advise you to do the same," Marcel said.

* * *

Levi opened his eyes slowly, looked around, and could only see space. He tried to move his arms and fingers. He was able to close and open his fist successfully. Then, he tried to move his legs and feet. He had regained movement. Levi grabbed the tether hooked to his suit, turned around, and started to pull it, moving towards the ship. He got to his tools attached to another tether. "Let's finish things up here. I need to run some tests to understand the extent of the damage," he said, using a type of resin to plug the last leak and a high-strength tape to seal it.

Levi made it to the hatch and went back inside the ship. He went to engineering and turned the power generator on. The whole exterior of the ship lit up at once. The ship's surface was again absorbing galactic cosmic rays,

transforming them into electricity, charging batteries, and powering all systems. "Oh yeah, babe!" Levi celebrated. "And just like that, we are back in business."

After running a complete check-up of the ship systems and making sure he was back on course, Levi went to the medical deck to run some tests on himself. "If I lose complete control like this again, it could be the end of my mission," he said, attaching himself to the machines and initiating a full body scan to obtain a complete analysis. "The situation is worse than I thought. I will need to go back into hibernation mode to be able to do some serious maintenance. To be fully operational again, I will need a full month hibernation cycle of repairs. But we will be entering Blue's orbit in two weeks. Oh, well. Two weeks of maintenance will have to do. I can time the hibernation to end one day before arrival, and I can maneuver to stay in orbit for as long as I need to complete the repairs before I land. Okay, Right. That is what we are going to do," Levi said, stepping inside the hibernation capsule, making the needed adjustments. "Let us hope I wake up in one piece."

* * *

"Hi guys," Levi said, looking at the 3D image projected in front of him. "How are you enjoying Patagonia?" he asked.

"Hi, Dad," Matthias said. "This place is amazing. You are going to love it here. When are you coming?"

"In a few weeks, son," Levi answered. "I am so sorry that I am not there with your right now."

"That is okay. I'll let the boys know. They keep asking for

you," Matthias said.

"Oh, man!" Levi said. "How are my grandchildren doing. Can I talk to them?"

"They are fine. Not here at the moment. They went hiking with Mom and Grandpa Jacob."

"Sounds like fun," Levi said. "Okay, I will call to talk to them later, then."

"What about you?" Matthias asked. "Are you still having fun building your ship? How is that going?"

"It's going. Mike and Lee came over a few times these past weeks to give me a hand. We got permission to test the vehicle last weekend, and all went well. So, yeah. Going well."

"Nice," Matthias said. "I knew that Uncle Lee became an expert in all things scientific, but I didn't know Uncle Mike was into space travel."

"Oh, yeah. Big time," Levi said. "Uncle Mike is a genius. He has helped me build this human biomechanical interface that is amazing. You have to try it."

"Biomechanical Human Interface?" Matthias asked.

"Yes. You know when we work in construction projects, and we can control heavy-duty machines from a distance using the brain wave enhancers?"

"Yes?" Matthias replied.

"So, it's more or less the same. Instead of controlling a giant mechanical arm in a construction site, this interface allows you to control a human look-alike machine, through which you can feel and experience any place or environment in the world from the comfort and safety of your home."

"I see," Matthias said. "It is some kind of a robotic extension of yourself."

"Right," Levi confirmed. "Mike loves diving, too. With this

interface, he can dive as deep as he likes with no limitation and live the experience as he was there. We are now working on...."

"Hey, Dad," Matthias interrupted. "It sounds fascinating. I would love to hear more about it, but unfortunately, I have to go now. I'm making dinner for the whole gang this evening, and I still have to get some of the ingredients from a brother living close by. The family hosting us this week will teach me some special local dishes. It's going to be a feast," he said.

"Really? Sounds like fun," Levi said. "Shame I am not there. I will be the only one missing out on the feast. No problem. I make sure I will join you guys soon, okay?" he asked, but the image seemed to be frozen. "Matthias? Are you there? Can you hear me?"

* * *

The hibernation capsule opened, and Levi woke up. The ship was bumping and shaking violently, making it very hard for him to leave the capsule. "No. I can't believe this is happening," Levi said right before he was thrown out of the capsule by the turbulence. "I need to get to the controls before it's too late," he said, struggling to move toward the cockpit.

"Okay! Now I am really doomed," Levi said, getting into the cockpit and looking through the windshield. "'Houston, we have a problem.' We are going down," he sat down at the pilot chair and tried to control the vehicle.

The planet's gravity was pulling the ship. Levi was entering the planet's atmosphere too fast. Diving toward the

surface in an uncontrolled descent, the ship was now in a collision course. "Come on, girl," Levi spoke with his ship. "We can do this. I just have to...oh, no. Not again! Not now!" Levi screamed. Both his hands were not responding, and his legs were again paralyzed.

"You've got to be kidding me!" The ship continued falling, gaining more and more velocity, burning through the planet's thick atmosphere. For a split of a second, Levi was amazed at a glimpse of the planet's surface before saying: "Aaand... we crashed. Great!"

Collision Course: Part III

"Oh, babe. I'm so sorry to hear that," Anne said. "What went wrong?" She asked while putting on her diving suit.

"Everything," Levi replied, sitting on a rock near the water putting on his fins.

"Impossible. Tell me exactly what happened," Anne said, handing Levi his diving helmet.

"Remember, I told you how I was studying gravitational waves to use it as a communication channel?"

"Yes," Anne said. "You also told me how that didn't work and how you had to adapt your quantum-communicator to use it instead."

"Right," Levi said. "The quantum-communicator worked fine until the particles began losing their entanglement, and I started to have problems controlling my Artificial Human Extention or ArEX, as Mike likes to call them."

"Yeah. Mike calls them that. But I told him I would call them *The Sims*," Anne said and smirked. "Sorry, Mike, but

ArEX just doesn't sound right."

"Ha-ha," Levi laughed. "I just love how your fascination with history extends to goofy old video games too," he said, making Anne smile. "Let us call it *Sim*, then. Why not. I'm sure Mike won't mind."

Anne answered with a grin, getting her fins and sitting beside Levi.

"So," Levi continued. "As you know, I used my *Sim* to pilot the ship from home."

"Um-hum," Anne confirmed. "It's crazy how you guys managed that."

"It was something," Levi said. "It was just like I was right there, piloting the ship myself. The suit and helmet I used to connect with it allowed me to see and feel everything the *Sim* saw and felt."

"Amazing," Anne said. "Can you feel everything it feels? Even pain?"

"Yes. But I can control the intensity of all senses. So, I can choose not to feel pain at all if I want to."

"Okay. Smart. Go on."

"Right," Levi continued. "I knew I would run into problems with the quantum communication. So, for most of the trip, I had my *Sim* on hibernation mode in this capsule, which I designed to strengthen its particle's entanglement. But, the closer I got to the Alpha Centauri, the more noise and interference I got".

"I see. The interference would give you a bad connection of sorts, making it hard to control your *Sim* from here," Anne said.

"Exactly," Levi said. "One time, I lost complete communication with it in the middle of a spacewalk to fix a power leakage in the ship."

"Oh, no. What did you do, then?"

"I still had a link with the ship. So, I used the tether connected to the *Sim* to reestablish communication with it. I was then able to fix the leakage, get my *Sim* back inside the ship, and put it into hibernation mode again for repairs."

"Wow. That was a close one, I imagine," Anne said. "But, now you were back in the ship, resuming control of it, right?"

"Yes, but my *Sim* needed a lot of repairs, and I didn't have sufficient time to complete all of them before arriving at Blue's orbit."

"And of course, you would need your *Sim* fully operational to pilot the ship through landing."

"Yes," Levi said.

"And, then? What happened next?" Anne asked.

"So, I timed the hibernation to be interrupted before we approached the planet. The idea was to turn my *Sim* on and use it to maneuver the ship, locking it to the planet's orbit. This would give me time to repair the ship and the *Sim* before landing."

"Uuh. Exciting," Anne said. "But, I'm guessing the plan didn't work?"

"Unfortunately, no," Levi answered. "Do you remember how I used to call BLU-E-20b, my Little Blue?"

"Yes. I thought it was cute. Why?"

"Well. As it turns out, Little Blue is not that little. It is actually much bigger than I thought. When I made the calculations to time the hibernation, I used old data that didn't show the planet's right mass. When the hibernation finished, I had control of my *Sim* again, but the ship was already being pulled down by a much stronger gravitational force I hadn't accounted for."

"Nooo!" Anne exclaimed.

"Yup. I couldn't believe it either," Levi replied. "I still tried to get control of the ship, but suddenly, I had problems with my connection again. My arms and legs were paralyzed, and I couldn't do anything to save the ship. Then, it crashed, and with it, all my dreams of exploring a new planet."

"Wow, babe," Anne said. "You were so close. I can't believe that you almost did it."

Levi nodded, disappointed.

"But, let me understand one thing," she continued.

"Shoot," Levi said, checking this diving helmet.

"If you had a link with the ship, why didn't you pilot the whole flight from Earth? Did you really need the *Sim* to control the ship?"

"Yes. I did," Levi answered. "First, I was using quantum-entanglement to communicate with the vessel. In order not to lose the entanglement, I had to reinforce it. I didn't find a way to do it for the ship's communication system, but I had found a way to do it for the *Sim*, using the hibernation capsule."

"Okay. Right," Anne said. "What were the other reasons?"

"I would also like to know if we would be able to make that trip one day. That is why I needed the *Sim*," Levi explained. "It simulates the human body. It needs oxygen to work, for example. And it was designed to simulate many other of our physical limitations, like being sensitive to radiation, changes in gravity, in pressure, among other things. From a human standpoint, the *Sim* is a perfect representation of the human body as a physical machine."

"Okay. That explains it. But, you got permission to launch the ship as a kind of probe, right?" Anne asked.

"Yes," Levi answered. "The actual mission was to learn more about Blue and draw a map of the Alpha Centauri star

system."

"Right," Anne continued. "Which was part of the *Learn From Creation* program, correct?"

"Correct," Levi confirmed.

"And you accomplished that, right?"

"We have more data about Blue and Alpha Centauri, yes. Not enough for mapping the whole system, though."

"That is amazing," Anne exclaimed. "You shouldn't be disappointed with your mission. You should be proud of it."

"I guess you're right," Levi said.

"I just don't understand why you wanted so badly to simulate a manned trip if you would not be able to do it anytime soon. I mean, New Heavens is not authorizing any manned mission at the moment, are they?"

"No. At the moment, they are not," Levi replied. "But, maybe after the Millennium reign is over and we pass the Final Test, I believe our Creator would love us to explore more of his creation. I just wanted to run an experiment to learn how that would even be possible."

"I totally understand that," Anne said. "I can see how our Father would like to show us more of his creations. But," she paused before continuing. "Don't you think when the time comes, he will help us how to do it? Just like He has given us the Bible to guide us through the Old World, and then He also gave us the New Rolls to guide us now in the New World. After the Millennium reign and Final Test, don't you think he will give something else that will guide us through the next phase of our human existence?"

"Maybe even including directions on how to explore space, you mean?" Levi asked, intrigued.

"I don't know. Maybe," Anne replied. "Sounds reasonable, right? Looking at the pattern and considering what we know

about Him."

"Huh," Levi gasped, amused.

"I mean, we are almost halfway through the Millennium reign, and we still have so much to do to get everything ready for the Final Test," Anne continued. "Should we not wait with new planets exploration for now and focus on more pressing matters?"

"You are right. It all started as a nice project, but I allowed myself to be carried away. Maybe I lost sight of what is more important right now."

"That is okay, babe. Even perfect spiritual beings in the past lost track of what was most important. But that could become a trap or something the Dragon could use against us in the Final Test."

"Definitely," Levi agreed. "Life in paradise is so perfect; sometimes I forget that the issue of God's Sovereignty is not over yet. And that having a perfect human body does not mean having a perfect spiritual mind. I have to keep working on it."

"We all have to," Anne continued.

"Thanks, babe. From now on, I will make sure I get my priorities straight. I can promise you that."

