

MADMEN

by

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August 19

I down-shifted my little hatchback car from fourth to third gear, gently and automatically to help the four-cylinder engine climb the mountain road. *Why was I heading in toward the base so early?* I asked myself. Bored at home again, and I did not have enough time to start a project before coming to work. I capped the peak of Pomerado Road, lost in a mental conversation with myself and reflectively slipped back into fourth gear. Thinking of Marshall Roberts and our disrupted future, thanks to the US Navy, I was barely aware of the spindly Aspens I sped past.

The *Other* presence had returned. I was well familiar with its feeling inside me. The *Voice* spoke with me, gave me a *Knowing* of things that quite simply would be. Clairvoyance? Perhaps a *Gift from God* set into my spirit before I was born, the imprint of my destiny. How long had I known this *Other's* presence? It felt like eons. It sometimes coexisted within me. The *Knowing* had existed since my early childhood, when I had been more comfortable with the adults. Precocious, they had called me to my face, as we sat on the patio out front of Mom and Dad's summer house.

Half-conscious of the increasing traffic, I slowed my car and reflected on the *Other's* presence. I knew he was William Martin, who now lived a half a world away, stationed with the US Navy in Iceland. *What time was it there?* I checked dashboard clock, added nine hours, and posed a mental question to the man: *What are you doing awake at this hour?*

His reply was apologetic, more a feeling than words. Very rarely did I hear actual words. This time I sensed insomnia and worry. I held a sad kind of anger at this man who had stolen my

heart and then shattered my dreams. I tried to think instead of my dear Marshall, but that only increased the sadness.

The last curve rose before me, and I focused my attention on the evening rush of Friday traffic. Wheeling my blue hatchback into the parking lot of my duty station at Miramar Naval Air Station, I mentally slipped on the mask I usually wore on the job. Smiling inside at my real identity, I climbed out and headed for the lockers.

Just another unknown to the military and civilians whom I worked with, I projected the image of a cool, serious young woman, more interested in religion and music than in the field of electronics. They knew so little about me. I smiled again. *Let them think what they will*, I thought heading toward the lockers where my work uniform waited. They'd called me drifty, spacey, and moody, but never looked at my priorities. Material things did not concern me. Spiritual matters did, because I felt that I was not of their world.

The radio shouted out the play by play of the local professional baseball game as Brent Turner paced restlessly about the flight simulator's office. Sharon Golding had her nose in some science fiction novel as I shuffled in and glanced through the Pass Down log to see what work needed to be accomplished. I had three malfunctions to check out, probably insignificant, and eight hours of Navy time to kill. No duty for me until the 24th, I recalled, as I settled down to the routine, wishing I was home writing one of my novels. Dennis scoffed from behind the local newspaper, and all was quite normal in my life.

* * *

I woke, startled and insecure, remembering sadly that the first man I'd found interesting in two years, Marshall, had been transferred to Alameda Naval Station, 500 miles north of here. My memory of our too-brief time together haunted me in the August moonlight. Puzzled by the rude awakening, I slipped out of bed and padded through the dark mobile home to the kitchen for my cigarettes. The mantle clock reported the hour as just passed 3 AM. As I returned to my bed, empty except for a slumbering feline companion, I was becoming aware of the reasons for my instant awake. The *Other*, again. Will's mind again lingered in my psyche after my many long months of putting him and my crushed emotions behind me.

Sighing, I took the nearby ashtray and sat, cross-legged on top of the bedspread, reaching, feeling, accepting this metaphysical mode of conversation. This was not the first time he had pulled me from sound sleep in his loneliness. Offhandedly, I wondered where in Europe he was this Saturday morning that he was free to reach me mentally. The Navy usually commanded his off-station time when his cargo plane was away from home base.

I extended myself on the mental plane to identify myself, but his reply again was of disbelief and denial. He was searching for someone other than me – again. Angry, I steeled myself stubbornly against this three-year-old argument about who he thought I was when our minds touched. I could feel his mind probing mine and yielded to him – *again*.

Half conscious of the here and now, I took a final drag on my smoke, snubbed out the butt, and placed the ashtray on the headboard.

“Why don't you believe me?” I whispered into the empty moonlight.

The feeling dissipated, now. Will Martin's mental touch had withdrawn. The old familiar cycle had occurred again. Again, when he identified me, he had rejected me, casting the contact aside and moved on, forever searching for someone he called his *Lady Ann*.

Frustrated, I eased down into the cool sheets and fell back to sleep.

* * *

I woke again at dawn, troubled, sweaty, and tense. Tosha, my cat, scolded me with several yowls for the early awakening, and then she trotted down the hall toward the kitchen. In her feline mind, if I got out of bed, it was time for breakfast. I climbed into my robe and followed her.

The living room clock hummed above the mantle in the dim eerie pre-dawn light. It was not yet 6:00 AM. As I wondered if I had been awakened by Will's metaphysical touch, I fed the cat, and then brewed some tea. Steaming cup in hand, I lit a cigarette and curled up on the sofa to stare into the foggy Southern California morning.

I focused my mind and spirit.

Something was very wrong, I knew, but could not focus on the problem. Other times flashed in my memory. Other *Knowings*. And William... My skinned crawled like drying leather as I gathered myself into deep meditation, hoping to clarify this odd external feeling.

Darn Will! I could feel his pain, his sorrows, his emotions, and sometime it felt as if I knew his very soul, despite over 5,000 miles between us. I often felt his mental touch, his tears, his loneliness, his presence. Yet three years ago in his physical presence, I had seen his fear and scorn of me as he broke our engagement.

That's ancient history, I reminded myself now, wondering what had caused this mental review of his connection to me. I had allowed satanic forces to use me in the past. The memories made me shiver. I understood more now about the use and abuse of this God-given talent, and I took a moment to thank God for redirecting my life through Will's influence. I had become

different. William had declared that I was one of an elite spiritual, metaphysical collection he called *The Thirty*.

Will's *Thirty* were *MadMen*, each and all. According to him, most had never met on the physical plane of this Earth and yet he "spoke" with most of them across some spiritual plane. His Madmen were watchers, combined in a righteous cause, bound together by God in defense of His people as the biblical End Time drew near. *The Thirty*, each unworldly, mad, or crazed, walked the everyday world, keenly aware of the world with its falsehoods and corruption.

And so, I had passively waited out injustices, *Knowing* they would fade away in the End Time.

Sighing, I glanced at my cat Tosha, who sat bathing herself efficiently on the blue floral couch near my feet. I willed my conscience again to journey to that astral plane, curious about this earlier rising. The mental plane felt... *crowded*. The only spirit person I fully recognized was William Martin. He introduced me to Jennifer, present from her Minnesota home. He had talked of her during our courtship, but I had never met her. Yet I immediately *knew* her on this mental plane. I smiled to her and felt her loving reply.

Why are we all called together? I asked.

No tangible reply came that I could make out, except a feeling to be patient and wait; feel and see; and *Know*. Thirty minds were coming together, crowding the gathering into a mental blur. Thirty souls, alive and dedicated to the coming cause gathered with William, some now called *The Holder of the Lightning*. Something – *God?* – said he would lead us. I waited near Will's side and heard me referred to as *The Teller of Tomorrow*. *Now* was the time we had awaited. *Now* began the manifestation of the End Time prophecies. *The Holder of Lightning* radiated before us as leader of *The Thirty* in this singular gathering before the destruction would

begin.

The peace of God drifted through my being, coupled with harmony in a complete fellowship of those thirty kindred souls. True tranquility settled into the mist of human insanity. Joy radiated among us. We had hurt so long for humanity, desiring something more godly and sacred for us all. As multiple beings, we basked in a oneness only dreamed of by some of the best contemporary minds. *The Thirty* could become the ultimate consciousness as only the multiple being can experience.

My limited, finite mentality stumbled in the reality of this global gestalt. Its existence felt like sanity lost. The words on one of Will's songs flowed through my head, and I could almost hear him singing: "*God Bless all the Madmen. Yes, God Bless us all. We don't know enough not to smile.*" I felt my mouth ease into a widening smile. Suddenly I *Knew* more than ever as enlightenment flowed from the Spirit of God into each of us. The waiting had finished.

The time *The Thirty* had waited for was at hand.

After a brief prayer for our safety, Will concluded with thanksgiving. Dismissed, I returned to my physical body, knowing the path I needed to take to survive the immanent destruction.

* * *

I rested a while, and then brewed another cup of tea, all the while *Knowing* some of my future in an atomic war shattered world. I pushed aside precognitive images of unscrupulous people actively hostile to me.

Mentally taking account of my possessions, I realized only two things really mattered to me now: Tosha, my cat, and my guitar, "Touchsong". Of course my car would prove a valuable

tool in my journey east.

Fear pierced me, filling me with more visions of angry mobs, desperate people and then of one friend laying bloody and dying on the floor. *Was I able to protect myself from these?* No. I had always been a pacifist, despite my enlistment in the Navy, and had just recently learned to fire a pistol. I realized that I would need protection from now on.

Liz, came the Divine Whisper in my mind.

Dear Lord, will you spare her for my sake? I prayed silently. The immediate answer came to me, *Of course, my daughter.*

My close Navy friend Penelope Pulaski knew many things about security and police work and had accepted my insanity when I spoke of *The Thirty*. Reaching for the cell phone at my elbow, I poked her contact number, knowing that if this were any other day, she would not be home. She answered it sleepily on the fourth ring.

“Good morning, sleepy head,” I began.

I heard a long pause and then a slight rattling.

“I was just having the strangest dream,” she muttered, still groggy with sleep. “We were in the desert -- just you and me -- and the world had gone terribly wrong.”

“That’s a distinct non-coincident, Liz. Listen to me now.” I drew a sharp breath and committed myself. “The reason I am up at this early hour and what’s behind your dream are not coincidental. I’ve been with *The Thirty*. They woke me.”

“Not just William this time?”

“*All Thirty of us*. Liz, you’ve got to get up here now.” I pushed on before she could interrupt. “No time to explain. Get yourself ready for a camping trip into the desert. We’re leaving as soon as you get here.”

“Now? I’ve got to work security tonight.”

“We have to go *now*,” I hissed impatiently. “Your job – our world -- will no longer exist by nightfall.”

During the silence on the other end of the connection I lit a smoke, waiting for my words to make their full impact. On the other end of the line, she drew a slow breath.

“Your serious.” She yawned slowly. “Are you positive?”

“It will be raining atomic warheads before sunset, and I need you with me. Liz, you’re going camping with me overnight in the Anza Borrego Desert.” I thought a second and added, “Just bring your side arm and best rifle with you. I’ll prepare the rest.”

Again, a long silence screamed from the receiver. I sipped my tea and waited, thinking about what to pack. Then I heard a deep sigh of decision and resignation.

“All right, camping tonight. I need to get away.” She cleared her throat. “Bob will just have to get somebody to cover for me tonight. You really want me to bring guns?”

“Let’s just say I’m afraid of snakes. The human kind.” I chuckled. “Gather what you can’t live without. And bring what think you’ll need for a few days and get up here now.”

“What about your church choir tomorrow?”

“I *have* to go in the next few hours, Liz.” I said through a lump in my throat.

“Yeah, I’m getting the feeling you do. Okay. I’m going with you.” My girlfriend drew a breath in the reality. “I’ll need some time to get stuff together.”

“No, grab your guns and some extra clothes. I’ll handle the rest.”

“What will I tell Bob?”

“Tell him the kingdom of God is at hand.”

“Like he’s gonna believe that!”

