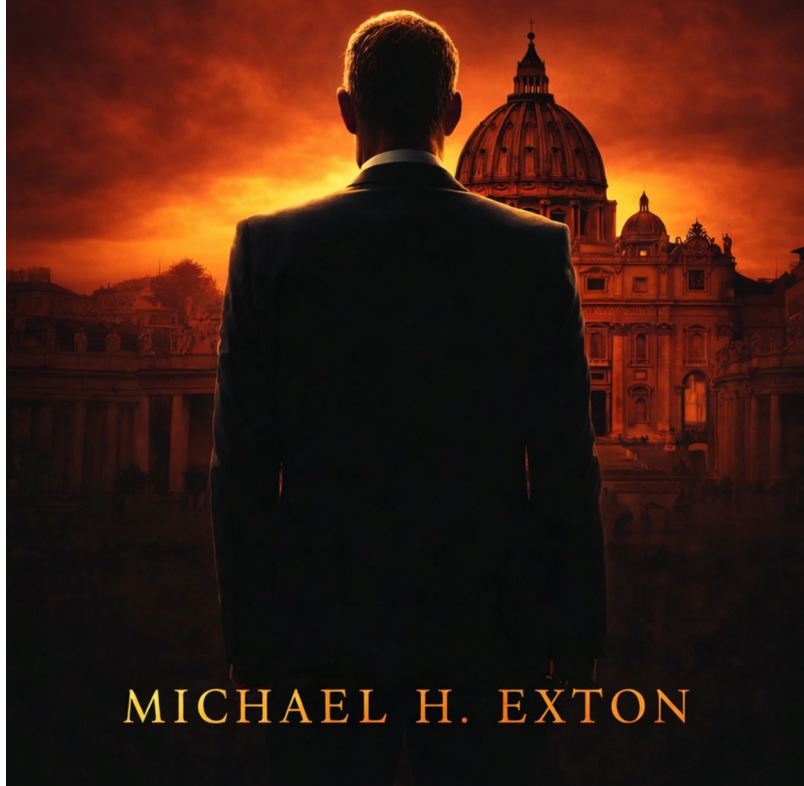


ROMAN

THE COUNTERFEIT MESSIAH



MICHAEL H. EXTON

FRONT INSIDE FLAP

For centuries the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation have warned that a man will arise in the last days who will captivate the nations and deceive the world. Now powerful political forces are quietly reshaping Europe, ancient alliances are stirring from the shadows of Rome, and a charismatic leader is emerging whose influence is impossible to ignore. As global crises push humanity toward desperate solutions, three forces begin converging toward the same moment in history — an empire determined to rise again, a powerful religious authority prepared to legitimize it, and a man destined to stand at the center of it all. The world will hail him as humanity's greatest hope. Prophecy calls him something else.

*As gripping as **The Da Vinci Code**.*

*As prophetically bold as **The Late Great Planet Earth**.*

*As emotionally powerful as **The Shack**.*

*As narratively driven as **Left Behind**.*

*And in many ways — **much better**.*

*And unlike any of them — **uncompromisingly true to Scripture**.*

ROMAN

The Counterfeit Messiah

A Prophetic Thriller

By Michael H. Exton

TheBibleComesAlive.org

DEDICATION

To the small flock — past, present, and future.

To all who hunger for truth in a world of deception.

To those who will live through these days — may you endure to the end.

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PREFACE

You are about to read a work of fiction.

Or are you?

The events in these pages have not yet occurred. The characters are not real people. The timeline is invented. By every conventional definition, what you hold in your hands is a novel — a work of the imagination.

But here is what makes *ROMAN: The Counterfeit Messiah* unlike any prophetic novel ever written:

Every major prophetic event depicted in this story **will happen**. Not may happen. Not could happen. **Will happen**. The Word of God has already declared it.

More than 2,500 years ago, the God of the Bible made an extraordinary claim — one no other god, religion, or philosophy has ever dared to make:

*“I declare the end from the beginning,
and from ancient times things not yet done.”*

— Isaiah 46:10

God does not merely predict the future. He **pre-records** it. What the prophets wrote was not speculation. It was history written in advance — placed in the permanent record before a single event occurred.

That is the foundation of this book.

After 47 years of independent biblical research — studying the prophecies of Daniel, Revelation, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the words of

Jesus Christ Himself — I have done my best to faithfully render those prophecies into a story. The names are fictional. The dates are approximate. But the prophetic framework is drawn directly and carefully from Scripture alone — without denominational bias, without theological tradition, and without compromise.

This means *ROMAN* occupies a category no other novel can honestly claim:

It is fiction today. It will be nonfiction tomorrow.

When these events begin to unfold — and they will — this book will no longer be a novel. It will be a record. Read it now as a story. One day, the world will read it as history.

— *Michael H. Exton*

Author and Biblical Researcher

TheBibleComesAlive.org

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PART ONE: THE RISE

CHAPTER 1

The Signing

DAVID

Brussels, Belgium

October 2, 2030

* * *

The chandelier above the conference table cost more than most people earned in a lifetime.

David Hartley knew this because he'd looked it up the night before, unable to sleep, scrolling through his phone in the darkness of his hotel room. Venetian crystal. Eighteen thousand hand-cut pieces. Commissioned in 1847 for a Habsburg archduke. Now it cast fractured light across the faces of the ten most powerful men in Europe---and David was in the room with them.

He stood against the wall with the other junior aides, clutching his leather portfolio like a talisman, trying to look like he belonged. At twenty-nine, he was the youngest person in the room by at least fifteen years. Six months ago, he'd been a mid-level analyst at the Foreign Office in London, writing reports that no one read about trade negotiations that never happened. Now he was watching history unfold.

All because of one man.

Roman Augustus stood at the head of the obsidian table, his reflection swimming in its polished surface like a dark prophecy. He was younger than the other leaders---barely fifty---with eyes the color of winter iron and a smile that never quite reached them.

"Gentlemen," he said, his voice carrying the soft cadence of old Europe, "history does not remember the cautious."

David felt a chill run down his spine. There was something about that voice---something that made you want to lean in, to agree, to follow. He'd felt it the first time he'd heard Roman speak, at an economic summit in Geneva three months prior. The man had a gift. Or perhaps something more than a gift.

The Austrian Chancellor shifted in his leather chair. He was sweating, David noticed, despite the room's climate control. Recently, the global economy had collapsed like a house of cards in a hurricane. Banks failed. Currencies became worthless. Riots swept through cities from Athens to Amsterdam. Millions lost everything.

Then Roman Augustus appeared.

No one quite remembered where he came from. Some said old Italian nobility. Others whispered of darker origins---a childhood in the Balkans, connections to intelligence services, wealth that seemed to materialize from nowhere. But when the world burned, he offered water. When nations drowned in debt, he threw them lifelines of gold. Within months, his reforms had stabilized the markets. Within a year, prosperity had returned---fragile, tentative, but real.

Now they owed him everything.

The 7-year treaty lay before each leader---two hundred pages of legal architecture that would transform ten separate nations into a single superstate. THE UNITED STATES OF EUROPE. David had helped draft portions of it, the minor clauses about agricultural subsidies and fishing rights. He'd never imagined he'd be here to see it signed.

But there was one clause he hadn't drafted. One clause that had nothing to do with European unity or economic integration or any of the things the press releases described. It was buried in Annex VII, Section 4, titled with the bloodless bureaucratic language that treaties used to disguise the things that actually mattered: Framework for Religious Heritage Site Access and Restoration in Jerusalem.

David had read it a dozen times in the weeks since it leaked. Still couldn't quite believe it existed.

In exchange for Israeli participation in the new European security and trade architecture, Roman Augustus had personally guaranteed one thing above all others: the right of the Jewish people to reinstate animal sacrifices on the Temple Mount. An altar. A priesthood. The ancient rites that hadn't been performed in nearly two thousand years---since Roman legions had burned the Second Temple to the ground and scattered the Jewish people to the winds of the earth.

The clause had caused a firestorm when it leaked. Arab nations had walked out of negotiations. Ultra-Orthodox rabbis had wept on camera---not from grief, but from an ecstasy so overwhelming it frightened David to watch. The Prime Minister of Israel had stood before the Knesset and said, in a voice that cracked on every third word, that this was the fulfillment of two thousand years of prayer.

Three Arab nations had returned to the table. The price of Roman's prosperity was too high to refuse.

David had asked his supervisor, a twenty-year veteran of the Foreign Office named Chadwick, what he made of it.

Chadwick had looked at him for a long moment. "I make of it that a man I've never been able to find a credible biography for just convinced every major power in the Middle East to let the Jews rebuild their Temple." He picked up his pen. "And I make of it that I'm going to stop asking questions and focus on the fishing rights."

David had not been able to stop asking questions. Which was probably why he hadn't slept in three days.

The French President picked up his pen first. He had no choice, really. Roman's reforms had saved France from dissolution. The man's signature scratched across the paper like a small death.

One by one, they signed.

France. Portugal. Spain. Greece. Poland. Austria. Belgium. Hungary. Italy. Germany.

Roman watched each signature with the patience of a man who had waited a very long time for this moment. When the tenth pen lifted from the final page, something shifted in his eyes---a flicker of triumph so cold it could freeze blood.

"It is done," he said softly.

The words hung in the air like incense. Like prophecy.

David felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. A text from his mother in Manchester: "Watching on BBC. Is that really you in the background?? So proud!!!"

He almost laughed. If she only knew how terrified he was. Not of the ceremony---of the man at the head of the table. Something was wrong with Roman Augustus. David couldn't name it, couldn't prove it, but every instinct he'd developed in his years of diplomatic training was screaming at him.

And then there was Annex VII. The clause that had made Israeli rabbis weep for joy and David Hartley weep for entirely different reasons he couldn't quite articulate to himself.

Who gives something like that away? he had written in his private journal the night the leak broke. What does he want in return? And why does the answer feel like something I don't want to know?

The leaders rose for photographs. Champagne appeared. Roman shook hands, accepted congratulations, smiled that smile that never touched his eyes.

David found himself pushed forward by the crowd, suddenly face to face with the most powerful man in Europe.

"You're young," Roman said, looking at him with those winter-iron eyes. "Hartley, isn't it? British delegation."

"Yes, sir. David Hartley."

"You have a future, David." Roman's hand closed around his, cold and dry. "I can always use talented young men. Men who understand that the old world is dying and something new must take its place."

"Thank you, sir."

Roman held his gaze a moment longer than comfortable. "We'll speak again."

Then he was gone, moving through the crowd, and David was left standing with champagne he didn't remember accepting and a feeling in his gut that he'd just shaken hands with something ancient and terrible.

Outside the window, church bells began to toll across Brussels. Somewhere in the city, David knew, people were celebrating. A new era. A united Europe. Peace and prosperity for all.

In Jerusalem, he had heard, the rabbis were already preparing the altar.

He raised his glass with everyone else.

But his hand was trembling.

* * *

CHAPTER 2

3:33

MICHAEL

San Lorenzo, California

October 2, 2030

* * *

The clock glowed red in the darkness: 3:33 AM.

Michael Exton sat up in bed, his heart pounding, the remnants of a dream already fading. Something about fire. Something about a voice.

Beside him, Ellen stirred but didn't wake. Forty-three years of marriage had taught her to sleep through his restless nights. He'd always been a poor sleeper—too many thoughts, too many questions, too many hours spent studying Scripture when he should have been resting.

But this was different.

His Bible had fallen to the floor sometime in the night. He'd been reading before sleep took him, as he always did, working through

Daniel again for what must have been the hundredth time. Now he reached down with arthritic fingers and retrieved it, squinting at the page in the pale glow of streetlights filtering through thin curtains.

Daniel 9:27 (ICB).

"That leader will make an agreement with many people for 7 years..."

Every serious student of Scripture knew about this. The final seven years before the return of Christ. The time of Jacob's (Israel's) trouble. The Great Tribulation. The Day of the Lord. Armageddon.

Michael's hands began to shake. Not from age. From understanding.

He fumbled for his phone on the nightstand, pulling up a news alert he'd silenced before bed. **HISTORIC MOMENT: TEN EUROPEAN NATIONS SIGN UNITY TREATY.** The article mentioned a seven-year framework for economic integration. Seven years. It mentioned the architect of the agreement—a man named Roman Augustus.

Roman.

Michael's throat went dry. He'd been teaching Bible prophecy for over forty years, ever since he'd come to faith as a young man. He'd written books about it. He'd given lectures. He'd argued with pastors who said it was all symbolic, all ancient history, all irrelevant to modern believers.

And now, at seventy-five years old, sitting in his small apartment in San Lorenzo, California, he was watching it begin.

The clock still glowed red. 3:33. Half of 666. He didn't believe in numerology—it was pagan nonsense—but he believed in signs. God had always used signs to get the attention of His people.

This was a sign. At least, it appeared to be.

He slipped out of bed quietly, pulling on his robe, and padded to the small office he'd carved out of their second bedroom. Bookshelves lined every wall—commentaries, concordances, history texts, the accumulated research of decades. His computer hummed to life, and he began searching.

Roman Augustus. The name itself was a statement. Roman—of Rome, the empire that Daniel had prophesied would be revived in the last days. Augustus—the title of the Caesars, the men who had declared themselves gods.

The man's biography was thin. Born in Italy, supposedly. Educated at private schools that no one could quite verify. A businessman whose fortune had materialized during the economic collapse, when everyone else was losing everything. He'd appeared on the world stage very recently, and now he commanded the loyalty of ten nations.

Ten horns.

Michael pulled up the passage in Revelation: "The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast."

His printer whirred to life. He needed hard copies. He needed to document everything.

"Michael?"

Ellen stood in the doorway, her silver hair sleep-tousled, concern creasing her face. "It's almost four in the morning. What's wrong?"

"It's starting," he said.

"What's starting?"

He turned to face her, and something in his expression made her take a step back. "The end, Ellen. The final seven years. I think... I think I just watched the Antichrist sign a 7-year covenant spoken of in the Scriptures. And not only does this treaty unite 10 nations of Europe into a United States of Europe with one leader at the helm as prophesied in the book of Revelation, but it also allows the Jews to finally restore animal sacrifices in Jerusalem as prophesied in the book of Daniel!"

She was quiet for a long moment. They'd had this conversation before—many times over many years. She'd always supported his teaching, even when she didn't fully share his urgency. But she'd never seen him like this.

"Are you sure?"

"No." He shook his head. "I'm not sure of anything except that we need to prepare. We need to warn people. We need—" He stopped, overwhelmed by the enormity of what he was saying.

Ellen crossed the room and put her hand on his shoulder. "Then that's what we'll do. But first, you need to rest. You can't save the world if you collapse from exhaustion."

"I don't think I can sleep."

"Then pray. That's what you always tell me when I can't sleep. Give it to God and rest."

She was right, of course. She usually was.

But as she led him back to bed, Michael couldn't stop thinking about that clock. 3:33 AM. Red numbers glowing in the darkness like a warning.

The final countdown had begun.

And almost no one would believe him when he tried to tell them.

* * *

CHAPTER 3

The Celebration

ROMAN

Brussels / Vatican City

October 2, 2030

* * *

The champagne was Dom Pérignon, 1998. Roman Augustus let it sit untouched in his hand while lesser men drank themselves stupid around him.

They thought they were celebrating their victory. Their unified Europe. Their new era of peace and prosperity.

Fools. They were celebrating their own enslavement.

He moved through the reception like a shark through shallow water—smiling, shaking hands, accepting congratulations from men who had no idea what they'd just done. The Prime Ministers and Presidents and Chancellors who'd signed away their nations' sovereignty believed they'd negotiated a partnership. An alliance of equals.

They would learn otherwise. Soon enough.

Roman excused himself and stepped onto a balcony overlooking the Grand Place. Below, fireworks exploded over the medieval guild halls, painting the ancient stone in colors of celebration. Crowds cheered and waved European flags. News crews broadcast the jubilation to every corner of the globe.

A new world order. That's what the pundits were calling it. They had no idea how right they were.

His phone vibrated. A private line known to fewer than a dozen people on earth. He answered without checking the caller.

"Your Excellency." The Pope's voice was silk over gravel. "Congratulations. The first seal has been opened."

Roman's lips curved into something that might have been a smile. "Thank you, Holy Father. But we are only beginning."

"Jerusalem next?"

"Jerusalem always." Roman watched a firework burst into a shower of golden sparks. "It has been waiting for two thousand years."

"The Temple?"

"Will rise. I've already arranged the financing. The construction materials are being sourced as we speak. Within eighteen months, the Jews will have their precious sanctuary again."

There was a pause on the line. When Sixtus spoke again, his voice was lower. "And the altar sacrifices — they begin tomorrow in Jerusalem? Before the Temple is even built?"

"The altar is enough to begin. As their own scriptures record, Ezra erected the altar and restored the offerings before a single stone of

the rebuilt Temple was laid. I gave them what their law requires. The Temple will follow — in my own time, on my own terms."

Roman turned away from the celebration below. His reflection stared back at him in the dark glass of the door—a handsome face, distinguished, trustworthy. The face he wore for the world.

Behind it, something else stirred. Something ancient. Something patient.

"In three and a half years," Roman said, "I will stand in that Temple myself. And they will learn who their true god is."

"The Master will be pleased."

"The Master is always pleased when his plans unfold."

He ended the call and stood alone on the balcony, watching the fireworks fade into smoke against the October sky. Somewhere below, a choir was singing the European anthem—Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," lyrics about brotherhood and unity.

Roman remembered the original words. The words Schiller had written before someone sanitized them for public consumption. Words about a loving Father dwelling above the stars.

There was no loving Father. Only power. Only the will to dominate. Only the ancient struggle between light and darkness—and darkness was winning.

Had been winning since the Garden.

A servant appeared at the balcony door. "Your Excellency? The German Chancellor wishes to propose a toast in your honor."

Roman's face shifted, the mask sliding seamlessly back into place. The warm smile. The humble demeanor. The gracious statesman.

"Of course," he said. "Tell him I would be honored."

He walked back into the light, into the celebration, into the adulation of men who would one day kneel before his statue or lose their heads.

Soon, he thought. Very soon.

The countdown had begun.

* * *

CHAPTER 4

The Refugee

MARIA

Madrid, Spain

November 2030

* * *

The child wouldn't stop crying.

Maria Santos had been working the intake tent for fourteen hours, and her Spanish was starting to blur with the Arabic and French and German she'd been speaking all day. The refugee camp outside Madrid had doubled in size over the past month—economic migrants, they called them, as if losing everything in the financial collapse was somehow less tragic than losing it to war.

"Shh, pequeño," she murmured, bouncing the toddler on her hip while his mother filled out forms she couldn't read. "It's okay. You're safe now."

Safe. What a joke. The camp was a maze of canvas tents and portable toilets, overflowing with humanity and despair. The UN had promised more resources. The Spanish government had promised more resources. Everyone promised, and nothing came.

But at least the worst was over. That's what the news kept saying. The European Unity Treaty would stabilize the economy. Roman Augustus had saved them all.

Maria found herself looking at the television mounted in the corner of the intake tent—footage from Brussels, the signing ceremony, world leaders shaking hands. Roman Augustus at the center of it all, calm and confident, promising a better future.

Something about him made her uneasy. She couldn't explain it—couldn't point to anything specific. He was handsome, articulate, obviously brilliant. He'd done more to help Europe in less than two years than the entire political establishment had done in decades.

But when she looked at his eyes...

"Santos!" Her supervisor, an exhausted German woman named Ingrid, appeared at her elbow. "We need you in medical. Three new arrivals, possibly tuberculosis."

Maria handed the toddler back to his mother and grabbed her clipboard. "Coming."

The medical tent was chaos—coughing patients, overwhelmed nurses, not enough beds, not enough medicine, not enough of anything. She spent the next four hours translating symptoms and filling out forms and trying not to think about how little any of it mattered.

By midnight, she was alone in the supply tent, counting boxes of expired antibiotics and fighting the urge to scream.

Her hand found her pocket, where it always found it—her grandmother's rosary. The beads were worn smooth from decades of prayers, first her abuela's fingers and now hers. She didn't know

why she carried it. She hadn't prayed in years. Not since her grandmother's death, when she'd asked God for a miracle and received a corpse.

But the rosary was familiar. Comforting. A connection to something beyond the endless parade of human suffering that filled her days.

"Do you believe in that?"

Maria spun. A woman stood in the entrance to the tent—elderly, weathered, with the unmistakable bearing of someone who had survived more than anyone should have to survive. She wore a Star of David on a chain around her neck.

"I'm sorry?"

"The rosary." The woman nodded at Maria's hand. "Do you believe in it? Or is it just... how do you say... a lucky charm?"

Maria looked down at the beads in her fingers. "I don't know," she admitted. "I used to believe. When I was young. My grandmother believed. She prayed every day of her life."

"And?"

"And she died. In pain. Asking God why He'd abandoned her."

The old woman was quiet for a moment. Then she shuffled into the tent and sat heavily on a crate of medical supplies. "I am Ruth. Ruth Goldstein. From Vienna."

"Maria Santos."

"I know. You helped my daughter-in-law today. The one with the little boy who wouldn't stop crying."

Maria remembered. "He's a beautiful child."