"More time for me? Yippee!" Anne said facetiously, jumping into Levi's arms. "But of course," she continued. "It doesn't mean we can't keep learning from creation, right? Can the next ship be a little bit bigger? I also want to have my *Sim* there when we land our space probe on Blue for the first time."

"Ha-ha," Levi laughed with a big smile. "You are great; you know that?" Levi said, kissing Anne.

"Love you too, my spaceman," Anne replied, kissing Levi back.

"Okay," Levi agreed. "I'll have to send a *Cleaner* to pick up the debris of my ship on Blue anyways. So, we can perhaps make it big enough to carry *Sims* for the whole family," Levi said, holding Anne in his arms. "But right now," he continued. "I don't need to explore any other planet. I don't want to obsess about things I don't have any longer. I want to enjoy my gorgeous wife, my wonderful family, and our life on this beautiful planet we call home."

"We actually call it Earth, but I love everything else you just said," Anne replied, teasing Levi.

"Ha-ha," Now it was Levi's turn to fake a laugh. "Are you ready?" Levi asked, setting his diving suit to automatically adjust to the hydrostatic pressure and turning on his helmet's water oxygen extractor.

"I can't believe we wait so long to explore the Anhumas Abyss," Anne said, turning her communication with Levi's diving helmet on. They entered the cave featuring stalactites in all forms and shapes hanging from the ceiling and the clearest turquoise water.

"Now I fully comprehend why this place is called Bonito. It means 'beautiful' in Portuguese. But it's quite an understatement if you ask me."

"I agreed. This place is not only beautiful. It is awe-inspiring," Anne said.

"Imagine all the amazing things we are yet to discover in the depths of this place."

"I can't wait any longer. Time to explore!"

"After you, my lady."

Meanwhile, somewhere on BLU-E-02b, something was emitting a beep sound.

"*Beep...beep....beep....*"

Wolves in Sheep's Covering

Marcel woke up tied to a chair on that strange day in the Old World's last days. He was still dizzy from whatever substance they used to subdue him. He wasn't bleeding or anything, but his whole body ached. In vain, his eyes tried to adapt to the darkness of the room. His mouth was silenced by duct tape, and the only sense that gave him a clue of his location was the one of smell. The place smelled like dead meat. Suddenly, Marcel heard footsteps. The door was opened, and an intense light shone through, blinding him.

"Hello, Mr. Williams," a shadow's voice in front of Marcel greeted him. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Williams. Let me take this off your mouth." The voice said, removing the duct tape carefully.

"Ah!" Marcel screamed. "Where am I? What do you want from me?"

"Calm down, Mr. Williams. Nobody is going to hurt you. If you cooperate, that is," the shadow said. He approached

Marcel and sat in the chair placed in front of him. The spotlight behind him made it impossible for Marcel to see his face. "You are a member of the 'Jehovah people', aren't you? Let us talk about that for a minute, shall we?"

Back at Marcel's house, his wife was panicking.

"They took him, Jacob," Marcel's wife managed to say through her sobbing over the phone.

"June, what happened?" Jacob replied, worried.

"They broke into our place," June said. "Everything is upside down, and Marcel is gone."

"No!" Jacob exclaimed in shock. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she replied. "They made me breathe in something, and I passed out. When I woke up, Marcel wasn't there, and I couldn't find him anywhere," she said. "They took him," she repeated. "They took him, Jacob."

"What do you mean, my child? Who would take Marcel?"

"I don't know," June replied. "You know how he has been insisting that someone was following him. Maybe he wasn't paranoid. Maybe someone was really stalking him, and now he is gone, and it is all my fault," she said in despair. "I should have listened to him."

"June! Listen. None of this is your fault, you hear me?" Jacob said. "Are you sure that Marcel has been abducted? Have you tried calling Saul yet?"

"Yes, of course, I did that!" June answered loudly. "Saul has also disappeared," she said.

"Disappeared?" Jacob asked in disbelief.

"Yes," June replied. "I have been to his place. Nobody has seen him anywhere, and his phone is disconnected."

"Really? That's is not like Saul."

"What if Marcel was right about Saul, Jacob?"

"Right about what?"

"Marcel and Saul were not always best friends; you know that. When Saul first arrived in our congregation, Marcel was very suspicious of him."

"What are you saying?"

"Marcel believed Saul wasn't who he said he was. What if he was right? And, Saul is somehow responsible for Marcel's kidnapping?"

"Of course not," Jacob answered firmly. "That was many years ago. When Marcel still struggled with his depression after his drug rehabilitation, right?" There was no reply. "Listen. I am coming over with Rachel. We are going to find him together, okay? Don't worry. Don't go anywhere. Wait for us, okay? Okay, June? Are you there?"

Meanwhile, not far away from there, Marcel was being interrogated.

"Let us talk about your friend Saul, Mr. Williams. Where is he?" the shadow asked.

"Saul? I have no idea where he is," Marcel replied.

"Stop the pretense, Mr. Williams. We both know that is not true."

"What are you talking about?"

"We know you have discovered Saul's true identity, Mr. Williams. We want to know where he is, and we want to know it now."

"Saul's true identity? What do you mean?" Marcel asked.

"Mr. Williams, please," the voice replied calmly. "I told you we don't want to hurt you, but you are not cooperating, are you, Mr. Williams?"

"What true identity? What are you talking about?"

"You keep playing with me, Mr. Williams. I am sorry, but I

think we will have to be more persuasive." The shadow then gave a signal, and another man came in, pushing a table on wheels. The clicking noise of metal filled the room, sending chills down Marcel's spine.

"What is that?" Marcel asked, terrified.

"These, Mr. Williams, are just a few tools my colleague here finds useful to rip the truth out of people like you. He doesn't need to use them, though. If you tell me what I want to know, now!"

"Know what?" Marcel screamed back.

"Where is Serg..." a loud *Boom* abruptly muffled the shouting voice. The explosion made the whole building shake. The spotlight blinding Marcel fell to the ground and was shattered into pieces. Marcel was thrown onto the floor by the blast. So were the other two men in the room with him. They were knocked unconscious. Marcel saw a man's silhouette walking through the door towards him.

"Saul? Is that you?" he asked before passing out.

* * *

A few hours, Marcel appeared to be regaining consciousness.

"Hey. How are you feeling?" Saul asked.

"Saul?" Marcel answered, surprised, as he tried to sit up.

"Take it easy, brother," Saul gently pushed Marcel back towards the bed.

"Where am I? What happened?"

"You are in the hospital," Saul answered. "Don't worry. Everything is going to be okay now. June and Jacob are already on their way."

"Who were those people? What did they want from you?" Marcel asked.

"You don't have to worry about them. They are not going to bother you anymore."

"They said something about you not being who you say you are. Is that true?"

"Unfortunately, yes, my friend. I haven't been completely honest with you."

"What?" Marcel asked, confused.

"My name is not Saul. My real name is Sergey. Sergey Ivanov," he continued. "For many years, I have served my country as a spy." He turned around and moved away from the bed. "My mission was to infiltrate Jehovah's people. I was baptized and made progress in the organization," he said, sitting down in the chair by the door with his head down and eyes fixed on the floor. "But, when the time came for me to betray my brothers, I had a change of heart, left my country, and disappeared. After a couple of years of hiding, I decided to move here with a new identity, hoping that my government would not find me. But they did, and now they are trying to kill me."

"Excuse me?" a man showed his badge and entered the room. "Mr. Ivanov? I'm agent Jones. We spoke on the phone earlier?"

"What is going on?" Marcel asked.

"I am turning myself in," Sergey said, standing up and putting his hands behind his back. "I am so sorry I lied to you. I hope you can forgive me someday," he then looked Marcel in the eye and said: "Please know that; it doesn't matter what happens; I'll always be your friend." The agents handcuffed and escorted him out of the room.

"No! Wait, wait," Marcel yelled.

* * *

Marcel visited Sergey Ivanov every week in prison for months. They studied the Bible together. They helped other inmates to learn about God together. They kept spending as much time together as they did before when Sergey was still called Saul. At first, Marcel felt hurt and betrayed by Sergey's lies. But now, he had forgiven him, and they were again close friends. It didn't take long for Sergey to dedicate his life to God and get baptized, but it wasn't part of a deception this time. Sergey had genuinely changed. On the day after his baptism, Marcel came for a visit to celebrate that moment with his friend when he got the sad news. Sergey had been poisoned. They took him to the hospital, but he didn't come back. Among Sergey's belongings, a letter was found.

"Dear Marcel, I will be forever grateful for the mercy and undeserved kindness of our Heavenly Father, Jehovah. He put you in my life, and your friendship saved me. Thank you for your love and forgiveness. Hope to see you soon in Paradise. Your brother, Saul."

"Marcel broke down in tears. From afar, a man was watching Marcel cry in his car in the prison's parking lot. A federal agent approached the man and urged: "We can't protect you here, Sergey. We have to go." The man dried his tears and answered. "Don't call me Sergey or Saul. For now on," he paused, looked at the agent, and demanded: "Call me Paul."

* * *

"Thank you for telling us your story, Paul. We appreciated that," Levi said. "Any questions for brother Ivanov?" He turned around and asked the class. All students raised their hands. "Any question other than 'what is it like to be a spy?'" he continued. Half of the hands came down. He then added: "or about how life was in witness protection?" Another half lowered their hands, leaving just a few left. "Yes, please, John. Go ahead."

"Hi, brother Ivanov. My name is John. I am 16."

"Hi, John. Nice to meet you."

"My question to you is: Do you think there will be spies among us when the Final Test begins?"

"Really, John?" Levi asked. "Seriously?"

After the class was over, Levi and Paul went for a walk around Lazarus I. Paul visited his old friends in the cleaning department, and Levi showed him the new decompression rooms in the Resurrection Center. When their little tour was over, they went to the dining hall to do some catching up over some pie and tea.

"Hey, Paul. Thanks again for today," Levi said.

"Anytime. Levi. I'm happy to help. You have a nice class, by the way," Paul said.

"Yes, I do. Thanks."

"Have you seen Marcel lately?" Paul asked.

"Not really. It's been a while. You?" Levi asked.

"I was in Jerusalem visiting him a couple of months ago."

"That is nice. I spoke with him recently. They are doing very well there, aren't they?"

"Really well," Paul confirmed. "They have just finished a new Lazarus in Israel. The place is amazing. You have to see it."

"So I heard. I am anxious to do that. We are planning to visit them next year for the Festival."

"Oh, good. You are going to love it."

"What about you? You are visiting a circuit in the Northern District, right? How are things going there?"

"Yes, that's right. We are doing well," Paul replied. "We are now building a new assembly hall. I finally had the opportunity to meet brother David in this project. Brother David as in King David, I mean."

"No way! How is he?"

"He is great. He told my children the '*David and Goliath*' story during our family worship last time we had him over. It was surreal."

"Wow. That must be something."

"It sure is."

"Can I ask you something?" Levi asked.

"Yes, of course," Paul replied.

"I heard some of the young ones in the Northern District are causing concern. My grandchildren have friends there. Should I be worried?"

"Some are pushing the limits too far, indeed."

"So I heard."

"And that is not all."

"What do you mean?"

"We have information about some kind of secret meetings."

"Secret meetings?"

"Yes. It seems that a small group meets together to talk about their unsatisfied opinion about Paradise."

"Really? Who are they?"

"The group is formed mainly by young ones born here in the New Earth and by some resurrected ones that used to be powerful and prominent in the Old World. They seem to believe that the Final Test can be an opportunity rather than a test."

"Really? It's happening already, huh?"

"Well. The Final Test is indeed drawing near."

"Any instructions on how to deal with this yet?"

"Nothing yet. I heard about a new educational program."

"But the prophecy says that 'The number of these [will be] as the sand of the sea.' Nothing we do will change that," Levi said.

"Yes. But we might be able to help and protect some still. It came to my knowledge that this group has contacted someone you know. It might not be too late for him if we act fast," Paul said.

"Someone, I know?" Levi reacted, perplexed. "Who?" he asked.