* * *

In the time between our phone conversation and Penny Pulaski's arrival, I packed for our camping trip. I tossed canned food in a box and loaded it along with my old tent and plenty of blankets into my car. I didn't own a sleeping bag. Then I packed my old kerosene lamp, guitar, and music, whatever I needed for Tosha, cooking gear, canned goods, and lots of water.

I *Knew* I would not be returning. That knowledge of the coming nomadic week God had laid out for me that morning lay heavily in my heart as I carried out a cardboard box filled with essentials. Rope, first aid equipment, towels, sheets, every candle in the house, work gloves, books, my bible, and toilet paper. I had all this packed in my car before my friend's arrival.

7:45 a.m.

When Liz's maroon muscle car appeared, I had already moved my little car out of my carport so she could park there. The front door of my modular home was open, and she stepped in without knocking to find me placidly sipping a cup of tea in the dinette. Silently, I motioned to the vacant seat and second cup of steaming tea across the table from me.

"Do we have time?" she asked, falling into the chair.

I nodded and drew on my cigarette. Penny faced me, a questioning look on her face and studied me intently over the teacup. I killed the butt, sighed, and met her gaze.

"I am glad you came," I whispered.

"So am I. You're serious about this, aren't you? How much do you know?"

"It happens at sunset, and we survive. A desert wall will protect us from the radiation."

“I know it’s your dream. But... Why me?”

“I’ll need a bodyguard.”

“A bodyguard?” she laughed, sputtering her tea across the small dinette table. “I thought this was about *your* destiny?”

“I accepted this a few years ago. You must choose now. Stay and die, or come with me and live a full life. You alone can make this choice.”

Standing, I moved to the stove, to give the young woman time to think. Penny gazed out the window absently as I prepared a fresh cup of tea for myself. When I sat down across from her again., she met my eyes, puzzled.

“Your whole face is... it’s like there’s a light behind your eyes,” she remarked uneasily.

Liz’s mouth muscles worked hard for a moment of difficult thought as she toyed with the steaming cup before her. I lit another cigarette in the quiet.

“If you don’t believe me,” I sighed toying with my cup. “Just come camping with me for the night.”

“Yeah. Sure, I can do that. But, *the End of the World* as we know it?” She shook her head slowly, then sipped her tea. “That’s a little hard to swallow, Hannah.”

Reaching across the table, I took and squeezed her hand in assurance. She looked sadly into my eyes, and I grinned back at her.

“I know,” I whispered, seeing her slight smile. “So, we’ll just go camping in the desert for the night. What did you bring?”

* * *

Penny looked apprehensive as she sat stiffly gazing out the hatchback's front windshield. Tosha, as usual, prowled the small car, yowling, but finally settled down at Liz's insistence. Fortunately, the weekend traffic was minimal, and the August sun had not risen high enough to make for an uncomfortable journey. I drove my vehicle up, down, and around the switchback curves with little difficulty from the usual amount of slow-driving tourists that frequented the Southern California mountains on any weekend. As I drove, I felt and listened to my inner sense for any information available about the coming devastation. None was supplied. Penny spoke, but I didn't catch what she had said. I asked her to repeat it.

"It doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't?"

"You haven't been listening to me," she scolded, shifting in the blue passenger seat to look at me. "You still have that weird look on your face."

"Probably." I smiled, thinking of the *MadMen* in each of us. "It may never go away. Now, tell me what doesn't make sense to you?"

"The biblical end of the world. It can't happen yet."

"Not the *rapture*. No, not yet. This is just the beginning."

"But how? So much hasn't happened yet." Penny insisted.

"But so much has. You told me yourself about the European Common Market forehead codes, the British cloned lamb." I breathed a sigh, unable to take my eyes from the road. "The changes in the weather in the last few years..."

"I thought these things had to happen to the whole world."

"Some of them *do* happen to all nations. But not all."

"So, what comes next?"

“Not next, Liz. What comes *first* is the real question. World War III, probably,” I replied sadly, watching a slow vehicle cross in front of us. “I don’t really know about that. You’ve read Revelation?”

“I can’t make sense out of it.” She sighed in frustration. “A beast with seven heads. Ten horns. The scrolls and a prostitute on a bull. It’s all jumbled up. I don’t understand any of it.”

“Neither did I until this morning.” A shiver crept up my spine. “We of *The Thirty* were called together and instructed; some were told where to take refuge. All were given special talents or amplifications of talents they already possess.”

“So, what are your powers?” This came out snidely.

“What do you think, Liz?” I asked, slowing as we entered the mountain town of Julian. “What have you seen me do?”

“You sometimes think you can see the future.” She thought a moment and grinned like a schoolgirl with the right answer. “You’re a teacher and healer.”

“Perhaps that too. I don’t know all of it. This time God has only given me what I need to survive today.”

“When will you know?”

“Just before each time I need to know,” I remarked gently, then thought, and added, “for the time being, anyhow.”

“Hann? Borrego is where you’re heading? You just missed the cut-off.”

“Mercy,” I whispered, checked my mirrors, and pulled off to the side of the road. I grinned at my companion. “I knew I brought you along for some reason.”

“Sure. Navigator, you airhead.”

“Which way? I always manage to get lost up here,” I laughed.

* * *

This new road took us higher into the mountains now, and orderly orange groves gave way to the national pines that stood at these elevations. Their beauty had a calming effect on me. Penny slumped into her seat and silently drank in the view that moved past her window. Tosha woke in her lap, stretched lavishly, and bounded onto the blankets piled in the rear seat. With a wide yawn, my black cat circled twice then lay down to resume her nap. I left Penny to her thoughts.

* * *

“It’s about a 5000 foot drop,” I said grimly as we stood at the summit of country road S-212 overlooking the Anza Borrego Desert.

Penny stood, wide-eyed, absorbing the spectacular view of the multicolored desert lands before her in awe.

“See that patch of blue way out there?” I lifted my hand and pointed toward the eastern horizon. “The Salton Sea, about 40 or 50 miles away.”

Whistling through her teeth, she gazed at the view, as I strolled the few feet back to the car and looked inside. Tosha, on her bed of blankets, raised her head with a sad look at me. The cat panted.

“I know you’re hot, Little One,” I whispered. “And it’s going to get a lot hotter for us.”

“We’ve got to be crazy to go into the desert in August,” Penny remarked, opening the

door of the passenger compartment. I slipped in to my side of the car.

“God Bless all the Madmen,” I sang happily, turning the ignition key. *“And God bless me and you. Someday we’ll be mad men too!”*

“William wrote that, no doubt.”

“I have never claimed sanity,” I responded cheerfully. “This road makes Lombard Street in San Francisco look like a straightaway. You’d better hold on to Tosha.”

Penny bundled the over-heated cat into her arms, as I guided the car onto the road again and began the decent at 25 mph.

* * *

On the Western edge of the Anza Borrego desert rested a small public campground called Palm Canyon Park. Once on the desert floor, I turned my car in that direction and was not surprised to find the entrance unmanned on this hot summer day. Few people braved the desert heat of August, and the Department of Forestry would not waste manpower for the few crazy souls who camped here in the hot months. I quickly drove through the main gate and aimed my car northward through a maze of roads that fingered into campsites. Before us, a solid wall of rock loomed -- 3000 feet was my offhanded guess -- and I prayed it would protect us from the coming radiation. Unable to find a road that penetrated deeper, I finally shut down the almost overheated engine.

“Grab your guns and ammo, the blankets and water,” I ordered as I jumped from the vehicle.

Tosha, still panting in the heat, stayed where Penny put her, and I began searching my

boxes for the rope and food supplies.

“What’s your plan?” Penny called, strapping on her police pistol.

“There’s a box canyon up there,” I answered while pointing toward a gap in the steep ravine wall. “Jesse once told me it goes back a couple of miles. That should protect us well enough.”

“It’s gonna get hotter. Over 110 degrees, I figure.”

“We’ll live through it. Are you sure you can climb in those boots?”

“Sure. What about the bombs’ sonic blasts and fireballs?” she asked as she hoisted blankets onto the car’s hood and dove for two water jugs.

“None coming. They’ll use neutron bombs on San Diego and LA, killing life forms with no fallout.”

The dark headed woman looked at me, questions in her eyes for an instant, then stuffed the blankets on top of the box of food.

“Got a can opener?”

“On my pocket knife,” I said lightly as I double-hitched the length of rope to Tosha’s yellow collar.

“Rule number nine!” she grinned.

“Lock up the car, but leave the windows down a crack,” I ordered, closing the back hatch.

Penny obeyed as I lifted the box of food, blankets, and cat onto my left shoulder. My friend took a one-gallon water jug in each hand and eyed me narrowly.

“*God bless all the madmen,*” she sang, then added, “How does the whole song go?”

“I don’t remember,” I replied, starting for the gap in the canyon wall. It was about 11:15, hot, and getting hotter. “God willing, someday you’ll hear it sung by the composer.”

“What! God, I hope not!”

“God willing, he won’t still be the asshole he was, Liz. Now, let’s get hiking. I’m not sure how much time we have left.”

We climbed the first half-mile into the canyon with little difficulty. Signs of careless civilization were all around us. Trash and discarded beer bottles littered the well-wore path, and the walls of the gap encircled us. My shoulder had begun to ache, and I worried about my cat, who balanced in the searing sun on top of my boxes. Sweat streamed down our faces. I stopped to balance my load, wipe my face with my free hand, and then examined the road ahead. Penny had kept quiet, so far, but came and deposited her water jugs to help relieve me of my load. She gazed about, but my mind concentrated on that canyon with its almost vertical walls.

“Boxed in,” I sighed.

“That’s what you wanted?”

“Yup. Now for some shelter for the night. See anything good?”

“I’ll look around,” she offered.

“Look out for snakes,” I remarked absently as I bent to check on the cat.

Unknown to me, Tosha had shifted the contents of the cardboard box, burrowing herself under a blanket and out of the sun. She was listless and panting heavily, but secure, and I knew her instincts told her how to make the best of the situation. I stroked her hot little head, speaking in a low tone, while blocking the sun with my body. She mewed once, looking at me with pathetic eyes, and I reached for the water jug. After wetting my own lips, I poured water on my fingers and extended them to the cat. She sniffed once and began licking the moisture from them.

A single gunshot rang out, and I spun around, almost dropping the water jug.

“Over here,” Penny called from up on a rocky ledge to the west. “Want to have

rattlesnake for dinner?”

“Ugh! No thanks.”

“Tastes just like chicken. Come here.”

I tucked Tosha into her blanket shelter and began to cross the rocky terrain to where Penny waited 30 yards away. My boots slipped a bit on the stones, my feet hot inside the leather, as I approached her.

“Find something?” I asked, joining her on the ledge.

“It’s almost a cave,” she replied, turning to lead.

A dead snake lay at shallow cave’s entrance, and I sidestepped the creature, shuttering at the bloody sight. This small fissure between two boulders extended inward about twelve feet deep into the rock face. It too showed the familiar signs of civilization. Empty beer cans littered the floor, and a circular rock pile at the entrance had been a campfire many times. My eyes swept the smooth walls, reading graffiti and assuring myself of the solid construction.

“At least it’s cooler in here,” Penny offered. “Shall we move in?”

“Looks good to me.”

Ten minutes later Tosha happily sniffed about the enclosure as we sat resting and drinking the cool fruit juice that I had brought in a smaller thermal jug. I stared off into the canyon, aware of its familiarity for an indefinable time. Pulaski left me to peace, and busied herself by digging our latrine area.

I glanced at the sun’s position in the cloudless sky and asked God “when?”. *Sunset* was the answer given to me. I stood and stretched as Penny stepped into our little alcove.

“Are you up to getting another load from the car?”