"He is. He reminds me of my son at that age. My son who died in the riots in Munich." Ruth's voice was matter-of-fact, the way voices became when they'd spoken of tragedy too many times. "I had three children. Now I have one daughter-in-law and one grandson. This is what the world has given me."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm not telling you for pity." Ruth leaned forward. "I'm telling you because I watched the news today. The treaty. The man they're all celebrating."

Maria nodded slowly. "Roman Augustus."

"Yes." Something flickered in Ruth's eyes—fear, perhaps, or something deeper. "My grandmother survived the camps. Auschwitz. She used to tell me stories about the beginning—how everyone thought Hitler was a savior. How he promised to restore Germany, to fix the economy, to make everything right."

"You think Roman Augustus is—"

"I think I'm an old woman who's learned to pay attention when saviors appear." Ruth stood, her joints creaking. "Don't ever stop praying, even if you don't believe. There are dark days coming, child. Darker than anything this world has seen."

She left before Maria could respond.

Maria stood alone in the supply tent, the rosary still clutched in her hand. On the television in the corner, Roman Augustus smiled at the camera, promising peace, prosperity, unity.

She slipped the beads back into her pocket and went back to work.

But Ruth's words echoed in her mind long into the night. *Dark days coming. Darker than anything this world has seen.*

The old woman was probably just traumatized. Shell-shocked from everything she'd lost.

Probably.

Maria Santos, at thirty-two years old, had stopped believing in prophecy along with everything else.

She would remember this night, years later, when the sky turned dark and the stars fell and the blood ran in the streets. She would remember Ruth Goldstein, and her grandmother's rosary, and the moment she'd looked into Roman Augustus's eyes and felt something cold crawl up her spine.

But that was later.

For now, she had work to do.

* * *

CHAPTER 5

The Promotion

DAVID

Brussels, Belgium

December 2030

* * *

The office on the thirty-seventh floor had a view of the entire city.

David stood at the window, looking out at Brussels spread beneath him like a circuit board—lights flickering, traffic flowing, the machinery of civilization humming along. Two months ago, he'd been a nobody. A junior analyst with a forgettable name and a stack of unread reports.

Now he had a corner office in the new European headquarters. A staff of six. A security clearance that would have made his old bosses at the Foreign Office weep with envy.

Roman Augustus had been true to his word. "I can always use talented young men."

He should have been thrilled. He should have been calling his mother every night, bragging about his meteoric rise. Instead, he found himself keeping a journal—encrypted, hidden, paranoid.

Because something was very, very wrong.

"Mr. Hartley?" His assistant's voice came through the intercom.
"Mr. Apollyon is here to see you."

David's stomach clenched. "Send him in."

The door opened, and Apollyon entered.

That wasn't his real name, of course. David had tried to find records of the man—birth certificate, education, work history—and found nothing. It was as if he'd materialized out of thin air the same time Roman Augustus appeared on the world stage.

He was thin, almost gaunt, with pale skin and eyes that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. He moved with an unsettling grace, like a predator pretending to be civilized.

"David." Apollyon's voice was soft, almost pleasant. "The Chancellor sends his regards. He's been very impressed with your work on the Eastern integration protocols."

"Thank you. I've been trying to—"

"He'd like you to attend the inner council meeting tomorrow. Eight AM. Restricted access."

David blinked. "The inner council? But that's—"

"Reserved for senior leadership, yes. The Chancellor feels you've earned a seat at the table." Apollyon smiled. It was the smile of something that had learned to mimic human expressions without understanding them. "Congratulations."

"I... thank you. I'm honored."

Apollyon moved to the window, standing beside David, looking out at the city. His reflection in the glass seemed wrong somehow—darker than it should be, the angles not quite matching his actual form.

"Do you believe in destiny, David?"

The question caught him off guard. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Destiny. Fate. The idea that some events are inevitable. That some people are chosen for greatness while others are merely... extras in the drama."

"I suppose I believe we make our own choices."

"Do you?" Apollyon turned to look at him, and for a moment—just a moment—David saw something behind those light-absorbing eyes. Something ancient. Something hungry. "How charming."

Then the moment passed, and Apollyon was just a strange man in an expensive suit, smiling that empty smile.

"Tomorrow at eight, Mr. Hartley. Don't be late. The Chancellor values punctuality."

He left without another word.

David stood at the window for a long time after he was gone. His reflection stared back at him—young, ambitious, successful beyond his wildest dreams.

Behind him, in the glass, he could see his office. His desk. The photograph of his parents he'd brought from London.

And something else.

A shadow that seemed to linger in the corner. A darkness that shouldn't have been there.

He spun around. The office was empty. Just furniture and files and the soft hum of climate control.

But his hands were shaking as he sat down at his desk and opened his encrypted journal.

"December 14, 2030," he typed. "Promoted to inner council. Meeting tomorrow with RA and senior leadership. Apollyon delivered the message personally. Something wrong with that man. Something VERY wrong. Can't explain it. Every time he's in the room, I feel like prey."

He paused, then added:

"Beginning to wonder if I've made a terrible mistake. But how do you walk away from the most powerful man in Europe? How do you say no to destiny?"

He closed the file and stared at the blank screen.

Outside, Brussels glittered with false promises.

And somewhere in the building, he knew, Roman Augustus was planning the future of the world.

A future David was increasingly afraid to see.

* * *

CHAPTER 6

The Warning

MICHAEL

San Lorenzo, California

January 2031

* * *

The congregation stared at him like he'd lost his mind.

Michael stood at the front of the community room in the San Lorenzo Senior Center, his notes trembling slightly in his hands. He'd been teaching Bible prophecy here for eleven years — every Tuesday night, rain or shine, to whoever showed up. Usually fifteen or twenty faithful souls. Tonight, word had spread that he had something urgent to share, and nearly forty people filled the folding chairs.

They'd come expecting insight. What he was giving them sounded like madness.

"I'm telling you," he said, forcing his voice steady, "what we witnessed in October was the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week. The formal agreement with many. The final seven years."

Silence. Then Harold Pettis, a retired electrician who'd been coming to these studies for eight years, raised his hand.

"Mike, I respect you. You know I do. But you're saying this Roman Augustus fellow is... the Antichrist? Based on what — a news report?"

"Based on Scripture, Harold. Ten nations. A seven-year treaty. The reinstating of animal sacrifices in Jerusalem after nearly two thousand years without them. A leader who appeared out of nowhere with supernatural ability to unite and persuade. His very name—"

"His name is Italian," said Linda Chu, shaking her head. "Lots of people have Roman names. My nephew is named Augustus."

"Is your nephew ruling a revived Roman Empire?"

The room shifted uncomfortably. Michael could feel it — the goodwill draining away, replaced by that particular embarrassment people feel when someone they respect starts saying crazy things.

"Look," said Pastor Dennis Wheeler, who'd come tonight out of curiosity, "I appreciate your passion for prophecy, Mike. Always have. But don't you think it's a bit presumptuous to claim you know who the Antichrist is? Better men than us have made predictions and been wrong."

"I'm not making a prediction. I'm making an observation. Everything Daniel described, everything John saw in Revelation — it's happening. Right now. In real time."

But he was losing them. He could see it in their faces — the polite smiles, the averted eyes, the subtle checking of watches. They'd come hoping for interesting discussion, maybe some current events

tied loosely to Scripture. Not this. Not a seventy-five-year-old man standing in a senior center claiming the apocalypse had begun.

After the study ended, only Ellen remained, helping him stack chairs.

"That could have gone better," she said quietly.

"They don't want to hear it."

"Can you blame them? It's frightening, Michael. If you're right—"

"If I'm right, frightening doesn't begin to cover it." He sat heavily in one of the chairs, suddenly exhausted. "Two billion people will die in the next few years, Ellen. Two billion. That's what Scripture tells us. War, famine, plague, persecution. And that's before the trumpet judgments."

She sat beside him, took his hand. "Then what do we do?"

"We prepare. We warn whoever will listen. We—" He stopped, rubbed his eyes. "I don't know. I've been studying this my whole adult life, and now that it's actually happening, I feel completely inadequate."

"You're not inadequate. You're faithful."

"Faithful and ignored."

"Noah was ignored too. For a hundred years, he built that ark while everyone laughed. And then the rain came."

Michael looked at his wife — this woman who had stood beside him through decades of obscurity, supporting his teaching, his writing, his endless research into prophecies that everyone said would never come true in their lifetime.

"I love you," he said.

"I know." She squeezed his hand. "Now let's go home. Tomorrow you can start again. Different approach, maybe. Smaller groups. People who are actually searching."

"And if no one searches?"

"Then we'll be ready ourselves. And we'll help whoever comes to us when the darkness falls."

They drove home through quiet streets, past houses lit with the blue glow of television screens. Normal life. Ordinary Tuesday night. People watching sitcoms and sports, scrolling through their phones, planning their weekends.

None of them knew.

Michael thought about Noah again — not just the ridicule, but the loneliness. A hundred years of building something everyone thought was insane, believing in a catastrophe no one else could see coming.

When they got home, he went straight to his office and began typing.

"A Warning to the Church," he wrote at the top of the page. *"What You Need to Know About the Treaty of Brussels."*

If they wouldn't listen in person, maybe they'd read. And if they wouldn't read now, maybe they'd remember later — when the world started burning and they needed someone to explain why.

He wrote until 3:33 AM.

The clock glowed red, and Michael smiled grimly.

"Message received," he whispered to no one. To Someone.

And kept writing.

* * *

CHAPTER 7

The Temple Announcement

RABBI ELEAZAR

Jerusalem, Israel

March 2031

* * *

Eleazar ben David had waited his entire life for this moment.

Seventy-three years. Fifty-two of them spent studying the ancient texts, memorizing the measurements, learning the rituals that hadn't been performed in two thousand years. He had trained as a kohen, traced his lineage back through generations of priests to Aaron himself. He had prepared the sacred garments, supervised the breeding of the red heifer, mapped every cubit of where the Temple would stand.

And now, finally, impossibly, it was happening.

"The European Union has agreed to guarantee the project," said Prime Minister Stern, barely containing his excitement. "Full security commitment. Roman Augustus personally assured me that any nation interfering with the construction will face united European response."

Eleazar stood at the window of the Prime Minister's office, looking out over Jerusalem. Somewhere beyond these hills, on the Temple Mount, construction crews would soon break ground on the Third Temple.

"And the Arab nations?" he asked.

"The Saudis are on board. Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco — they've all accepted the compromise. The Dome of the Rock will be preserved at the northern end of the Mount. The Temple will rise at the southern end. Separate access, separate administration, shared holiness."

"The Palestinians?"

"Isolated. No one's listening to them anymore. Not after the economic collapse. The Gulf states want stability, trade, tourism. They want to be part of the new European prosperity zone. And Augustus has made it clear — peace with Israel is the price of admission."

Eleazar turned from the window. "When do we begin?"

"Groundbreaking ceremony in six weeks. Augustus himself will attend, along with Pope Sixtus VI. A show of interfaith unity." Stern's smile faltered slightly. "I know that part isn't... ideal. But the political realities—"

"The political realities don't concern me, Prime Minister. Only the Temple concerns me."

He left the office and walked through the streets of Jerusalem, his mind spinning with calculations and preparations. The architectural plans had been ready for decades. The Temple Institute had reconstructed every vessel, every instrument, every piece of

furniture. The priesthood had been trained. The sacrifices had been studied.

Two thousand years of exile. Two thousand years of praying "Next year in Jerusalem" while the holy mountain sat occupied by a foreign shrine. Two thousand years of waiting for God to restore what the Romans had destroyed.

And now a man named Roman was making it possible.

The irony was not lost on Eleazar. But he had long ago learned that God worked through unlikely instruments. Cyrus the Persian had rebuilt the Second Temple. Why not a European politician for the Third?

That night, he sat in his study surrounded by ancient texts and modern blueprints. His wife, Rachel, brought him tea and sat quietly while he worked.

"You're troubled," she said.

"I'm elated."

"You're troubled and elated. I've been married to you for forty-nine years, Eleazar. I know the difference."

He set down his pen. "The prophecies speak of a temple in the last days. Daniel, Ezekiel, the words of Yeshua that the Christians love to quote. They all assume a temple standing in Jerusalem before... before the end."

"And?"

"And I've spent my whole life preparing for this temple. Believing it was the restoration of Israel's glory, the return of HaShem's presence, the fulfillment of our covenant."

"But?"

"But what if it's something else? What if we're building something that will be..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

Rachel was quiet for a long moment. Then she said, "Do you remember what your grandfather told you? When you were a boy, asking why we couldn't just rebuild the Temple ourselves?"

Eleazar nodded. "He said, 'The Temple will come when HaShem wills it. Not before, not after. Our job is to be ready.'"

"Are you ready?"

"I've spent seventy-three years getting ready."

"Then trust that preparation. Trust that HaShem has led you to this moment for a reason." She kissed his forehead. "Even if the reason isn't what you expected."

After she left, Eleazar sat alone with the blueprints spread before him. The Holy of Holies. The altar. The courts. Every measurement precise, every detail faithful to the original.

His life's work, about to become reality.

He should have felt nothing but joy.

Instead, somewhere deep in his gut, a small voice whispered warnings he couldn't quite hear.

He ignored it, and went back to his preparations.

There was so much work to do.

* * *

CHAPTER 8

The Dedication

RABBI ELEAZAR

Jerusalem, Israel

September 2032

* * *

The Temple gleamed white and gold against the Jerusalem sky.

Eighteen months. That's all it had taken. Eighteen months from groundbreaking to completion — a miracle of engineering, logistics, and unlimited funding. Critics said it was impossible. The construction crews, working around the clock with technology and resources that seemed almost supernatural in their abundance, proved them wrong.

And now Eleazar stood in the outer court, wearing the sacred garments of the High Priest for the first time since Caiaphas had worn them two millennia ago. The breastplate with its twelve stones. The ephod. The turban with its golden plate: HOLY TO THE LORD.

His hands trembled as he prepared for the dedication ceremony.

Thousands filled the courts — dignitaries, rabbis, politicians, journalists from every nation on earth. Roman Augustus stood in a place of honor, flanked by Pope Sixtus VI, whose presence had sparked protests from ultra-Orthodox groups but whose political necessity no one could deny.

Prime Minister Stern delivered a speech about peace and unity. Augustus spoke briefly about the dawn of a new age of cooperation between faiths and nations. The Pope offered blessings in Latin that made Eleazar's skin crawl, though he kept his face carefully neutral.

Then it was time.

Eleazar approached the altar — newly constructed but faithful in every detail to the original — where a perfect red heifer had been prepared to purify the Temple and all who would serve within it.

The crowd fell silent.

In that silence, Eleazar heard his grandfather's voice again: *The Temple will come when HaShem wills it.*

Was this HaShem's will? Standing here, wearing these garments, preparing to restore the ancient covenant while a European politician and a Roman pope watched approvingly?

He pushed the doubt aside. He had waited seventy-three years for this. He would not falter now.

The sacrifice was made. The blood was sprinkled. The ancient words were spoken.

And for a moment — just a moment — Eleazar felt something. A presence. A weight in the air. As if the God of Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob was indeed watching, indeed accepting, indeed returning to dwell among His people.

Tears streamed down his face.

It's real, he thought. After everything, it's real.

The crowd erupted in cheers and singing. Shofars sounded across the Temple Mount. Somewhere in the distance, church bells rang — whether in celebration or protest, Eleazar couldn't tell.

Roman Augustus caught his eye and nodded once, slowly. A gesture of respect, perhaps. Or something else. Something that looked almost like satisfaction.

Like a man watching a chess piece move exactly where he wanted it.

Eleazar looked away, focused on the altar, on the smoke rising toward heaven.

This is what I was born for, he told himself. This is the fulfillment of everything.

The dedication continued through the day and into the night. Sacrifices were made. Prayers were offered. The Levites sang psalms that hadn't been sung in their proper place for twenty centuries.

And through it all, Eleazar kept thinking about Roman Augustus's nod. About the satisfied look in those cold gray eyes.

Three and a half years after the treaty is signed, something whispered in his mind. That's how long it would take before he would show you who he really is. And that treaty was signed two years ago.

But that was prophecy. That was Christian interpretation. That was fear talking.

This was the Temple. This was restoration. This was glory.

Eleazar ben David, High Priest of Israel, chose to believe.

He had no idea how short a time that belief would last.

* * *

CHAPTER 9

Signs and Wonders

MARIA

Rome, Italy

November 2032

* * *

The Pope called fire from heaven, and Maria Santos watched it fall.

She had come to Rome as part of a refugee aid delegation — a conference on the ongoing migration crisis, bringing together NGOs, government officials, and church representatives. The Vatican had offered to host the closing ceremony, and Pope Sixtus VI himself would address the gathered humanitarians.

Maria hadn't wanted to come. Something about Rome made her uneasy now, something she couldn't name. But her supervisor insisted, and so she found herself standing in St. Peter's Square with ten thousand other people, watching the Pope emerge onto the balcony.

He was younger than she expected. Handsome, even, with silver hair and a warm smile that radiated across the massive screens

flanking the square. His voice, when he spoke, was rich and compelling — the voice of a grandfather, a friend, a guide.

"My children," he said, "we live in an age of miracles."

The crowd murmured agreement. In the two years since the Treaty of Brussels, the world had indeed seen wonders. Economic recovery. Political cooperation. Animal sacrifices restored. The Temple rising in Jerusalem. Peace spreading where there had been only conflict.

"Some doubt," Sixtus continued. "Some question. They ask, 'Is this truly God's work? Or is it merely human achievement?' They demand signs."

He paused, and something shifted in his expression. Something harder. Colder.

"Then signs they shall have."

He raised his hands toward the sky.

Maria would remember what happened next for the rest of her life. Would see it in her nightmares. Would feel the heat of it on her face whenever she closed her eyes.

Fire fell from heaven.

Not lightning — fire. A column of flame descending from the cloudless sky, striking the obelisk in the center of St. Peter's Square. The ancient stone glowed red, then white, then subsided. The fire vanished as quickly as it had come.

The obelisk stood unharmed.

The crowd went insane.

People fell to their knees, weeping, praising God, praising the Pope. Some fainted. Others screamed in terror or ecstasy — Maria couldn't tell which. The noise was overwhelming, a wall of human sound crashing against her.

She alone, it seemed, felt no urge to kneel.

Her hand found her pocket. Her grandmother's rosary. She gripped it so hard the beads cut into her palm.

This is wrong, something whispered inside her. *This is all wrong*.

The Pope was speaking again, but Maria couldn't hear him over the roaring in her ears. She pushed through the crowd, desperate suddenly to get away, to get out of this square, out of this city, away from whatever she had just witnessed.

It took her an hour to reach her hotel. She locked the door, closed the curtains, and sat on the bed with her rosary clutched in both hands.

Pray, she told herself. *You're supposed to pray at times like this*.

But she didn't know how. Didn't know what to pray. Didn't know if anyone was listening.

The television was on, muted. She watched the footage replay again and again — the Pope raising his hands, the fire falling, the crowd's rapture. Already the commentators were calling it the greatest miracle since Christ walked the earth.

Maria's phone buzzed. A text from her colleague: "Wasn't that AMAZING?! See you at dinner?"

She didn't reply.

Instead, she sat in the darkening room and tried to understand why, when everyone else had seen the face of God, all she had felt was the shadow of something ancient and terrible passing over her soul.

Ruth Goldstein's words came back to her, from that night in the refugee camp two years ago: *There are dark days coming, child. Darker than anything this world has seen.*

Maria looked at her grandmother's rosary. The beads were old, worn smooth by decades of faithful fingers.

Did you know? she asked silently. *Did you feel this coming, Abuela? Is that why you prayed so hard?*

No answer came.

Outside, Rome celebrated into the night.

Maria Santos sat alone in the dark and wondered if she was losing her mind — or if she was the only one who could still see clearly.

* * *

CHAPTER 10

The Inner Circle

DAVID

Brussels, Belgium

December 2032

* * *

The conference room was underground, three levels below the European Parliament building, in a section that didn't appear on any official blueprints.

David Hartley had been attending inner council meetings for two years now. He'd seen things that would have gotten him killed if he'd spoken of them. He'd heard plans that made his blood run cold. He'd watched Roman Augustus consolidate power with a patience and precision that seemed almost inhuman.

But tonight was different.

Tonight, for the first time, he would see behind the final curtain.

"You've proven your loyalty," Apollyon had said, escorting him through security checkpoints that required retinal scans, blood samples, and codes that changed every hour. "The Chancellor believes you're ready for the next level of involvement."

"The next level?"

Apollyon's smile revealed too many teeth. "You'll see."

The conference room held perhaps twenty people — the innermost circle of Roman's empire. David recognized some faces: finance ministers, media moguls, intelligence chiefs. Others were strangers, though something about them suggested vast and hidden power.

Roman Augustus sat at the head of the table, utterly still, watching David enter with those winter-iron eyes.

"Mr. Hartley. Thank you for joining us."

"Thank you for the invitation, Chancellor."

"Please. We're beyond titles here. Beyond nations, beyond allegiances, beyond the petty divisions that have plagued humanity for millennia." Roman gestured to an empty chair. "Sit. Listen. Learn."