Of Princes and Kings

The peaceful sound coming from the river running nearby and the touch of the fresh breeze on his skin soothed him and brought back good memories. The view from the house's balcony, featuring a mountain rim that surrounded a vast green carpet covering the whole valley of Shushan, made Artaxerxes, the once King of Persia, feel right at home. He was serene for a moment before he got angry again.

"Nehemiah, what are you trying to say?" Artaxerxes asked. He kept gazing at the landscape. The surroundings looked familiar, but the house he had just woken up in was not his. It looked more like a house of a slave or a servant. He refused to believe that his palace, together with his empire, was gone.

"I know it's hard to accept," said Nehemiah, one of the many servants Artaxerxes used to have. "Here, please. Drink some water."

"Are you not forgetting something, cup-bearer?"

Artaxerxes demanded.

"Don't worry," Nehemiah replied. "The water is fine." Artaxerxes took the cup and sat down. They had been there for hours. After Nehemiah mentioned that Artaxerxes was no longer a king, he kept going on and on, moaning about it. Artaxerxes was so absorbed in his feelings that he hadn't noticed how Nehemiah looked so much younger. Worse yet, he had not even realized how he had become a young, strong man himself. In 424 BCE, when Artaxerxes died, there were no mirrors in the Persian houses, and he kept missing the polished disk of copper on the wall by the bed.

"This is all Themistocles's fault," he murmured, standing up and moving towards the balcony's parapet. He kept looking at the horizon.

"Themistocles?" Nehemiah asked. "The Athenian general?"

"Yes. Who else?" Artaxerxes exclaimed.

"I can see why you would think that, but I assure you; Themistocles had nothing to do with your present situation."

"You?" Who are you calling, *You*?" Artaxerxes protested. "Show me some respect, Nehemiah, please."

"Sorry, but as I said...."

"You have no idea what you're talking about, Nehemiah. Themistocles had everything to do with it. I'm sure," Artaxerxes affirmed. Nehemiah nodded and listened patiently.

"We had a plan to stop Athens. The plan was simple," Artaxerxes continued. "Sparta hated the Athenians. We would fund Sparta's military build-up while making overtures of peace and gifts of gold to Athens. The Spartans would eventually grow tired of Athenian arrogance and would be ready to wage war against them.

"I understand, but...." Nehemiah tried to speak.

"When the time came," Artaxerxes interrupted him and continued, "Themistocles was supposed to help the Spartans defeat the Athenians. That was the deal. I granted him asylum in Persia when the Athenians wanted to kill him, and he was supposed to repay me by helping us take Athens," he explained.

"Um-hmm," Nehemiah nodded.

"But, what does Themistocles do, you ask?" Artaxerxes paused and took a deep breath before he exclaimed.

"He kills himself! Can you believe that?" he said, upset. "And that was the beginning of the end, Nehemiah. After that, it was just a matter of time before they came for us."

"I see," Nehemiah said calmly.

"We fell before the Greeks, didn't we? Tell me I am wrong," he demanded. There was silence for a time. Artaxerxes stared at the horizon again while Nehemiah waited. Nehemiah was about to say something when Artaxerxes resumed.

"I guess you're right. It wasn't Themistocles's fault," he said gloomily. "I'm the only one to be blamed for this. I should have known that he would never fight against his countrymen." Artaxerxes paused again, turned towards Nehemiah, and asked rhetorically: "Maybe, ruling over kings with a light benevolent hand wasn't such a good idea, was it? So much for being the *Kings of Kings*, right?" Nehemiah approached and stood beside him on the balcony.

"What has become of me, Nehemiah?" Artaxerxes continued. "What am I now? A slave?" he asked, still agitated. "Look at me," he pleaded, pointing at his simple white garments. "A slave to the Greeks?"

"You are not a slave to the Greeks," Nehemiah replied. "You are..."

"Of course not," Artaxerxes interrupted again, shaking his

head. "The Greeks would have killed me," he thought aloud. "To whom, then? To the Egyptians?" he asked. "But we are not in Egypt," he remarked, looking at the scenery that reminded him of Shushan's basin, but not quite. "Where are we anyway, Nehemiah? What place is this?"

"Artaxerxes, please calm down," Nehemiah said, touching Artaxerxes' shoulder empathetically and helping him to sit down. *Can't he see that he is not an eighty-year-old sick man anymore?* Nehemiah thought to himself. After giving Artaxerxes a moment, he asked him: "Do you remember how the Greeks used to call you *Longimanus*?"

"Are you making fun of me now?" Artaxerxes replied, standing up and moving away from Nehemiah. "Is it not enough that I have lost everything? You still have to mock me?" he said, turning his back at Nehemiah.

"Sorry. It was not my intention to offend you," Nehemiah replied. He was truthful, but he needed to try something to get Artaxerxes' attention and help him stop obsessing about his lost empire. "I just want to show you something," he continued. "They called you *Longimanus* because your right hand was longer than your left hand. Look at your hands now," he requested.

"What kind of silly game is this, Nehemiah? You...huh! What?" Artaxerxes shouted, looking at his hands perplexed. "My hand!" he exclaimed, staring at his perfect hand; before of abnormal size. "How is that possible?" he asked, confused.

"Come inside. I want to show you something else," Nehemiah went back to the bedroom, taking Artaxerxes with him. "Look," he said, pointing at the polished disk of copper hanging on the wall. "Do you recognize that young man?"

"Nehemiah? Is that? Am I? How?" Artaxerxes asked,

shocked by his reflection.

"Come with me," Nehemiah said. He knew now what he would have to do. Maybe a little sooner than he would normally do when welcoming someone from 400 BCE back to life, but he felt like Artaxerxes had forced his hand. They walked out of the house. Nehemiah took out a device from his inner garments and pushed a button. The house, the mountains, the river, the wind, everything vanished. The Persian landscape gave place to a large white dome-like structure. The room had only one door, no windows. Nehemiah kept moving towards the door, but Artaxerxes stayed behind unmoving, bewildered by what his eyes were seeing.

"Artaxerxes!" Nehemiah called out. Artaxerxes jumped back, startled and pale like not a drop of blood could be found in his stunned face.

"Don't worry, my friend," Nehemiah reassured him. "Come with me. It's all right."

"What kind of magic is this, Nehemiah? Is this vision coming from your God?"

"As I've been trying to explain. You were dead. And today, you were brought back to life," Nehemiah said, pausing for a moment before he pronounced excitedly. "Welcome to Paradise, my friend." Nehemiah then turned around and walked towards the door. "Come! I will show you everything."

"Nehemiah, wait!" Artaxerxes demanded while trying to catch up with him. "Paradise?" he asked, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

* * *

"Paradise?" Artaxerxes asked. "This is very different from my idea of paradise."

It was a lovely sunny day in Israel. The gardens of the Lazarus complex looked especially beautiful at that time of the year. Nehemiah and Artaxerxes enjoyed going for a walk during their break.

"What do you mean?" Nehemiah asked.

"Well," Artaxerxes replied, feeling a little bit ashamed of himself. "I think I hate cleaning," he said.

"Ha ha ha," Nehemiah laughed until he realized that Artaxerxes wasn't. "Ow. Are you serious? Of course, you are being serious. I am sorry," Nehemiah said. "What is so bad about it?" he asked.

"You know," Artaxerxes continued. "Before, I would have servants to work for me. And now I have to cook for myself, wash dishes, tidy up my own house, wash my own clothes. And when I am ready with that, I still have to come here and work with...cleaning. It feels like my life has become a big unending chore sometimes. Chores I don't like doing."

"Okay," Nehemiah said. "I know you don't like cooking. But you don't cook that much, do you? Since most days, you have dinner with families in the congregation and with me?"

"That is true, but...."

"And as for the dishwashing, we can get you one of those new recycle bins that is also an object printer. Have you seen them? They separate and break down any material you want into their atomic building blocks, and it uses that to print all kinds of new objects, even clothes. It's amazing."

"Um-hmm. I know," Artaxerxes said. "A brother in my department just installed one for me yesterday."

"Really? How nice of him," Nehemiah said. "And you have the automatic surface cleaner in your place, don't you? All Lazarus' student housing is equipped with that, right?"

"They do, yes," Artaxerxes responded. "With a push of a button, the walls and floors will chemically react with the dust and dirt, breaking them down and absorbing them. It's unbelievable."

"It is, isn't it?" Nehemiah replied. "As for your cleaning assignment, they have even better-cleaning systems here in Lazarus, don't they? And how many days a week is your assignment now? Three days?"

"Two," Artaxerxes replied.

"Two days," Nehemiah repeated. "Talk to me, my friend. Is cleaning really the problem?"

"I guess not."

"Do you still miss the advantages of the life of a king?"

"Yes. I do," Artaxerxes replied. "I miss being in charge. It's very hard for me to take orders from someone else and not have servants to do things for me."

"What about the disadvantages of a king's life? What don't you miss?"

"Ah. The conflicts, the betrayals, the lies, the schemes, the killing, the fight over power. There are a lot of things I don't miss about being a king."

"You are well known for being an extremely kind and good-hearted king. What we have today, isn't it what you envisioned a perfect kingdom should be like? What are the things you love here that you didn't have then?"

"Being young again," Artaxerxes answered. "Also, I'm humbled by the advances made by humankind. But, I think it's the love, peace, and unity among people here that really makes me love this place."

"Would you trade what you have now for the life you had then?" Nehemiah asked.

* * *

Days later, Nehemiah joined Marcel, and the other princes, how the humans assigned by the New Heavens to take the lead on Earth were called to discuss the needs of their local territory. Nehemiah shared with the body how Artaxerxes was responding to training. Artaxerxes had just graduated from his School For Resurrected Ones at Lazarus XII and received a cleaning assignment while continuing personal training both on a spiritual and practical level.

"My dear friend is still struggling to adapt. Going from a king to a subject overnight hasn't been easy for him," Nehemiah said.

"Understandable," Marcel said. "I can only imagine how he might feel. And he is not the only one that struggles going through that process. Remember how David, as in the king David, also had a hard time at first?"

"Marcel! You are a genius!"

"Aren't we all?" Marcel said, joking, but no one laughed. "Because we are perfect, and we have perfect brains, get it?" he kept trying, unsuccessfully.

"Yup. Not funny," Nehemiah said, making them laugh.

"David is building a convention hall in our territory, isn't he?" Nehemiah continued.

"Yes, he is," Ezra confirmed. "They start construction in a couple of weeks. He is beyond himself with the privilege of finally being able to build houses for Jehovah. According to

him, a dream come true."

"Maybe he can give me a few minutes of his time. I would love for him to talk to Artaxerxes," Nehemiah said.

"Oh, yeah. Great idea. David would definitely love to do that," Marcel continued. "Ezra, you will meet with the building committee, right? Could you talk to David after that meeting?"

"Consider it done," Ezra said.

In the meeting, they also talked about how the vast majority of resurrected unrighteous ones in their territory were accepting, adapting, and integrating very well into the new society. At the same time, some individuals born in the New Earth displayed a lack of interest in spiritual matters. Young ones were more interested in enjoying life. Many have become addicted to adrenaline, putting their own lives at risk while pushing their perfected abilities to the limit. Some felt they should be able to do whatever they wanted. The body discussed how the New Heavens' program *'Learn From The Past'* would help these young ones learn more about humankind's dark past and perhaps help them appreciate what God's kingdom has done.

Learn From the Past

I have fought battles; I have won wars. I have defeated generals and their armies. I have faced death many times. Every single time I looked it straight into its eyes, unmovable and unafraid. I have never backed down or felt like running away before, but that day? That was an army of a completely different kind, and for the first time in my life, I was terrified.

"Thank you, brother da Vinci," the moderator said. "That was very insightful. Who has another question for our special guests?" he asked.

Teenagers. So many of them. Hundreds of them. They were all there, staring at me. Well, thankfully, not only at me. My colleagues seemed to have done this before. They sounded very confident and articulated. Not at all nervous.

"The young man in the third row," the moderator said. "Please, tell us your name and your question."

Here we go again, I thought to myself, hoping he would

miss me.