* * *

By 7:00 PM we had emptied the car, set up camp, and scouted enough flammable material for a small fire against the darkness. My tent, not needed as a shelter, hung to the upper lip of our cave against tomorrow's heat, and as shadows crept across the canyon, I grew increasingly apprehensive of this night. Penny sat on the outer ledge, softly playing my guitar as I roamed the locale, collecting firewood in the fading light. Finished, I grabbed my cigarettes and joined her on our "terrace."

The flat ledge, relatively level, dropped off in natural step-like formations to the canyon floor below. Penny sat, guitar in hand, but had stopped playing. She was watching something intently down by the entrance to our canyon. I followed her gaze but became aware of her hand moving to her side arm.

"See him?" She whispered.

"Yeah. Easy, Liz. I sense no danger. Let him come closer."

We watched, not moving, as the tall figure approached. In the lengthening shadows of the day I could see the broad figure of a black headed man. Then a second figure appeared: a huge gray and black wolf that darted in and out of the sage brush near the man. I prayed Tosha would stay safe in the cave, asleep where I'd last seen her. The stranger moved straight for our shelter, and I could see Liz's shoulders rise in tension and readiness. I touched her shoulder in confidence, sensing something unique about the new comers.

The man stopped about 10 feet from us and whistled to the animal. The huge wolf ran to him then sat at the man's feet. Then they looked up in our direction as if they knew exactly where we were. I thought we were out of his line of sight, but as I watched, he spread his arms down

and away from his body and bowed deeply from his waist. When he straightened, he took a deep breath and called to me.

“Greetings, Hannah. Hello, Penny. We are glad you accompanied Hannah.”

Penny jumped involuntarily at the sound of her name and swung a look at me. I touched her shoulder gently, looking with my unworldly eyes at the man who moved toward us in the twilight. A strong recognition leapt in my heart and soul. This was a kindred soul, though not one of *The Thirty*.

“Hello...” I called tentatively.

“Lord William is concerned for you, as is the one who loves you.”

“Tell him... er tell them that we’re safe in God’s hands,” I replied, smiling in a *Knowing* recognition of this man/spirit, but confused by his message, thinking *the one who loves me?*

“Please come out of the heat, my friend.”

“Who is he?” Penny whispered.

“Apparently a helper,” I replied honestly. “Hush, now.”

The brown-skinned man stepped forward onto our terrace. His hair was cut in a contemporary style, his face showed an age in the mid thirties. He’d dressed for the desert in tan slacks and shirt with hiking boots.

“You have laid yourself at the altar of God,” he spoke, staring deeply into my eyes as he closed the gap between us.

“The God of my gladness and joy,” I responded, not knowing why or from where the response came. “Would you like something to drink?”

“No. You’ll need all you have.” He turned to the big wolf; a gray-black mixture of thick fur and powerful muscle. “Judica, please stay.”

The huge wolf obeyed, laying down and stretching its long body.

“Please. Be seated,” I said with a smile and sank cross-legged on the ground.

“It is good that Penny is with you.”

“I think so, too.” I noted her confused face but she returned quietly to playing the guitar.

“What brings you to me?”

“It is time. The Holder of Lightning asked that you not be left alone.”

“Thank you. Do you know how long should we stay here?” I asked without a moment’s thought.

“Five days. Do not go back to San Diego.”

“Will we meet survivors along the way?”

“Two percent of San Diego will survive for a while before being overrun by foreign armies. Less than one percent of your nation will live through the first winter.”

Pulaski stopped her tune, and I glanced at her for a moment. Tension gripped her face causing veins to rise on her neck and above her eyes. Then I focused my attention back on the stranger who now didn’t feel like a stranger to me, wondering who he was.

“I was called the Beloved.”

“Ironic. Sent by William,” I scoffed then caught myself. “Is my destination the same?”

“The one who loves you sent me.” The dark man smiled and a wonderful peace settled in our little cave. “And, yes you will be meeting in St. Paul.”

“Where is William now?”

“Aloft on a naval flight back to Iceland. Safe for the moment,” he whispered, glancing at Liz. “Do you have other questions?”

“Too many,” I sighed, sadness swirling inside me for the coming slaughter of all those

innocent people throughout the world. Then I looked back to the saint.

He nodded slightly then rose, I with him, and he laid his hand gently on my shoulders.

“Your friend shall be your helper.” He nodded toward Liz. “In addition, I bring you two gifts. Call this fine intelligent being called ‘Judica.’ She will serve you well.”

“Thank you.” I replied meeting the wolf’s golden eyes and sensing an immediate connection with the animal.

“You have suspected your other gift for a long while,” he continued, moving to the cave’s opening. “Soon your talents will manifest, and you shall realize their full worth.”

“God honors me,” I whispered, emotions tightening in my throat. “Thank you, John.”

He nodded, spoke quietly to the big wolf, and then turned and made his way down the rocky path. Then, his body *dissipated* into the evening air.

Knees turning to jello, I crumbled to the terrace floor, feeling stunned and drained.

“That was very... er, interesting,” Penny remarked in a quiet voice.

“Indeed,” I muttered, suddenly aware that the ghastly destruction had begun outside of our small canyon walls.

Out there, sirens wailed. Enemies volleyed missiles that fell like lethal rain from the sky. Explosions rocked great cities, turning them to rubble and radioactive debris. There was no time for screams, or for prayers. Millions of people vaporized along the Atlantic coast.

Beneath my feet, the canyon floor shifted slightly.

“Five days?” Penny asked sarcastically. “Think we have enough supplies?”

“Yes, we do.” Sighing, I felt death and destruction in my mind. “Judica? Come here, girl.” I called, trying to ignore the dark screams in the recesses of my soul.

The gray wolf perked up at once and trotted over to stand next to me. She butted her

great gray head on my knee and gazed at me with large golden eyes.

“Hello, Judica. Smell who I am. It’s okay.”

To my surprise, the animal seemed to understand and proceeded to give me a thorough going over, smelling every inch of my jeans and booted feet. Wagging her tail, she completed her investigation and sat down, looking at me with intelligence and expectation.

“Penny too.” I chuckled. “Go ahead.”

Again the animal understood, stepped over to Pulaski and gave her the once over with her nose. Judica ended her investigation of Penny with a playful lick on her cheek.

* * *

I woke with a start, the feel of a distant despair, not my own, filling my spirit. A cold feline nose touched mine. Tosha purred into my face and licked my nose. I could sense her disquiet. In the opposite end of the shelter, the small kerosene lamp burned dimly. Penny was gone, as was Judica.

Sitting up, I threw aside my blanket and reached for my boots. Tosha meowed softly, and I stopped to look into her eyes. We’d had a rapport ever since she was a kitten. This time it felt much stronger. The cat seemed concerned about my friend. Sensing confusion, mixed with sorrow and hopelessness on the psychic plane, I applied a mental block as I might try to ignore a throbbing toothache.

“Okay. Let’s find her,” I whispered, chuckling at the fantasies I believed at times.

My dark little friend meowed and started for the cave’s entrance. I followed after grabbing the lantern. Setting it on the small terrace like a homing beacon, I scurried down the steps after

my Tosha.

I heard the radio broadcast before I saw Penny Pulaski. Then I saw her sitting with her knees to her chest, her arms wrapped tightly around Judica. Her face was buried in the wolf's thick neck as her shoulders rose and fell in great sobs and mournful moans.

The broadcast reported various nuclear attacks throughout the United States, which I had known. I crossed the distance to my friend, knelt, and wrapped my arms around her, stroking her hair and murmuring softly. Tears sprung from my own eyes, and together, we sobbed for the death of our nation.

After a while, Judica nudged me with her soft muzzle, and I looked up, still clinging to the sobbing woman. *Dang radio*, I thought. Judica picked up the little portable radio between her teeth and brought it to me. Startled by the wolf's action, I took the radio and turned it off. Then, I tried to stand, bringing Penny with me, but a tidal wave of fear and dying screams split through my head. Dizzy, I fell to the ground, panting against an onslaught of humanity's despair.

"Come on, woman," I whispered hoarsely, pushing the death cries to the back of my mind. "We're not safe out here."

This time, I stood with her help, and together we stumbled back to the cave. Reaching it, the larger woman helped me inside, dimmed the lantern, and brought it in.

I collapsed on my pile of blankets, and the wolf settled next to me. Penny turned to draw a cup of water, then pulled off a length of toilet paper and brought both to me. I could not look up, but sat trembling in the warm air. She pushed the make-do tissue into my right hand, set the cup down within my reach and took the radio from Judica. The animal's full attention turned to my friend, and knowing me, Penny just let me be. Scouting out my cigarettes, I focused my mind on the cave floor, pushing away the terror of the dying people who kaleidoscoped through the back

of my mind. I lit a smoke. Tosha curled up, leaning against me on the blanket. The only sound for a long while was Liz's labored breathing mixed with occasional moans. I knew she still cried. Numb now, I prayed silently.

Later, I lit another cigarette and decided to watch her in silence. At the sound of my lighter snapping shut, she raised her head and looked around. Judica inched her way closer and rested her massive head in Liz's lap. She smiled appreciatively at the animal, and then looked up at me.

"You knew!" she whispered as if in first realization. "How can you just sit there like an emotionless lump?" she growled. "They're dead."

"Many are still dying. Slowly," I sighed, fortifying my mental blocks against the agonies echoing in my head. "I can... er, *sense* them when I don't keep my mental barriers up."

"The Chinese blew away the whole East Coast! Washington and... New York."

Penny sobbed again, not trying to control herself. I knew that her parents lived in New York City.

I *Knew* they had been killed by atomic weapons. I *Knew* that the West Coast population had been massacred by neutron bombs, which only took life, leaving the buildings soon to fall in to the hands of the aggressors. I *Knew* that China would move quickly to occupy those buildings. I *Knew* that China wanted the American *bread basket*. China needed our farmland to feed their people.

I hated *Knowing* the future.

The fact that somebody still broadcasted over San Diego commercial radio waves substantiated my foreknowledge. The West Coast population would die slowly and painfully in the next few weeks of radiation poisoning, I *Knew*, while the East Coast might have been

mercifully spared that torture by instant annihilation by atomic weapons of destruction.

I leaned back against the cave wall and sighed, as Penny finally sought to control herself. The weight of this fatal reality rested heavily on each of us, probably more so on Liz. I had known for three years of this deadly probability.

“Oh, Liz...” I sighed. “I wish I had some words of comfort for you, my friend. Would you rather I’d let you die with them?”

“I don’t know.” She stared off into an unknown distance, sniffing quietly. Then she laughed weakly. “You knew all about it this morning before you called me.”

Pulaski swallowed briefly, avoiding my eyes, as I reached for my smokes.

“I’m not all-knowing,” I said quietly. “Tell me what you heard.”

Fear shadowed her pretty face, and she began to sob again. Waiting for her, I steadied my own shaking with a relaxation technique, slowing my breathing and focusing within my being. The roar of the dying eased to a dull throb.

“Liz, you’re a cop. I want a sit-rep, now.”

With a visible effort, my friend gathered herself into some kind of calm. She swallowed hard and reached for the cup she had placed at my side. I waited, watching her sadly. After a few sips, she blew her nose and composed herself.

“The East Coast was vaporized.” She shifted on her sleeping bag, then reached to scratch Judica.

“Atomics?”

“Yeah, that’s what they said. Chicago too,” she sighed, hurting me unintentionally. *My* family lived in Chicago. “And most of the major cities -- Denver, Philadelphia, Dallas got atomics. The rest of the country got hit with neutron blasts to kill the people yet preserve the structures.

All of the West coast. I think. I'm ... er, It's all.... Too much, too quick. They said China might be responsible."

"They are," I said with a frown, toying with the sleeping cat's tail. "That I do *Know*."