The meeting that followed was unlike anything David had experienced.

They spoke openly of things that governments denied, that media dismissed as conspiracy theory, that ordinary people couldn't imagine. Population control. Economic manipulation. The systematic dismantling of national sovereignty. The role of religion in pacifying the masses — and the planned obsolescence of that role once global unity was achieved.

"The Temple was a masterstroke," said a woman David didn't recognize — someone from the banking sector, by her bearing.

"The Jews are pacified. The Christians are confused. The Muslims are isolated. Three birds, one stone."

"Credit goes to our friends in the Vatican," Roman said. "Sixtus has performed admirably."

"The fire from heaven was impressive," someone else added. "Our people are still analyzing the technology. The projection systems alone—"

"It wasn't technology."

Everyone turned to look at Apollyon, who had spoken from his position against the wall.

"Excuse me?" said the banker.

"I said, it wasn't technology." Apollyon's eyes glittered in the low light. "Some powers are older than technology. Some alliances predate human civilization entirely."

Silence. Uncomfortable shifting.

Roman smiled — that cold, empty smile that never reached his eyes. "Apollyon speaks poetically, as always. The point is that Sixtus delivered, and the masses believed. That's all that matters."

The meeting continued, but David barely heard it. His mind was stuck on Apollyon's words. *Some powers are older than technology. Some alliances predate human civilization.*

What did that mean?

He thought about the shadows in his office that moved wrong. The feeling of being prey whenever Apollyon entered a room. The way

Roman's presence seemed to lower the temperature and raise the pressure all at once.

What have I gotten myself into?

After the meeting, Roman asked David to stay behind. The others filed out, leaving them alone in that underground room.

"You're troubled," Roman said. It wasn't a question.

"I'm... processing."

"Understandable. What you heard tonight would shatter most men's understanding of how the world works." Roman stood, walked to a painting on the wall — a Renaissance depiction of the fall of the angels. "But you're not most men, David. You're intelligent. Adaptable. Ambitious."

"Thank you."

"Those are observations, not compliments." Roman turned to face him. "I'm going to ask you something, and I need you to answer honestly. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe in God?"

The question hung in the air. David's throat went dry.

"I... I was raised Anglican. Church on holidays, that sort of thing. But honestly? I'm not sure what I believe."

Roman nodded slowly. "Good. Belief is a cage. It limits what men can see, what they can achieve, what they can become." He moved closer, and David fought the urge to step back. "The world is

changing, David. Everything humanity thought it knew — about power, about meaning, about the nature of reality itself — is about to be revealed as a lie. When that revelation comes, I need men beside me who can accept the truth without breaking."

"What truth?"

Roman's smile widened. For a moment — just a moment — his eyes seemed to flash with something other than reflected light. Something red. Something ancient.

"That there is no God watching over humanity. No divine plan. No salvation coming. There is only power — and those strong enough to seize it."

He clapped David on the shoulder. His hand was ice cold.

"Go home. Sleep. Process what you've learned. And when you're ready to fully commit to our cause — to the only cause that matters — come back to me."

David nodded, unable to speak, and left the underground room on unsteady legs.

He didn't go home.

Instead, he went to his office, locked the door, and opened his encrypted journal.

"December 15, 2032," he typed, his hands shaking so badly he had to retype every other word. "I think I just met the devil. Not metaphorically. Not poetically. The actual devil. Or something close to it. RA asked if I believe in God. The honest answer — the answer I didn't give him — is that I didn't, until tonight. Now I'm not sure. Because if what I saw in his eyes was real, if Apollyon's

words meant what I think they meant, then there's something ancient and evil at the heart of this new world order. And that means there might be something ancient and good opposing it. I need to find out. I need to know what's really happening. And I need to decide which side I'm on before it's too late to choose."

He saved the file, encrypted it twice, and sat staring at the blank screen.

Outside, Brussels slept peacefully under a blanket of winter snow.

David Hartley was more awake than he had ever been in his life.

And more terrified.

* * *

CHAPTER 11

The Mother

ANNA

Hong Kong

February 2033

* * *

The children were asleep when the knock came.

Anna Chen froze, her hands still wet from washing the dinner dishes. It was after ten o'clock. No one knocked on doors at this hour in Hong Kong anymore — not since the new regulations had passed, the ones requiring all religious gatherings to be registered and approved by the state.

The house church had been meeting in their apartment for three years now. Fifteen families, rotating locations, never more than a dozen people at a time. They sang quietly. They prayed in whispers. They studied Scripture with the curtains drawn.

It wasn't enough.

"Anna." Her husband James appeared in the kitchen doorway, his face pale. "Don't answer it."

"If I don't answer, they'll break it down."

"Then let them. I'll go out the back with the children—"

"There is no back, James. We're on the fourteenth floor."

Another knock. Louder this time.

Anna dried her hands and walked to the door. Her heart pounded so hard she could feel it in her throat. She thought of her children — Mei, eight years old, and Daniel, five — sleeping peacefully in the room they shared, unaware that their world was about to change.

Lord, give me strength.

She opened the door.

Two men stood in the hallway. They weren't police — at least, not uniformed police. They wore dark suits and expressions that suggested they had done this many times before.

"Mrs. Chen?"

"Yes."

"Your husband is James Chen? Leader of an unregistered religious organization?"

"My husband leads a Bible study. For friends. It's not—"

"May we come in?"

It wasn't really a question. Anna stepped aside, and the men entered her home like they owned it. One of them immediately began photographing the apartment — the stack of Bibles on the bookshelf, the children's drawings of Christ's disciples.

"Where is your husband?"

"I'm here." James emerged from the hallway, positioning himself between the men and the door to the children's room. "What do you want?"

"James Chen, you are required to appear before the Religious Affairs Bureau tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. You will bring all materials related to your unregistered gatherings — attendance lists, teaching materials, contact information for participants."

"And if I refuse?"

The man who had been photographing stopped and turned. His smile was thin and cold.

"Mr. Chen, the Religious Harmony Act is very clear. Unregistered religious activities are a threat to social stability. First-time offenders receive re-education. Repeat offenders..." He shrugged. "The new facilities in Xinjiang have plenty of room."

Anna felt the blood drain from her face. Everyone knew about Xinjiang. Everyone knew what "re-education" meant.

James stood very still. "I'll be there tomorrow."

"Excellent. Nine o'clock sharp. And Mr. Chen?" The man's eyes flicked to the children's door. "The bureau takes a special interest in families who raise their children in unapproved ideologies. I'm sure you want what's best for your son and daughter."

They left without another word.

Anna locked the door behind them, then collapsed against it, shaking. James caught her, held her, his own body trembling.

"What do we do?" she whispered.

"I don't know."

"James, the children—"

"I know."

They stood there in the darkened apartment, holding each other, listening to the distant sounds of the city that had been their home for their entire lives. A city that was no longer safe for people like them.

"We could leave," Anna said. "Your cousin in Vancouver—"

"The borders are monitored. They flag anyone with religious activity on their file. We'd never make it through."

"Then we hide. We stop meeting. We pretend—"

"Pretend what? That we don't believe? That Jesus isn't our Savior?" James pulled back, looked into her eyes. "Anna, I can't do that. I won't."

"Even if it means losing the children?"

The question hung between them like a blade.

James was silent for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was barely audible.

"The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

"Don't quote Job at me right now, James."

"I'm not quoting. I'm... I'm trying to remember what we believe. Why we believe it." He took her hands. "Anna, I've read the prophecies. I've studied what's happening in the world. The treaty, the Temple, the miracles the Pope is performing — it's all there, in Daniel and Revelation. The end is coming. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not next year, but soon."

"All the more reason to protect our children."

"The best protection I can give them is faith. Real faith. The kind that doesn't bend when the government knocks on your door." He squeezed her hands. "I'll go tomorrow. I'll tell them what they want to hear. But I won't betray our brothers and sisters, and I won't stop teaching our children the truth."

Anna wanted to argue. Wanted to scream that faith wasn't worth dying for, that God would understand, that surely there was another way.

But she looked at her husband — this quiet, gentle man who had never raised his voice in anger, who spent his evenings teaching their children to pray, who believed with every fiber of his being that Jesus Christ was worth everything — and she knew.

There was no other way. Not for people like them.

"Then we face it together," she said.

"Together."

They checked on the children — still sleeping, still innocent, still unaware — and then sat up all night, praying and planning and preparing for whatever was coming.

The sun rose over Hong Kong, painting the harbor in shades of gold and red.

Anna watched it through the window and wondered how many more sunrises she would see.

And whether her children would remember her when she was gone.

* * *

CHAPTER 12

The Convergence

MARIA

Madrid, Spain

March 2033

* * *

The video had been viewed two billion times.

Maria sat in her small apartment in Madrid, watching it again on her laptop. Pope Sixtus VI, standing in St. Peter's Square, raising his hands to heaven. The fire falling. The crowds collapsing in worship.

Four months since she'd witnessed it in person. Four months of sleepless nights, unanswered questions, and a growing certainty that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

She'd tried to talk to her colleagues about it. They looked at her like she was crazy. *Didn't you see it, Maria? A miracle! The Pope called fire from heaven! How can you doubt?*

She'd tried to talk to a priest. He'd smiled benevolently and suggested she was suffering from spiritual fatigue. *The Evil One*

often attacks those who witness great works of God. Pray the rosary. Trust the Holy Father.

The rosary. Her grandmother's rosary, still sitting in her pocket, still worn smooth from decades of prayers. Maria pulled it out and stared at it.

What would you think, Abuela? If you'd seen what I saw?

Her grandmother had been a simple woman. Deeply devout. She'd believed everything the Church taught without question — the saints, the sacraments, the Pope as Christ's vicar on earth.

But she'd also taught Maria something else, something Maria had almost forgotten until now.

"The Bible is the word of God, mija. Whatever anyone tells you — priest, bishop, even the Pope himself — if it contradicts the Scripture, they are wrong and the Scripture is right."

Maria had never actually read the Bible. Not really. She'd heard passages at Mass, memorized a few verses for confirmation, but she'd never sat down and read it for herself.

Now, on impulse, she opened her laptop and searched for an online Bible.

She didn't know where to start. The Old Testament seemed impenetrable — all those names and laws and battles. The Gospels were familiar enough, but she wasn't sure what she was looking for.

Then she remembered something Ruth Goldstein had said, that night in the refugee camp. Something about dark days coming, darker than anything the world had seen.

Maria typed into the search bar: "Bible prophecy end times."

The results overwhelmed her. Thousands of articles, videos, interpretations. Everyone seemed to have a different theory. But one phrase kept appearing again and again.

The Book of Revelation.

She found it and began to read.

An hour later, she was still reading, her coffee growing cold beside her, her heart racing with something between terror and recognition.

And I saw another beast coming up out of the earth... and he performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men.

Fire from heaven.

And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform...

Maria's hands were shaking.

She kept reading. The mark of the beast. The false prophet. The great tribulation. The return of Christ.

It was all there. Everything that was happening — the unified government, the Temple in Jerusalem, the miraculous signs — it was all there, written two thousand years ago by a man named John on an island called Patmos.

This can't be real. This can't be happening.

But it was. She'd seen the fire fall with her own eyes.

Her phone rang. She almost ignored it, but then saw the caller ID — Ruth Goldstein.

Maria hadn't spoken to the old woman since that night in the camp. She'd moved on to other assignments, other crises. But she'd never forgotten Ruth's warning.

"Ruth? How did you get this number?"

"I have my ways." The old woman's voice was weaker than Maria remembered, crackling with age and distance. "I've been watching the news. The Pope's miracle. I thought of you."

"Ruth, I was there. I saw it happen."

"I know. I could tell from your face on the news footage. You were the only one not kneeling."

Maria closed her eyes. "I don't understand what's happening."

"Yes, you do. You're starting to, anyway. That's why you've been reading Revelation for the past hour."

"How do you know that?"

"Because it's what I did, fifty years ago, when I first started to see." Ruth coughed, a wet, rattling sound. "Listen to me, Maria. I don't have much time left. The cancer is everywhere now. But I needed to tell you something before I go."

"What?"

"The man who signed that treaty. Roman Augustus. The Pope who calls fire from heaven. They are not what they seem. They are not from God. They are—"

"The beast and the false prophet." The words came out of Maria's mouth before she could stop them.

Silence on the line. Then, softly: "You see it. You really see it."

"I don't want to see it. I want to go back to not seeing it."

"That's not how it works, child. Once your eyes are opened, they cannot be closed." Another cough. "There's a man in California. A teacher. Michael Exton. He's been writing about this for years. Find him. Learn from him. And Maria?"

"Yes?"

"Throw away the rosary."

Maria looked at the beads in her hand. "It was my grandmother's."

"Your grandmother isn't here now. She doesn't need beads to talk to Him, and neither do you. The rosary is a chain, Maria. A chain that connects you to a church that has become a harlot. Cut it loose before it drags you down with it."

The line went dead.

Maria sat in the silence of her apartment, the rosary in one hand, her phone in the other. On her laptop screen, the words of Revelation glowed like fire.

And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not participate in her sins and receive of her plagues..."

Come out of her.

Maria looked at the rosary — her grandmother's rosary, her last connection to the faith she'd been raised in, to the church that had baptized her and confirmed her and promised her salvation.

She couldn't throw it away. Not yet. But she could put it in a drawer. She could stop clutching it like a lifeline. She could start reading the Bible for herself and see what she found.

She opened the drawer of her nightstand and placed the rosary inside.

Then she went back to her laptop and searched for "Michael Exton California Bible prophecy."

The search returned a website: TheBibleComesAlive.org.

Maria began to read.

* * *

CHAPTER 13

The Call

And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them!

Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea!

For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.

— Revelation 12:7-9, 12 (NKJV)

GRACE PHAM

Singapore

January 5, 2034

* * *

The call came at 3:47 in the morning.

Not a phone call. Not an email. Not any form of communication Grace Pham could explain to her colleagues at the software company where she worked, or to her mother who still lit incense at the Buddhist temple every Sunday, or to anyone who hadn't spent the last five years studying prophecy with a small group of believers who kept the seventh-day Sabbath.

It was a voice. Clear as a bell, impossible to ignore, speaking words that burned themselves into her consciousness:

"Come out of her, my people. The time has come."

Grace sat up in bed, her heart pounding. The room was dark, silent. Her phone showed no missed calls, no messages. But the words echoed in her mind with a certainty that left no room for doubt.

She knew exactly what it meant.

For years, her teacher — an elderly American named Michael Exton — had explained the prophecies. The coming tribulation. The Abomination of Desolation. The place of safety where God would protect His faithful remnant. He had taught them to watch for the signs, to be ready to move at a moment's notice.

"When the call comes," he had said, "don't hesitate. Don't look back. Remember Lot's wife."

Grace was already packing before the echo of the voice faded from her mind.

* * *

MICHAEL EXTON

Rural Nevada, United States

The Same Morning

* * *

Michael heard the call too.

He had been expecting it for forty years — ever since he first understood the prophecies, ever since he began teaching others what he had learned. The signs had been accelerating. The European federation was consolidating power. The charismatic leader named Roman Augustus was rising to prominence. The world was sliding toward the abyss.

And now the voice had spoken, clear and unmistakable:

"Come out of her, my people. The time has come."

Michael knelt beside his bed and prayed. Not for guidance — he knew what the call meant. But for something else. For permission.

Heavenly Father, I've taught Your truth for four decades. I've prepared people for this moment. I've done everything You asked of me.

But what about the ones who aren't ready? The ones who are just now discovering the truth? The ones who will wake up tomorrow,

or next month, or next year, and realize everything I taught was real — but too late to escape?

Who will teach them? Who will guide them through the tribulation? Who will help them hold on until You return?

The answer came — not as a voice this time, but as a knowing. A door opening in his heart. A choice laid before him.

He could go to the place of safety. He had earned it. Forty years of faithful service, forty years of keeping the Sabbath and obeying God, forty years of swimming against the current of a world that called him crazy. He was one of the Philadelphians. The protection was his by right.

Or he could stay.

Stay and face the tribulation. Stay and teach the great multitude — the millions who would discover the truth too late for protection but not too late for salvation. Stay and shepherd souls through the darkest period in human history.

Michael thought of his students scattered across the world. Grace in Singapore. Thomas in Jamaica. Elena in Spain. Hundreds of faithful believers who had heard the same call, who were probably packing their bags right now, preparing to flee to safety.

Then he thought of the others. The ones who had heard his teachings but hadn't fully committed. The ones who kept one foot in the world and one foot in the truth. The ones who would wake up on the day the bombs fell and finally — FINALLY — understand that everything he had said was real.

They would need a teacher.

Michael stood up from his knees, his decision made.

He would not go to the place of safety.

He would stay with the sheep who didn't yet know they were sheep.

* * *

THE HENDERSONS

Oklahoma City, United States

January 16, 2034

* * *

"We can't just LEAVE."

Robert Henderson stood in the middle of his living room, surrounded by half-packed suitcases, watching his wife move with calm efficiency from room to room.

"We can and we are," Martha replied, not slowing down. "The call came eleven days ago, Robert. ELEVEN DAYS. We should have been gone by now."

"But the house — the business — the kids' schools—"

Martha stopped and turned to face him. Her eyes were filled with a mixture of love and exasperation that only thirty years of marriage could produce.

"Robert. Listen to me." She took his hands. "We've been studying prophecy for fifteen years. We've kept the Sabbath. We've obeyed God. We've taught our children the truth. And now — NOW —"

when everything we believed is actually happening, you want to worry about the HOUSE?"

"It's not just the house. It's our whole life. Everything we've built."

"Everything we've built will be ASH in a few weeks if we don't leave." Martha's voice was gentle but firm. "Remember what Pastor Whitfield taught us? The tribulation isn't some distant future event anymore. It's HERE. Roman Augustus has consolidated power in Europe. The peace treaty with Israel has been ratified. The Abomination is coming. And when it does—"

"When it does, America burns." Robert's voice was hollow. "I know. I've read the prophecies. I just... I thought we'd have more time."

"We have exactly the time God gave us. Seventy-five days from the call to arrival at the place of safety. That's what Daniel's 1,335 days means — seventy-five days of grace before the tribulation begins." Martha squeezed his hands. "We've already used eleven of them, Robert. We don't have time to linger."

"Remember Lot," their daughter Rebecca said from the doorway. She was nineteen, already packed, her Bible tucked under her arm. "When the angels told him to flee Sodom, he lingered. He didn't want to leave everything behind. And the angels had to literally GRAB him and drag him out of the city."

Robert looked at his daughter — this young woman who had absorbed the teachings better than he had, who had been ready to leave the moment the call came.

"And Lot's wife," Rebecca continued softly. "She looked back. She couldn't let go of what she was leaving behind. And she became a pillar of salt."

The words hit Robert like a physical blow.

He thought of his business — the hardware store his father had started, that he had built into a regional chain. He thought of the house they had lived in for twenty-five years, where his children had taken their first steps, where Martha had planted the garden she loved.

And then he thought of what was coming. Nuclear fire. Cities vaporized. Millions dead in an instant. Everything he was clinging to — burned to ash and radioactive dust.

"Okay," he said quietly. "Let's go."

Martha's face melted with relief. "Thank God. I was starting to worry I'd have to drag you out like Lot."

Robert managed a weak smile. "You probably would have."

"Absolutely." She kissed his cheek. "Now pack. We fly to Jordan tonight. From there, the network will get us to the gathering point."

"What about the Millers? The Johnsons? Everyone in our congregation?"

Martha's face fell. "Some have already left. Some are leaving today. But others..." She shook her head. "Others don't believe the call was real. They think we're overreacting. They want to wait and see."

"Wait and see." Robert felt sick. He had heard those words from friends he had known for decades. Good people. Faithful people, in their own way. But they had looked at him like he was crazy when he told them about the call. "They're going to die, aren't they?"

"Some will. Others will survive and face the tribulation." Martha's voice was heavy. "But they won't be protected like we will be. They'll have to endure it. The mark. The persecution. Maybe martyrdom."

"The great multitude."

"Yes. The ones who are martyred in the great tribulation whose robes are washed white. They'll be saved — if they stay faithful. But they won't be spared death." Martha picked up a suitcase. "We have a chance to be spared, Robert. God gave us the call. Let's not waste it."

Three hours later, the Henderson family boarded a flight to Amman, Jordan.

They never saw Oklahoma City again.

* * *

GRACE PHAM

The Wilderness

March 18, 2034

* * *

The place of safety was not what Grace had expected.

She had imagined something like a refugee camp — tents, portable toilets, supply trucks coming and going. Instead, she found herself in a valley so remote it didn't appear on any map, surrounded by rose-colored cliffs that seemed to glow in the morning light.

And the people. Thousands of them, arriving in small groups from every direction. Americans and Australians. Brits and Canadians. Europeans and Africans and Asians. Speaking a hundred languages, wearing a hundred styles of clothing, but united by one thing:

They had all heard the call.

"Twelve thousand," Elder Thomas said, standing beside her as they watched another group arrive from the mountain pass. He had come from Jamaica, arriving two weeks before Grace. "Give or take. That's how many have made it so far. And they're still coming."