"My name is Carl. My question is for brother Einstein," the young boy said. The children seemed to be more interested in my new friend Albert than in me to my satisfaction.

"Okay. Go ahead, Carl," the moderator said.

"Why don't we hear more from you, sir? You don't publish your studies and discoveries as often as you used to. What happened? Did you get bored?" the boy asked.

"Hi, Carl. Please, call me Albert," he said. I had seen old pictures of him, and I have to say. Paradise did him good. Thankfully, they didn't have any of these so-called photographs of me lying around.

"That is a great question," Albert continued. "Of course, I didn't get bored. I never get bored, really. But you are right. I have been publishing less than I used to. What happened, you ask?" I looked at the boy while Albert spoke. He looked fascinated, thrilled to hear from him. I guess I would be, too, if I understood half of the things he wrote about. He seemed to have been a pretty big deal in his time. "Well, I just decided that I don't ever want to lose what I have," Albert continued. "But, for me, it is not enough to be able to live forever and keep learning for eternity. I have realized that the best part about creating and discovering is sharing what you have created or learned with someone else. And I love to share in the creations and discoveries of others, too, with as many as I can. But, the end of the Millennium Reign is drawing near, and we all know what is coming. So I am now resolved to dedicate more of my time in helping as many people as I possibly can to be ready to survive the Final Test." He paused for effect and took some steps forward in the boy's direction. "I made a mistake once, where I prioritized my curiosity and personal achievements over others' needs and the greater good. I had to live with the pain of knowing that

my work contributed to thousands of people's death. You all know what I am talking about. Thanks to our Creator, many of them were brought back to life and are here today. But I promised myself not to make the same mistake again. I continued advancing my work, sure. But my work is not my number one priority in my life anymore." He is good, isn't he? After that one, even I was fascinated with him.

"Thank you so very much, brother Albert," the moderator said. "Would someone else like to ask another question?" he asked. "Yes. Here, the young lady in the front. Tell us your name and your question, please."

"My name is Ana, and I also have a question for brother Albert." They loved him. I could only hope they kept firing their question at him.

"Is it true that you said once, I want to know God's thoughts? You said that in the Old World before your resurrection, right? What about now? Are you still trying to know God's thoughts?"

"Good question, Ana," Albert said. "I like to think that now I have a pretty good idea about how God thinks. It has nothing to do with how much more I know now about the visible universe. Instead, it has to do with how I feel spiritually connected to him by knowing him as a real person. I still want to know exactly what his thoughts are, especially about the universe. And, I am quite sure that once our King hands over the kingdom to our Father, we will have a completely different kind of relationship with God, and that intimate relationship will allow us to have even greater insight into how he thinks. I'm looking forward to that."

Quite inspiring, don't you think? But, sadly for me, the questions were not over yet.

"Okay, guys. One more question before we conclude. Yes.

Please, the young men in the back," the moderator said.

"My name is Alex. I love history, and my question is to Artaxerxes." *To me? Are you sure?* I thought to myself.

"Go ahead, Alex," the moderator said.

"You were one of the most powerful kings in human history. Now your current assignment is to help with the cleaning in the Lazarus Center. How do you feel about it? Don't you miss being rich and powerful?"

Do you understand now why I was so nervous? "Hi, Alex," I said. "I have to confess that it was hard for me in the beginning. Before, since I was a child, I had people treating me like some kind of god. I have never learned how to do simple basic things, like cleaning or cooking, because I never needed to. But now I know all about cleaning, as you might guess. And I have never been happier. One thing about being powerful is that you can rule over other people. And without Jehovah's guidance, we did a pretty bad job doing that. We were terrible at it, to be completely honest. A lot of people died when I was a ruler. And I killed many because I wanted to continue to be in power. Today I don't have to decide who lives or dies to protect my people and my family's ways of life. I wouldn't ever trade the peace and unity we have today for the riches and power I used to have back in the Old World. Most of you here have no idea what real suffering feels like. For most of you, human death is just a concept. Learn from the mistakes of those who lived through human history and cherish what you have. You are truly privileged. You have everything. And do not ever allow anyone to fool you into thinking otherwise," I said, feeling pretty good about it. In the end, it wasn't that bad.

"That was beautiful, Artaxerxes. Thank you for that," the moderator said. "Thank you too, brother Einstein and brother da Vinci, for being part of this wonderful interview

series of the *Learn From The Past*. We very much appreciated you taking the time to share some of your thoughts and experiences with us today."

"Thank you, Levi," we said in reply.

The moderator then turned to the audience and continued. "And for you, students. Don't forget. Next week we will have a field trip through what used to be Rome, and brother da Vinci will be our tour guide. That's all for today. Class dismissed," he concluded.

The Salvation Festival

"Hey, Lee! Thanks for helping me with that, man! I appreciate it. Okay, I have to go now. Yes, I understand. Um-hmm. Okay. Don't worry. Love you too. Bye," Levi said, turning off his brainwave-enhancer communicator. "Okay, guys. Are we ready? The next Pod to Israel leaves in forty-five minutes," Levi asked, standing in the hallway, double-checking his pockets for his Assignment Card.

"I'm ready," Jacob said from the living room, patiently waiting on the sofa while he rehearsed his lines. "I'm coming," Anne yelled, coming down the stairs.

"Wow. Anne is going to be the most beautiful one in the whole festival this year," Rachel said. Anne replied with a grin from ear to ear.

"Yes, she will if we leave now," Levi said, turning the levitating hover-cases on and opening the door. Once everybody was out, he left the house, leaving the door ajar.

The massive, city-sized Brooklyn Central Station would

always become small and cramped around this time of the year. Thousands of people from all corners of the world would travel to attend the five-day-long Salvation Festivals. This global event celebrated the end of the Old World and remembered God's acts of deliverance throughout humankind's history. Different regions from every continent organized and hosted the Salvation Festivals every year. People could apply to attend the festival in other parts of the world. With their applications accepted, they could travel and enjoy the festivities in different continents as delegates representing the region they came from. This year, Levi and his family applied to attend the festival in Israel. Hundreds of people went to the Station in Israel to welcome their guests. They were greeted with music, dance, and many gifts. Everyone was hugged and kissed, taking Levi and his family hours to get through the people and get to the arrivals' main hall, where Marcel was waiting.

"Levi! Anne! Over here!" Marcel yelled and waved when he finally spotted Levi and his family in the crowd.

"Babe, look! It's Marcel," Anne said.

"Can you see him?" Levi asked, still unable to locate Marcel in the crowd.

"Yes. Do you see the big 'We Love You' banner?"

"Yes?"

"Just below it."

"Ah, there he is," Levi said, smiling at the vision of Marcel in the middle of the people, jumping and waving frenetically. They cut through the crowd and eventually got to him.

"Hey! So nice to see you, my friend," Marcel said, hugging Levi.

"It's great to see you too. Where are the girls?" Levi asked.

"They are waiting for you at home. They can't wait to see

you guys," Marcel said, kissing Anne and hugging Jacob until he got to Rachel.

"I'm so happy that you guys are here. You have no idea."

"We are happy to be here, brother," Levi replied.

"Come on, guys! Let's go home," Marcel said.

They left the arrivals with their hover-cases flying close by, following them into one of the many large glass elevators in the center of the hall. Moving up slowly, they emerged from the ground in the middle of Jerusalem. The glass doors opened. The Adams stepped out of the elevator with mouths open and hearts racing. With the sun going down on the horizon, the various yellow and violet shades made the impressive sight of Jerusalem's walls even more stunning. A green carpet of trees claimed the grounds of what used to be an overpopulated busy city, filled with arrays of crammed off-white and beige-colored buildings. Large and tall buildings were all together rare. The few edifices blended with the local flora in a way that made them almost invisible. The city walls and other historical icons stood out and amazed their visitors. That evening, the skies were cleansed from all clouds and covered with billions of twinkling lights. Marcel and Levi decided to catch up during a walk under the stars.

"I heard that you were invited to be an instructor in the School for Lazarus Instructors. Congratulations, my friend! I'm proud of you," Marcel said.

"That was a huge surprise."

"How long are you serving at Lazarus, anyway?"

"I started before we had Matthias. So, a few hundred years already."

"What? Wow. Really? We really don't feel the time passing,

do we?"

"Yes. I still remember my first day as if it was yesterday."

"Me too. You cried like a baby in every resurrection?" Marcel said, joking.

"Yes. It took me a while before I got used to it," Levi replied. They both laughed.

"And we thought living forever and perfection would be boring, remember that?"

"Don't remind me."

"Enough about me," Marcel said. "How are you guys doing? Is Matthias still serving in Patagonia?"

Back in the house, June made sure her guest had plenty to do.

"Thanks for helping me with these little Festival gifts, guys," June said.

"Of course! I love it," Anne said.

"These mini go-bags with dried fruits are the best idea ever, June," Rachel said, making June and Anne laugh.

"Well, they were a very integral part of our lives in the last days of the Old World, weren't they? I thought it would be a fun way to remember this year's festival."

"Genius!" Anne said. "You are helping in the Hospitality Committee, designing the costumes for the plays, and...what else are you doing? How do you find time for all of this?"

"Well, you know. Mostly with the girls' help. And, to be honest, I just love being part of it, you know. Like our conventions in the past, our festivals today are the highlight of the year for me," June said.

"Organizing a global event in the Old World? I can't understand how they managed to do that in that old system where *unexpected events* could happen at any time," Anne said.

"In comparison with today, sure. You're right. Today, even

the weather is controlled. There are no bad surprises. Only good ones," June said.

"Everything was more challenging, absolutely," Rachel said. "Those convention days were the happiest days of the year for us as a people. The love and the unity of our brotherhood was a true miracle in that ungodly world."

"Indeed," June agreed.

"I didn't experience the truth in the Old World, but I can imagine how faith-strengthening it must have been to witness God's hand like that," Anne said.

"You're completely right, Anne," June said. "It was not easy, but that experience gave us the unique opportunity to know God in a way that children of the New Earth will never understand."

"That is the only worry I have about my children and grandchildren," Anne continued. "I lived in that terrible and cruel world. I can appreciate what Jehovah has given me, but they have only known peace, security, perfection. I worry about how they will make it in the Final Test."

"That is one of the reasons we have our festivals, right?" Rachel asked. "It helps us remember those days of deliverance, but it also helps us to impress in the minds of the ones born in the New Earth how life without God leads to disaster. We don't want to make the same mistakes as our first human parents made ever again."

Every year the festival was held in a large open field in the middle of the forest. In the center of the encampment, a big-round platform would be the stage of plays, dramatizations, and talks prepared for the attendees' delight. Each day of the festival commemorated a different act of deliverance from God. People would wear costumes and eat food from the

period when the events took place. Each day's program would always end with a closing talk from a representative of God's Kingdom, and every evening, gatherings with plenty of food and good music would end the day's festivities. On the first day of the festival, people would remember the days of Noah and how God destroyed all wicked people by the flood but saved Noah and his family in the ark. On that day, parents would build models of the ark with their children, and they reenacted Noah's story on the main stage. On the second day of the festival, the theme was the exodus of God's people out of Egypt. The Ten Plagues' drama was one of the most anticipated. The live visual effects of the Dead Sea divided into two were more realistic every year. On the third day, it was time to remember how God freed his people from Babylonian captivity. On the fourth day, the days before the Roman Empire destroyed Jerusalem were relived, and how God's people were spared was depicted. And on the fifth and final day, all present remembered how God saved his people in the Final War and celebrated the end of the Old World.

On the concluding day of the festival, Marcel and his family took part in the live super-production of the final moments of the Old World's last day. During the intermission, behind the stage, actors, actresses, musicians, and the whole production team were commemorating the drama's great success. It was the first time Marcel and Jacob participated in a final day festival drama, and they were beyond themselves.

"What a great day," Marcel said, hugging Jacob.

"I was so nervous. It was wonderful, but I'm glad it's over now," Jacob said with a big smile.

"You as a narrator, wow! I felt like I was truly living those moments again. Thank you for that, Jacob. Marvelous job."