"What now?" she asked after a moment.

"We'll have to wait long enough for the radiation to subside. Maybe hold up here for five days. I hadn't figured for that -- or for Judica. The evening wind from the West will be contaminated. We'll have to stay indoors at night," I reminded her. "No sense taking the risk."

"Yeah. What about Judica? What'll we feed her?"

"She'll have to fend for herself." The wolf raised her head at the mention of her name, and now looked at me. "Hear that, girl. You'll have to hunt for your food."

The wolf gave a single muffled *woof*. An eerie feeling came over me, as if I'd heard the animal agree to my instructions. My arms and back broke out in goose bumps for a moment. I shook off a shiver as the wolf pushed her nose under Liz's hand for a scratch.

"What happens to us in five days?"

"Hummmm?" The contact with the wolf's being caused a derail in my train of thought. I swallowed dryly, focused, and replied. "Will and I made an agreement before we left Memphis: If the holocaust came, we'd meet in the North Woods."

"Where exactly are the North Woods?" Her tone was snide.

"Our visitor said we're heading for St. Paul." I bit my lip. "William went to college there before enlisting. And Jennifer's there. He'd want to get to her. That's the logical place to start."

"So?" She frowned, stroking Judica's big head. I felt surprise that Penny didn't ask who Jennifer was. "We're just gonna drive there?"

"Actually, yes. If the electrical power plants are still working, self-service gas should be

available. Or we can make some sort of manual pump.”

“And if he’s not there?”

“He’ll be there - eventually.” I sighed, aware of my own doubts. “Anything else on your mind?”

“Yeah. Who exactly was that dude just now?”

“I believe that was Saint John the Apostle? But then again, I’m a madman...er woman. Do you think you can sleep?”

“I don’t know...” Penny sighed.

“Well. I can. My bible’s in that box if you want it.”

I picked up my sleeping cat and shifted her to the bottom of my makeshift bed. Penny crawled to the box as I took off my boots. Sensing her concerns, I had a thought.

“Liz, you and I have both read enough end-of-the-world science fiction to know what to do. We’ll get by.”

“Sure.” She shrugged then looked over at me, her face brighter. “Besides, you’ve got God on you side.”

“So do you.”

August 21

Judica was gone when I awoke, but Penny continued sleeping for over an hour. Grateful for the *alone time*, I scouted the canyon a little and stretched my legs in the early morning sun. When I returned, I sat praying until she woke. The topic over a breakfast of canned peaches was our survival for the next five days. Next, the food was inventoried and rationing agreed upon. Our

two biggest worries were the meager water supply and activities to keep away boredom.

Combining our knowledge, we agreed that nights on the desert floor were far too dangerous. Penny particularly disliked nocturnal reptiles. I worried about contaminated breezes from the West Coast settling into the cooling night desert. All hunting and fire wood gathering would have to be done in the light of day before the heat.

Next, provisions for trash disposal were agreed upon, and then we talked of my fear and lack of knowledge about firearms. Penny decided to school me on both her police revolver and her rifle later in the week, when the possibility of someone in the city of Borrego Springs coming to investigate the gun shots would be radically reduced. Neither of us knew if or how radiation sickness could be transferred. Besides, I told myself, any survivors may quickly revert to barbaric behaviors, and I knew my special talents were not yet strong enough to defend us from any attack in the near future. Later, months later, I *Knew* that would be another story.

Restless, Penny decided to go out scouting before it got too hot and strapped on her holster. I'd decided to stay indoors and write my journal.

"Hey!" I called as she started for the door.

"Yeah?"

"Is that rifle loaded?"

"No. Why?"

"Please load it before you go." I asked. "I know I can't shoot it, but if I need it, at least it'll be loaded."

"You'll shoot your eye out." Penny laughed as she came back into the cave.

"I shot an M-16 in boot camp."

"Big deal. One round and you are an expert."

“Please. Humor me.”

Pulaski took out her rifle, loaded it, showed me the safety, placed the loaded weapon on the floor, and went on out to explore our front yard.

* * *

Penny and Judica returned some time later, and I put my bible aside to greet them. The wolf came to me immediately, tail wagging, happily licking my face. Liz, meanwhile, took off her holster and drew a bit of water to quench her thirst.

“Find anything good?” I asked, feeling like I was coming back to reality.

“Someone stockpiled some firewood not far from here, up near that dark table rock, and there’s a lot of small game in the area. Jack rabbit, ground squirrel, and snake.”

I made an ugly face.

“It’s food, Hann.”

“I know, but *snake*? Ugh!”

“We’ll eat it only if we get desperate, okay? By the way, Judica got a jackrabbit for breakfast. What have you been up to?”

“Thinking mostly.”

“Visiting with *The Thirty*?”

“No. They’re all busy right now. I was trying to think about our trip, mostly. I can *see* some of what it’s like out there.” I sighed, blocking the continual death song in my head as she sat down on her bed. “The aftermath of the bombs, the radiation... Cities will fill with rotting bodies.”

“Ugh. Your Sight shows you this? I hadn’t thought of that.”

“I’ve got to get to St. Paul without going near any radioactive areas.”

“We need a Geiger counter,” Penny said, frowning in thought.

“Yes, but where?”

“I’ll have to think on that. We’re going to have to go back to San Diego for supplies—“

“No!”

“In a few days the air should be safe.”

“Supplies, yes. San Diego, no,” I replied shaking my head. “If the air is safe for us, it will be safe for our enemies, and we can’t chance that.”

“Oh, lord! The Chinese will be invading. We’re supposed to report to the nearest military base.”

“Which is Miramar Air Station. You want to go there?”

“Fuck, no.” Penny hissed.

“Neither do I. I *can’t*. My destiny lies in the other direction. We’ll head to El Centro for supplies.”

“There’s a Navy base there,” she warned. “We’d better ditch our I.D. cards.”

“Right. I left my cell behind, so no GPS. Did I leave the atlas in the car?”

“Nope.” She reached under her bedroll and brought out my two-year-old Rand McNally map book. “We should mark the areas hit by atomics for future reference, before the radio batteries go down. Or the newscasters.”

“I didn’t need to hear that,” I reminded her, then regretted the sadness in her eyes. “Here.” I tossed her the pen from my journal. “Mark what you know. Atomic and neutronic.”

August 24

Penny paced the shallow cave restlessly throughout the heat of the day, having hunted and scavenged the canyon floor with Judica in the morning. I felt comfortable and secure in our temporary dwelling and only left the confines of the compartment for morning and evening exercise. Sharpshooter Penny had already cleaned the fresh game she'd brought, and now it was time for me to cook. Consequently, my qualms about our food stocks dissipate. Water was another matter. I'd brought enough for five days, not six.

"I'm afraid we should ration back our water, again," I said and held my breath, pending her reaction.

Penny Pulaski swung around to glare at me, then looked down at the translucent plastic jug. Frowning, she exhaled as if gut-punched.

"I don't care!" She bellowed, pushing open the cave's cloth door. "I do not fucking care!"

"Come on, Liz. One more day. Maybe two."

"Why bother?" she grumbled in a shaky voice, then stepped into the desert heat.

"Liz! Wait! Talk to me," I said loudly, watching Tosha exit near the woman's ankles.

"Don't feel like it."

With a *harrumph* she stormed away from the enclosure. I let her go, watching after her in a pity-filled silence. Sighing to myself I said a prayer for Liz, then turned to prepare a meal around the squirrel meat and whole kale.

"Judica? Would you mind keeping an eye on her?"

The gray beast raised her sleepy head from her place in one corner, looked at me for an instant, got up, and followed Penny out of the cave. Thanking her as she left, I felt more secure

knowing the wolf would be with Liz. On instinct, I crossed to Liz's pile of belongings. There, next to her down vest and blue jeans, sat the radio. I took it back to my bed, turning it on as I eased down to my pile of blankets.

Static filled the airwaves of the frequency we had been listening to previously, and thickness crept into my throat as I swung the dial, searching the sound for a human voice. Swallowing emotions, I completed one sweep of the whole band. My anticipation deflated. After a prayer, I again tried the radio. With painstaking care I turned the tuning dial and swept the frequency band, high to low this time. Nothing but static.

I stowed the radio back where it had been.

* * *

Surprisingly cool air met me as I stepped out on to the terrace. The sun had sunk below the sheer western canyon wall. This fresh desert air sharply contrasted our stuffy cave with its canvas tent door. Turning about, I yanked the cheap plastic tent from under the ledge rocks and let it fall to the ground. A rush of stale air came from within, and I smiled, stretching. No wonder Pulaski preferred to be outdoors, I thought, happily digging out a cigarette for myself, then squatting on the terrace.

How many packs left? Six? When they went, I would have problems and did not look forward to the nicotine withdrawal. Penny hated the habit, so she would have no sympathy. I knew it was another matter I would have to pray on and then leave in God's hands.

We had about a pint of water left to last two days, maybe three -- between two people, a cat, and a huge wolf, who was the greatest consumer of that supply. I wondered if I could get the

spirit guide within the animal to understand.

Don't be silly, Hannah, I told myself. She's intelligent, but still just an animal.

A movement in the early evening shadows caught my eye, and I tensed. Mentally locating the rifle, I wondered if I could reach it if need be. Hearing a sound of the underbrush rattling about thirty feet from me, and I focused on it. Tosha's dark body appeared from out of the lower rocks. She carried a large rodent in her teeth. She brought her dinner onto the terrace, settled down a few feet from me and began her feast.

"Good hunting, little one," I laughed to my feline friend, glad there was moisture in her food.

As was her custom, Tosha ignored me and intently devoured the rodent. Looking elsewhere, I lit a cigarette and gazed into the canyon, thinking an ice-cold beer would taste good just then. Judica's bark announced Liz's return, and I looked up to see them coming up our cleared path. Penny carried no game with her and her face showed her sense of failure.

"Looks like canned dinner for us," I said, using a pleasant tone I didn't really feel.

"Jude got two gophers," she breathed, sweat running down her temples and neck, as she settled on to the rock patio.

"Tosha got a mouse."

"I see. Not to worry, Hann. Last night I saw several rabbits playing out there. I'll get them when they come out later." She looked at the tent lying on the ground. "What's up with this?"

"Airing out the abode."

"It needed it. And I could use a bath," She muttered watching Tosha and Judica touch noses in greeting.

"Yeah. I think I stink."

“I *know* you do,” Penny muttered as she stepped into the shallow cave.

She emerged a moment later with the lantern. I passed her my lighter without her asking and watched her light our lamp in the evening breeze. After she returned the lighter, I turned my attention back to the canyon floor. My companion moved back inside the cave. I dropped into a meditative state, barely aware of the sounds of food being prepared.

Penny came out minutes later with two small aluminum cans in one hand, a box of crackers in the other. Unable to see in the dimming light, I sniffed the contents of the container that she’d passed me. Spaghetti. Cold spaghetti, at that. My stomach rumbled in protest, and I set the container down on the ground next to me, uninterested.

“It’s not *that* bad,” Penny remarked unsympathetically.

“Could be worse,” I agreed. “It could be steaming hot.”

“Yeah. Or snake meat.”

My insides flipped again, and I realized I was developing a headache. Sighing, I returned to my turned-off state of mind and focused my eyes on a cactus across the canyon floor.

“It’s *not* that bad,”

“My stomach’s just a little queasy.”

“You should eat.”

“I don’t want it. Okay? Are there any canned peaches left?”

* * *

Penny had gotten out the guitar and was sitting inside the cave now that that she had rehung the canvas tent door. In the darkness of the patio, against my own rule, I watched the night

slip by. When I went inside much later, the camping lantern had been turned down to its lowest possible level, and I could barely make out the figure of the dark headed woman lying in her sleeping bag. The wolf lay near her, comfort emanating from the animal. I made my way to my bedroll.