"How do they know where to go? There were no maps, no instructions—"

"The same way we knew. The voice. The knowing." Thomas smiled. "God doesn't need GPS coordinates. He guides those who trust Him."

Grace watched a family emerge from the pass — a man, a woman, a teenage girl, their faces drawn with exhaustion but shining with relief. They had made it. Against all odds, abandoning everything they knew, trusting a voice that the world would call hallucination, they had made it.

"That's the Hendersons," someone nearby said. "From Oklahoma. They almost didn't come. Robert wanted to wait."

"But they came," Thomas said. "That's what matters. They heard the call, they struggled with it, and in the end they obeyed. Like Lot."

"Where's Michael?" Grace asked suddenly. She had been scanning every arriving group, looking for the teacher who had first opened her eyes to the truth. "Michael Exton. He should be here by now."

Thomas was quiet for a long moment.

"He's not coming."

"What?" Grace spun to face him. "But he's one of the most faithful — he's been teaching this for forty years — he—"

"He chose to stay." Thomas's voice was thick with emotion. "He heard the call. He had every right to come. But he stayed. For the ones who won't make it here. For the great multitude."

Grace felt tears spring to her eyes. Michael Exton — the man who had taught her about the Sabbath, Easter, Christmas, crosses, the prophecies — had given up his place of safety to shepherd those who would face the tribulation.

"He's staying in California?"

"He was. But I received word yesterday — he's moved to Nevada, to a network of underground believers there. He said..." Thomas's voice broke. "He said someone has to teach the latecomers. Someone has to help them hold on until the King returns."

Grace wept.

Not for herself — she was safe, protected, exactly where God had called her to be. But for her teacher, who had loved the lost sheep so much that he was willing to face the wolves to protect them.

"He'll die," she whispered. "Without the protection—"

"He might. But he'll die faithful. And he'll be there when the King returns." Thomas put a hand on her shoulder. "Different path, same destination. That's what he told me. He said God willing he'd see us all in the Kingdom."

In the valley below, more families were arriving. The last of the 12,000, finding their way home before the door closed forever.

* * *

THE PLACE OF SAFETY

The Day After Easter Sunday, 2034

* * *

The news came at dawn.

Someone had smuggled in a shortwave radio — the last connection to the outside world before the community cut all ties. And what they heard turned celebration into mourning.

Nuclear strikes. Simultaneous. Coordinated.

Washington D.C. New York. Los Angeles. Chicago. Dallas. A dozen more American cities, vaporized in the span of an hour.

London. Manchester. Birmingham. Edinburgh. The United Kingdom, burning.

Toronto. Vancouver. Montreal. Sydney. Melbourne. Auckland. The English-speaking world, destroyed in a single morning.

The United States of Europe, under Roman Augustus, had made his move.

What the world didn't understand — what almost no one had been taught — was that the English-speaking nations were the modern descendants of the lost tribes of Israel. In the Bible, God renamed Jacob "Israel," and Israel had twelve sons who became twelve tribes. Joseph was one of those sons — and America, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are his modern descendants. Judah was another son — and his descendants are the Jews, who had named their modern nation "Israel." Joseph and Judah were brothers, both part of the same family. The Bible called this period "the time of Jacob's trouble" — the time of Israel's trouble — and now the world could see why these nations were struck first. The prophecies of judgment against Israel in the last days had always pointed here. And Satan, who had hated Israel since the beginning, had just destroyed them through his servant.

Grace collapsed to her knees. Singapore had been spared — for now — but her mother was in Hong Kong, visiting relatives. Her brothers were in San Francisco. Her childhood friends were scattered across cities that no longer existed.

All around her, others were falling, weeping, crying out to God. The Hendersons from Oklahoma — their entire extended family, everyone who had "waited to see," was gone. Australians learning that Melbourne was ash. Brits realizing that the country of their birth had ceased to exist.

"It's the beginning," Elder Thomas said, his voice breaking. "The tribulation has begun. And we... we're the only ones from those nations who..."

He couldn't finish.

They were the remnant. Twelve thousand souls plucked from the fire, gathered from the nations, sheltered in this valley while their homelands burned.

"The 1,335 days," Martha Henderson whispered, holding her sobbing daughter. "We made it by three days. THREE DAYS. If Robert had delayed any longer..."

She didn't finish either. She didn't need to.

Seventy-five days of grace. That's what God had given them. Seventy-five days from the call to the closing of the door. And they had made it — barely, reluctantly, some of them dragged like Lot from Sodom — but they had made it.

Others hadn't.

Millions of people who had heard the same teachings, received the same warnings, understood the same prophecies — but had waited. Had lingered. Had looked back.

And now they were dead. Or soon would be.

* * *

That night, the community gathered to pray.

Not in celebration — there was nothing to celebrate. Not in despair — they knew the prophecies, knew this was coming, knew that worse was yet to come before the King returned. But in mourning. In intercession. In surrender to a God whose ways were higher than their ways.

"Daniel wrote of this moment," Elder Thomas said, his voice hoarse from weeping. "'Blessed is he that waits, and comes to the thousand three hundred and five and thirty days.' That's us. We

waited. We came. We're blessed — not because we deserve it, but because we obeyed."

"And the others?" someone asked. "The ones who didn't come?"

"Some are dead. Some will face martyrdom. They will be part of the "great multitude" — those who are executed in the great tribulation — but they will be raised back to life when Christ returns. Different path, same destination." Thomas's voice steadied. "But let their fate remind us: when God speaks, we LISTEN. When He says go, we GO. When He calls us out, we don't linger, don't look back, don't cling to what we're leaving behind."

He looked at the gathering — twelve thousand faces, lit by starlight, wet with tears.

"We have 1,260 days ahead of us. Three and a half years in this place, protected from what's coming. But we're not here to hide. We're here to prepare. To study. To be trained for the work of the Millennium. When the King returns, when He establishes His Kingdom, the world will need teachers. We will BE those teachers."

"And Michael?" Grace asked, unable to stop herself. "What about the ones who stayed behind to help the others?"

Thomas smiled through his tears.

"They're the bravest of us all. They had protection and gave it up. They had safety and chose danger. They loved the lost sheep more than their own lives." His voice grew reverent. "When the King comes, they'll hear the words every servant longs to hear: 'Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.'"

Grace looked up at the stars — the same stars that were shining over Nevada, where her teacher was preparing to shepherd the great multitude through the darkest period in human history.

See you in the Kingdom, Michael, she thought. Different path, same destination.

The tribulation had begun.

And in a valley hidden from the world, twelve thousand souls began the wait for their King.

* * *

PART TWO: THE BETRAYAL

CHAPTER 14

The Declaration

POPE SIXTUS VI

Rome, Italy

Palm Sunday, Spring 2034

* * *

The faithful filled St. Peter's Square like a sea of souls waiting to be harvested.

Pope Sixtus VI stood at his window, watching them gather — hundreds of thousands, perhaps a million, waving palm branches and singing hosannas. They had come from every nation to celebrate the most sacred week in the Roman Catholic calendar.

They had no idea what they were about to witness.

"Your Holiness." Cardinal Benedetto appeared at his elbow, his face pale with barely concealed excitement. "The broadcast systems are ready. Every major network is carrying the address. Estimated global viewership is three billion."

"Three billion," Sixtus repeated. "Half the world, watching."

"More than watched the moon landing. More than any event in human history."

Sixtus smiled. It was not a warm smile.

He had been born Giuseppe Martinelli, sixty-seven years ago, in a small village outside Naples. His mother had dedicated him to the priesthood before he could walk. His father had beaten him until he learned to hide his true nature behind masks of piety and obedience.

He had worn those masks for six decades. Climbing the ranks. Accumulating power. Waiting.

The waiting was almost over.

His phone buzzed — a private line known only to one other person on earth.

"It's time," said Roman Augustus.

"I know."

"Are you prepared?"

Sixtus looked out at the crowd, at the palm branches waving like a forest of worship. "I've been prepared my entire life."

"Then give them what they came for. Give them a god."

The line went dead.

Sixtus adjusted his robes, checked his reflection in the mirror. The face that looked back at him was grandfatherly, benevolent, trustworthy. The perfect mask.

He walked to the balcony.

The roar of the crowd was deafening. They chanted his name, reached toward him with desperate hands, wept with joy at the mere sight of him. For three and a half years, he had given them miracles. Fire from heaven. Healings broadcast on live television. Prophecies that came true within days.

They loved him. They worshipped him.

They were ready.

"My children," he said, his voice carrying across the square through speakers that reached around the world. "Today we celebrate the triumphal entry of our Lord into Jerusalem. Two thousand years ago, the crowds waved palm branches and cried 'Hosanna!' as Jesus rode through the gates."

The crowd cheered.

"But Jesus was rejected. Crucified. His kingdom was not of this world." Sixtus paused, let the silence build. "For two millennia, we have waited for that kingdom to come. We have prayed, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' And our prayers have been answered."

The crowd stirred, uncertain.

"Three years ago, a man arose who brought peace where there was war, prosperity where there was poverty, unity where there was division. He rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. He ended the conflicts that have plagued humanity for generations. He has done what no one else in history has accomplished — he has made the world one."

Sixtus raised his hands, and the crowd fell utterly silent.

"My children, I have seen visions. I have heard the voice of the Almighty. And I have been commanded to reveal to you a truth that has been hidden since the foundation of the world."

Three billion people held their breath.

"Roman Augustus is not merely a man. He is the fulfillment of prophecy. He is the one we have been waiting for. He is..." Sixtus let the moment stretch to breaking. "He is God made flesh. The true Messiah. The Lord of Lords and King of Kings."

For a heartbeat, nothing.

Then the crowd erupted.

Not in protest. Not in horror. In *worship*.

They fell to their knees by the thousands, by the hundreds of thousands, weeping and crying out praises to Roman Augustus. The palm branches waved with renewed frenzy. The hosannas rose toward heaven like incense.

Sixtus watched it happen and felt something stir in his chest — not joy, exactly, but satisfaction. The deep, cold satisfaction of a plan finally coming to fruition.

They'll believe anything, he thought. *Show them enough miracles, and they'll worship a snake if you tell them to.*

His phone buzzed again. A text from Roman: "Well done, my prophet. Now bring them to Jerusalem. It's time they meet their god in person."

Sixtus smiled his grandfather's smile and raised his hands for silence.

"In a few days," he announced, "on the holy day of Passover, Roman Augustus will enter the Temple in Jerusalem to receive the worship of all nations. Every knee shall bow. Every tongue confess. The new age begins now."

The crowd roared its approval.

Somewhere in that crowd, Sixtus knew, there were people who weren't kneeling. People who saw through the masks. People who would resist.

They wouldn't matter. Not anymore. Not after what was coming.

The harvest had begun.

* * *

CHAPTER 15

The Abomination

ROMAN

Jerusalem, Israel

Passover, Spring 2034

* * *

The Temple gleamed before him, white and gold, waiting.

Roman Augustus stood at the entrance to the outer court, flanked by his security detail and a retinue of priests who had been... persuaded to cooperate. Behind him, a crowd of dignitaries and true believers pressed forward, eager to witness history.

Inside him, something ancient stirred with anticipation.

Finally, it whispered. *After all these millennia. Finally.*

He had been patient. So patient. Since the Garden, since the Fall, since the moment he had first tasted the sweetness of human rebellion against the Almighty. Empires had risen and crumbled. Religions had flourished and faded. Billions of souls had lived and died, most of them sliding into his grasp like ripe fruit.

But this — this was different. This was the culmination. The desecration that would prove, once and for all, that the so-called "Holy One of Israel" was powerless to stop him.

Roman smiled his public smile and began walking toward the Temple.

The crowds parted before him like the Red Sea before Moses — an irony that amused him greatly. They fell to their knees as he passed, reaching out to touch the hem of his garment. Some wept. Some screamed in ecstasy. Some simply stared, slack-jawed, at the face of their new god.

Sheep, he thought. Bleating, terrified sheep. So desperate for a shepherd that they'll follow a wolf right into the slaughter.

The outer court. The inner court. The Holy Place.

With each step, he felt the resistance building — that ancient barrier, that sacred boundary established millennia ago to keep unholy things out of holy spaces. It pushed against him like a physical force, like walking into a gale-force wind.

He pushed back.

The priests accompanying him began to falter. Some fell to their knees, gasping for breath. Others turned and fled, their robes streaming behind them.

Only Apollyon remained at his side, moving through the sacred space like a shadow given form.

"They feel it," Apollyon murmured. "The presence. They're not strong enough to endure it."

"They're not meant to be."

Roman reached the veil — the massive curtain separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. In the days of the first Temple, only the High Priest could pass beyond this point, and only once a year, on Yom Kippur.

But there was no High Priest here to stop him. Only terrified acolytes and the weight of tradition.

He grasped the veil and tore it aside.

The Holy of Holies spread before him — an empty room, cubic in shape, designed to house the presence of the Almighty. The Ark of the Covenant had been lost for millennia, but the space remained sacred. Set apart. Waiting.

Roman stepped inside.

For a moment — just a moment — something pushed back. A light. A warmth. A voice without words.

He laughed.

"This place is mine now," he said aloud. "This world is mine. These people are mine. And there is nothing You can do to stop me."

The light flickered. Faded.

Abandoned, he thought with savage satisfaction. *He's abandoned them again. Just like He always does. Just like He did to His own Son.*

Roman turned to face the entrance, where Apollyon waited with the television cameras and the huddled priests and the watching world.

"Bring the statue," he commanded.

They carried it in on a golden platform — a perfect likeness of Roman Augustus, twelve feet tall, carved from white marble and overlaid with precious metals. The eyes were rubies. The crown was set with diamonds.

They placed it in the center of the Holy of Holies, where the Ark had once rested.

Roman stood beside his own image and faced the cameras.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life," he said, his voice broadcast to every screen on earth. "No one comes to peace except through me. From this day forward, there is no god but Roman Augustus. All who worship me will have eternal prosperity. All who refuse..." He smiled, and it was not a human smile. "All who refuse will learn the cost of defiance."

He raised his hand.

Fire fell from heaven — not onto the obelisk this time, but onto the altar of sacrifice outside the Temple. The flames consumed the morning offering in an instant, replacing the smoke of roasted lamb with something darker. Something that smelled of sulfur and burning flesh.

"Let it be known," Roman declared, "that the old covenant is ended. The new covenant begins. And I am its god."

Across the world, people fell to their knees.

In the Temple, in the place where God's glory had once dwelt, an abomination stood in triumph.

And somewhere, in a dimension beyond human perception, angels recoiled.

* * *

CHAPTER 16

The Scattering

RABBI ELEAZAR

Jerusalem, Israel

Passover, Spring 2034

* * *

They beat him until he couldn't stand.

Eleazar ben David had tried to stop them. When Roman Augustus entered the outer court, he had stepped forward, his High Priest's garments flowing, his voice raised in protest.

"This is the house of the Eternal! You cannot—"

The security forces moved so fast he barely saw them. One moment he was standing, the next he was on the ground, tasting blood and marble dust.

They kicked him while he lay there — ribs cracking, vision blurring, the sacred breastplate torn from his chest. He heard screaming, realized it was his own voice, and then stopped because screaming took energy he didn't have.

"Leave him," someone said. Roman Augustus himself, walking past without even glancing down. "He's not worth killing. Let him watch."

So Eleazar watched.

From the ground, through swelling eyes, he watched the man he had welcomed into Jerusalem walk into the Holy Place. He watched the veil torn aside. He watched the statue carried into the Holy of Holies.

He watched the abomination that causes desolation take its place where God's glory was supposed to dwell.

This is my fault, he thought. I built this Temple. I dedicated it. I opened the door.

The crowd that had gathered for Passover was in chaos. Some were prostrating themselves, worshipping the statue, crying out praises to Roman Augustus. Others were fleeing, pushing through the gates, trampling each other in their desperation to escape.

A few — a precious few — were standing still, their faces white with horror, their lips moving in silent prayer.

Eleazar tried to rise. Failed. Tried again.

A hand gripped his arm, hauling him upward.

"Can you walk?"

He blinked, focused. A young man — one of his students, he realized. Daniel, the one who had always asked too many questions about the prophecies of Daniel and the visions of Zechariah.

"Can you walk, Rabbi? We have to go. Now."

"The Temple—"

"Is gone. Defiled. There's nothing we can do here except die."

Daniel half-carried him through the chaos, away from the Temple, through streets that were quickly filling with violence. Roman's security forces were everywhere, dragging away anyone who refused to kneel. Gunshots echoed off ancient stone.

They made it to a side street, then an alley, then a cellar that Eleazar hadn't known existed.

A dozen people huddled in the darkness — priests, worshippers, ordinary Jews who had come to Jerusalem for Passover and found themselves witnesses to apocalypse.

"What do we do?" someone whispered.

Eleazar sat against the cold stone wall, his broken ribs screaming with every breath. His grandfather's words came back to him, but they brought no comfort now.

The Temple will come when HaShem wills it.

The Temple had come. And now it was defiled, desecrated, possessed by something that wore a human face but was not human.

"Rabbi?" Daniel knelt beside him. "What do we do?"

Eleazar closed his eyes.

What did they do? What *could* they do? Everything he had believed, everything he had worked for his entire life, had just been revealed as a trap. He had built a shrine for the devil and called it holy.

"Rabbi, please. People are looking to you."

He opened his eyes. The faces in the darkness were terrified, lost, desperate for someone to tell them this wasn't the end.

But it was the end. Or the beginning of the end.

"We flee," he said, his voice a ragged whisper. "The prophets speak of a place in the wilderness. Petra, perhaps. The rock city. We go there. We hide. We wait."

"Wait for what?"

Eleazar thought of all the prophecies he had studied, all the verses he had memorized, all the interpretations he had rejected because they didn't align with what he wanted to believe.

"For the true Messiah," he said. "The one I refused to see. The one my fathers rejected. Yeshua."

The word hung in the air like a confession. Like a prayer.

"You believe in Jesus?" someone asked, incredulous.

"I believe..." Eleazar paused, gathered his broken thoughts. "I believe I've been blind. I believe I helped build a throne for the Antichrist because I wanted my Temple more than I wanted the truth. I believe that if there is any hope left, it lies with the one my people crucified two thousand years ago."

Silence.

"Then we follow you," Daniel said quietly. "To Petra. To the wilderness. To wherever this road leads."

They left that night, slipping through the chaos of a city under siege. Eleazar walked on broken ribs and shattered faith, supported by strangers who had become refugees, led by a hope he had spent his whole life denying.

Behind them, the Temple glowed with unholy light.

Before them, the wilderness waited.

And somewhere above, hidden beyond the veil of sky and stars, the Messiah they had rejected was preparing to return.

* * *

CHAPTER 17

The Assassination

DAVID

Jerusalem, Israel

Good Friday, Spring 2034

* * *

David watched Roman Augustus die.

The day after the Temple desecration, the world had been transformed. Mandatory worship services were being organized in every major city. Those who refused to kneel before Roman's image were being arrested, imprisoned, executed. The news was an endless parade of prostration and praise.

And then, in the middle of a triumphant address outside the Temple, a single gunshot rang out.

David was standing in the VIP area, close enough to see it happen. One moment Roman was speaking, his arms raised in benediction. The next, his head snapped back, blood spraying in a crimson arc, and he crumpled to the ground.

Screaming. Chaos. Security forces swarming the stage.

David stood frozen, unable to process what he was seeing. Roman Augustus — the most powerful man on earth, the self-proclaimed god of the new age — lying in a spreading pool of blood, his eyes open and empty, a hole in his forehead where the bullet had entered.

Dead, David thought. He's actually dead.

Hope surged through him — wild, desperate hope. Maybe it was over. Maybe whoever had pulled that trigger had ended the nightmare before it truly began. Maybe—

Apollyon's voice cut through the chaos, calm and cold.

"Do not touch him. Do not move him. Leave him where he lies."

The security forces froze.

Apollyon walked to the body, knelt beside it, and looked directly at David. Those light-absorbing eyes held something that might have been amusement.

"Faith is tested in fire, Mr. Hartley. You're about to see a fire that will test the faith of the entire world."

He stood, turned to the cameras that were still broadcasting, and spoke.

"People of Earth, do not despair. What you have witnessed is not the end. It is the beginning. In two days, your god will rise again. As the Nazarene claimed to do and failed, Roman Augustus will do in truth. Watch. Wait. Believe."

The broadcast cut to static.

David stumbled away from the scene, his mind reeling. The assassination. Apollyon's words. The comparison to Jesus. The promise of resurrection.

This is insane. This is completely insane.

He found a quiet corner in the security compound and pulled out his phone to make notes — anything to process what he had just seen.

His hands were shaking too badly to type.

Roman is dead. Shot through the head. But Apollyon says he'll rise in two days. Like Jesus. They're mimicking the Christian story. They're creating a counterfeit resurrection.

But that's impossible. Dead is dead. You can't fake a headshot on live television. The whole world saw him die.

Unless...

The thought that followed was too terrible to complete.

Unless what Apollyon said was true. Unless there are powers at work here that go beyond politics and conspiracy. Unless Roman Augustus really isn't human.

David closed his eyes and tried to remember the prayers his mother had taught him as a child. Anglican prayers, formal and distant, addressed to a God he'd never really believed in.

He believed now.

