

MadMen: In the Beginning

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 the 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.

August 20

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 a 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 sometimes 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*.

William'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 sent a smile 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 an 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 imminent 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.

Penny, 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 Penny 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, sleepyhead,” 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, Penny. 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. Penny, 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.

“You’re serious.” She yawned slowly. “Are you positive?”

“It will be raining atomic warheads before sunset, and I need you with me. Penny, you’re going camping with me overnight in the Anza Borrego Desert.” I thought a second and added, “Just bring your sidearm 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, Penny,” 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 Penny'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.

Penny'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 Penny’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, Penny. 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, Penny?” 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, Pretty 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 into 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 madmen 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 descent 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, and 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, Penny. 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 sidearm.

"See him?" She whispered.

"Yeah. Easy, Penny. 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 sagebrush 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 Penny's shoulders rise in tension and readiness. I touched her shoulder in confidence, sensing something unique about the newcomers.

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 leaped 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 Penny. “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 Penny. “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 Penny'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 Penny'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 into the hands of the aggressors. I Knew that China would move quickly to occupy those buildings. I Knew that China wanted the American breadbasket. China needed our farmland to feed their people.

I hated *Knowing* the future.