Penny rolled on her side and stroked Judica's large head.

"How are you doing?" she asked quietly.

"I tried the radio a while ago. Nothing." I sighed, studying the lantern's little glow of flame.

"Hannah, I'm scared. I don't think the water is going to last."

"It will last. Have faith." I felt that Truth but *Knew* she didn't. "Why would God spare us from the holocaust only to let us die in this desert? *Believe, Liz*. I can't be the only believer here. Your belief strengthens mine."

"I'm trying."

"Try not. Do. Or do not. There is no try." I tried the movie quote she knew, and saw a smile touch her lips. But it quickly faded. "I know you're a remarkable woman, Penny Ann Pulaski --"

"No. I'm not."

"Ah, but you are! You'll amaze yourself in the months to come." I felt the familiar sense of what Will had called *True-Speech* flowed through me. "You will learn and grow, and come to know a Love the depths of which you have never experienced before."

"You can see my future?"

"Some, but I'm not telling you all of it."

"Why not? Tell me!"

“You will meet three more of *The Thirty*, this year if you stay with me--“

“Cool!”

“You will know the worst winter ever you’ve ever seen. You will find the peace you need and deliver a fine strong son.”

“Who’s the father?”

“You haven’t met him in the before time.” I grinned, watching hope color her cheeks.

“And I ain’t telling.”

“You’re eerie tonight,” she laughed, stroking the wolf. “You just got a faraway look in your eyes, and they start to glow. Then you started talking weird. That’s when you find things out, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I just feel like someone else is tapping my energy.”

“Like an auxiliary power supply?”

“Something like that. Will and I used to be able to physically link our energy, but this could be any of *The Thirty*.”

Her face turned to stone, brows furrowed in a dark glare at me.

“Does mentioning Will bother you? You’d better get ready to meet him.” I warned with a heavy heart, hoping that I’d be proven to him at last. *But by whom?*

“How will he treat you? You split on very bad terms.”

“If you think I look forward to seeing him again, you are mistaken.”

“You’re still hurting over him.”

“More likely very angry.”

“Very hurt,” Penny insisted in the dim light. “What if he still denies you are his mystical *Lady Ann*.”

Bitterness washed through her voice. And my soul. In that instant I *Knew* he would continue to deny me.

“Liz, I know you’d like to kill him and horsewhip me, but— “

“I’m going to have a long talk with that boy!”

“Go for it! Be my guest. By the way, he has to come looking me.”

“I don’t think so!” She said with a wicked chuckle. “He’ll be tearing up the countryside looking for Lady Ann.”

“Yes, and he will only find me. Remember: He doesn’t want Hannah. It will get very crazy.”

Penny rolled over on her back again, not commenting. Judica rose and left the cave.

“You’re both crazy,” she muttered after a long silence. “Mad men. You take that song too literally. Does he?”

“Probably.”

“Mad woman.”

“I’ve never claimed sanity.” I smiled as I reached for the cigarettes in my shirt pocket.

“What are you gonna do when you run out of cigarettes?”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I burn it,” I muttered tossing them next to my bed. “I could take up a pipe again.”

“They’re worse.”

“Another reason you’ll just *love* Will. He smokes the nastiest pipe tobacco. Where would I get tobacco for him?”

“I couldn’t care less. Where are we going to get a Geiger counter?”

“A hospital?” I sighed.

“Maybe a radiology lab?”

“I don’t want to walk into a hot spot while looking for a Geiger counter.”

“That would be ironic, wouldn’t it?” She laughed a heartfelt laugh. “Wouldn’t it? What an ironic joke, huh?”

“I don’t think we will,” I quickly said to ease the fears behind her laugh. “You’ve got to remember, God drew us here with a reason. Now get some rest. There’s something in the wind, and I may feel it better in dreams.”

August 25

I had slept badly, tossing in my sleep, or so Penny informed me. I had dreams throughout the night that had disturbed me greatly. Dead, rotting bodies and starving, caged zoo animals, haunted me, as I saw continued destruction by half-crazed survivors. With the coming of the dawn, the visions crept away. Their memory lingered, accompanied by their vivid smells and sounds.

My appetite had not returned. The best I could manage to eat was a small amount of canned mixed fruit in thick syrup. I craved the sugar of the syrup more than I wanted the bulk of the fruit. I sat back down on my terrace with my first cigarette for the day. I listened as Penny moved about the small cave. She gave the animals each a ration of water, then brought the jug to me for inspection. It held less than five ounces now. With a slight nod of the head I acknowledged her.

Shrugging, the woman reached for her black leather belt and strapped her gun to her hip with ritualistic attention. With an incomprehensible glance at me, she called to her hunting

companion, and the two of them left the cave. I found myself staring at the trail after them for a long while. Then rising, I pulled down the canvas door and let fresh, cool air fill the small cavern. Taking up my bible, I returned to my terrace and knelt upon the blankets in the stiff-legged style taught to me by the Dominican Sisters years ago. Placing the red bound book on the floor before me, I clasped my hands together, sighed, relaxed, and began my prayers by saying: "Dear God, I believe; please help my unbelief."

An unworldly peace enveloped and permeated me, and I shifted my weight, yet stayed in position. Clearing my mind, I concentrated on thankfully focusing on the One responsible for my abilities, this situation, and my very existence. In prayerful thought, I turned to my concerns for Penny. Her faith, her fears, and her understanding. Feelings drifted back to me in answer to my queries and reassured my being. Next, I prayed for William then asked for God's blessings and protection on my former love, Marshall. I thought suddenly of water. Opening my eyes, I turned to the water jug with prayerful intent.

"It would strengthen her faith, Father God. And mine," I prayed softly. "Please. Let it be done. I ask this in Jesus' holy name."

Rolling into a sitting position, I reached for my bible with one hand, flipping to a random page, and began reading Psalm 91. Soon, I heard footsteps approaching the cave. Liz's shadow passed into the doorway. I set my book of scared scriptures aside.

"Time for you to learn the guns," she remarked gravely, taking up the rifle.

I pulled on my boots, rose, and followed her out into the morning sun. The daytime glare hit my cave eyes, and they began to smart and tear with the freshness of the sun's brilliance. We slowly made our way down the natural stairway.

In the still cool desert, I saw of Tosha and Judica frolicking a short distance away. I took

the moment to marvel at the sight of classic enemies, such as these, enjoying such a friendship. Judica would bark, chase, and dodge as my cat would do the same in their makeshift game of tag. I felt a twinge of jealousy while watching the pair. Not long ago, it was I who had played the game with Tosha.

“Hann?”

Penny kept walking, but I had stopped to watch my animals play, and now she was waiting ahead.

“Where are we going?” I asked as I caught up with her.

“Here is good.”

Pulaski passed the rifle to me and pulled her service revolver from its holster, checked it, and looked at me seriously.

“You tried to qualify with the .45 a few months ago, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Missed it by three points. But I learned what I was doing wrong.”

“Yeah?” She passed me her handgun as I gave her the rifle. “What?”

Taking the .357, I set it into my right hand and took a tight grip, getting the feel of its balance. Then I glanced at Liz.

“Nice.”

“It’s my favorite. Now, what were you doing wrong before?”

“Okay, you know how you position your index finger and squeeze off a round? Well, after I shot one round, I would re-grip and move my finger.”

“Hmm... I know what you mean. Denny used to do that.”

She frowned a moment in thought, then pointed to a barrel cactus about 40 yards from us.

“Can you hit the left branch? Have at it.”

I brought my body around to position and raised my arms, left hand steadying the right, as I had been taught. I raised the gun above my eyesight and brought it down level. After a slight sighting, I squeezed the trigger, taking the recoil to my shoulder. The top of the left branch exploded as I leveled, sighted slightly lower, and shot again. My second mark was slightly off, taking the low side of the target off.

“See what I mean,” I remarked to Penny who stood gazing out at my target.

“Close enough for government work,” she muttered, then looked at me. “How come you didn’t qualify?”

“I hot-dogged the last part, so they told me what I was doing wrong afterwards.”

“Figures. Ever fire a rifle?”

“Only the one round in boot camp. Lying down.”

“Not good.” Penny frowned, bringing the rifle butt to her shoulder. “Look at my stance and grip on the rifle.”

My companion smoothly shouldered her rifle, leveled at the barrel cactus, and squeezed the trigger as I watched intently.

* * *

“Liz, I’ve already seen what this country looks like.”

My voice caught, and emotions gagged in my throat. Grabbing onto my inner self, I shook off the ghosts and opened my eyes. Penny watched intently as I fought down these emotions.

“You’ve been having some bad dreams lately.”

“Nightmares. For the first time in my life, nightmares.”

“Future stuff? Yours?”

“No, thank God, not my future.” I sighed deeply and grabbed a cigarette.

“Then what?” Penny leaned back to rest against the cave’s outer wall. I did the same.

“I guess you could call it astral-projection. I leave my body while I’m asleep and fly around the countryside. All I’ve seen is death and destruction.” A shiver ran through my body.

“And those few people left are frightened, hungry, and so very lost. Why must I see all this, Lord?”

What must be, came the silent reply with a sense of peace presiding. Inhaling my cigarette, I sighed, watching smoke drift upward. Pulaski shifted uncomfortably in her place, and I smiled unenthusiastically.

“Yes, I get weary.” I said in answer to her question.

“You’re ... reading my mind,” she remarked quietly. “More so than ever before.”

“I know. All I really do is rely on instinct.”

“I envy you.”

“Don’t.” Another shudder passed through me.

“I just thought -- Hann! Look at the water!”

“What?”

“Look.”

The plastic container that sat near our food bags against the wall near the door was full.

“Thank you, God,” I whispered reverently, staring at the now-full jug.

“How did you...” She stammered in awe. “It’s a miracle!”

“Yes, it is. Oh, thank you, God!”

“Hann, how’d you do it?”

I locked Liz's eyes with mine and held them fast. I could feel the flow beginning.

"Faith, dear lady, and prayers that you would believe."

"Me?"

"Yes, you." I smiled. "Your faith in God is essential to us. You must *believe*."

"I... I thought I did..."

I shifted my weight and crawled to the water jug. After pouring a full cup, I drank half and passed it to my friend. Penny received it, wide-eyed, brought it to her lips, and then hesitated.

"A water sharing?"

"In essence," I replied, recalling the mutually known science fiction novel, "but more like the living water the Lord offered the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well."

"May we never thirst!" Penny raised the metal cup and emptied it in a few gulps.

As she reached for the container, she eyed me oddly.

"Call Judica. Mentally, I mean. Tosha too."

I did as requested while she drained off a second cup. She passed more to me, but I took very little; more out of ceremony than thirst. Watching her fill the wolf's water bowl, I resumed my position against the wall.

The gray wolf trotted into the cave. The black cat followed close behind.

August 27 Morning.

"Today's the day" I muttered through a yawn, rolling onto my side on the rock hard pile of stale smelling blankets.

"Umm?" Penny shifted in her sleeping bag and flopped over to face me. She counted on

her fingers in the morning's dim light. "It's been six days."

"Yeah," I said, testing those paranormal feelings I had begun to trust. "And I have the feeling that it's time to get out of here."

Penny grinned enthusiastically, a twinkle in her eyes for the first time in days. I smiled slightly in return, and then stared at my hands, knowing a bit of my future, and dreading it.

"What's wrong?"

I whispered, "Nothing."

"Don't lie to me. I saw something in your eyes just then."

I caught myself chuckling softly.

"What's so funny?"