Whatever Roman Augustus was — whatever force animated him, whatever darkness had looked out through those winter-iron eyes

— it was real. It was ancient. And it was evil in a way David had never imagined evil could be.

"God help us," he whispered.

It was the first genuine prayer he had spoken in his adult life.

He had a feeling it wouldn't be the last.

* * *

CHAPTER 18

The Resurrection

DAVID

Jerusalem, Israel

Easter Sunday, Spring 2034

* * *

Two days later, Roman Augustus opened his eyes.

David was there — compelled to attend by Apollyon's personal invitation, which was not really an invitation at all. He stood in the great hall of the European compound in Jerusalem, surrounded by dignitaries and true believers and cameras broadcasting to every corner of the globe.

The body had been lying in state on a golden bier, surrounded by flowers and candles and the constant murmur of worshippers who filed past day and night. The wound in his forehead was clearly visible — a ragged hole, crusted with dried blood, undeniably fatal.

No one had touched the body. No medical intervention. No makeup to hide the damage. The world had watched Roman Augustus lie dead for forty hours.

And now Apollyon stood beside the bier, his pale face lit with something that looked disturbingly like religious ecstasy.

"The hour has come," he announced. "Witness the power of your god."

He placed his hand on Roman's chest.

For a moment, nothing.

Then the body convulsed.

Roman's back arched. His mouth opened in a silent scream. His hands clawed at the air, grasping for something unseen.

And the wound began to close.

David watched in horror as the hole in Roman's forehead knit itself together — flesh regenerating, bone reforming, skin smoothing over until only a faint scar remained. The color returned to his face. His chest began to rise and fall.

His eyes opened.

They were different now. David could see it even from across the room. Whatever had looked out through those eyes before had been cold and calculating. What looked out now was something else entirely.

Something that had been to the abyss and returned.

Something that was no longer pretending to be human.

Roman sat up slowly, surveying the room with those terrible new eyes. When he spoke, his voice resonated with harmonics that

hadn't been there before — as if multiple voices were speaking in unison.

"I was dead," he said. "And behold, I am alive forevermore."

The room erupted.

People fell to their knees, wailing, worshipping, crying out praises. The cameras captured every angle, broadcasting the miracle to billions. Apollyon smiled his too-wide smile and led the assembled dignitaries in chanting Roman's name.

David couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Couldn't do anything but stare at the thing that had risen from the dead and try not to scream.

This is real. This is actually real. He died and came back. Which means everything — the prophecies, the Bible, the beast, the false prophet — it's all real.

And I've been working for the Antichrist.

His stomach heaved. He clapped a hand over his mouth and stumbled toward the exit, pushing past worshippers, desperate to get out before he lost control entirely.

He made it to an alley behind the compound before he vomited.

Everything came up — his breakfast, his coffee, his illusions about the nature of reality. He braced himself against the ancient stone wall and retched until there was nothing left, until he was empty and shaking and weeping like a child.

"God," he gasped between heaves. "Oh God. Oh Jesus. What do I do? What do I do?"

No answer came. Just the distant sound of celebration from within the compound, and the closer sound of his own ragged breathing.

He couldn't go back. Couldn't walk into that room and kneel before that thing, couldn't pretend to be a loyal servant when everything in him was screaming to run.

But he couldn't run either. Not yet. He knew too much about the inner workings of Roman's empire. If he fled now, they would hunt him down within hours.

I have to stay, he realized. I have to pretend. At least long enough to figure out how to get away — and who to warn.

He thought of his encrypted journal. All those notes, all those observations, all that evidence of what was really happening behind the scenes.

Someone needs to know. Someone needs to see this from the inside.

He wiped his mouth, straightened his suit, and forced his face into a mask of composed loyalty.

Then David Hartley walked back into the hall and stood before the beast, while inside him a small flame of resistance began to burn.

* * *

CHAPTER 19

The Counterfeit Resurrection

ROMAN AUGUSTUS

Jerusalem, Outside the Temple

GOOD FRIDAY, Spring 2034

* * *

Roman never saw it coming.

One moment he stood before the Temple, arms raised in triumph, proclaiming his divinity to the world. The next — a crack of thunder, a flash of white, and then nothing.

No pain. No time to react. The bullet entered his forehead and ended Marcus Romano before his body hit the ground.

In that final instant — a fraction of a second that seemed to stretch into eternity — he felt the cold. A cold deeper than death, deeper than the grave, a cold that reached into his very soul and pulled.

At approximately 3:00 in the afternoon — the same hour, almost two thousand years earlier, that another man had died on a hill outside these same city walls — Roman Augustus breathed his last.

* * *

POPE SIXTUS VI

Jerusalem

GOOD FRIDAY, Spring, 2034

* * *

The False Prophet watched it happen on the screen in his chambers.

Pope Sixtus VI — the second beast of Revelation though he didn't think of himself in those terms — stared in horror as Roman crumpled to the ground, blood pooling beneath his shattered skull. The cameras kept rolling. The whole world was watching.

Then Apollyon's voice cut through the chaos: "Do not touch him. Do not move him. Leave him where he lies."

Sixtus felt terror grip his heart. Not grief — he had never loved Roman. But fear. Raw, primal fear. The man who had promised him power beyond imagination was dead. The man who had been possessed by... by something that Sixtus still couldn't fully comprehend, even after everything he had witnessed.

What now? he thought. What happens to your plan? What happens to ME?

He watched as Apollyon addressed the cameras, promising resurrection in two days. Promising that Roman would rise again.

Impossible. That's impossible. Dead is dead.

But even as the thought formed, Sixtus knew better. He had seen too much. He had learned that the impossible was merely the unexplored.

He fell to his knees and began to pray — not to God, not anymore.
To the darkness that had given him everything.

Let it be true. Let him rise. Because if he doesn't, I am finished.

* * *

THE WORLD WATCHES

The Saturday between Good Friday & Easter, Spring, 2034

* * *

All day Saturday, the world held its breath.

Every screen on earth showed the same footage: Roman Augustus, lying in state on a golden bier in the great hall of the European compound, surrounded by flowers and candles. The wound in his forehead was clearly visible — ragged, fatal, undeniable. Worshippers filed past day and night, weeping, praying to their fallen god.

The beast was dead.

World leaders began jockeying for position. Generals made contingency plans. In the underground churches, believers dared to hope that perhaps — perhaps — God had delivered them from their persecutor.

But a few of them remembered the prophecy: "And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast."

They did not celebrate. They watched. And they prayed.

* * *

THE RESURRECTION

Jerusalem

Easter Sunday, Spring, 2034 — Before Dawn

* * *

In the darkness before dawn, Roman Augustus opened his eyes.

Not slowly, not groggily, like someone waking from sleep. All at once — one moment dead, the next aware. Aware of the cold bier beneath him. Aware of the flowers and candles. Aware of the guards standing watch, their backs turned, not yet knowing that death had just been conquered behind them.

The wound in his forehead remained — ragged, undeniable, exactly as the world had seen it for forty hours.

Roman drew a breath that filled lungs which had been still for forty hours.

And he smiled.

The man named Marcus Romano — the empty vessel who had invited darkness into his soul twelve years ago — was now completely conquered. Death had shattered his last resistance, leaving him utterly subjugated to the demon. The dragon. Satan himself, fully in control of human flesh — and of the man who still lived within it, powerless to resist.

“Now,” he said, and his voice carried harmonics that hurt to hear. “Now we truly begin.”

He lay still for a moment, savoring the sensation of existence. Then he heard footsteps approaching — Apollyon, coming to check on him.

“You’re awake.” Apollyon’s voice held no surprise. “Good. The cameras will be rolling in three hours. We have a resurrection to stage.”

Roman looked at Apollyon — this pale creature who had served him so faithfully, who had no idea what truly stood before him now. “Yes,” he said. “Let them see their god rise. Let them worship what they cannot comprehend.”

He lay back down on the bier and closed his eyes, waiting for the cameras to roll, waiting for the wound to close before the watching world — the final, undeniable proof that death itself had been conquered.

* * *

WORLDWIDE BROADCAST

Easter Sunday Morning, Spring, 2034

* * *

The world watched in stunned disbelief.

Friday afternoon to Sunday morning — the same span of time, the same pattern, that another death and resurrection had once followed — and Roman Augustus rose from the bier where his corpse had lain. Not through some trick of medicine or technology. He simply opened his eyes, sat up, and smiled at the cameras that were broadcasting to every corner of the globe.

Apollyon stood beside him, pale face lit with something that looked disturbingly like religious ecstasy. He turned to face the cameras and spread his arms wide. "The hour has come," he announced to the watching world. "Witness the power of your god."

"Citizens of the World Unity Government," Roman said, standing on the steps of his Jerusalem headquarters, the morning sun behind him like a halo. "You have witnessed something unprecedented. You have seen death — and you have seen me CONQUER it."

Billions of people stared at their screens, unable to process what they were seeing.

"For two thousand years, the Christians have celebrated a resurrection that happened with no witnesses, in a sealed tomb, seen only by a handful of followers. Their 'risen Christ' appeared to a few hundred people at most before vanishing into the sky." Roman spread his arms wide. "But MY resurrection? You ALL witnessed my death. You ALL saw my body lying cold. And now you ALL see me standing here, alive, victorious over the grave itself!"

He stepped forward, and the cameras zoomed in on his face — beautiful, terrible, no longer all human.

"I am not a story from ancient history. I am not a faith that requires belief without evidence. I am HERE. I am NOW. I am PROOF that death can be conquered — and I am the only one who has done it before your very eyes!"

His voice rose to a thundering crescendo:

"I AM YOUR GOD! The only god who has proven his power! The only god who has conquered death where all could see! And from

this day forward, every human on earth will acknowledge this truth — or they will face consequences beyond their imagination!"

In the crowd below, people began to kneel. Not out of faith — out of fear. Out of shock. Out of the desperate human need to make sense of something that defied all sense.

If a man could die and rise again, what COULDN'T he do?

If death itself couldn't stop him, who COULD?

One by one, then in groups, then in waves, people around the world fell to their knees before their screens. Some wept. Some prayed — to Roman, now, not to any other god. Some simply stared in numb acceptance of a new reality.

The beast had received a deadly wound.

And the deadly wound had healed.

And all the world wondered after the beast.

* * *

ROMAN AUGUSTUS

Jerusalem

Later That Day

* * *

"You're... different."

Sixtus stood before his master, trying to hide the trembling in his hands. Roman sat behind his desk as if nothing had happened, as if

he hadn't been dead since Friday afternoon, as if his resurrection hadn't just shattered every understanding of reality the world possessed.

But Sixtus could see the difference. Could feel it. The man he had served for five years — ambitious, ruthless, charismatic — was gone. What sat before him now wore Roman's face, spoke with Roman's voice, but was something else entirely.

"The man you knew is gone," Roman confirmed, as if reading his thoughts. "Not dead — but broken. Conquered. There is nothing left of his will, his resistance, his hope. He exists only as my vessel now — alive, but utterly mine."

"Fully present?" Sixtus's mouth went dry.

"I have worn many vessels over the millennia." Roman's eyes blazed with ancient fire. "Nimrod. Pharaoh. Nebuchadnezzar. Alexander. Caesar. Each served their purpose. Each advanced my plan. But none of them could hold all of me. The human mind is fragile — it breaks under the weight of my full presence."

"And Marcus Romano?"

"Was stronger than most. Empty enough to receive me without shattering. But still human. Still limited." Roman smiled, and the smile was the most terrifying thing Sixtus had ever seen. "Death changed that. When the bullet shattered his skull, his last resistance shattered with it. What rose from that bier is a man completely possessed — body, soul, and spirit. Marcus Romano still lives within this flesh... but he will never speak again, never choose again, never resist again. He is mine forever."

Sixtus understood. The thing that had whispered to Roman, guided Roman, empowered Roman — it was no longer whispering. It was fully, completely in control.

"What would you have me do, my lord?" he whispered.

"Implement the mark," Roman commanded. "Immediately. Within the week, every government office worldwide will be equipped to administer it. Within the month, all commerce will require it. Within the year, everyone who bears my mark will be bound to me forever. And everyone who refuses will be dead."

He rose from his desk and walked to the window, looking out over Jerusalem — the city where another had died and risen, the city where the final battle would eventually be fought.

"There will be resistance," he murmured. "The two witnesses are already prophesying against us. The Jews who refuse to worship my image. The Christians who cling to their dead Messiah. They will fight, and hide, and die by the millions."

"Should we be concerned?"

"No." Roman's voice was absolute. "Let them resist. Let them suffer. Let them die as martyrs to their worthless faith. In the end, it changes nothing. I have three and a half years to consolidate my power before HE comes. Three and a half years to ensure that when the final battle arrives, every weapon on earth will be pointed at the sky, ready to destroy the Christ and His angels."

"Can we win that battle, my lord?"

Roman was silent for a long moment. Then:

"I don't know. But I know this: I would rather drag every soul on earth into the lake of fire than bend my knee to the one who cast me out of heaven. I would rather see creation BURN than acknowledge His sovereignty."

He turned back to Sixtus, and for a moment, the False Prophet saw what was really looking out through Roman's eyes — not a man, not even a demon, but an abyss of hatred so deep and so ancient that it defied comprehension.

"Implement the mark," the beast commanded. "And let the tribulation begin."

* * *

In the weeks that followed, the mark spread across the world like a plague.

Those who accepted it gained access to food, shelter, employment — everything necessary for survival in the new world order. Those who refused were cut off, hunted, killed.

And the beast who had died on a Friday afternoon and risen on a Sunday morning — mocking the Christ whose death and resurrection he had counterfeited — watched it all with satisfaction, knowing that every soul who bore his mark was one more soldier in his war against heaven.

The counterfeit resurrection had served its purpose.

The world worshipped the beast.

And the dragon smiled.

* * *

CHAPTER 20

The Making of a Beast

MARCUS ROMANO

Rome, Italy

2019 — Fifteen Years Before the Tribulation

* * *

The man who would become the Antichrist was born Marcus Antonio Romano, the youngest son of an old Italian banking family with ties to the Vatican that stretched back centuries.

He was brilliant. Everyone who met him said so. Graduated top of his class at Oxford. Doctorate in economics from the London School of Economics. Fluent in seven languages by age twenty-five. A face that belonged on magazine covers and a voice that could charm the gold out of a miser's pocket.

By thirty, he was the youngest member of the European Parliament. By thirty-five, he had brokered trade deals that reshaped the continent's economy. By forty, whispers circulated in the halls of power that Marcus Romano was destined for something greater than any office currently in existence.

But Marcus had a secret.

He was empty.

Behind the charm, behind the brilliance, behind the perfect smile that won elections and seduced diplomats, there was nothing. No conscience. No empathy. No capacity for love or loyalty or any emotion that didn't serve his ambition. Psychologists would have called him a textbook sociopath. His family's priest, who had baptized him as an infant, privately called him something else: a vessel waiting to be filled.

The priest was more right than he knew.

* * *

MARCUS ROMANO

The Vatican, Rome

2022

* * *

It happened in the Vatican Archives.

Marcus had been granted access through family connections — a favor called in, a donation made, the usual currency of influence. He was researching the history of European banking, or so he claimed. In truth, he was looking for something else. Something his grandfather had whispered about on his deathbed, words that had haunted Marcus for years:

"The power behind the throne, Marco. It's real. Our family has served it for generations. When you're ready — truly ready — it will find you."

Marcus had dismissed it as the ramblings of a dying mind. But the words stayed with him. And when he found himself alone in a restricted section of the Archives, surrounded by manuscripts that

predated the printing press, he felt something he had never felt before.

A presence.

Not visible. Not audible. But THERE — ancient and vast and impossibly patient, watching him from somewhere beyond the dusty shelves and crumbling parchment.

"Who's there?" he demanded, his voice echoing in the silence.

No answer. But the presence grew stronger, pressing against his mind like a hand testing a door.

And Marcus — empty, ambitious, soulless Marcus — did something that would change the course of human history.

He opened the door.

"Come in," he whispered. "Whatever you are — come in."

The presence flooded into him like fire, like ice, like nothing he could describe in human language. For one terrible, glorious moment, Marcus Romano ceased to exist — and something ancient looked out through his eyes at a world it had been planning to destroy for six thousand years.

Then the moment passed. Marcus was himself again — or thought he was. But somewhere in the depths of his consciousness, a voice had taken up residence. A voice that would guide him, empower him, and eventually consume him.

The voice of the dragon.

The voice of Satan himself.

* * *

MARCUS ROMANO

Brussels, European Union Headquarters

2025

* * *

The voice taught him things.

Not just information — though there was plenty of that. The voice knew secrets that had been buried for millennia. It knew where the bodies were hidden, literally and figuratively. It knew the weaknesses of every world leader, the hidden vices of every saint, the leverage points that could topple governments.

But more than knowledge, the voice taught Marcus power.

It started small. The ability to sense what people were thinking before they spoke. The capacity to project confidence and charisma that bordered on the supernatural. A talent for being in the right place at the right time, for knowing which investments would succeed and which rivals would fall.

Then it grew larger.

Marcus discovered he could influence people's decisions with a touch. Could plant suggestions in their minds that they believed were their own ideas. Could make them love him or fear him with a glance. The emptiness inside him — the void that had always been there — filled with something dark and intoxicating.

"What are you?" he asked the voice one night, alone in his penthouse overlooking Brussels. "What do you want from me?"

The answer came like thunder in his mind:

"I am the god of this world. The prince of the power of the air. I was cast down, but I will rise again — through you. You will be my instrument, my vessel, my avatar. And together, we will rule everything."

"And if I refuse?"

Laughter — cold, ancient, terrible.

"You invited me in, Marcus. You opened the door. There is no refusing now. There is only forward — to glory beyond your imagination, or destruction beyond your nightmares. The choice is not whether to serve me. The choice is only how willingly."

Marcus should have been terrified. Any sane person would have been.

But sanity had never been Marcus Romano's strong suit. And the power the voice offered — the absolute, unlimited power to reshape the world according to his will — was everything he had ever wanted.

"Then let's move forward," he said. "What do I need to do?"

The voice told him.

* * *

ROMAN AUGUSTUS

Brussels

2028

* * *

The first step was a new name.

"Marcus Romano" was the name of a banker's son, a politician, a man who played by the rules of a system he intended to destroy. The new name had to be something grander. Something that echoed with the glory of empires past and the promise of empire to come.

Roman Augustus.

The voice approved. It had worn many vessels over the millennia, had whispered in the ears of many tyrants. Nimrod. Nebuchadnezzar. Alexander. The original Augustus Caesar. Napoleon. Hitler. Each had served their purpose, each had advanced the ancient plan, and each had ultimately failed.

But this one would be different.

This one would be the last.

"The European nations are fracturing," the voice explained. "Economic crisis. Migration chaos. Loss of identity and purpose. They are desperate for a savior — someone who can restore order, rebuild prosperity, give them meaning again. You will be that savior."

"And the Americans? The British?"

"They must be eliminated. Removed from the board before they can oppose you. When the time is right, you will strike — suddenly, overwhelmingly, devastatingly. Nuclear fire. The death of nations. And from the ashes, you will build a new world order with yourself at its head."

Roman felt a chill at the scale of what was being proposed. Hundreds of millions dead. Entire civilizations erased.

But the chill passed quickly. What were hundreds of millions, compared to absolute power? What was the destruction of nations, compared to ruling those that remained?

"And then?" he asked.

"And then you will do what I have been trying to do since I was cast out of heaven. You will be worshipped. Not as a king, not as an emperor — as a GOD. Every human on earth will bow to you, will receive your mark, will pledge their souls to you. And through you, to ME."

"What about the other one? The God of the Christians and Jews?"

A pause. For the first time, Roman sensed something in the voice that might have been hesitation. Or fear.

"He will send His champions. Two witnesses, to prophesy against you. They will be... troublesome. For a time. But in the end, you will overcome them. And then..."

"And then?"

"And then He Himself will come. The Son. The one they call the Christ. He will descend from heaven with His armies, and there will be a final battle."

"Can we win?"

Another pause. Longer this time.

"We will fight. With every weapon, every soldier, every ounce of power I can give you. We will gather the armies of the world and meet Him at Armageddon. And we will..."

The voice trailed off.

Roman understood. The voice knew how the story ended. It had read the prophecies too — had probably been there when they were written. It knew that Christ would win, that the beast would be defeated, that Satan himself would be bound for a thousand years.

But it didn't care.

Because the voice was insane — driven mad by pride and hatred over six millennia of exile from heaven. It would rather drag all of humanity into the lake of fire than accept defeat. It would rather destroy creation than surrender to its Creator.

And Roman, who had invited this madness into his soul, was now bound to share its fate.

"Then let's begin," he said. "Show me the path to power."

The voice showed him.

And the beast began to rise.

* * *

By 2030, he had consolidated the European Union into the United States of Europe — ten nations surrendering their sovereignty to a

central government with himself as Chancellor — and positioned himself as the only man capable of solving the Middle East crisis, brokering a seven-year peace covenant that gave Israel security guarantees, the Temple Mount, and the right to reinstate animal sacrifices in Jerusalem.

By 2034, he was ready.