"Thank you, son. But it was your family that brought us all back to those days with your outstanding acting. I'm very grateful for all the hard work you guys have put into the festival this year.

"Thank you, Jacob. Means a lot coming from you."

"June is a force of nature, isn't she? I get tired just by looking at how much she works. It's amazing."

"She is exceptional," Marcel confirmed proudly. "And she has always loved to be busy with the festivals. Even in the Old World, remember that?"

"I do remember. June was always so zealous. Jehovah was good to you," Jacob said.

"Indeed," Marcel replied. "You and Rachel had a great influence on what June and I have become. And for that, I'm truly grateful, my friend."

Meanwhile, in front of the stage, Rachel, Anne, and June were having a celebration of their own.

"June! You were amazing," Anne said.

"Are you sure? Was it okay?" June asked, hugging Anne.

"Am I sure?" Anne said. "The scene where you guys playing yourselves crossing the woods, being chased by soldiers, and finally getting to the camp with the angels' protection, gives me goosebumps until now."

"Yes! It was awesome," Rachel said, approaching from behind them.

"Rachel!" Anne exclaimed, surprised. "And what about you? I didn't know you were that good," Anne said, giving Rachel a warm hug.

"Yes, Rachel," June said. "The music was just perfect. You are an excellent composer. And thank you for also agreeing to conduct the orchestra."

"Did you write that!" Anne continued, astonished. "Rachel? How come I didn't know that?"

"It was meant to be a surprise," Rachel said humbly as she always was when it came to her many gifts. "It was nothing, really," she continued. "The musicians did the real work. And the girls were outstanding, June. You must be proud of them."

"Oh, yeah!" Rachel agreed. "Nathalie and Misja played beautifully. Where are they, by the way?" she asked.

"They were just here one minute ago taking pictures with the guys," June replied.

"Talking about the guys, have you girls seen Levi?" Anne asked. "The program is about to start."

"*Brothers and sisters!*" said a familiar voice coming from the loudspeakers.

"Anne, you didn't know?" Rachel asked.

"Didn't know what?" Anne replied.

"*The moment you have eagerly awaited has now arrived,*" the voice continued.

"Oh, I think you're in for a big surprise, my dear. Look at the stage," Rachel said, excited. Anne turned around and looked at the stage.

"No!" she exclaimed, stupefied after recognizing who the chairman was. "Is that?"

"*Please, give your attention to the message from The Word...*," he said while a loud sound like thunder echoed through the forest, "*...the Great Instructor...*," suddenly the skies were opened, "*...the Prince of Peace...*," then the most bright, beautiful light came out from the heavens when Levi finally announced, "*...our Lord and King, Jesus Christ!*"

* * *

"Now, as soon as the 1,000 years have ended, Satan will be released from his prison. and he will go out to mislead those nations in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Ma'gog, to gather them together for the war."

"This is what the ancient book says, right? Jesus Christ is ruling now for one thousand years on behalf of his father, Jehovah God the Creator, and Satan, his evil brother, will be released from prison after that, correct?"

"Yes? This is what we call the Final Test. Where Satan will test people's loyalty to Jehovah and will convince many to move to his side in a war in opposition to his father's heavenly government."

"This Satan being. He was the one in charge of the world before the Final War, correct?"

"That is what they say. Not everyone was aware of it, but it seems that he was the one manipulating things behind the scenes, yes."

"He had a good run, right? More than 1.000 years?"

"Yes. For thousands of years, in fact."

"The book doesn't say for how long he will be free. What if it takes another couple of thousand years?"

"Just '*for a little while,*' the book says. So, I don't think it will take that long, no."

"Okay. Even if it is just for a couple of hundreds of years, wouldn't you like to be free again, to do whatever you want?"

"And then what? Die?"

"So what if you die after that? People used to die all the time. They would rather die trying to live their lives to the

full than wasting it, nodding *yes* and obeying *quietly*. Don't you want to get the chance to have a few years of pleasure and indulgence like they used to have in the past? But now enjoying it with a perfect body and mind, even if it is for a short time?"

"Well."

"Look. This rebellion is going to happen as soon as Satan is released, right? The book says: *'he will go out to mislead those nations in the four corners of the earth.'* We know the book doesn't lie. It is going to happen for sure. Well. These nations will need leaders, correct? And we can use someone with Old World experience. Like you."

"Me?"

"Yes, Lee. You. Think about it?"

One Last Time

"What a journey," Levi said, addressing the hundreds of brothers and sisters gathered in the Lazarus' dining hall. Memories from the first time he had set foot in that hall came rushing through his mind. "I will miss this place. For the past hundreds of years, Lazarus has been the most important place in my life," he continued, looking at all the familiar faces in the audience. Marcel and June were unable to hide how proud they were of their friend. Matthias and his wife, recently assigned to circuit work, were also there. "I was born again here. And after being brought back to life, I kept coming back to this place almost every single day of my existence. In the beginning, I would be back here to learn more about this fantastic new world," he said, winking at his friend Mike, a former Lazarus' overseer, who was still amazed at how Levi grew to become a Lazarus' overseer himself. "I wasn't the easiest of students, though. Even after having experienced real miracles daily, I still had many questions. Many doubts. I was a little bit of a rebel, to be

completely honest," he said, looking at Jacob and Rachel, who were all smiles notwithstanding the tears. "But our Father was so patient and loving with me. It took a while, but with time, just like a butterfly, my transformation was complete, and I have become someone else. Something else entirely. Something perfect, and I love our Father for molding me into what I am today. With the great help of my dear wife, Anne, of course." Anne tenderly squeezed Levi's hand in approval, standing right beside him, inspiring and supportive, as always. "My transformation was complete, but I was not yet ready. And I kept coming back to this place, day after day — this time to welcome others just like me into paradise. I had the special opportunity to help many here to appreciate their "second chance" and to love its Giver for that," he said, looking at Brother Adams, his dad, sitting right in front of him in the first row. "I love this place," he then looked around the room. "Being part of this place's evolution throughout the years was a wonderful experience. To think that in the beginning, when I was brought back to life, this place was nothing more than a hospital-like building. Now it has become a marvel of human ingenuity and a great example of God's compassion and consideration, simulating entire ecosystems, just to make resurrected ones feel at home when they wake up." After hearing that, Artaxerxes and Nehemiah looked at each other and laughed at their own memories. "I will cherish this place for all the days of my everlasting life. Lazarus. The Resurrection Center. The School for Resurrected Ones. They have accomplished their purpose. They will not be needed any longer and will soon be transformed into something else for God's glory," Levi said, getting emotional. He paused, took a deep breath, and continued. "I hope to see you all soon when our paths cross again in our future assignments. Serving with you all these years was a huge

privilege. Thank you," Levi said while all hundreds of people in the dining hall got up and applauded fervently. They kept clapping until Levi asked them to stop, and the room slowly became quiet again. "Every one of the righteous and unrighteous ones has been resurrected, but one. Today we will have the last and final resurrection—a historical one. Let's go, everyone. Back to work. It's time."

* * *

What am I doing laying down in the middle of the fields? The young man thought, waking up. Wait. he carefully touched the back of his head. *There is no bump, no blood. It was probably just a bad dream,* he concluded. He sat up, looked around, and found his flock of sheep at a distance, grazing peacefully on the hillside. The sun is high in the sky already. *Why am I sleeping in the fields in the middle of the day? I better get up. Mom is probably worried,* he said to himself.

Where is everyone? he thought upon arriving at his camp. "Mom? Dad?" He called out. *The tents are empty. That is strange. At this time of the day, they should be back from working the land already,* he reasoned. He kept walking west when he saw someone far away coming in his direction.

"Greetings," he said, approaching the stranger.

"Greetings. How do you do? It's so good to see you again," the stranger replied.

"I am doing well. Thanks. Do I know you? I have never met anyone here other than my family."

"We have met before," the stranger said.

"I don't remember that," the young man replied.

"What is the last thing you remember?" the stranger asked.

"I remember going into the fields with my brother. I don't remember what happened after that. I just woke up in the middle of the fields, and now I am looking for my family, but I can't find them anywhere. Have you seen anyone?"

"I remember your brother. He *was* a cultivator of the ground, right?"

"Yes. He was. I mean, he is a cultivator. Have you seen him?"

"No. Not for a long time."

"My parents? Anyone?"

"No. I haven't seen them neither."

"Really? I don't understand. Who are you anyway? Where did you come from?"

"Come with me. I will show you."

"Come where?" the young man asked.

After a long walk, they arrived at this beautiful woodland surrounded by high trees.

"Do you remember this place?" the stranger asked.

"Yes. Of course. But it was closed. The access was forbidden, and the way was guarded. There is no one guarding the entrance now."

"Correct. I remember when you used to come to look at us from a distance. As a little boy at first. You kept coming as a grown man, but then one day, you stopped coming."

"What do you mean I stopped coming. I was here just yesterday. Wait. Are you saying you are one of the angels guarding the *Garden of Eden*?"

"It's very nice to see you again after so long."

"After so long? What do you mean? And why are you not

guarding Eden anymore? What happened?"

"Oh. A lot has happened, my dear Abel. Come with me. Let me introduce you to the *New Earth*."

PART THREE

* * *

The following stories are memories of Marcel and other survivors shortly after the FINAL WAR, also known as Armageddon: Tales from the Early Days of the "New World's Foundation."

Survivors

[Marcel]

MY ARM STRETCHES OUT, seeking my wife's warmth. Instead, I find only the cold and wet dew covering the grass. I sit up and look around. What am I doing sleeping on the ground in the middle of the forest? I stand up in one rapid movement. Well, this is new. My knee doesn't hurt. Neither does my back. Until my joints warm up, I'm usually all stiff and slow when I wake up. After sleeping the whole night on the ground like this, I would expect to be all pain now. But instead, I feel great. I feel like.... Wait a minute. Did I? "No!" I exclaim, suddenly realizing what is going on. "Aaaah, yes!" I cry out. "Oh, my God. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much." I can't believe it. Where is everyone? I have to find June and the girls.

I start running. I have never felt so excited and alive. In front of me, there is a small hill. The camp should be on the other side of it. The hill is very steep, but I climb it with ease. I get to the top of the hill and am taken aback by the scene. "Wow," I whisper. "Look at this."

From a distance, I can already see my brothers and sisters down there in the valley. I can hear their cries of joy. They look so happy. Many are celebrating while the children are already playing with the animals. I pause and contemplate this view for a moment—paradise at last.

“Huh,” I gasp with surprise. “Is that a lion?”

The lion follows me with his eyes while I run down the hill toward the valley where my people are. On my way down, I pass by a couple of giraffes and a family of elephants. Where did all these animals come from? We are supposed to be just a few hours away from New York. How could it be? Ah! June! I can see her down there with the rest of them. “June! June! I’m here,” I call out.

“Babe!” June shouts once she spots me and starts running in my direction. We finally meet each other in a firm embrace. I kiss her over and over again. I hold her face with my two hands, and looking at her beautiful eyes, I say: “Oh, how I love you. I love you so much.”

“I love you more,” she replies. “We made it, babe. We made it,” she keeps saying.

“It doesn’t feel real. Are we dreaming?”

“No, babe. This is happening.”

“Where are the girls?”

“They are playing with the animals. Come!” June holds my hand and takes me with her. Everywhere I look, I see happy faces. I wave and smile at the friends. I want to hug them all and join in their celebration, but I must get to my daughters first. “How long have you guys been awake?” I ask.

“For a few hours already. You took your sweet time, didn’t you?”

"It seems so. Why didn't you wake me up?"

"I wanted to, but Jacob told me to let you sleep."

"But why?"

"I don't know. Do you remember how Jehovah put Adam to sleep and removed his rib to make Eve?"

"Yes?" I ask, unsure about where she is going with this.

"Maybe He put us all to sleep to work on us? I didn't want to wake you up without knowing if you were ready," she says grimly.

"Seriously?" I reply incredulously.

"I don't know. Maybe Jehovah decided that you needed more time. Or should I say, more work than the rest of us?" June says with the most lovely smile, clearly kidding.

"Beautiful and funny? God really loves me," I say. We break down laughing. We can be silly like that at times. And I love her for that.