"My poker face." I closed my eyes against the world to come. "Or lack of it."

"What is wrong, Hann?" Liz's voice held the concern and sincerity I loved her for.

"Tonight, we'll only go to Borrego Springs. About five miles from here for a hot bath and a soft bed." I stretched and rotated my shoulders. "It's time to see what's left out there. Quietly and slowly at first. Okay? It won't be pretty."

"I didn't think it would be," she remarked with a sadness in her words that I wondered if she had dreamed the realities of this war, as I had and seen it for herself.

* * *

At dusk we set off in my little car toward the small nearby town. Borrego Springs consisted of two gas stations, three hotels, a grocery and drug store, a Wal-Mart and various agricultural businesses required to sustain the local desert ranches. At Liz's insistence, our first

stop was at a small country sheriff's office which we found had been already looted and deserted. There Penny chose the best remaining handgun for me and the smallest holster. I was not thrilled by the gift.

Directly across the tiny main street stood a single-story structure of the classic stucco seen throughout the Southwest. As Penny quietly plundered the sheriff's department for ammunition, I tested their damaged radio set. Deciding it was beyond help, I stood offset to the window, watching the street, waiting for her to finish. The sounds of our automobile could have alerted any survivors in the area, and I wanted no confrontations on this evening. Down the street, a movement caught my eye, but it was only Judica on reconnaissance.

I considered the building across the road again. We needed supplies for later, true, but for right now, I would settle for a hot bath and a few cold beers. That building looked like the ideal spot. The sign in front told me all I needed to know. "Chamberlain's Mortuary" was attached to a private residence, and it had apparently been a thriving business in this retirement community until last week.

"Got a plan, Hann?" Penny called from her search of another cabinet.

"Just looking for night creatures."

"Jude's doing that."

"So am I."

I looked back over my shoulder at my companion and flashed a wide grin. She chuckled, shaking her head. On the desk before her were a few small boxes. She snatched one up and tossed it to me. Catching it, I was surprised at first by its weight until I read the packaging label.

"Figured you might need extras ammo," Penny grinned wickedly. "Your aim isn't that great."

“Thanks a lot. Ready?”

“For a long hot shower? You bet.”

“No promises on the shower.”

“Every hotel has a shower.”

“Change of plans. I don’t want to fire up the car again, so ... What’s in the vicinity will do just as well, if not even better.”

Pulaski eyed me a question as she crossed to the window, looking at the small business district.

“What about a private residence, hopefully with a well stocked kitchen? And an outstanding security factor.”

“What do you mean?”

I pointed to the apartment behind the mortuary and watched her face screw up in disgust.

She whispered, “Crazy woman.”

“Logical, you have to admit.” I chuckled. “Few would bother that place.”

“Nobody in their right mind.”

“We’ll be safer there. People are superstitious by nature. Want to check it out?”

“I am not sleeping in a coffin!” Penny said with an odd grin. “Send Judica first.”

“Tosha’s there, checking it out. She can’t get inside.”

“Oh, all right.”

Although we had not seen a living soul since we had arrived in town, my internal suspicions were running a little on the high side. That certain something inside vibrated, demanding caution. *Stay away from survivors*, it told me. I would if I could. Penny was at the door now, peeping out of it, and I checked the street for inhabitants again. I nodded to Penny as I

moved to her position, the new pistol and holster feeling awkward on my hip.

“Where are the critters?” she whispered.

“Behind the mortuary. All clear there.”

“Me first?”

“You’re the cop.”

“Right.”

The ex-police woman stepped cautiously out into the open, and I fell in behind her. My stomach went queasy, and I chided myself for being a natural coward and moved onto the pavement at an unhurried pace. As we walked, I scanned the area both visually and with a stronger than ever internal radar. I chuckled, recalling how I had used it in the past to drive at high speeds on the highways and avoid speed traps. I could always sense the police radar before the cops knew I was there. I never knew how I did it.

We skirted around the back by a side drive. “Delivery Entrance” the sign read. At the end of the driveway Judica sat, waiting. In the approaching dark, I could not see Tosha, but I sensed her lurking nearby. Penny patted the big wolf roughly on the shoulders, while I tried the door. It was locked.

“Liz?” I called softly.

She came alongside me immediately and tried the door. Frowning, she eyed me.

“That window.” she added, pointing off to the left of the patio.

Penny made quick work of a weak lock. One hard shove sent the windowpane sideways. I directed Judica to investigate, and the big wolf hurled herself up and onto the window ledge, and then into the house. Tosha galloped across the terrace with a chirping mew and bounced up through the open window after her canine friend.

Giggling under my breath, I turned to check out the area. The terrace and yard beyond was enclosed by a five-foot stucco wall. Nice and secure, I told myself, and those small trees in the back weren't tall or strong enough to hold an adult's weight. A scraping sound brought me around to see Penny climbing into the open window. Taking two steps, I grabbed her by the belt and pulled back hard.

"Wait a minute, Liz."

She turned, balancing now on the sill in a crouch and regarded me for a moment.

"Let Tosha and Judica check it out."

From inside the room came the muffled *woof* of our canine-like companion, then I nodded to Penny to proceed. Once inside, she grinned out the window sash.

"Want me to open the door for you, short stuff?"

She disappeared into the sounds of booted footfalls, and I moved to the back door to wait. Before I could reach it, the door lock clicked, and Pulaski's head popped around the corner. I stepped through the doorway into a kitchen. In the fading dusk, I could see the room's immense size and lavish decor.

"Quiet a lively business," I muttered sarcastically.

"I want a look around before we settle in."

"Let's start with the bathroom."

We found what had been the bedroom of two young boys, complete with bunk beds. In the living room were plenty of scented, decorative candles to use instead of bright electric lights, and adjacent to the master bedroom waited a luxurious bath. The showerhead was designed to give a syncopated massage. As we toured the night's lodging, Penny and I worked out the evening's activities. Taking turns in the bath was a prime concern. I consented to start dinner, but

set my friend on a time limit.

Judica was waiting in the living room when we had finished the security sweep, and we headed for the kitchen.

“Think we should check out the business?” I asked tentatively on a hunch.

“Guess it wouldn’t hurt to let the animals check it out.”

“Right. I’ll be right back.”

“What about dinner?” Penny called as I started off.

“I just got to open a door for Judica.”

* * *

Shortly after the shower began to hiss, I heard the soft familiar sounds of a high-pitched meow and galloping kitty paws. I stopped my meal preparations, dug into the refrigerator for the cold cuts I had chosen for Tosha’s dinner. Then I returned to the three steaks I was thawing in the microwave, before working on a vegetable side dish. I imagined Judica preferred her steak raw, so I tossed her meat into a corner when she arrived, then went about setting our candlelight dinner.

To my disappointment, the previous residents kept no alcohol. I really wanted a beer.

By the time Penny emerged from her scrubbing, dinner preparations were as far along as I could go. The gas broiler was hot and ready, and I was relaxing with a cold glass of raspberry tea in the living room. In the candles’ glow, I beckoned her to a nearby recliner and passed a second glass to her. She eased into the chair, elevated her feet, and sighed contently.

“Dinner will be ready in as long as it takes the steaks to cook. They’re marinating in a warm spice now.”

“Hmm, wonderful. You sure I can’t sleep in the master bedroom?”

“No, not safe,” I replied gently. “And I’m not sleeping on that floor.”

“Well, then, I want the top bunk.”

“Fine.”

“Okay, window open?”

“Definitely. Look, I’ll do the steaks.” Penny grinned, bolting to the chair’s upright position. “Medium rare, for you, right? You want to start your bath?”

“I can do that.”

“There’s some great smelling bubble bath in there,” she called over her shoulder as she went.

* * *

Enjoying the steamy water, I had considered scrubbing my stinky hide, but hot water on tired shoulders won. Soon, I heard footsteps on the carpeted hall. Penny set an old railroad lantern on the vanity. From its high polish, I was surprised it would light.

“Where’d you find the oil?”

“In the kitchen. Cooking oil.”

“Burns clean enough.” I stretched and shifted to sit up in the water. “You were shuffling around out there a lot. Find what you wanted?”

“Yes and no. I found a big fluffy robe, and I started looking for a drink. No alcohol, but there’s enough food to last us two years.”

“You want that robe?” I muttered, reaching for the soap.

“No. I’ll bring it.”

The stocky brunette bounced out of the bathroom and was back before I had lathered my body. I had to stop to stare at her choice for a robe, as she brought it forward in the dim light. It was a caftan, dark purple velour with a cowl-like hood. Something uncomfortable stirred inside me. I shrugged the feeling aside and put my attention on my scrubbing.

“You don’t like it?”

“I love it. It’s beautiful.”

“You don’t sound like you love it.”

“Yes, I do.” I smiled, looking at her with affection. “Wait until you see me in it.”

My friend shrugged and tossed the robe on the hook of the door. Then she settled onto the closed commode. I was aware of her eyes on me as I finished rolling dead skin from my toes.

“I’ve never seen you so thin. How much did you weigh?”

“110, last check. How much have I eaten in the last week?” I laughed.

“I’d bet I’m down close to 140 pounds by now.”

“You look a bit anorexic. At least we’re both not dehydrated.”

“Yeah, if you hadn’t...” My companion’s face fell in a heavy thought. I watched her for a moment and sighed.

Shifting onto my knees, I ducked my head into the water and began washing it. The water had drained off as I hurried to finish rinsing under the faucet, and I was beginning to feel chilled. While I was rubbing the soap from my eyes, a soft towel was draped across my shoulders. A second wrapped around my head.

“You’re a love,” I purred under Liz’s brisk drying hands.

“Come on, you’re cold.”

Like a servant, Penny saw to a fresh towel for my damp head, slippers for my feet, and the hooded robe. Then she disappeared down the hallway. A short while later, I found her in the kitchen brewing tea. I located my cigarettes, lit one, and fell into a green upholstered dinette chair. A steaming cup appeared on the table in front of me.

“There are some Boy Scout uniforms in the closet.” She began seating herself across from me. “Bet there’s camping gear in the garage.”

“Sounds good, we’ll check it out.”

“Oh, and I found this.” Penny pushed a small jeweled box across the table. “Something for you. Not me.”

Opening it, I peered into a velvet lining and a plastic sandwich bag of shredded greenish-brown leaves. A package of rolling papers lay beneath it and a book of matches. I recognized the pungent fragrance.

“*Thank you, God!* It’s roll-your-own time!” I laughed loudly, reaching to draw out the bag of marijuana. I could smell its distinct aroma and immediately knew it was good stuff. “Sorry there’s no alcohol for you.”

“I’ll get by. I see that it’s your needs that get met in this madness.”

I stopped my preparations and looked up at Penny quizzically. Her face was open and relaxed, yet serious.

“You realize this stuff heightens my sensitivity?”

“I guessed as much years ago.” She bent to ease the steaks onto the grill. “What about the robe? I saw your reaction.”

“It feels kind of familiar, without *being* familiar. I can’t explain,” I said as I rolled a marijuana cigarette.

After a long silence, she spoke again. “It’s not that this place scares me…”

“You are too practical for that.”

“I remember this place from a dream.” She saw me frown behind a lit match and added, “No, it’s all right. I’m handling it. I guess I go to St. Paul and face William with you.”

“Wonderful.” I muttered and drew on my smoke. “I’ll need you to watch my back.”

“But I really don’t understand what’s going to happen when we get there.”

“Neither do I.” I closed my eyes for a moment, feeling the first effects of the drug then looked at Liz. She was toying with her cooking fork.

“Who am I in this, Hann?” she asked quietly as I exhaled away from her. “Am I a bodyguard, a servant, companion, or what?”