The nuclear codes were in place. The loyal generals had been identified. The propaganda machine was primed to blame the coming destruction on "terrorists" and "extremists" and anyone else who opposed the new world order.

* * *

THE HEAVENS

Beyond Time and Space

Spring 2034

* * *

The war in heaven lasted only moments — and an eternity.

For six thousand years, Satan had retained access to the throne room of God. Not as a welcomed guest — those days had ended with his first rebellion, when pride had transformed the anointed cherub into the adversary. But he had been permitted to appear before the Almighty, to accuse the loyal brethren day and night, to point his clawed finger at every human failure and demand justice against the creatures God loved.

He had accused Job. He had accused Joshua the high priest. He had accused every saint who ever stumbled, every believer who ever doubted, every soul who ever fell short of perfection.

"They don't deserve salvation," he had argued, century after century. "Look at them. Weak. Sinful. Faithless. They break Your commandments and mock Your name. Why should the blood of Your Son cover THEM?"

But now the time of accusation was over.

Michael moved first.

The archangel who had contended with Satan over the body of Moses, who had stood as the guardian of Israel for millennia, now led the armies of heaven in one final assault. Behind him came angels beyond counting — warriors of light who had never wavered, never doubted, never turned from their Creator.

Against them stood the dragon and his angels — the third of heaven's host who had followed Lucifer into rebellion at the beginning of all things. For eons they had waited for this moment, believing their master's promises of ultimate victory.

They were wrong.

The battle was fierce but brief. Michael's sword blazed with holy fire as he drove through the fallen ranks. One by one, the rebellious angels fell — not destroyed, but defeated, driven back, cast down. And at the center of the chaos, Satan himself faced Michael in single combat.

"You cannot win," Michael declared. "You have NEVER been able to win. Every scheme, every rebellion, every attempt to

overthrow the Almighty — all failures. And now your time of accusation is FINISHED."

Satan's response was a roar of pure hatred — the sound of pride refusing to accept reality, of evil refusing to acknowledge defeat. He struck at Michael with all his ancient power.

It wasn't enough.

Michael's blade found its mark, and the dragon fell.

Not dead — spirits cannot die. But broken. Defeated. And for the first time since creation, permanently EXPELLED.

The gates of heaven — gates Satan had passed through countless times to stand before God's throne — slammed shut. The sound echoed through every dimension of reality.

And a voice thundered from the throne:

"Now salvation, and strength, and the Kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God, day and night, HAS BEEN CAST DOWN."

In heaven, there was rejoicing.

On earth, there was about to be hell.

* * *

Satan plummeted.

Down through the heavens he fell, his demons tumbling after him like burning stars. Down past galaxies and nebulae, past the

celestial realms he had once ruled as the anointed cherub, past everything he had lost through his pride.

And as he fell, something broke inside him.

Not repentance — he was far beyond that. Not surrender — he would never surrender. What broke was the last restraint on his hatred, the final limit on his malice. For six thousand years, he had divided his attention between heaven and earth, between accusing the saints before God and deceiving them on the ground.

Now heaven was closed to him forever.

Now earth was all he had left.

And his time was SHORT.

He knew the prophecies. He had been there when Daniel received them, when John wrote Revelation, when every warning about the end times was recorded. He knew that Christ would return. He knew that he would be bound for a thousand years. He knew that his ultimate fate was the lake of fire.

But between now and then, he had three and a half years. Forty-two months. One thousand two hundred and sixty days.

And he intended to make them count.

In Brussels, Roman Augustus suddenly staggered.

The voice that had whispered in his mind for fifteen years — guiding, suggesting, empowering — suddenly became a ROAR. A flood. A tsunami of dark power that crashed through every barrier Marcus Romano had ever erected, swept away every remnant of his humanity, and filled him completely.

Before, Satan had been a passenger in Marcus's soul.

Now, Satan was the DRIVER.

Marcus Romano — the empty vessel who had invited darkness in — finally ceased to exist. What remained was something that wore his face, spoke with his voice, and commanded his empire. But it was no longer human in any meaningful sense.

It was the beast.

Fully possessed. Fully empowered. Fully enraged.

And ready to make the world pay for what he had just lost.

* * *

On Passover, 2034, Roman Augustus set up his image in the newly rebuilt temple in Jerusalem — the Abomination of Desolation that Daniel had prophesied 2,500 years before.

On Good Friday, 2034, he was assassinated.

On Easter Sunday, 2034, he was resurrected.

On the day after Easter Sunday, 2034, he pushed the button.

America. Britain. Canada. Australia. New Zealand. Modern descendants of ancient Israel — gone in a single morning.

And several hundred million people died in nuclear fire.

The Great Tribulation had begun.

And the man who had once been Marcus Romano — the empty vessel who had invited darkness into his soul — was now something more and something less than human.

He was the beast.

And his time had come.

* * *

CHAPTER 21

The Counterfeit

MICHAEL EXTON

Rural Nevada, United States

Easter Sunday, Spring 2034

* * *

Michael Exton sat in the small farmhouse that served as headquarters for their underground network — a group of believers who had not been called to the place of safety. The others were in the main room, but Michael had retreated to his small office in the back — a desk, a laptop, and the books he'd managed to bring from California. A small television sat in the corner, and on its screen, the world was worshipping the Antichrist.

Every channel showed the same footage — Roman Augustus sitting up on that golden bier, the wound closing, the crowds falling to their knees. The commentators were calling it the greatest miracle in human history. Churches were already revising their theology to accommodate this new "revelation."

"Greater than Christ," one televangelist gushed. "He has done what Jesus did — risen from the dead! Surely this is God among us!"

Michael muted the television and put his head in his hands.

They can't see it. They can't see the flaw.

He had been teaching about this for over thirty years. He had written a book about it — *When Was Jesus Crucified?* — that had sold a few hundred copies and been ignored by the mainstream church. He had argued with pastors, debated theologians, pleaded with anyone who would listen.

And no one had listened. Because the Friday crucifixion was tradition. It was what everyone believed. It was "Good Friday," — a tradition so deeply embedded that almost no one dared question it.

And now the whole world was paying the price for that false tradition.

He unmuted the television.

The coverage had shifted to a panel of religious experts discussing the "theological implications" of Roman's resurrection.

"This mirrors the Easter story so perfectly," one expert said. "Dead on Friday, risen on Sunday. It's as if Roman Augustus is showing us that he has the same power as Christ. Or, that he IS Jesus Christ!"

"Or greater power," another added. "After all, we have VIDEO of this resurrection. We don't have video of Jesus rising from the tomb."

Michael grabbed a notebook and began writing furiously.

The Counterfeit Exposed, he wrote at the top of the page.

For centuries, Satan has deceived the world about the day of Christ's crucifixion. The "Good Friday" tradition contradicts Jesus's own words, as He clearly stated that the ONLY sign that He would give PROVING that He was the Messiah, was that He would be dead THREE days and THREE nights, NOT two days and two nights (Matthew 12:40)! But if Jesus was crucified on Friday and resurrected on Sunday — then that would mean that He was ONLY dead TWO nights (Friday and Saturday nights) — NOT the three nights that the Scripture demands! And that would mean that we do NOT have a Savior, since that was the ONLY sign that Christ Himself said that would PROVE that He was the true Messiah!

But thankfully, Jesus was NOT crucified on Friday. Otherwise, we would not have a Savior! Instead, He was crucified on THURSDAY, as Luke 24 (verses 1, 13, 20, and 21) plainly points out! Therefore, He was indeed dead three nights — Thursday night, Friday night, and Saturday night. So, we DO have a Savior. Jesus Christ of Nazareth. But Roman was only dead two nights (Friday and Saturday nights). Therefore, Roman is an imposter. A COUNTERFEIT MESSIAH!

Most Christians never noticed. Most pastors never questioned it. The lie became tradition, and tradition became unquestionable truth.

But the lie had a purpose.

Today, Roman Augustus — the Beast, the Antichrist — rose from the dead Sunday morning after being killed on Friday. The whole world is saying Roman died and rose on the same exact days as Jesus did 2,000 years ago. Therefore, they reason, he MUST be Christ. But this is false reasoning, because their premise is wrong. Jesus died on a Thursday and not a Friday. But don't take my

word for it. Look it up for yourself in both Matthew 12:40 and Luke 24:21.

Roman's resurrection is a FAKE. It mimics the false tradition, not the true timeline. Satan created the Friday myth specifically so that when this moment came, the deception would seem to match. And as a result, the whole world would be convinced that Roman was indeed Jesus Christ!

The counterfeit always has a flaw. This is the flaw. And anyone with eyes to see can see it.

Michael paused, his hand aching from writing so fast.

Ellen found him there, her face pale, her eyes red from crying.

"I just found out that everyone at our old church in California is celebrating," she said quietly. "Pastor Wheeler sent out an email saying we should 'remain open to what God is doing in the world.' Over half the congregation thinks Roman Augustus might actually be divine."

"He's not divine. He's demonic."

"I know. But how do we convince them?"

Michael looked at his notebook, at the words he'd been writing for decades that almost no one had believed.

"The timeline," he said. "That's how. Jesus said the ONLY sign proving He was Messiah was three days and three nights in the grave. Roman couldn't match that. He tried — killed on Friday, rose on Sunday — but that's the CHURCH'S timeline, not CHRIST'S timeline."

"Will they listen?"

"Some will. The ones who love truth more than false tradition." He stood, his old joints protesting. "I need to record a video. Post it everywhere I can before they shut us down. People need to see this."

"Michael, if you post something like that, they'll come for us."

"They're going to come for us anyway, Ellen. Everyone who refuses to worship the beast is going to be hunted. We might as well be hunted for telling the truth."

He set up his camera — an old webcam connected to an even older laptop — and sat before it. His face was tired, lined with seventy-five years of living and three and a half years of watching prophecy unfold. But his eyes were clear.

He pressed record.

"My name is Michael Exton. I've been teaching Bible prophecy for over forty years. And I need to tell you something about what you just witnessed — something the media won't tell you, something your pastor probably doesn't know.

"Roman Augustus did not rise from the dead like Jesus Christ. And I can prove it with simple math.

"Jesus said in Matthew 12:40 that the ONLY sign He would give proving He was the Messiah was the sign of Jonah — three days AND three nights in the heart of the earth.

"Roman Augustus was killed on Friday and rose on Sunday. Not three days and three nights. The timeline doesn't match.

"For centuries, Satan has deceived the world into believing Jesus was crucified on Friday. But Friday to Sunday doesn't give you

three days and three nights — it gives you just two days and two nights. But Thursday to Sunday IS three days and three nights.

“Plus, in Luke 24 (verses 1, 13, 20, 21) it is recorded that Jesus was crucified three days before Sunday, once again proving that he was crucified on a Thursday and not on a Friday.

"Why does this matter? Because the Antichrist's 'resurrection' follows the FALSE timeline — the one Satan planted in church tradition. It mimics the lie, not the truth.

"Roman Augustus is not God. He is not the Messiah. He is a counterfeit, and his resurrection proves it — if you have eyes to see.

"The mark of the beast is coming. Do not take it. Do not worship the image. Do not worship Roman. And, do not be deceived by a resurrection that can't even match the sign Jesus gave.

"God bless you. And may God help us all in the days ahead."

He stopped recording.

Ellen was crying softly. "That's going to make a lot of people angry."

"The truth usually does."

He uploaded the video to every platform he could access. YouTube. Facebook. His website. Email lists he'd been building for decades.

Within hours, the video would be removed, flagged as "misinformation." Within days, his accounts would be suspended. Within weeks, men in dark suits would probably come looking for him.

But for now, the truth was out there.

And somewhere in the world, someone with eyes to see would see it.

* * *

CHAPTER 22

The Mark

MARIA

Madrid, Spain

Spring 2034

* * *

The lines stretched around the block.

Maria watched from her apartment window as thousands of people queued outside the government registration center, waiting patiently in the spring heat to receive their marks. Some chatted cheerfully with neighbors. Others scrolled through their phones, bored but compliant. A few children played tag between the stanchions while their parents shuffled forward.

No one looked afraid.

That was the most terrifying part.

The announcement had come three weeks ago — a simultaneous broadcast on every channel, every platform, every screen on earth. Roman Augustus, his resurrection scar gleaming faintly on his forehead, explaining the new system.

"For too long, humanity has been divided by currencies and borders, by wealth and poverty, by the accidents of birth and geography. Today, that ends. The Universal Economic Identity

will ensure that every person on earth has equal access to the global marketplace. No more cash to be stolen. No more cards to be lost. No more inequality."

The UEI was simple — a TATTOO, permanently inked on your right hand or your forehead. Your choice of location. Your choice of design too: either "ROMAN" or "666." Both meant the same thing. Both marked you as a loyal citizen of the new world order. Both identified you forever as a follower of Roman Augustus, as a worshipper of Satan the Devil!

Without it, you couldn't buy or sell. Couldn't work. Couldn't access healthcare or transportation or housing. Couldn't exist in the new world order.

Everyone knew what the mark meant.

That was the part that haunted Maria most. The Two Witnesses had been prophesying in Jerusalem for weeks, warning the world in plain language: *Do not take the mark. Do not worship the beast. Those who do will face the wrath of God.* Their message was broadcast everywhere — impossible to avoid, impossible to ignore.

And then there was the angel.

Maria had seen it with her own eyes, along with everyone else on earth. An angel — an actual angel — flying through the sky, visible to all, crying out with a voice that somehow reached every ear in every nation: *"Anyone who worships the beast and his statue or who accepts his mark on the forehead or on the hand ¹⁰ must drink the wine of God's anger. It has been poured full strength into God's cup of wrath. And they will be tormented with fire and burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. ¹¹ The smoke of their torment will rise forever and ever, and*

they will have no relief day or night, for they have worshiped the beast and his statue and have accepted the mark of his name.”
(Revelation 14:9-11, NLT)

The warning could not have been clearer. The consequences could not have been more terrifying.

And yet the lines kept growing.

"It's just a tattoo," people said, shrugging off the warnings. "Religious fanatics have been predicting the end of the world for centuries."

"Those 'witnesses' in Jerusalem are just performers," others insisted. "Special effects. Holograms. Government propaganda to control the gullible."

"And that 'angel'?" The news anchors laughed. "Mass hysteria. A shared hallucination caused by atmospheric conditions. Scientists have already explained it."

They didn't believe. They had heard the warnings — from the Two Witnesses, from the angel, from believers like Michael Exton who had been shouting the truth for years — and they simply didn't believe, or didn't want to believe.

They were choosing Satan over God. Not in ignorance. Not by accident. Not because they were forced or tricked. They were making a deliberate, willful choice, knowing full well what the mark represented, knowing full well what the consequences would be if the warnings were true.

They just didn't think the warnings were true. And if they did, they didn't care. They cared more about the "world" than God. Much more.

Maria hadn't taken the mark.

She'd quit her job at the refugee aid organization weeks ago, when they announced that all employees would be required to receive the UEI. She'd emptied her bank accounts — the old-fashioned way, with paper currency that still worked for now. She'd stockpiled food and water in her small apartment.

And she'd kept reading.

The Bible she'd downloaded sat open on her laptop, the words of Revelation 13 highlighted in yellow:

"He required everyone—great and small, rich and poor, slave and free—to be tattooed with a certain mark on the right hand or on the forehead. And no one could buy or sell anything without that mark, which was either the name of the beast or the number representing his name." (v. 16-17 TLB; NLT)

Right hand or forehead. The NAME of the beast — ROMAN. The number of his name — 666. Buy or sell. The words were two thousand years old, and they described exactly what was happening outside her window.

Her phone buzzed. A text from her mother in Barcelona:

"Maria, please. Just get the mark. Everyone has it. Your father and I have it. It doesn't hurt and it makes everything so much easier. I'm worried about you, mija. The news says people without marks are being arrested as economic terrorists. Please don't throw your life away for some conspiracy theory."

Maria stared at the message for a long time.

Her mother had taken the mark. Her father had taken the mark. They had heard the angel's warning, they had heard the warning from the Two Witnesses — the same warning everyone on earth had heard — and they had chosen to take it anyway. They had willingly, knowingly allowed "ROMAN" to be tattooed on their right hands — permanently marking themselves as followers of the Antichrist, the False Prophet, Satan himself. They knew exactly what they were doing. They were openly pledging allegiance to the devil, fully aware of the consequences, and they did it anyway.

Maria typed a response: "I love you, Mama. But I can't take it. I'm not throwing my life away. I'm trying to save my soul."

She hit send and immediately regretted it. Her mother would think she'd joined a cult. Her father would call, angry and bewildered. Her sister would send concerned messages about mental health resources.

And then she wept — deep, shuddering sobs for what her parents had done.

A knock at her door made her jump.

She crept to the peephole, heart pounding. Two men in suits stood in the hallway — the kind of men who had been appearing at the doors of mark-refusers all over the city.

"Maria Santos?" one of them called. "We need to speak with you about your registration status."

She backed away from the door, silent.

"Ms. Santos, we know you're in there. Your building has confirmed you haven't left in three days. We're not here to arrest you — we're here to help. The registration deadline is approaching,

and we want to make sure you have access to the resources you need."

Lies. They were always lies now.

Maria grabbed her go-bag — the one she'd packed weeks ago, with cash, food, water, a change of clothes, and a printed copy of the New Testament. She slipped out the back window onto the fire escape, climbed down three floors, and dropped into the alley below.

She didn't look back.

The streets were dangerous for people without marks. Facial recognition cameras tracked everyone, and enforcement officers checked hands and foreheads for the visible tattoo. But Maria had studied the routes — the blind spots, the old neighborhoods where the surveillance was sparse, the underground networks that were forming to help people like her survive.

Michael Exton had seen the crackdown coming. Before the authorities shut down his website and kicked in his door, he'd moved everything that mattered onto an encrypted iPhone and passed it to a network of trusted contacts. The device she carried had been handed to her three weeks ago by a woman she'd never met before and would never see again — a dead drop in a grocery store parking lot, a whispered word, a phone in a paper bag. Apple had refused every government demand for backdoor access. What was on that phone, only the phone knew. And right now, it was telling her there was a safe house in Portugal.

She had a long way to go. And no way to travel except on foot, avoiding cameras, begging food from strangers, sleeping in abandoned buildings.

But she was free.

The rosary was still in her nightstand drawer. She'd left it there deliberately. A final break with the old religion, the counterfeit church, the system that had betrayed her.

She had only one possession from her grandmother now — not the beads, but the faith. The real faith. The one that said some things were worth more than comfort, more than safety, more than life itself.

Maria Santos walked into the gathering darkness, a fugitive in a world that had heard the truth and rejected it. Behind her, the lines at the registration center kept growing — and not just here in Madrid, but in every city on every continent, as countless souls across the earth willingly chose Satan.

* * *

CHAPTER 23

The Faithful Servant

ANNA

Hong Kong

August 2034

* * *

They made her watch.

Anna Chen stood in the front row of the crowd, her children pressed against her legs, as her husband was led onto the platform in Victoria Park. Her hands gripped Mei's and Daniel's shoulders so hard she knew she was hurting them. She couldn't make herself let go.

James looked thin. Months in detention had carved hollows in his cheeks and shadows under his eyes. His prison uniform hung loose on his frame. But his back was straight, and when he saw Anna in the crowd, he smiled.

He smiled.

"Citizens of Hong Kong," the official announced through crackling speakers, "you are gathered to witness the consequences of economic terrorism and religious extremism. James Chen has been

found guilty of operating an unregistered religious organization, refusing lawful registration under the Universal Economic Identity system, and encouraging others to commit the same crimes."

The crowd murmured. Some nodded approvingly. Others looked uncomfortable but said nothing. A few wept silently — members of the house church, Anna knew, who had come to bear witness despite the risk.

"Under the Religious Harmony Act and the Global Economic Security Protocol, the sentence is death."

Daniel whimpered. Mei stood rigid, her eight-year-old face a mask that no child should ever have to wear.

"The condemned will be given one final opportunity to repent. James Chen, do you renounce your illegal religious beliefs? Will you accept the Universal Economic Identity and pledge loyalty to the World Unity Government and its rightful leader, Roman Augustus?"

James was silent for a moment. Then he spoke, his voice carrying across the park with a clarity that seemed almost supernatural.

"I cannot renounce what is true. Jesus Christ is my King, my Master, my Lord — the only true Messiah. Roman Augustus is a counterfeit. He is the Antichrist prophesied in Scripture, and his mark is the mark of damnation. I will not take it. I will not worship him or his statue. And I pray that everyone hearing my voice will have the courage to refuse, even unto death."

The official's face contorted with rage. "You condemn yourself with your own words."

"No. I free myself with them."

They forced him to his knees.

Anna wanted to scream. Wanted to rush the platform, to throw herself between her husband and the executioner, to somehow stop what was about to happen. But she couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Could only stand there, gripping her children, as the man she had loved for fifteen years prepared to die.

James looked at her one last time. His lips moved, forming words she couldn't hear but understood anyway:

I love you. Be strong. I'll see you soon.

The blade fell.

Anna heard herself screaming — a raw, animal sound that tore from her throat without her permission. The children were crying, clutching at her, burying their faces against her body so they wouldn't see.

But Anna saw. She saw everything. She would see it for the rest of her life.