"You joke, but I do feel somewhat different today. This morning....Whoa!" I exclaim, interrupted abruptly by a dazzle of Zebras crossing before us, followed by happy children. I follow them with my eyes, and they pass by a black rhino lying down on his back, all relaxed, while a couple rubs his belly. And, just a little bit further, there is a family of hippos having a great time with their new human friends. The view is simply amazing. "They are so impressive up close like that, aren't they?" I ask.

"They are magnificent," June replies. "And you haven't seen anything yet."

"Really? What do you mean?"

"You'll see," she says.

As we approach the middle of the valley, June finds the girls in the crowd. "There they are," she says, pointing to Sarah

and Naomi playing with a giant full-grown white tiger. "What!" I say to the image of my daughters petting the wild animal. "Sarah! Naomi!" I call out.

"Daddy!" the twins shout and run towards me.

I get on my knees and hug my two babies. "Oh, my princesses. Daddy loves the two of you so much."

"Love you too, Daddy," they reply simultaneously, as they usually do. "Come! Come, Daddy! You have to meet Mrs. Tiger," they say while each grabs one of my hands and drags me to meet the beast. I have to say, I am a little hesitant about that. Sarah then makes the proper introductions.

"Mrs. Tiger, this is my Dad. Daddy, this is Mrs. Tiger," she says.

"Hi, Mrs. Tiger. How are you doing, ma'am?" I say. The animal answers with a loud and intimidating roar, making me take a step back. The girls, on the other hand, love it.

"Again, Mrs. Tiger. Again," they request.

"She is gorgeous, isn't she?" June asks.

"She is beautiful," I say.

"And, look! These tiny balls of fur are her babies. Aren't they adorable?" June asks.

"Ah! Hi! Hello there," I reply, unsettled – not sure yet about petting wild animals.

"Can we keep them, Daddy? Please! Please?" the girls ask.

"I don't think that is a good idea, girls," I say.

"Oh, no," they reply, a bit disappointed.

"Where did they come from?" I ask.

"From the Zoos around New York, we think. Some of them, anyway," June replies.

"Ah, of course. That makes sense. And, who is 'we'?"

"Well, you know. The rest of us were enjoying paradise while you were still in your beauty sleep."

"Ha-ha, funny. But, I have to say. I do feel great."

"Yes. We all feel the same way. Some feel even better than others."

"What do you mean?"

"Look. You see that girl there playing with the cobra?"

"Oh, wow. I can see her. Should she be doing that?"

"Stop worrying. She is fulfilling prophecies right now, you could say."

"I know, but..."

"Listen. Look a few meters to her right. Can you see the wheelchair?"

"Oh, yeah. What about it? Wait. Is that little girl Jaz? Tony's daughter?"

"Can you believe it?" June asks.

"Does she?"

"Yup. She has legs now. She must have grown them while we were all asleep."

"No way! But, but, how?" I stutter.

"Why are you so surprised? Everything is happening just as promised. It's all coming true."

"I know. But seeing it with my own eyes doesn't make it less incredible."

"I know, right?" June says. "In the accident, little Jaz lost her legs, and Tony lost his arm. If you think seeing Jaz walk again is unbelievable, you must see Tony's new arm."

"Really? How so?" I ask.

"You have to see for yourself. And there are so many more miracles like that among the *Friends*. You have to go around and hear their experiences."

"I will do that."

"But first, you might want to find Jacob."

"Why?"

“He was asking for you earlier. He might need your help with something.”

“Really? What else did I miss?”

“Don’t worry, babe. We will have eternity to enjoy paradise. But there is a lot of work to be done, I imagine. Go find Jacob.”

“Any idea where I can find him?”

“Try the Tent of Meeting. The elders were having a meeting there earlier,” June says.

“Okay, babe. I will do that. Love you,” I say.

“Love you too,” June replies and gives me a little see-you-later kiss. While going to the Tent of Meeting, I hear June talk to the girls.

“Okay, girls. I think Mrs. Tiger needs a break. Have you spoken with the Black Bear family yet? Come! Let’s go. Let’s say ‘Hi.’”

Tent of Meeting

[Marcel]

After the ban on religion, we had to meet in secret. Different arrangements were made to ensure we could worship together. Governments around the world seized all our organization's properties everywhere. That meant no more study literature, website, or library app, and our most beloved monthly broadcasting program was also gone. Everything was shut down and shut off. Posting religious content online was a felony. Getting caught with a Bible or any other religious literature was a serious offense punishable by imprisonment. The same applied to religious meetings. So, we had to be very careful. For a time, we met online using different conference sites and more discreet and anonymous chat rooms, but soon the authorities found out about our meetings and tracked us down.

After that, we started meeting in small groups and various places – a different basement, attic, barn, or shed every week, but that didn't last either. At one point, the government knew where we all lived and kept us under surveillance. It was then that we began meeting in the

woods. Our meetings in the middle of the forest were very special for many. It made us think of how our brothers in Poland and other countries did the same when they were under a ban in the past, way before the Great Tribulation we lived through started. They were being trained. And we learned a lot from their experience. When holding small assemblies in the woods, we had a big tent for our meetings, and each family in the group would also set up their own little tent. We would all pretend we were camping together. One day, June, the girls and I were on our way to meet our congregation in the forest. While walking through the trees, we saw soldiers moving toward our congregation's camp. We made it there first, but before I could warn the brothers, the soldiers closed in and surrounded us.

At that, a bright light coming from the heavens blinded everyone for a brief moment. Then, I saw coming through the clouds what seemed to be an army of angels. They were right behind who I am convinced was Jesus Christ himself. The soldiers pointed their guns at the clouds and started shooting. That was the last day of that old world. We were so thrilled to see prophecies being fulfilled.

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling out of heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.” – Mark 13:24-26

I like this one. We had to memorize many scriptures like that since not all of us had access to the Bible. What this scripture

describes is what I saw that day. I look forward to talking to Jacob about it. My friend and his wife are pushing ninety. Little Jaz grew new legs, and according to June, Tony got a brand new arm. I wonder which transformation Jacob and Rachel went through while we were asleep.

I see the Tent of Meeting, but I don't see Jacob anywhere. Maybe he is in a meeting with the other elders right now. I will stand here outside and wait for him. I see a couple standing just a few meters from the tent. They have their back to me. I know everyone in our congregation well, but I don't recognize these two. Looking at their size and built, it could be Tony and his wife. They are cooking something in that pot over their little campfire. Well, I could eat something. I am starving. And you never know how long these elders' meetings can take. I might as well have a bite. Let me talk to them.

"Hey, Tony," I say. "How are you doing, my brother?" The tall man turns around, facing me, and I gasp. It is not Tony. It is, "Jacob? Is that you?" I ask, amazed.

"Hey, Son," Jacob says. "You finally decided to wake up, hey?" He asks with a big smile and open arms. We have a long hug.

"You look fantastic!" I exclaim.

"Well, look at you. You don't look bad yourself," the sister says, leaving the pot, turning around, and meeting me.

"Rachel!" I exclaim, shocked. "You look amazing! Your back!"

"Yup. No more scoliosis for me," she replies.

"And you, Jacob! Are you taller?" I ask.

"Yes. And stronger, too," he replies, flexing his biceps and

radiating a big grin.

I laugh at the comic image and say: "You guys look so much younger already."

"Well, I still have some of my wrinkles," Rachel says.

"Same here," Jacob says. "But my knees don't hurt. My back is straight."

"And, look!" Rachel demands, showing her hands. "My arthritis is gone. Not a nodule to be found."

"We might not look like we did in our twenties yet," Jacob continues, "but we certainly feel like it."

"Which is a good thing," I say. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have recognized you guys at all," I confess, making them laugh.

"It's so amazing; it is hard to believe," Rachel says.

"You know what else is unbelievable?" I ask.

"What, Son?" Jacob replies, curious.

"Look! I also made it!" I proclaim.

Jacob and Rachel laugh. "Yes, Son. You did. Come here," Jacob says, and the three of us hug again as we have never done before.

After a long hug, I finally say: "Jacob, were you looking for me?"

"Oh, yes. I was, indeed. We are organizing a small team to go to the nearest town. We need to stock up on some supplies for a few days until we can make contact with the new government. Before Armageddon, we received instructions regarding what to do right after it. One of them was to have supplies for a few days. The team will leave in a few minutes. Can I count on your help?"

"Yes, sure. Whatever you need."

"Perfect. Come with me."

* * *

We enter the Tent of Meeting. The brothers gathered here are elders and ministerial servants of my congregation. They turn around to greet us. The coordinator of the *Body* stands up and walks in my direction.

“Tony!” I say.

“Marcel! My brother,” Tony says, coming my way.

“It’s so nice to see you, brother,” I say while he gives me a tight squeeze.

I recover from Tony’s tight and firm embrace and say: “Tony, I just realized that we never hugged like this before.”

“True! That would have been very hard for me to do with only one arm. But, now, look! I have two!”

“Yes. I can see that,” I say, fascinated.

“Do you want to see something cool?” Tony asks. He stretches both his arms forward. “Look at this,” he says.

“Wow! Can I touch it?”

“Sure. Go ahead.” His right arm looks aged and worn down. You can still see the cracks on the skin and the scars from Tony’s accident. But, the skin of his new arm looks and feels as fresh and smooth as the one of a baby.

“It’s a real miracle,” I say.

“Cool, huh?” Tony says.

“Amazing!” I reply.

“Marcel, thank you for joining us,” Tony says.

“No problem. My pleasure,” I reply.

“All right, brothers,” Tony says, turning around and facing the others. “Let us go over the assignment one more time. We have already checked. All the publishers of our congregation are accounted for. We have to provide for their needs for the next few days. The water supply is taken care of. We have a river running close by, and the water is good for consumption. A group gathers some of the overflowing fruits and other eatable plants in the woods. It would be good to have grains and some nonperishables too. We will also need some tools and other materials. Special items for our small celebration party this evening are also welcome. All the items are on the list you received. We hope to find what we need in the nearest town or what is left of it. Brother Jacob here will take the lead. Any questions?”

The ten of us shake our heads no.

“Great!” Tony says. “Let us say a prayer before You go.”

The Ten Spies

[Marcel]

The nearest town is about a two-hour walk from our camp. We have been walking for almost one hour now. Jacob and I go in front of the team, trying to clear the way with our machetes.

"It looks like the forest grew denser overnight," I say.

"I was thinking the same thing," Jacob says.

"It couldn't have grown like this while we were asleep, could it?" I ask.

"It probably could," Jacob replies. "Tony grew a brand new arm, remember?"

"Good point." I pause. "But, are you sure it happened last night? What if we have been asleep for longer?"

"Now that you mentioned it, I looked for my cellphone this morning, and it was dead. But it was fully charged before the soldiers showed up."

"If Armageddon happened yesterday, your cellphone should have sufficient battery still. Is that what you are saying?"

“In theory. What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I wondered what the city must look like now after Armageddon.”

“Well, you will not have to wonder for too long. We are almost there.”

We finally make it to the edge of the forest. I am surprised by what I see when we reach the road. The asphalt is cracking, and the local vegetation has partially replaced it. Almost as if the forest is reclaiming what was once part of it. The place is deserted. Not a soul around. We keep following the road east. It doesn’t take long for us to arrive at the nearby village. The welcome sign says: “Welcome to ...” the rest of the sign is burned off. We didn’t expect to meet anyone, but it’s a strange feeling to walk into an empty place like this. We pass by a few houses. They look abandoned but undamaged. There are no vehicles to be found. And, just like with the asphalt, the local vegetation appears to be taking over everything.