I looked at her a brief moment in my own questions, inhaled the potent weed.

“Be whoever you are,” I replied after a moment of thought. “You can’t be anything less – or more.”

“One day at a time. That’s all you can say?”

“It’s a beginning, isn’t it?”

* * *

I could not sleep, although the bunk was comfortable and the room dark, partially because of the unfamiliar bed and partially because of my overactive brain. Where was the *Other*? Penny rolled and muttered in her sleep above me, as I thought about having a cigarette. Tosha, at the foot of my bed, questioned mentally, but I assured her all was well.

Judica, I knew prowled the house somewhere on designated guard duty. All was right in

my micro world. I couldn't help wondering about the real world; the politics, the wars. What happened to the remnant population of the United States? When would China be massing an occupational force? That government would not be content to eliminate their enemy without physically occupying the territory.

My senses and extra senses didn't help in this realm; neither did knowledge of *The Thirty*. My spiritual brothers and sisters were each involved in their own fights for life and were unable to supply the information needed to still my fears.

I sighed, then began a simple mental exercise to calm myself for sleep. Still sitting in my normal fashion, cross-legged style, I took control of my automatic body functions and began to slow my pulse rate and breathing. Later, I settled back between the sheets, lying on my back. I stared into the latticework of the upper bunk and continued concentrating on the mental controls. After a few minutes, I was calm and relaxed. My brain and heart had slowed sufficiently.

Someone, somewhere called into my being, and I closed my eyes against the physical world, reaching to that metaphysical one. Hearing the call, I thought out a replying question. *Who are you?* I asked. A familiar presence drifted into me, and with it, a feeling of satisfaction. Pulling out of my body, I floated upward, and with the *Other*, danced in happy greeting, at the manner and intensity of first meeting of old friends.

A touch? It felt like silk had brushed against my wrist. Something akin to a tender embrace, but without a physical reality. A feeling of comfort and contentment. A special, very reserved feeling. A reunion of a sort, but not quite. You must first have a separation to be separated. On this plane, there had never been a separation.

A blur of shared memories passed through my mind, a few painful. Most brought a warm glow of emotion to me. Seven months together at Memphis Naval Air Station, and then a few

awkward, awful days of the following year at his parents' home. Hot anger replaced the loving in my heart when I thought of that time. Everything and nothing had changed, and I found myself again blaming *me* for running out on him -- terrified, confused and hurt. Yes, we somewhat knew even then, but he denied me my own dignity to my destiny. Instead, he disavowed my identity.

I still didn't know why.

William slipped softly from my brain, claiming his focus needed to be elsewhere, now.

What would it be like to walk the Earthly plane again with William? I had changed. Again. *Was the metamorphosis almost complete?* I wondered, then thought of my hair's recent accelerated growth. Was I becoming *Lady Ann*? I had thought at one time I knew our destiny. As I drifted into a fretful sleep, I felt I was mistaken.

August 28

After a light breakfast, Penny and I discovered enough camping gear in the garage to eliminate our planned stop at a sporting goods store. After loading the car with whatever was wanted or needed, I scraped the military decals off the hatchback. From Borrego Springs, we traveled east on Route 78 across a two-lane blacktop ribbon that stretched and rolled through the desert flora and fauna. At the southern edge of the Salton Sea, with Penny driving at the time, we spun the little car southward again on Route 86 and toward E1 Centro, California.

Just outside of Brawley, we stopped to eat and gas up the car at a deserted truck stop. Both Tosha and Judica seemed relieved to be out of the moving vehicle. As soon as we stopped, the two were out and prowling the area despite the afternoon heat. We decided that I would see to the car, while Penny scouted around a nearby diner.

On my command, the big wolf followed after Penny, quickly taking the lead. God had again smiled on us. Blythe still had electricity, and after I had filled the gas tank, I pulled my car into the maintenance bay. Putting up it up on the hydraulic lift, I gave it a complete check for indications of possible trouble. The Navy had taught me to perform preventative maintenance on a regular basis. I had always enjoyed working on cars, pitying those who thought such activity undignified, dirty, and unfeminine.

As I worked, my thoughts drifted to my own family, undoubtedly lost in the holocaust of the previous week. I prayed in the silent bay for each soul until I became overwhelmed. The thought forced me to stop my work. I let myself slip to the floor. I could not perform the maintenance through my tears. Finally, I gave way and wept.

Later, I rose from my slumped position on the garage floor. Finding a clean rag, I blew my nose, wiped my face, and edged down onto a case of motor oil to rest. My ribs ached from the sobs, and my eyes felt dry and salty.

“Hannah?”

Liz’s voice floated from far away, and I pulled myself back to this reality. From Judica’s mind, I knew they were coming back. Rising from the carton, I resumed my work. She entered the shop as I was lowering the lift, and my companion’s face poorly disguised the elation that emanated from her being. I flashed a smile as I shoved the lift supports away from the car. She replied with only a silent ear-to-ear grin, leaning happily against the bay door. After I’d finished, I joined her, fishing for a smoke as I came. She beamed with anticipation.

“You sure looked very pleased with yourself. What’s up?” I queried behind the flame of my lighter.

“Why’d we stop here?”

“To check out the car -- which I’ve done, and eat, which I haven’t.”

“Could it be a coincidence that there just happens to be a radiology lab a block away?”

“What! I love it!” I cheered. “Thank you, God!”

“As in Geiger counter.”

Swirling around, Penny marched out the bay door and reappeared carrying a small metal container in her left hand, which she passed to me. My electronics background recognized the manufacturer’s name as one noted for their outstanding test equipment. Below the printed name on the faceplate, the inscription read ARL 450. The meter, above this was divided into three color-coded sections: far left was green with the word “safe” inscribed on it; center was yellow, proclaimed danger; far right was in red and advised “fatal.” A shudder vibrated through me, so I passed the Geiger counter back to my friend.

“It’s your baby,” I remarked stiffly and returned to my work. “Please, figure out how to read it.”

“I already did.”

I passed Penny an impressed expression as I slid into the driver’s seat. Firing up the engine a moment, I listened to the motor. Satisfied, I shut her down again. Pulaski had moved up next to the car, fiddling with her new toy.

“How does it work?” I asked, climbing from the vehicle.

“I’m not sure of the theory, but it’s battery operated. It’s a nine-volt dry cell. I found two extra cells still sealed and brought them with.”

“Good idea. Think it will keep us out of the hot spots?”

“Most definitely.”

Taking the instrument, I ignored my vague discomfort to study it again, this time much

closer. “Tosha? She’s weaseling around in the opposite direction you went.”

“I didn’t ask that out loud, Miss Spooky.”

The meter in my hands clicked once, startling me. I looked up at Penny in question. She was smiling at my jumpiness.

“I don’t think that means anything,” she said, accepting the metal box back. “It’s clicked a couple times since I found it, but nothing serious.”

“Do you think it’s safe to go into E1 Centro?”

“Probably. If it was hot, that counter would be going nuts already.”

The idea of radiation sickness caused my stomach to lurch. I’d seen visions.

“But you’re not sure?”

“No, I’m not.” She frowned for a moment then grinned again. “But then, neither are you.”

“True. Lunch?”

Over our meal of cold sandwiches we’d brought from Borrego Springs, we decided we’d acquired all the gear necessary for the trip east. Collecting fresh water after the light lunch, I called in the animals. We got underway heading north/ northwest until we again came to Route 78. Once there, we started east across the barren desert toward Blythe, California and Interstate 10.

We drove in two-hour shifts, stopping to allow everyone to stretch their legs. Most of the ride was without conversation as the CD player sang softly. I had no desire to voice my thoughts, and Penny seemed to sense my need to be alone. I was again thankful of her loving friendship and perception.

It seemed odd to see the freeway deserted except for a few jackrabbits and road runners who eyed us passively as we journeyed on under the hot sun. Because of the heat, Liz, at the

wheel, maintained only a 50-mph average speed. More than that overheated my older car.

As the sun sank into a purple horizon, we were yet 90 miles from our proposed night's lodging, Quaitaite, Arizona. On Interstate 10 Penny and I sped east, until we saw our first survivor. They came on us before we realized it. I was dozing in the passenger seat with Tosha curled in my lap. I guess Liz's thoughts were off on some tangent other than driving. In the back Judica, too, was asleep.

Her startled curse brought me back to reality, and my eyes tried to focus where she was pointing. Ahead, less than 300 meters across the highway divide, a large, blue van came toward us at high speed. My sixth sense tingled intensely as I glanced over my shoulder. As my eyes swept the area anticipating a dangerous situation, Liz's right hand moved to the gun on her hip. She slipped off the safety.

"Let's try to avoid that," I said evenly, now watching the vehicle across the rocky divide.

She merely grunted in reply.

In the van's front window I could see two faces. Wide-eyed men gawked back at us as the vehicle passed us beyond the center divide. Both faces appeared young in the short glimpse, and as Penny drove on, I turned in my seat, upsetting the cat. The van's brake lights flashed momentarily, followed by a cloud of accelerator exhaust.

"They're speeding up," I said, a lump in my throat. "How far back was the last exit?"

"Less than two miles. Think they'll do a flip?"

"I don't know."

As I settled myself, facing forward again, I felt the little hatchback surge ahead beneath my companion's heavy foot. Penny frowned into the rearview mirror as I glanced over at the speedometer. It was climbing past 90, as we sailed eastward and toward another incline. The

grade loomed before us, and I could feel the little car slowing.

“Oh, shit! They turned around!” Pulaski’s tone held fear and the question, *What to do?*

Barren, rocky hills with nowhere to turn off gave us nowhere to hide; and I had never been one for fighting. The prospect of any two males catching up to us left me uneasy. Liz’s foot flattened the accelerator to the floorboard. Her face twisted with tension as her eyes darted from the road to her mirror and then back to the highway again.

The speedometer dropped below 50 mph less than three-quarters up the steep grade, and Penny slapped the little car into third gear. It surged determinedly forward with a high-pitched mechanical objection. I turned around in the high-backed seat to check on the van.

Behind us, the blue vehicle had reached the bottom of the grade and was closing on us. It probably had us beat by four cylinders, I thought, frantic for an escape plan. When I looked again, the driver had turned on his hazard lights as the distance between us grew smaller. I suddenly sensed that he wanted us to stop, and that we would be safe.

My normally suspicious self cried inside to flee, but my strange hunch said otherwise. I reached for my sidearm, to be sure that it was indeed loaded. Then I slipped it into its holster.

Penny eyed me sharply, but loosened her pistol holster also.

“What’s the plan?” she asked.

“When we reach the top, pull over fast.”

I caught her frowning as I again checked the van’s progress. It was less than 200 meters from us now. Praying silently for divine wisdom, my breath caught in my throat. The view from the ridge top was a breathtakingly beautiful sight of the next inland valley, and I wished I had time to admire it. With a jerk, Penny stomped the brakes and downshifted to second. Like an expert, she maneuvered onto the shoulder of the highway.

“Bail out and get ready!” I ordered as we rolled to a halt.

Pulaski left the engine running, put the car in neutral, and pulled up the emergency brake as I slipped out of the car. I looked up to see Penny leap out of the vehicle and stand, while Judica jumped out on my side. I could hear the approaching van, but it had not yet appeared. My companion checked her police gun and was returning it to its holster as the blue van streaked past us. Taillights glowed, and tires squealed as the driver brought it to a halt. Penny started around our car toward me, but I motioned for her to hold her position.

As our visitors backed along the highway shoulder toward us, I bent into my car, bringing out the Geiger counter. The small meter kept silent, to my relief, but I continued holding it in the open doorway. My .357 stayed in its holster, and as I glanced Liz’s way, I noted the confidence in her face and posture.