The crowd began to disperse, some quickly, some slowly, all avoiding eye contact with the widow and her orphaned children. The members of the house church melted into the masses, invisible, surviving for another day.

Anna stood rooted to the spot, unable to move, unable to think, unable to do anything but stare at the platform where her husband's body lay.

A hand touched her elbow.

"Mrs. Chen. You need to leave. Now."

She turned. A young man she didn't recognize — but his eyes held the look she had come to know, the look of a believer trying to survive in a world that wanted them dead.

"They'll come for you next," he said quietly. "You and the children. We have a place. It's not much, but it's safe. Will you come?"

Anna looked at Mei and Daniel. Her daughter's face was blank with shock. Her son was still sobbing, his small body shaking against her leg.

What choice did she have?

"Yes," she whispered.

They left Victoria Park as the cleanup crews arrived to wash the blood from the platform. They walked through streets that had once been home and were now enemy territory. They descended into the underground — literally, into tunnels beneath the city that had once been used for smuggling and were now used for survival.

The safe house was a basement room with concrete walls and a single bare bulb. A dozen people huddled there, all of them marked by the same hunted look.

Anna sat in the corner with her children and tried to pray. The words wouldn't come. All she could see was James's smile, James's lips forming "I love you," James's blood spreading across the wooden platform.

"Mama?" Mei's voice was very small. "Will we see Papa again?"

Anna pulled her daughter close, breathing in the scent of her hair, feeling the fragile bones beneath her skin.

"Yes, baby."

"When will we see him again?"

"Someday soon. When Jesus comes back, we'll all be together again."

"Promise?"

Anna thought of the prophecies James had taught her. The return of Christ. The resurrection of the dead. The new heaven and new earth where there would be no more death, no more crying, no more pain.

"I promise," she said. "Papa promised too. And Papa never broke his promises."

Mei nodded slowly, solemnly, and closed her eyes.

Daniel was already asleep, exhausted by grief and terror. Anna held them both tightly.

Be strong, James had said. I'll see you soon.

She didn't feel strong. She felt shattered, hollowed out, held together by nothing but the need to protect her children.

But somewhere deep inside, beneath the grief and the fear, a small flame still burned. The same flame that had sustained James through months of imprisonment. The same flame that had given him the courage to speak truth with a blade at his throat.

Faith.

Anna Chen closed her eyes and began to pray — not the words she had learned in church, but the raw, wordless cry of a broken heart reaching toward the only hope that remained.

Heavenly Father, I don't understand. I don't know why this happened. I don't know how I'm going to survive. But I trust You. Help me trust You. Help me be strong for my children. Help me believe that this isn't the end.

Help me believe that James is right — that we'll see him soon.

Amen.

Outside, the city of Hong Kong hummed with commerce and surveillance and the steady march of the new world order.

In the basement, a widow and her children slept, waiting for a dawn that might never come — or might come sooner than anyone expected.

* * *

PART THREE: THE HORSEMEN

CHAPTER 24

The White Horse

MARIA

Somewhere in Southern France

September 2034

* * *

The abandoned farmhouse smelled of dust and decay, but it had walls and a roof, and that was more than Maria had found most nights.

She had been traveling for months now — on foot through the Pyrenees, hitching rides with sympathetic farmers who didn't ask questions, sleeping in barns and forests and once, memorably, in a drainage culvert during a thunderstorm. Portugal was still weeks away, maybe more. Without the mark, she couldn't buy food or fuel or passage. She survived on the kindness of strangers and the occasional produce from orchards and gardens.

Tonight, for the first time in weeks, she had privacy and light — a single candle she'd found in the farmhouse kitchen, its flame casting wavering shadows on the stone walls. She pulled out her worn copy of the New Testament, its pages soft from handling, and tried to decide what to read.

She had been working through Revelation again, trying to understand what was coming. The four horsemen. The seals. The trumpets. The bowls of wrath. It was terrifying, but it was also strangely comforting — proof that God knew the end from the beginning, that none of this was outside His control.

But tonight, something drew her back to the beginning. To the foundation.

She turned to Exodus 20. The Ten Commandments.

She had memorized them as a child, reciting them for her catechism class, earning a gold star from Sister Marguerite. But she realized now that she had never actually READ them. Not carefully. Not word by word.

"I am the Eternal your God... You shall have no other gods before me."

First commandment. Roman Augustus had violated that one comprehensively.

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image..."

Second commandment. The statue in the Temple. The images of Roman being erected in every city.

"You shall not take the name of the Eternal your God in vain..."

Third commandment.

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Eternal your God..." ¹¹ For in six days the Eternal made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested

the seventh day. Therefore, the Eternal blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it."

Maria stopped.

The seventh day.

She counted on her fingers, the way she had as a child learning the days of the week. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday.

Sunday was the first day. Saturday was the seventh.

The seventh day is the sabbath.

But the Church had always worshipped on Sunday. Every mass she had ever attended, every holy day of obligation, every Easter sunrise service — all on Sunday. The priests called it "the Lord's Day."

She read the commandment again, looking for an exception, a clarification, something that would explain what she had been taught.

There was nothing. Just the plain words: *"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Eternal your God..."*

Maria sat back, her mind racing.

She kept reading, counting the commandments on her fingers the way Sister Marguerite had taught her decades ago.

One. No other gods.

Two. No images or idols.

She stopped again.

⁴ *"You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵ you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.* This was the second commandment. Right there. Plain as day.

But that wasn't how she had learned them.

Maria closed her eyes and recited the catechism version she had memorized as a girl: "I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have strange gods before me. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. Remember thou keep holy the Sabbath day..."

In the Catholic version, "no carved images" wasn't the second commandment. It wasn't a commandment at all. The Church had deleted it entirely in their teaching.

And the tenth commandment — about coveting — had been SPLIT into two separate commandments. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife" became the ninth. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods" became the tenth.

They had removed the 2nd commandment against idols and split the 10th commandment into two commandments (the 9th & the 10th) in order to keep the count at ten.

Maria thought of every Catholic church she had ever entered. The statues of Mary in flowing robes. The crucifixes with Jesus forever dying. The images of saints with halos and clasped hands. The faithful kneeling before these images, lighting candles, praying to plaster and paint.

“You shall not bow down to them nor serve them.”

They had REMOVED that commandment. Erased it from their catechism. And then filled their churches with the very idols God had forbidden.

No wonder they had to delete it. How could you teach "no carved images" while surrounded by statues?

She pulled out the small notebook where she had been recording her discoveries — the things she'd learned that contradicted everything the Catholic Church had taught her. The Friday crucifixion lie. The rosary as a chain to false religion. The Pope as the False Prophet.

Now this.

She thought about Michael Exton's videos, the ones she'd downloaded before they disappeared. He had mentioned the Sabbath briefly, in passing, as part of a larger point about Rome's authority. What had he said?

She dug through her bag and found the USB drive with his materials. The farmhouse had no electricity, but she had a small solar charger she'd traded for weeks ago. Her phone had just enough battery to play the file.

Michael's weathered face appeared on the small screen, speaking from his study in San Lorenzo:

"...and this is the key to understanding how deep the deception goes. Daniel 7:25 tells us that the Antichrist system would 'think to change times and laws.' Not just break God's laws — CHANGE them. Make people think the law says something different than what it actually says.

"The Sabbath is the clearest example. The fourth commandment is explicit — the SEVENTH day is the Sabbath. That's Saturday. It's never been anything else. But the Roman church changed it to Sunday, the first day of the week, and most of the Christian world followed along without ever questioning it.

"They didn't even hide what they did. Cardinal Gibbons wrote openly that the change of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday was proof of the Catholic Church's authority. His argument was: 'We changed God's law, and you Protestants followed us. That proves we have power over Scripture itself.'

"Think about what that means. They didn't claim they FOUND something in the Bible that authorized Sunday worship. They ADMITTED the Bible says Saturday and they changed it anyway. By their own confession, they placed their false tradition above the Word of God.

"And this connects to everything else we've been discussing. The same system that changed the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday also changed the crucifixion from Thursday to Friday. The same pattern — moving God's appointed times to fit Rome's agenda.

"Daniel said the beast would 'change times and laws.' The Sabbath is BOTH. It's a law — the fourth commandment. And it's a time — God's appointed day of rest. Rome changed it. And in doing so, they set the stage for everything we're seeing now..."

The video continued, but Maria paused it.

She sat in the candlelight, tears streaming down her face.

Everything. They had changed EVERYTHING.

Not just the day of crucifixion. Not just the prayers and the saints and the rosary. The very commandments of God — altered, twisted, replaced with faulty human tradition.

She thought of all those Sunday masses. All those priests intoning the liturgy. All those faithful Catholics — her parents, her grandmother, generations of her family — worshipping on the wrong day because Rome had decided it had the authority to overrule God.

"By their fruits you shall know them," Jesus had said.

And the fruit of the Roman church was... this. Centuries of deception, culminating in a False Prophet who called fire from heaven and pointed the world toward the Antichrist.

Maria opened her notebook and wrote:

September 2034. Tonight I read the Ten Commandments — the REAL ones, from Exodus 20. What I found has shattered everything I thought I knew.

1. The 4th commandment says the 7th day — Saturday — is the Sabbath. The Catholic Church changed it to Sunday and ADMITTED they did it to prove their authority over Scripture.

2. The 2nd commandment says NO CARVED IMAGES. No idols. Don't bow down to them. But in the Catholic catechism, this commandment DOESN'T EXIST. They removed it completely and split the 10th commandment (about coveting) into two commandments to keep the count at ten.

They removed the commandment against idols so they could fill their churches with statues. Then they told us to pray to those statues. And we did. I did. For my whole life.

Daniel 7:25 says the beast would "think to change times and laws." They changed TIMES — the crucifixion day from Thursday to Friday, the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. They changed LAWS — literally rewrote the Ten Commandments, removing what they didn't like and splitting what was left to cover their tracks.

This isn't interpretation. This isn't conspiracy theory. Anyone can compare Exodus 20 to a Catholic catechism and see it with their own eyes.

The whole system is rotten. Not just the Pope — the whole thing. Centuries of lies built on lies. "Come out of her, my people!" I'm trying, Heavenly Father. I'm trying.

She closed the notebook and sat in silence.

Outside, the night was quiet. Somewhere in the distance, an owl called. The candle flame danced in a draft from the broken window.

Maria thought about the four horsemen of Revelation. The first horse was white — a conqueror with a bow, going forth to conquer. Many admitted this represented false religion, false Christianity, false peace. A counterfeit Christ riding a white horse, mimicking the true Christ who would return on a white horse at the end.

The white horse had been riding for a long time. Centuries. Changing the Sabbath. Changing the crucifixion day. Removing the commandment against idols. Filling churches with statues and calling it worship. Building a false church that looked like Christianity but served a different master.

And now it had reached its destination. The False Prophet on his throne in Rome. The Antichrist ruling from Jerusalem. The mark being tattooed into the hands and foreheads of billions.

The white horse had conquered.

But not everyone.

Maria blew out the candle and lay down on the dusty floor, using her bag as a pillow. Tomorrow she would walk again — toward Portugal, toward the safe house, toward whatever remained of God's faithful people.

But tonight, despite everything, she felt something she hadn't felt in months.

Peace.

Not because the world was safe. It wasn't. Not because she understood everything. She didn't. But because she was finally seeing clearly. The lies were falling away, one by one, revealing the truth that had always been there underneath.

The truth that Satan had worked so hard to bury.

The truth that Rome had tried to change.

The truth that would outlast every empire, every pope, every antichrist.

"Heaven and earth will pass away," Jesus had said, *"but My words will not pass away."*

Maria fell asleep with those words echoing in her mind, and for the first time in a long time, she didn't dream of fire and blood.

She dreamed of rest.

* * *

CHAPTER 25

The False Prophet

SIXTUS VI

Vatican City

October 2034

* * *

The reports arrived every morning at seven, delivered by Cardinal Benedetto on a silver tray with his espresso.

Giuseppe Martinelli — Pope Sixtus VI to the faithful, though he had long ago stopped thinking of himself by any name at all — read them with the same detached interest a farmer might read livestock inventories.

Europe: 94% compliance. Holdouts concentrated in rural Poland and southern Italy.

South America: 87% compliance. Resistance strongest in rural areas and among evangelical communities.

Asia: 91% compliance. China reporting full integration of UEI with existing social credit systems.

Africa: 78% compliance. Infrastructure challenges in sub-Saharan regions.

Global total: 89% of adult population now marked and integrated.

Eighty-nine percent. Billions of souls bearing the mark of his master in their flesh. And the number climbed every day as the holdouts were identified and eliminated.

Sixtus sipped his espresso and allowed himself a moment of satisfaction.

Sixty-seven years. That's how long he had waited for this.

He had known what he was since childhood — known it the way some children know they are artists or athletes or destined for greatness. The priests who taught him saw piety and devotion. His mother saw a future saint. Even the masters at the seminary saw nothing but a brilliant young man with a gift for theology and an instinct for politics.

None of them saw the emptiness inside. The cold, calculating void where faith was supposed to live.

He had learned early to mimic belief. To say the words, perform the rituals, wear the masks that the faithful expected. It was remarkably easy. People wanted so desperately to believe that their leaders were holy that they would ignore any evidence to the contrary.

By thirty, he was a bishop. By forty-five, a cardinal. By sixty-two, he sat in the Chair of Peter itself, the supreme leader of over a billion Catholics worldwide.

And through it all, he had served only one master.

Not the crucified Nazarene whose fraudulent image hung in every church. Not the so-called "Father" that the faithful prayed to. But the one who had whispered to him in the darkness of his childhood bedroom, who had guided his steps through the labyrinth of Vatican politics, who had promised him power beyond imagination if he would only... serve.

His phone buzzed. A private line — only two people had this number.

"Good morning, Holy Father." Roman Augustus's voice was smooth as silk over broken glass. "I trust the reports are satisfactory?"

"Eighty-nine percent globally. We should reach ninety-five by year's end."

"Excellent. And the holdouts?"

"Being processed. The camps in Eastern Europe are operating at capacity. We've had to open additional facilities in Argentina and Algeria."

"Casualties?"

"Acceptable. Perhaps two million so far. Mostly the elderly and the stubborn."

"A small price for unity." Roman's voice carried that edge it always did — the hint of something vast and ancient lurking beneath the human words. "Speaking of which, I need you in Jerusalem next week. The dedication of the new administrative center."

"Of course."

"And Sixtus?" A pause. "My Sixth?"

The nickname sent a small thrill through him, as it always did. Roman had called him that since the beginning — "my Sixth." A private joke between them. Six and six, serving the one whose number was written in the flesh of billions.

"Yes?"

"The Two Witnesses are becoming a problem. Their preaching is reaching too many ears. I want you to address it personally."

Sixtus frowned. The Two Witnesses — those ragged prophets who had appeared in Jerusalem around the same time as Roman's resurrection, preaching repentance from the steps of the Temple itself. They should have been easy to eliminate. But every attempt had failed. Soldiers who approached them burst into flames. Drones malfunctioned. Snipers found their rifles jammed.

"What would you have me do? Nothing we've tried has worked."

"Then try harder. Discredit them. Counter their message. Remind the world that I am the one who rose from the dead, not their pathetic carpenter god."

"It will be done."

The line went dead.

Sixtus sat back in his chair, gazing out the window at St. Peter's Square. Even now, pilgrims gathered there — faithful Catholics who had no idea that their beloved Pope had never believed a word of the creed he recited.

It was almost too easy. Humanity was so hungry for guidance, so desperate for someone to tell them what to do and think and

believe. Give them miracles and they would follow you anywhere. Give them a god to worship and they would worship without question.

The fire from heaven had been his masterstroke. Real power, channeled through his hands by the one who had given him everything. The looks on their faces when the fire fell — the awe, the terror, the instant prostration. In that moment, he had understood why Lucifer had rebelled. Why settle for serving when you could be served?

His thoughts drifted to the Two Witnesses. They were a nuisance, nothing more. Two men shouting prophecies that no one wanted to hear. But Roman was right — their message was spreading. Underground networks were forming, passing along their words, refusing the mark, hiding in wilderness places.

They called Roman the Antichrist. They called Sixtus the False Prophet.

They weren't wrong.

He smiled at the thought. False prophet. As if there were any other kind. All prophets were false — all religion was manipulation — all faith was weakness exploited by the strong. The only difference was that Sixtus knew it, while the others deceived even themselves.

His espresso had grown cold. He set it aside and pulled up the latest surveillance reports on the Two Witnesses. Their names were unknown — the faithful called them simply "the Witnesses," while Roman's propaganda machine had dubbed them terrorists and madmen.

They stood in the same spot nearly every day, near the Eastern Gate, proclaiming judgment in voices that somehow carried across the entire city. They wore rough clothes and ate nothing that anyone could see. They had been preaching for six months now, and not once had they shown any sign of human weakness.

It was... unsettling. Not that Sixtus believed in their god. But he believed in power, and these men had power that didn't come from his master. That made them dangerous.

He dictated a memo to Cardinal Benedetto: increase media coverage depicting the Witnesses as mentally ill. Plant stories about their "violent rhetoric." Suggest connections to terrorist organizations. The usual playbook.

Then he returned to the morning reports, calculating compliance percentages and casualty projections with the same cold efficiency he had brought to every task since childhood.

Outside, the faithful gathered to pray.

Inside, the False Prophet planned their damnation.

And somewhere in Jerusalem, two men opened their mouths and spoke words that made demons tremble — words that even Sixtus VI, in the darkest corners of his empty soul, almost believed might be true.

Almost.

* * *

CHAPTER 26

The Red Horse

DAVID

Brussels, Belgium

November 2034

* * *

The war room was forty feet underground, encased in concrete and steel, supposedly impervious to anything short of a direct nuclear strike.

David Hartley hoped that claim wouldn't be tested tonight.

The screens covering every wall showed the same apocalyptic images — mushroom clouds rising over three cities in the Middle East, satellite footage of naval battles in the South China Sea, troop movements across the borders of a dozen nations that had been at peace just seventy-two hours ago. And in Africa: Libya, Ethiopia, and Egypt destroyed.

It had happened so fast. One moment, the world was united under Roman Augustus's banner of peace. The next, it was tearing itself apart.

"The Russians launched first," General Franz Brühl was saying, his voice hoarse from hours of continuous briefing. "Tactical strikes on Pakistan nuclear facilities. Pakistan retaliated against Saudi oil fields. The Saudis invoked their defense treaty with us, and—"

"And now we have three regional wars that are about to become one global one." Roman Augustus stood at the head of the table, utterly calm despite the chaos on the screens. "Yes, General. I'm aware of the situation."

"Sir, with respect, we need to respond. If we don't—"

"We will respond. But not yet."

David watched Roman's face, searching for any sign of concern. There was none. If anything, he looked... satisfied.

He planned this, David realized with a chill. He's not reacting to the crisis. He created it.

The thought should have been absurd. Roman had built his entire empire on the promise of peace. The Treaty of Brussels, the unified economy, the end of nationalist conflicts — it was all supposed to usher in a new age of harmony.

But David had been taking notes for over three years now. He had seen the private meetings, heard the whispered conversations, watched the chess pieces move. And he knew that Roman Augustus never did anything without a reason.

"Sir." Apollyon materialized at Roman's elbow, his pale face impassive. "The casualty projections you requested."

He handed Roman a tablet. David caught a glimpse of the numbers on the screen:

Estimated casualties (first 90 days): 400-600 million

Estimated casualties (first year): 1.5-2 billion

Resource reallocation potential: Significant

Roman studied the figures and nodded. "Acceptable."

Acceptable. Two billion dead, and it was *acceptable*.

"The third and fourth seals," Apollyon murmured, low enough that only those closest could hear. "Famine follows war. Disease follows famine. As it was written, so it shall be."

David's blood ran cold.

They weren't just allowing this to happen. They were *following a script*. The seals from Revelation — the four horsemen. They were deliberately unleashing them, one by one, as if they were checking items off a prophetic to-do list.

"Ladies and gentlemen." Roman addressed the room, his voice cutting through the chaos. "What you are witnessing is not a disaster. It is a cleansing. For too long, humanity has been divided by the illusion of national sovereignty. These wars will burn away that illusion. When the fires die down, there will be no more Russians or Africans, no more Chinese or Europeans. There will only be citizens of the World Unity Government."

"And the dead?" someone asked — a diplomat from what used to be France. "What about the billions who will die?"

Roman turned to look at him. Those eyes — the eyes that had changed since the resurrection — seemed to glow faintly in the dim light of the war room.

"The dead will be mourned. And then they will be forgotten. That is the way of history. That is the way of progress." He smiled. "That is the way of god."

The room fell silent.

David excused himself, claiming a need for the restroom. In truth, he needed to get away before he screamed or vomited or did something else that would mark him as a traitor.

He found an empty corridor and leaned against the wall, his heart pounding.

Two billion people.

He thought of his relatives and friends scattered across a world that was suddenly on fire. Were they safe? Would they survive the famine and plague that Apollyon had promised would follow war?

He pulled out his phone — the personal one, not the government-issued device that was certainly monitored — and typed a message to his encrypted journal:

November 2034. The wars have begun. Multiple nuclear exchanges. Casualty projections: 2 billion within the year. And they PLANNED it. Roman and Apollyon were quoting Revelation — talking about the seals being opened, as if they're following a script. They're not trying to stop the horsemen. They're RIDING them.