We arrive at the village’s center. Now we can see more evidence of Armageddon’s destruction, but nothing like what I expected—no debris, no buildings in ruins, or rubble anywhere. Everything indicates that a church used to be there in the main town square. Not anymore. There is a facade building sign on the ground with the church’s name covered by weeds and shrubs. But the building itself has simply vanished. Whatever was standing in that plot of land before it has been pulverized out of existence. We look at each other, dumbfounded by the scene, as we walk around the

town's commercial area. We can see a pattern emerging. While some buildings are entirely gone, others were left altogether unharmed. In this corner, where signs show the location of a bank, the scorched signs are the only thing left. The gas station and the car dealership on the other side of the street had the same end as the bank and church buildings. Their destruction seems to have been selective, targeted, and deliberate. On the other hand, the hardware store stands intact; not even one of its windows is broken. The supermarket has also survived unscathed.

"All right," Jacob says. "James, John, and I will check the hardware store for the materials on the list. Marcel and Caleb, you can get the supplies we need from the supermarket. Josh, you can take the rest of the team with you to assess the town's situation, okay?"

"Okay!" the ten respond.

"We'll meet here again in one hour."

"Right!" we agree and scatter.

We enter the supermarket. There is no electricity. Light is coming through the windows, but the place is still dark. The site looks like it has been abandoned for many days, even months. Everything is covered by dust, branches, jungle-like vines, and ropes coming from trees outside the building. I walk through the corridors, looking at the shelves. I find the dry food aisle. I take a quick look at my list and start putting things in my shopping cart.

"Hmm. Peanut butter with pieces of peanuts." The girls will love this, I think to myself. "Hey, Caleb," I call out.

"Hi," he replies.

"Maybe we can have a barbecue at the party today. What

do you think?"

"I don't know. Do you have meat on your list?"

"Not really. But Tony asked us to keep an eye out for things we could use for the celebration, right?"

"Yes, but it might have spoiled without electricity to power the freezers."

"You're right. Let me check." I go to the freezers. "Empty?"

"What did you say?" Caleb asks from the other side of the shop.

"I said, it is all empty. Nothing left here."

"There are no fruits or vegetables either. I think all perishables are gone."

"Maybe the people took everything during Armageddon."

"Only the perishables? It doesn't make sense. Everything else is untouched."

"I don't know," I say. "It's like everything perishable had decomposed completely. And, if that is true, we have definitely slept way more than a few hours."

"Not necessarily," Caleb says. "Remember how Jehovah grew the bottle-gourd tree for Jonah. And how on the next day He sent a worm at the break of dawn, and it attacked the plant, and it withered as fast as it grew?"

"Yes. I remember that."

"And, if He could make the sun stand still for Joshua, He can also make it move faster, right?"

"Definitely, yes."

"Anyways. I guess no barbecue today, huh?" Caleb says.

"No. I guess not," I reply.

"My cart is full already. I have everything on my list. How are we going to take these all back with us?" Caleb ask.

"Hey, guys," Jacob enters the shop. "Look what we found in the hardware store."

"Ah, nice. Construction bags," Caleb says. "We use this to move debris and heavy equipment on the construction site."

"Exactly," Jacob confirms. "We will use them to take the supplies back to the camp."

We fill our bags with supplies. The others arrive with their bags filled too.

"How did it go, guys?" Jacob asks.

"We got everything," Matthew replies.

"The town is completely deserted," Joshua adds. "Most of the houses survived the destruction, but no vestige of the people, yet."

"Do you think they have all been destroyed?" I ask.

"Or maybe some of these houses belong to brothers and sisters that are still on their assigned refuge just like our congregation is still in the camp."

"Oh, yeah. That is possible."

"Some of these houses and little farms have gardens, and they are all overflowing with produce. There is food growing everywhere you look. It's amazing. We got some fruits and vegetables with us."

"All right, guys," Jacob says. "I think we have everything. We should be heading back now."

We have four enormous bags full. We use construction wood stakes to lift the bags by the handles and carry the weight with our shoulders. Each bag, made of extra strong cloth, must weigh around one hundred kilos at least. I am impressed by how we can take that kind of weight with no problem. Let alone how my eighty-something-year-old friend here can do it at all.

We make our way back to the camp. Tony is the first one to

welcome us.

“Dear brothers, thank you so much. This is great,” he says.

“Tony, you have to see it. The town. The scene,” I say, struggling to find the words to describe what we saw.

“I am looking forward to hearing all about it, but right now, we need your help with something else,” Tony says.

* * *

It didn't take long for the sun to set on the horizon. The most beautiful one I have ever seen. There is something exceptional about it. Maybe it's the beautiful double rainbow accompanying it. Or simply because it is our first sunset in the new world. One thing is for sure, June and I can't have enough of it.

Everyone was informed about the dinner we would all have together. Many took part in the arrangements for the celebration by preparing the food and drinks, while others rehearsed music presentations and Bible dramas.

Now, everything is ready, and we all meet in front of the Tent of Meetings. As the coordinator of the body of elders of our congregation, Tony welcomes everyone and says that before enjoying the meal prepared and starting with the party activities, he would like to read the last letter received from the Governing Body. This letter should be read to all congregations on their first day in the new world. We all gasp and sigh at his announcement.

“The letter reads as follows,” he says. “To all

congregations....”

Rejoice!

[Marcel]

We applaud and raise shouts of triumph. That was the most powerful letter from the Governing Body I have ever heard. We received many beautiful words of commendation and were reminded of how and why we were selected for survival. The brothers have also emphasized what a privilege and great responsibility it is for us to be chosen to build the foundation of this New Earth. And how Jehovah will bring us to perfection, the planet into a paradise, and how we all can participate in this restoration project. The loving words of reassurance and encouragement filled our hearts with joy and gratitude. The letter concluded with an exhortation saying: “Rejoice, New Earth! Because your enemy has been hurled into the Abyss. Shout in triumph to Jehovah, for he is good, and his loyal love endures forever!”

After that, we prayed and ate a banquet of different dishes and quiches, soups and stews, and all kinds of other delicious things. The recipes featured vegetables, fruits, legumes, and other fine ingredients growing everywhere in abundance. Our congregation is not particularly big, but we are very

tight as a family. It feels great to have a party with all of us together like this again. We could only meet with small groups in secret for a long time. Thankfully, I was assigned to my friend Jacob's field service group during that time. We have been through a lot together, and Jacob has literally saved my life with a lot of Jehovah's help. It is nice to see him so active and fully involved in taking care of the congregation. He has always spoken fondly about the time he served as the coordinator of the body of elders. But with age, he had to slow down and eventually step down from that privilege. He was happy to train others to qualify and be ready to replace him when the time came. But I know him too well. I know how much he missed the time he was able to do more. Look at him now. I have never seen him this happy.

"I missed this," I say, approaching Jacob while he is helping with serving the food to the brothers and sisters.

"Me too, son," Jacob replies.

"You haven't stopped since we were back. Have you eaten anything yet?"

"Not yet. Maybe I can eat something now. Care to join me?"

"No, no. I can't eat another bean, or I will sin." I can hear the silence. "Bean. Sin. Got it?"

Jacob frowns at my attempt at comedy.

"No, thanks. I am full," I finally reply.

Jacob picks up a paper plate, some of the stuff we found in the supermarket, and starts filling it with food.

"You have to try a bite of everything, Jacob. They taste amazing," I say.

"Marcel, thanks again for your help earlier."

“Stop thanking me, Jacob. I am the one that should be thanking you for taking the lead and organizing all this.”

“How does it feel? Does it feel real to you yet?” Jacob asks.

“It is surreal, isn’t it?” I reply.

“We have lived in expectation to see this day for so long,” Jacob says. “I had made a point to visualize in my mind, fantasize and imagine how this day would be, but this! This here beats all dreams I might have had and surpasses all expectations I have ever had. Jehovah loves surprising us, doesn’t he?” he asks.

“He sure does,” I acknowledge. “And he is so loving and considerate too.”

“He is, indeed,” Jacob agrees.

“I mean, look at you,” I tell him. “Getting younger by the minute.”

“Yeah. I feel young,” Jacob replies.

“The lame can run,” I continue. “The blind can see. Even I can see things much better now, and I didn’t realize how bad my eyesight was before today.”

“Really?” Jacob asks, surprised. “I thought you had great eyesight.”

“Me too,” I say. “That is what I mean. And, at first, I was somewhat puzzled by being one of the last ones to wake up, but now I think I know why Jehovah did that.”

“You do? And why is that, you think?” Jacob asks.

“To be honest, I have never made the new world real in my mind as you did, fantasizing about it. Living it in your head. I was never able to imagine anything beyond the artwork in our literature; you understand what I mean?”

“I do, but....”

“And that is why Jehovah woke me up later, I think.”

“I don’t follow,” Jacob says, confused.

“Allow me to explain,” I continue.” My first impression waking up today was pretty much the one depicted in our literature for so many years. It was familiar. I recognized it right away—the children playing with the wild animals. Or should I say, what used to be considered wild animals? Sister Mary is not blind anymore. Little Jaz can run again. My first new world experience seeing all this after waking up is precious to me, and for that, I am genuinely grateful to Jehovah.”

“Okay?” Jacob says, unsure. “I don’t understand how Jehovah waking you up later helped you. I was one of the first ones to wake up, and that was a great experience too. The wild animals were not yet here, and most brothers and sisters were still sleeping. But, I could help with preparations to provide everyone with water and their first meal and help make the arrangements for today. It meant a lot to me that I could do that.”

“Exactly. This is precisely my point,” I say emphatically. “That was the experience Jehovah knew you needed,” I affirm and continue. “Imagine if I would be the first one to wake up. I would most likely have no idea of what to do. Seeing everyone lying on the ground, I would probably have panicked and tried to wake my wife, daughters, and everyone else still sleeping. I am not sure if that would have been for the best. Big chance I would have spoiled the first impression of the New Word for everybody,” I say, making both of us laugh.

“Oh, my friend,” Jacob replies with a smile. “I am sure you wouldn’t have spoiled anything. But it is nice that you see Jehovah’s love and concern with you on a personal level like this.”

“But it makes sense, no?” I ask.

“No! You are still crazy,” Jacob cries through his laugh.

“You will need the full one thousand years to reach perfection. You and me, both,” he declares.

“Haha,” we laugh.

“I knew that already,” I say.

“And who knows,” Jacob continues, “after the Millennium, when Jesus hands over the Kingdom to God, and we can finally have a direct father-son relationship with him again, you can ask Jehovah if your theory was correct.”

“Like Adam could speak with Jehovah before he sinned, you mean?” I ask, puzzled.

“Who knows?” Jacob replies.

“Hmm. I have to remember to do that,” I say. “Jacob, can I ask you something?” I continue.

“Sure,” Jacob replies.

“What happens next?”

“We are not sure yet, but....”

“Jacob!” Caleb calls out, approaching us.

“Hey, Caleb. What’s up?” Jacob asks.

“Hi. The body of elders is requesting your presence,” Caleb says.

“Ah, all right. I’m coming right away,” Jacob says.

“Okay. Thanks,” Caleb replies and leaves us.

“Sorry, son,” Jacob says. “We’ll continue this conversation later, okay?”

“Of course, sure. Go do what you do best, my friend.”

“And what is that?” he asks.

“Taking care of Jehovah’s sheep.”

“Haha. Okay, Marcel. Thanks. Enjoy the party.”

“Will do.”

* * *

[Jacob]

I love Marcel and his crazy ideas. Would this one have any merit, though? Probably not. But about one thing, he is right. I feel great to be useful again. I wonder what assignment the other elders will have for me now.

Here we are. I enter the Tent of Meetings, where the elders are assembled.

“Hi, Jacob,” Tony says. “Thank you for joining us.”

“Of course. What is going on?” I say, looking at the others sitting around a radio, leaning over towards it, and listening very carefully.

“We have been taking turns ‘watching’ the radio the whole day. The entire day we didn’t get anything other than the noisy static. Until a few minutes ago, when we received something.”

“Really? What did they say?”

“We were not able to make a word of it. Too much noise.”

“It will work. We followed every instruction. They have never failed us before.”

“I’m so excited; I can barely contain myself. Can you imagine?” Tony asks.

“Not really. I guess we will have to wait and see....”

“Guys!” one of the elders interrupts. “I think I hear something.”

There is only static again for a moment, then: “Hi, everyone out there. If you are receiving this, listen carefully. We will repeat the instructions.”