The blue van’s engine stopped with a dying moan, and I could hear the driver’s door open and then close. No one emerged from the passenger’s side, but hard, weary eyes met mine in the rear view mirror. They seemed tired, distant. A shiver of pain went through my left leg suddenly, and I had to lean on the car door for support. Judica who sat in the gravel at my feet whimpered softly. I looked down at her.

“Stay where you are,” Penny commanded sternly. “That’s far enough.”

The woman had drawn her hand gun when I looked up again. The driver of the van paled and followed her instructions explicitly staring at the leveled police gun. A touch of a smile played on Pulaski’s face, and I moved forward with the Geiger counter held in front of me. On mental command, Judica trotted over to investigate the man who waited in the vehicle.

Satisfied that there was no danger of radioactivity, I returned the meter to the front seat of the car, and turning, approached the driver who had pursued us. Careful not to enter Liz’s line of

fire, I cautiously studied the survivor.

He was between 27 and 35 years old and of Mexican descent, I guessed. His tattered clothes and manner spoke of poverty. He stood shuffling his feet a bit in the gravel, watching the gun trained on his chest.

“Well, at least you’re not radioactive.” I smiled at him, aware of his fright.

Although I meant him no harm, I was not willing to call Penny off just yet. I breathed, relaxing a bit. He sighed audibly, grinning shyly for an instant. From Judica, I received a mental picture of an open wound and pain, and then knew the other man’s situation instantly.

“If your friend can get out of your van, we’ll see to his leg,” I remarked gently.

As I turned to my car for the first-aid kit, I saw a frown pass briefly across my companion’s face, followed by some inward realization. The driver moved to assist his friend, careful under Liz’s steady gaze and police revolver.

When I joined them with our box of gauze and bandages, I found Penny overseeing the proceedings. The second man, older by many years, was of the same Mexican descent, and I thought to myself, *possibly a brother*. He now sat on a small nearby boulder, painfully favoring his left leg, bloodstained from knee to ankle. I nodded to Penny who gestured the younger man away from his friend. Judica sensed my intent, helping to herd him to one side as I squatted down to examine the wound.

After carefully ripping away the material from around the area, I could see a gapping mass of mangled meat that had been the man’s knee. I quickly looked away, feeling nauseous.

“What happened?” I asked my patient stiffly, avoiding the sight by looking up into a dazed and weathered face beneath several days’ growth of black beard.

“Wolves attacked our camp last night,” the younger man answered for his companion.

“I’ve been loosening and tightening that tourniquet since then.”

“He needs a doctor...” Penny began.

“There are no more doctors. Everybody’s dead!” This escaped in a moan from the wounded one. “All dead... gone.” He chuckled in a low, crazed muttering.

My own leg throbbed in empathy.

Trying to ignore the pain radiating from the man sitting before me, I gazed at the driver of the vehicle again. His clothes were ill-fitting, and he was barefoot. His hair was much shorter than the contemporary styles.

“What’s your name?”

“Enrique Mortentes. I am er... an accountant...”

“Before you went to prison.” I finished for him then winked assurance at Liz.

“Si. I mean, no.”

The dark color of his face deepened with embarrassment, and he again began shuffling his feet. I smiled gently at him and then at the wounded man sitting on the rock. Then I returned to my examination of his knee.

“And your friend?”

“He is Louis.”

“A convict, too?”

“Si -- no, Senorita!”

I chuckled, glancing at Penny before working a pressure pad onto Louis’s leg. She was frowning at Enrique whose shade of red had deepened. The patient moaned low, his eyes rolling as he steadied himself in his seat. Enrique moved towards him, but stopped, remembering the gun still aimed at him.

“How was he shot?” Penny asked in a low tone as the breeze kicked up on the deserted road.

“This morning in Panito at a deserted cafe. Three men came in with guns. White men. They called us ... er... Senorita, they didn't like Indians.”

“Two against three with guns? I think I understand.”

“Hannah?” Penny hissed, frowning over my work. “I don't think that is going to be enough.”

“You're a medic, woman?”

“I can't stitch arteries,” she insisted. “Can you do something else?”

Frowning, I tried to remember my boot camp first-aid lessons. Reduce blood flow with a tourniquet and apply pressure, I thought. What else? Make the victim comfortable and...

“We can treat for shock, Liz.”

“Lay him down and elevate his feet,” she ordered. “Hann, get a blanket.”

I retrieved a bright yellow blanket from my car and found the semi-conscious man lying on the smooth pavement at the side of the road. Both Penny and Enrique worked quickly to elevate his feet using a bundle of clothes and a blanket. The dizziness hit again, and my vision blurred as I passed the blanket to Liz.

“Don't cover his leg, Liz. Senior, can you check his pulse?”

He followed orders. He smiled when his shaking fingers found the flutter while probing the older man's neck.

“Pulse is very ... er, not good. Low.”

“Enrique, there's a jug of water in the back seat --“

The man had gone before I could finish and returned with the bottle and a cup, pouring

water as he came. I silently prayed to God on behalf of the hurt man, then felt an incredible surge of energy within. Suddenly, my life's energy pounded throughout my body. Drawing deep, lung-filling breaths, I shifted on my aching leg until Louis's mangled leg lay before me. My stomach muscles tightened in protest to the gory mass of tendons and muscles. Yet, my hands moved toward out of my control.

Penny spoke my name, looking at me in question for a moment. Then she moved aside for me to work. I felt warmth and wet in my fingers as they now probed the remains of the knee and again the energy level increased. The *Other* came to join in my work. William's being full of celestial power swept in on me to help with the task at hand. An oncoming, all-enveloping energy overtook my eyes and brain until all I could see was the devastated knee joint, inside and out. I could hear only the pulse of two blood systems surging. Two heartbeats pounded in a syncopated duet. My head stretched upward, back and neck convulsed in a straining arch as many others of *The Thirty* joined in intercessory prayers.

“Oh Great God of glory, Lord of my fathers,” I moaned. “In Jesus' name --“

The sum total of my being erupted in a force of power and energy. *The Thirty* filled my heart, chest, and flowed outward to my hands and head. I *Knew* Penny constrained Enrique as the energy glow surrounded Louis and me. Penny prayed out loud, and I heard Enrique's whispered words of devotion.

* * *

I woke to the dim glow of a single flickering candle and the smell of strong coffee. Raising my head was painful, so I didn't. My body felt sapped of strength. I rested back into the pillows

and gazed about the enclosure. I rested on the floor of a small enclosure of dark wood and cheap carpet. The smell of stale beer and cigarette's hit my nose, as I tried to make sense out of the starlit sky outside the open van door. *Where was I?* In a flood of memory, I recalled the incident with the wounded stranger and grew concerned for my companions. I tried to sit up, but the dizziness stopped me, and I closed my eyes in fatigue.

YOU ARE FINE. REST.

The thought echoed clearly in my mind, but was not from me. I sensed four feet and a fur covering, a tail and heightened senses. Animal instinct.

"Tosha?" I whispered without recognition.

YOUR FELINE FRIEND SLEEPS AT YOUR FEET. The disembodied voice replied.

Judica? I asked in my mind, then asked myself, *Could I be speaking mentally with an animal?*

I AM MORE THAN JUST A WOLF, came the answer. *YOU ARE WEAK AND REQUIRE REST.*

Where's Liz? I thought.

SAFE WITH ME, JUST OUTSIDE. SHALL I BRING HER TO YOU?

No, not yet. How is the...

A sound near my feet brought my eyes sharply open, and I saw the figure of a wolf's head in the dim light at the door of the van. *Come,* I called, and the great beast vaulted in to lie next to me. Her eyes glowed brightly in the candlelight as she regarded me.

YOU ARE SURPRISED?

Yes, and pleased. How is Louis doing?

HE IS FINE AND RESTING NEAR THE FIRE. YOU CALLED GOD'S HEALING WELL FOR A FIRST EFFORT.

What are you? I asked feeling my head spin, which sent my stomach churning.

A LESSER ANGEL. A HELPER. YOUR SERVANT FOR NOW.

And your purpose?

TO SERVE AND GLORIFY GOD THE FATHER.

Why haven't you spoken before?

YOU COULD NOT HEAR ME BEFORE. YOU ARE JUST BECOMING AWARE OF YOUR ABILITIES.

YOU KNOW MORE THAN YOU REALIZE. The whispered, feminine voice seemed to almost laugh. *YOU WILL DO WELL. PENNY'S COMING.*

As announced, Liz's face appeared at the open door, her eyes squinting into the darkness.

"You awake?" she asked quietly.

"More or less. You're okay, woman?"

"Me? Sure. You're the one that had us worried." She chuckled. "Want some coffee?"

"Please." I rose up on my elbows still feeling very lightheaded. "And a cigarette, too?"

With a frown, Penny disappeared, and I climbed from underneath the blankets piled on me. Tosha woke, yawned, and stretched lazily as I pulled my legs out. Patting her with affection, I waited for Judica to vacate the van, then followed the wolf carefully from the vehicle. My legs barely held my weight. In my sleepy state, I had to rely on what little strength my arms had to hold me. Once I moved outside, the cool Arizona night air hit me, causing a bit of disorientation. I leaned, half sitting, half standing on the van's rusty bumper taking deep reviving breaths. Mentally, I ordered my pulse to increase and continued breathing deeply until my head cleared.

Suddenly young Enrique came to me, and wrapped his big arm around me, supporting my weak legs. He helped me to the campfire where the others waited. Louis sat comfortably wrapped in the yellow blanket, alert, but still looking tired. When Enrique has seated me in a folding lawn chair, he smiled, bowing, and stepped away. In a moment he returned and carefully wrapped me

into a course gray army blanket. He did not meet my eyes, but behaved like a servant, silent in awe and respect.

“Where are your cigarettes?” Penny asked, as she passed me a warm cup of dark liquid.

“On the dashboard, I think.”

Before she could move, Enrique was off toward the little hatchback. I looked back at Liz, who smiled a haggard little smile. She appeared well and rested in the diminishing light after sunset.

“What happened?” I whispered, then tested the hot brew.

“You don’t know?” Surprise lit her face when I shook my head slightly. “Louis’s leg is good as new, thanks to you.”

“*Thanks to God,*” I sighed, scrubbing at my face to bring myself more alert, while thinking *That must have taken a lot of energy.* “No wonder my body feels like lead weights,”

“Are you hungry, Hann?”

“Famished.”

“Enrique made some great rabbit stew,” Penny informed me, as he moved to a blackened pot resting near the crackling fire.

As Penny saw to my dinner, the younger Mexican returned with a pack of smokes and my lighter that he held until I’d dug out a cigarette. Then Enrique graciously lit it for me. As I thanked him, his smiling face faded into a frown.

“It’s we who thank you, *senorita.*”

“Then, you are welcome.” I smiled gently at him. “And how is Louis?”

“Very fine, good Lady of God,” boomed a deep baritone voice to my left.

I looked in his direction and was met by dark Spanish eyes that twinkled and wrinkled in

their age. Louis flashed a grin behind many days' growth of beard, and I returned it with enthusiasm over my coffee mug.

“Senorita, you are blessed by God,” he remarked reaching for and pulling aside the blood-matted material of his pant leg. “Look! See how you have healed me.”

I looked. I stared in utter awe. The leg I had seen was now replaced by a healthy knee, unscratched and unscarred. Swallowing hard, I reached for the small cross around my neck and clutched it tightly in my left hand.

“I did not heal you, Louis. Only God has that kind of power.”

“Then I thank God, Senorita, for sending you to me.”

“I thank God for allowing me to glorify Him through me.”

AMEN, Judica replied.