Bear With Me

[June]

I kiss Marcel gently. I am so proud of him. He has been working so hard to keep us physically and spiritually safe for all these years. "We have finally received our reward, my love," I whisper softly, careful not to wake him up. And look at my baby girls. They look so beautiful sleeping peacefully like this. I love them more than my own life. Knowing now that nothing can harm them gives me such inner peace. Nothing makes me happier than to know that my daughters will grow up in a perfect world where they will always be safe and well. Thank you, Jehovah. I love you so much for allowing my family to enjoy real life: a life without anxiety, sorrow, or pain. My only concern is that they grow to love you as much as I do, Father. Please help us ensure their love for you keeps growing daily for eternity. I kiss them on their cheek and slowly crawl my way out of the tent.

I take a deep breath and exhale: "Aaah, what a beautiful day." The blue skies, the sweet smell of flowers, the peaceful sound of birds singing. I love spring. It is still early, and it will take a while until my people here wake up. I think I will

go for a walk.

I walk into the woods in the direction of the nearby river. When I approach the river bed, I see what seems to be a huge black bear. Hiding behind trees, I move carefully towards it. Once I get closer, I realize. That is Mama Bear and her cubs playing in the water.

“Hello, guys. Remember me?” I ask.

Mama Bear turns around and looks at me. She gets out of the river and shakes the water off. Oh, here she comes. I know we are friends now, but she is still very intimidating. Mama Bear stands up on her hind legs and walks towards me. What is going on? What does she want? Standing up like this, she is immense—almost twice my size. She keeps walking toward me, and I take a step back. I shouldn’t run, right? Should I? She takes a step closer and then another. I’m stunned. I brace myself and close my eyes in fear when Mama Bear finally gives me a gentle, very wet hug.

“Aaah,” I sigh in relief. “Don’t scare me like that, Mama.” Of course, Mama Bear would never hurt me. What was I thinking? I hug her back, and she kisses me, licking my face like a friendly dog. “Ow, okay. Okay. I love you too. Where did you come from, Mama? I wonder if all wild animals are now this friendly. Or did you come from a zoo? Or maybe from a circus, where you got familiar with humans, huh?” She stands up again and starts to push me toward the water. “What is it? What are you trying to say now?” She keeps moving me with her nose. “Are you saying that I need a shower or something?” I check myself, and she is right. I could use a bath, like yesterday. “Okay. All right. I’m going. I’m going,” I comply reluctantly. But the water is so cold. “Ah! It’s freezing!” I cry out after trying it with only the tip of my toe. Mama Bear doesn’t seem to care and keeps pushing. I

enter the water very slowly, shaking like a tree in a storm, and my teeth begin to chatter uncontrollably like I am having a seizure or something. Wait! What happened? Suddenly the cold is completely gone. "Whoa." The water actually feels great now. How is that even possible? Did my body just adapt to the water's temperature? Extraordinary.

Mama Bear, me, and the cubs are having a great time. "But now I have to go, guys. My family will wake up soon, and I want to be back before they do, okay?" Mama Bear roars and dives.

"Sorry. I can't keep playing. I have to go," I say, getting out of the water. She emerges swiftly with a giant salmon in her mouth. She then gets out of the water and throws the fish at my feet. "What is this? Is this for me?" She nods and pushes the fish in my direction with her snout. I can't accept that." She stands up and roars at me again. "All right. All right. I accept it," I say. "You're so kind, Mama. Thank you." She hugs me and leaves me, going into the forest, followed by her offspring.

"Aaah," Marcel groans while trying to leave the tent.

"What is it, babe?" I ask.

"I have muscle pain all over my body," Marcel replies.

"What did you expect after all that hard work yesterday, huh?" I say, kissing him good morning.

"You're right. I guess even a perfect body would need time to recover after that kind of physical exertion."

"Even Jesus got tired, right?" I say.

"He did, indeed," Marcel replies. "By the way. What is this great smell?" he asks.

"Fried fish," I answer.

"Fish? Where did you get it?" Marcel asks.

"It's a funny story. Remember the bear family?" I ask.

"Mommy, mommy," Sarah and Naomi shout, coming out of the tent.

"When I woke up, you were not there, mommy. Where did you go?" Sarah asks.

"Oh, my darling. Mommy woke up very early today and went for a walk. And do you know who I met in the forest?"

"Who?" the girls ask.

"Mama Bear and her babies!"

"Really? Where? I want to see them too!" they exclaim.

"We will look for them later, okay?"

"Okay," they agree.

"And, look. Look what Mama Bear gave me." I point to the picnic mat with all the food and proclaim, "Breakfast!"

"The bear gave you the fish?" Marcel asks.

"Yes. It was amazing. She caught the fish and practically forced me to take it."

"Seriously?"

"Yup. You should have seen it. It was almost like we could understand each other. It was crazy. And..."

"Mommy, mommy. I'm hungry!" Naomi says, looking at the various tasty things.

"Okay, sweetie. Let me show you what we have here today," I say. "Some fried fish, wild berries, mint tea, and, surprise, surprise..."

"What, mommy? Naomi asks.

"Peanut butter!" I announce.

"Yeee," they shout.

"You have prepared quite a feast here, babe. Thank you," Marcel says.

"Thanks, love," I say.

"Okay. Let's eat, then. Right girls?"

"Yes. But first, we pray, right, daddy?" the twins ask simultaneously.

"That's right, sweethearts. Let's say a prayer."

* * *

[Marcel]

During our breakfast, Caleb came by to deliver a message from the elders. The family heads had been invited for a brief session at the Tent of Meetings. We all got excited about it. Many wondered what would happen now. And I wonder if maybe this meeting had been called to address some of our questions.

I enter the Tent of Meeting with eager anticipation.

"Thank you, brothers. Thank you for coming," Tony says. "It seems that we are all here. So, I think we can start," he continues. "Yesterday, we picked up the brothers' radio broadcast. It was a great feeling to hear the familiar voices of our dear brothers again. They transmitted the same instructions throughout the day. They gave coordinates to a meeting place where everyone in the region should go. We will be uniting with the brothers and sisters of our circuit there. What exciting news, don't you think?"

We all applaud in agreement. We haven't had any conventions for many years. We are indeed longing to see everyone once again.

"Great!" Tony continues. "Let us get ready and get

moving. We will leave in approximately two hours, okay?" he asks.

"Tony?" I ask.

"Yes, Marcel," he replies.

"What about our homes? When will we be able to go back?"

"That is a good question, Marcel," Tony says. "I would like to know too if my place survived Armageddon. I think we will know that soon enough. We will probably get more answers to our questions in the meeting place the brothers ask us to go."

"I don't care about my lousy apartment, to be completely honest," one of the brothers says. "But, I would not mind getting some clean clothing there. Can we do that first?"

"And I could check if my fish is still alive," another brother says.

"Your fish? Really?" they ask.

"What?" the brother shrugs.

All of a sudden, everyone starts speaking at the same time. There are 'sighs' and 'cries' and agitation until Tony interrupts, saying: "Brothers, Brothers. Please." The commotion fades away. "For now, let us just follow the instructions, okay?" he continues. "I'm sure all our needs and questions will be attended to as soon as we get to the meeting place."

"Where are we going exactly?" someone asks.

"That is the good news. The meeting place is not too far from here—just a few hours walk. Brother Jacob here is going to lead the way," Tony says. "Any more questions?" he asks.

All hands go up.

"Great," Tony says. "Keep note of them, so we can ask the brothers taking the lead once we get there," he says with a

grin. "Thank you again, brothers. Time to break camp. Let us meet the rest of the family."

On Earth as Well as in Heaven!

[Marcel]

We have never felt this happy before. Not even when we realized we had survived Armageddon unharmed. Seeing this multitude of people is heartwarming. Hundreds of brothers and sisters flock from all directions to the coordinates given by the brothers. Most arrive by foot, while others come in buses, which I can only assume are electric since they produce little noise and no smoke. We meet and greet each other with kisses and hugs, even those we have never met before. We can't hold back the tears of joy seeing families being reunited. Meeting our good old friends from our circuit is an incredibly emotional moment for us too. Friends we haven't seen for 'ages.'

"Marcel. Is that...?" June asks once she spots a friendly face from a distance.

"Yes," I answer. "I think that is Mel." June takes off right away to meet her best friend.

Like in the conventions we used to have, I see many brothers serving as attendants, offering help, and giving

directions. They instruct us to keep moving toward the baseball stadium of this small city we have just arrived in. The stadium doesn't look very big from where we stand. It might hold a few thousand people. And looking at the size of the crowd here, we will need every single seat available.

Inside the stadium, we are overwhelmed with joy by having this type of experience again. The crowd's chatting and the noise of people milling around sound like music. Meeting old friends and making new ones makes you feel warm inside and takes you right back to those international convention days. We are so absorbed by this beautiful familiar feeling, surrounded by so many of our people after so long, that we completely lose track of time. Until a kind voice comes out of the stadium's speakers, saying: "Dear brothers, sisters, and friends. Please, take your seats. We are about to start."

"Start what?" I ask.

"I don't know," June replies. "Exciting, isn't it?"

"Very," I reply. "Let's go, girls. Let us find our seats."

We finally find some seats all the way up in the grandstand, where we have a great view of the field. In the middle of it, there is a small round blue podium and a microphone stand. I can also see a few brothers sitting on the team benches in the dugout—the only ones wearing suits. One of them leaves the dugout and walks towards the podium.

"Brothers and sisters. Welcome," he says. The sound of his voice amplified by the speakers fills the stadium making everyone in it go silent. All eyes fixed on him.

"Is that...?" I ask.

"Yes. We know him," June replies. He is far away, but we recognize the Speaker. We got familiar with him when we

used to have our monthly broadcasting.

“How are you feeling today?” He asks. The crowd cries a shout of joy in response.

“Yes. I feel the same way,” he replies with a big grin. “We waited so long for this moment, didn’t we?” We all nod and reply, “YES.”

“For all this time, we couldn’t meet freely,” he continues with warmth in his voice. “We always had to meet in secret. Many times we had to hide. Some of us had just now been freed from imprisonment. Think for a moment of all the things we had to endure,” he requests, overcome by feelings. “Persecution. Oppression. Hardship. We all met with various trials. But even when put in isolation, we were never alone. We were always together in faith and spirit,” he pauses and then exclaims emphatically: “Jehovah has never forsaken us!” The mass reacts accordingly with a resounding round of applause.

“Yes,” he continues. “Gog of Magog tried to stop us. It wanted to break us, to eliminate us. And what did we do in response?” He pauses. “I can tell you what we didn’t do,” he continues, raising his voice after every sentence. “We didn’t give up. We didn’t give in. And the more they pressed on, the more we pressed forward. The more they tried to eradicate us, the more we flourished. The more they tried, the more they failed. If anything, their attack had only strengthened our faith and made our conviction unshakable, don’t you agree?” He asks loudly. The whole stadium answers with a loud and clear “YES.”

“Where is Gog now?” The Speaker continues with a soft, low voice. “Where are their soldiers with their weapons? Where are their arrogant talk and evil threats now? Look around,” he requests humbly, and the audience complies. “What do you see?” He asks. Do you see any of your

persecutors anywhere? Do you see any sign of Gog of Magog?" He pauses before saying firmly: "No!" It's the response to his rhetorical question. "I will tell you what I see," he pauses again before shouting: "I...see...VICTORY!"

The crowd roars with him loudly. We all cry shouts of triumph, making the structure of the building shake beneath our feet.

"We are God's people," he continues in high volume, cutting through the noise, almost screaming to overcome the crowd's roar. "No weapon forged against us will ever succeed. Satan's system was destroyed. And today, God's Kingdom is established on earth, as it is in heaven.

Look up, you people," he demands. "And behold—God's Kingdom and his king!" At that, the skies open. And just like when Jehovah made Elisha's servant see it then, He makes us see it now.

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I hope you have enjoyed it.

For more stories, access our website: www.imaginetheime.com

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I would love to hear from you. If you want, you can send me a message to my email: driofernands@gmail.com

Till next time.



A. F. Lima