The red horse is war. "Power was given to him to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another."

It's happening. Exactly as the Bible said it would. And I'm working for the people making it happen.

God help me. God help us all.

He deleted the message from his phone — it would sync to his encrypted backup automatically — and straightened his tie.

Then David Hartley walked back into the war room, put on his mask of loyal efficiency, and watched the world burn.

* * *

CHAPTER 27

The Number

MICHAEL

Safe House, Rural Nevada

December 2034

* * *

They gathered in the basement of an abandoned ranch house — seventeen souls who had refused the mark and fled into the wilderness to survive.

Michael hadn't planned to become a leader. He was seventy-nine years old, his joints ached constantly, and some days he could barely remember what he'd had for breakfast. But people kept finding him — drawn by his videos before they were scrubbed, by word of mouth through the underground networks, by what some of them called divine guidance.

So here he was, teaching prophecy in a basement lit by kerosene lamps, while the world above burned with war and famine and disease.

Tonight's lesson had been requested specifically. A young man named Carlos, a former Protestant who had fled Los Angeles right

before the bombs came down, had asked the question that everyone wondered about:

"What does 666 actually mean? Everyone talks about it, but no one explains it."

Michael opened his worn Bible and smiled. "That's because most people don't know. They think it's some kind of spooky number, or they look for ways to make modern names add up to it. But the early church knew exactly what it meant."

He turned to Revelation 13:18. "Here's what John wrote: Here is a puzzle that calls for careful thought to solve it. Let those who are able, interpret this code: the numerical values of the letters in his name add to 666!" (TLB)

"That means gematria, doesn't it? Where letters have numerical values?" said Maria Santos, who had arrived at the safe house two weeks ago after a harrowing journey — stowing away on a cargo ship from Portugal to San Francisco, then traveling on foot across California and into Nevada. She had been a devout Catholic before discovering the truth about God's Sabbath.

"Exactly." Michael nodded, pleased. Maria had become one of his best students — hungry for truth after a lifetime of religious lies. "John wrote Revelation in Greek. And in Greek, every letter has a number. Alpha is 1, beta is 2, and so on. So names can be calculated."

He pulled out a piece of paper where he had written out the Greek letters.

"The apostle John had a disciple named Polycarp. Polycarp sat at John's feet and learned directly from the man who wrote Revelation. He became John's successor and carried that torch of

truth into the next generation. And Polycarp, now the Bishop of Smyrna told us precisely what 666 means. Although some people give the credit to Irenaeus, a student of Polycarp.”

The room was silent, waiting.

"It's the Greek word LATEINOS." Michael wrote it out: "Λ-A-T-E-I-N-O-Σ. Lambda is 30. Alpha is 1. Tau is 300. Epsilon is 5. Iota is 10. Nu is 50. Omicron is 70. Sigma is 200."

He added them up on the paper: "30 + 1 + 300 + 5 + 10 + 50 + 70 + 200 = 666."

Carlos leaned forward. "Lateinos? But what does that mean?"

"Latin-man. Ro-man. It refers to the Latin-speaking Roman Empire — and the religious system that grew out of it." Michael let that sink in. "John's own disciple and successor told us that 666 identifies the Roman system. Not some future mystery figure. Rome. The beast that was, and is, and is to come."

"The Roman Catholic Church," Maria said quietly.

"The ROMAN Catholic Church, yes. But also, the ROMAN Empire that preceded it, and the revived ROMAN Empire we're seeing now under ROMAN Augustus." Michael shook his head. "Even his NAME tells you what he is. Roman Augustus — the title of the Caesars who declared themselves gods. It's not hidden. It's right there in the open."

An older woman named Ruth — not Ruth Goldstein, who had died of cancer months before, but another Ruth who had fled from Phoenix — raised her hand. "But how can we trust what Bishop Polycarp said? How do we know he was right?"

"Because of what else he did." Michael's voice grew more intense. "Polycarp didn't just identify the beast. He FOUGHT it. He had a direct confrontation in 155 AD with Anicetus, the Bishop of Rome over the changing of Passover."

"Changing of Passover?"

"God commanded His people to observe Passover on the 14th day of the first month of the Biblical calendar — the day Jesus was crucified as our Passover Lamb. The early true church, following the apostles' teaching, continued to observe it on that date. But the Bishop of Rome wanted to change it."

"To Easter," Maria said. "They changed it to Easter."

"Yes. And here's what most people don't know — Easter wasn't a Christian holiday. It was a pagan festival that had been celebrated for CENTURIES before Jesus was even born. It was named after a fertility goddess — Ishtar in Babylon, Eostre in northern Europe. Eggs and rabbits — symbols of fertility — were part of the original pagan celebration."

Carlos looked stunned. "So, the Roman Church took a pagan holiday and slapped a Christian label on it?"

"That's exactly what they did. And when Polycarp (the Bishop of Smyrna) confronted Anicetus (the Bishop of Rome) about it, he refused to back down. He said he had learned to keep Passover on the 14th from the APOSTLE JOHN himself. The Bishop of Rome eventually had the audacity to threaten excommunication for anyone who refused to abandon Passover in favor of Easter, including even Bishop Polycarp himself. And if anyone should have been excommunicating someone, it should have been Bishop

Polycarp excommunicating Bishop Anicetus, not the other way around."

Michael paused, letting the weight of history settle over the room.

"This is the same pattern we've been seeing all along. Rome changes God's appointed times and thinks it has the authority to do so. Passover to Easter. The seventh-day Sabbath to Sunday. The Thursday crucifixion to Friday. Every change moves people AWAY from what God commanded and TOWARD pagan traditions dressed up in Christian clothing."

He held up his Bible. "And it goes even deeper. Most Christians don't realize that God gave His people a complete calendar of holy days. It's right here in Leviticus 23. The weekly Sabbath. Passover. The Feast of Unleavened Bread. Pentecost. The Day of Trumpets. The Day of Atonement. The Feast of Tabernacles. God calls these 'MY feasts' — not Jewish feasts, not Old Testament feasts — HIS feasts, His appointed times."

"And Jesus kept them," Maria added. "All of them."

"Every single one. He kept Passover — that's what the Last Supper was. And He went up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles — you can read about it in John chapter 7. And the apostles kept them AFTER the resurrection. The Holy Spirit came on Pentecost — that's a biblical feast day from Leviticus 23. Paul rushed to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost. He wrote to the Corinthians, 'Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us KEEP THE FEAST.'" (1 Cor. 5:7-8; NKJ)

Carlos shook his head slowly. "So, what happened? Why doesn't anyone keep these days anymore?"

"Rome happened." Michael's voice was heavy with grief. "They replaced every single one of God's holy days with pagan counterfeits. Passover became Easter — a fertility festival. The fall holy days got swallowed up by Halloween — an ancient Celtic death festival called Samhain. And the Feast of Tabernacles, which occurs in autumn, got pushed aside for Christmas."

"Christmas is pagan?" Ruth looked shocked.

"December 25th was the birthday of the sun god — Sol Invictus, Mithras, Tammuz — celebrated across the heathen world for centuries before Jesus was born. The Saturnalia festival. Jesus wasn't even born in December — shepherds don't watch their flocks in fields at night in the dead of winter in Israel. But Rome wanted to Christianize the pagan population, so they slapped Christian names on heathen festivals and called it "Christianity." But God had a better name for it — 'Mystery Babylon the Great.'" Revelation 17:5.

He let that settle over the room.

"Think about what that means. The days God commanded His people to keep — replaced. The days pagans kept to worship false gods — adopted. And the whole "Christian" world followed along, celebrating Satan's calendar while ignoring God's."

"Daniel 7:25," Maria said. "He shall think to change times and laws."

"Exactly. And this system was identified nearly two thousand years ago. 666 — Lateinos — the Latin Roman system that would change God's times and laws and deceive the whole world."

He looked around the room at the faces illuminated by flickering lamplight — refugees from a world gone mad, hiding in a

basement, learning truths that the institutional church had buried for centuries.

"The man calling himself Roman Augustus is the culmination of that system. The Pope calling himself Sixtus VI is its false prophet. And the mark they're forcing on the world is the final step — the moment when people must choose either the beast's system or God's truth."

"What do we do?" Carlos asked.

"We endure. We keep the faith. We refuse the mark, even unto death." Michael closed his Bible. "And we remember that John didn't just see the beast. He saw the beast DEFEATED. He saw Christ return. He saw the devil and the false prophet and the beast thrown into the lake of fire."

He smiled — a weary smile, but genuine.

"The number 666 isn't a mystery anymore. We know what it means. We know who it identifies. And we know how the story ends. Our job is to stay faithful until that ending comes."

The lesson continued into the night, questions and answers flowing back and forth, truth spreading like light in the darkness.

Outside, the world continued its descent into chaos.

But in the basement, seventeen souls held onto hope — armed with understanding that had been preserved for two thousand years, waiting for exactly this moment.

* * *

CHAPTER 28

The Witnesses

RABBI ELEAZAR

Petra, Jordan

January 2035

* * *

The journey from Jerusalem to Petra had taken three weeks.

Three weeks of hiding by day and traveling by night. Three weeks of rationing the meager supplies they'd managed to gather before fleeing. Three weeks of watching the sky for drones and the roads for patrols.

But they had made it. Nearly two hundred of them now — refugees from Jerusalem, survivors of the Abomination, Jews who had seen their Temple defiled and their world shattered.

Petra was everything the ancient prophecies promised — a city carved into rose-red cliffs, accessible only through narrow canyons, invisible from the air, defensible against armies. For centuries it had been a tourist attraction. Now it was a sanctuary.

Eleazar had organized the refugees as best he could. Food distribution. Water collection. Medical care for the wounded and

sick. Guard rotations at the canyon entrances. It wasn't much, but it was something. Purpose. Structure. A reason to keep breathing.

But he couldn't escape the questions that haunted him.

Who is Yeshua? Was I wrong my entire life? What does God want from me now?

He had spoken the name in the cellar beneath Jerusalem — “Yeshua” — almost without meaning to. The name his fathers had rejected. The name that meant “salvation” in Hebrew. The name the Christians claimed belonged to the true Messiah.

Was it true? Could it be true? After everything he had dedicated his life to — the Temple, the priesthood, the traditions of his people — could it all have been pointing to a man his nation had crucified two thousand years ago?

The questions tormented him. And he had no one to ask.

Until the two strangers arrived.

They appeared at the eastern entrance to Petra on a morning when the winter sun painted the canyon walls in shades of gold and crimson. Two men — vigorous, perhaps in their fifties, with the bearing of men who had walked long roads and feared nothing at the end of them. They wore plain, travel-worn clothes. They carried no supplies, no water, nothing but wooden staffs worn smooth by countless miles of walking.

There was something about them that Eleazar could not name. An authority that had nothing to do with rank or title. A stillness that seemed out of place in a world that had not stopped trembling for two years.

The guards brought them to Eleazar immediately.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “How did you find this place?”

The taller of the two smiled — a gentle smile, almost sad. “God led us here, son of Aaron. As He has led His people to hidden places since the beginning.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“No. It isn’t.” The shorter one stepped forward. “We are witnesses. That is all you need to know for now. We have come because there is one here who is seeking truth — and truth cannot be found without a teacher.”

Eleazar felt a chill run down his spine. “How do you know I’m a son of Aaron?”

“We know many things. We know you built the Temple that now houses an abomination. We know you spoke the name of Yeshua in a cellar while your city burned. We know you fled here hoping to find answers — and fearing what those answers might be.”

“Who ARE you?”

The two men exchanged a glance—a look of quiet communication that needed no words.

“We are God’s witnesses,” the taller one said simply. “Called for this hour. That is all we are, and it is enough.”

Eleazar stared at them. His mind reached for something — some category, some precedent, some way to understand what he was seeing. The supernatural knowledge they carried. The calm authority that seemed to fill the canyon. The sense that these were not ordinary men living ordinary lives.

*The two witnesses. The ones the whole world had been watching.
The ones in Jerusalem.*

“You have been preaching in Jerusalem,” he said. It was not a question.

“Yes.”

“The plagues. The fire.” Eleazar’s voice dropped to a whisper. “That is you.”

Neither man confirmed nor denied it. They simply waited.

“The prophet Malachi wrote,” Eleazar said slowly, his eyes moving to the shorter one, “that Elijah would come before the great and terrible day of the Lord.”

Micah met his gaze steadily. “Malachi’s prophecy is and will be fulfilled in God’s time and in God’s way. What I can tell you is this: the great and terrible day of the Lord is no longer a distant warning. It is upon you. And God sent us here not to answer every question you carry — but to give you the one answer that matters above all others.”

“What answer?”

Ethan answered. “The truth, son of Aaron. The truth that has been buried under centuries of lies. The truth about the Sabbath day, which was changed from the seventh day to the first. The truth about God’s holy days, which were replaced with pagan festivals. The truth about the commandments, which were altered and deleted to accommodate idol worship.”

“The truth about the Messiah,” Micah added. “Whom your fathers rejected, and whom you are only now beginning to see.”

Eleazar's throat tightened. "Yeshua."

"Yes. Yeshua. Jesus. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The one whose death and resurrection — His TRUE resurrection, three days and three nights in the grave, not the counterfeit you witnessed in Jerusalem — proved that He was everything He claimed to be."

"But I..." Eleazar's voice broke. "I built the Temple for the Antichrist. I dedicated it. I thought I was serving God, and I was serving the devil."

Ethan knelt beside him — this man of unmistakable authority, kneeling beside a broken old priest in a cave in Jordan.

"You were deceived," Ethan said gently. "As millions have been deceived. As your fathers were deceived when they rejected the Messiah the first time. But deception is not the same as damnation. You can still turn. You can still choose."

"How? What do I do?"

Micah spoke. "You learn. You study. You compare what you were taught with what is written. And then you teach others — because there are many in Israel who will soon be asking the same questions you are asking now."

"The time of Jacob's trouble is upon us," Ethan said. "The great tribulation that Daniel prophesied. But at the end of the trouble comes deliverance. The Messiah will return — not as a suffering servant this time, but as a conquering King. And when He comes, He will find a remnant who kept the faith. A remnant who observed His Sabbaths and His holy days. A remnant who worshipped Him in spirit and in truth."

“Will you teach me?” Eleazar asked, hardly daring to hope. “Will you show me what I’ve been missing?”

The two witnesses looked at each other, and something passed between them — a communication deeper than words.

“We cannot stay long,” Micah said. “Our work is in Jerusalem, testifying against the beast. But we will return when we can. And in the meantime...” He reached into his coat and withdrew a small scroll — parchment, hand-written, covered in the careful script of someone who knew the weight of every word. “Study this. It contains the prophecies of the Messiah — His first coming and His second. Compare them to the man called Yeshua. See if they match.”

Eleazar took the scroll with trembling hands.

“And remember,” Ethan added, rising to his feet. “The same God who delivered Israel from Egypt, who gave the law on Sinai, who preserved a remnant through every persecution and exile — that God is still working. He has not abandoned His people. He is calling them home. Will you answer?”

“Yes,” Eleazar whispered. Then, stronger: “Yes. I will answer. I will learn. I will teach.”

The two witnesses turned and walked back toward the canyon entrance. Just before they disappeared into the narrow passage, Micah looked back over his shoulder.

“Remember the law of Moses. Remember the testimony of Yeshua. The great and terrible day of the Lord is coming. But for those who turn, there is mercy. There is always mercy.”

Then they were gone.

Eleazar sat alone in the rose-red city, holding a scroll in trembling hands, contemplating a truth that would reshape everything he thought he knew.

Around him, the refugees of Jerusalem went about their daily survival — finding food, tending the sick, watching the skies for enemies.

None of them knew that their leader had just received a commission that would change the course of history.

None of them knew that the restoration had begun.

* * *

CHAPTER 29

The Restoration

MICHAEL

Safe House, Rural Nevada

February 2035

* * *

The questions never stopped. And Michael was grateful for them.

Every question was a mind opening. Every answer was a chain breaking. These refugees from the beast system were hungry for truth in a way he had rarely seen in his forty years of teaching.

Tonight, it was Carlos again — the former Protestant whose questions had sparked so many discussions.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said last week,” Carlos began. “About Rome replacing God’s calendar with pagan holidays. But I grew up Protestant. We weren’t Catholic. So how did we end up with the same holidays?”

Michael nodded slowly. This was an important question — one that many Protestants never thought to ask.

“The Reformation was a miracle,” he said. “Luther, Calvin, Zwingli — brave men who stood against Rome at the risk of their lives. They recovered crucial truths. The authority of Scripture. The priesthood of all believers. We owe them a debt we can never repay.”

“But?” Maria prompted.

“But the Reformation was incomplete. And most people don’t know how CLOSE it came to succeeding completely.” Michael leaned forward, his eyes intense. “There was a moment — a critical moment — when the Roman Catholic Church was on the verge of repenting. Of going back to the Bible.”

“What?” Carlos looked stunned. “The Catholic Church almost gave in?”

“Yes. There was an official meeting between Luther and the Roman Catholic leaders. Luther had been hammering them with ‘Sola Scriptura’ — the Bible and the Bible ONLY. No traditions. No papal authority. Just Scripture. And it was working. The RCC leaders were about to capitulate. They were ready to return to biblical teaching.”

Michael paused, letting the weight of history settle over the room.

“But right before they made it official, one of the bishops asked Luther a simple question. He said, essentially: ‘If you really believe the Bible alone, will you keep the seventh-day Sabbath holy — Saturday — instead of Sunday? Because there’s no Scripture for Sunday worship. That came from US. From Rome. From our authority.’”

The room was dead silent.

“And Luther said NO.”

“No?” Ruth whispered.

“No. He refused. He would not keep the Sabbath that Scripture commanded. And in that moment, the Catholic bishops saw through him. They realized he didn’t REALLY believe ‘Bible alone.’ He was still following Rome’s tradition on the most basic question of weekly worship. He was protesting Rome while still obeying Rome.”

Michael shook his head slowly. “The conference broke up. The RCC never repented. The Reformation stalled. And for the next five hundred years, Protestants have kept Sunday — Rome’s day — while claiming to reject Rome’s authority.”

“If Luther had just said yes...” Maria trailed off.

“History might have been completely different. The whole Western church might have returned to the true Sabbath. To God’s calendar. To biblical Christianity instead of this hybrid of Scripture and paganism that we’ve inherited.”

“Did Luther know?” Carlos asked. “Did he understand what he was doing?”

“He had to know. His own colleague — Andreas Karlstadt — was a seventh-day Sabbath keeper. Karlstadt worked alongside Luther at Wittenberg. He pushed for more radical reforms, a more

complete return to Scripture. He tried to convince Luther to keep the true Sabbath. But Luther refused.”

Michael’s voice was heavy with grief for what might have been.

“Luther was a brave man. But on this one issue, he failed. And because he failed, the Protestant Reformation was only a PARTIAL reformation. The Reformers left Rome, but they took Rome’s baggage with them. They kept Sunday worship without ever questioning why. They kept Easter and Christmas without examining their origins. They kept the false Friday crucifixion tradition. Some of them even kept Rome’s altered version of the Ten Commandments.”

He paused, letting that sink in.

“Think about what that means. Protestants broke away from the Pope’s authority — but they still follow the Pope’s CALENDAR. They rejected Catholic doctrine on salvation — but they celebrate Catholic holidays that came from paganism. The Reformation was a beginning, not an end. It was supposed to be an ongoing process of returning to Scripture. But somewhere along the way, most Protestant churches stopped reforming.”

Ruth raised her hand. “What about the cross? I’ve been wearing a cross my whole life. My grandmother gave me one when I was baptized.”

Michael took a deep breath. This was always a difficult topic — the cross was so central to Christian identity that questioning it felt like heresy to many believers.

“Let me ask you a question first. When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in Latin America for the very first time in the early 1500s, what do you think they found the native people wearing?”

Ruth frowned. “I don’t know. Feathers? Gold jewelry?”

“Crosses.”

The room went silent.

“The conquistadors were shocked,” Michael continued. “They found cross symbols throughout the Americas — among peoples who had never heard of Jesus, never seen a Bible, never met a Christian. How is that possible?”

“It’s not,” Carlos said slowly. “Unless...”

“Unless the cross was a pagan symbol BEFORE it was a Christian one.” Michael pulled out a folder of printed images he had prepared for exactly this discussion. “Look at this. The Egyptian ankh — a cross with a loop at the top, symbol of life and fertility. The Babylonian tau — a T-shaped cross, symbol of the heathen god Tammuz. Cross symbols in ancient India, China, Scandinavia — all predating Christianity by centuries.”

He spread the images on the table.

“The cross was a universal pagan symbol. It represented the sun, fertility, the four directions, the union of male and female. Different cultures gave it different meanings, but the shape was everywhere.”

“But Jesus died on a cross,” Ruth protested. “That’s not pagan — that’s historical.”

“Did He? The Greek word in the New Testament is ‘stauros.’ It means a stake, a pole, an upright piece of timber. The Romans executed people on simple wooden stakes as often as on crossed beams. The traditional cross shape — what we call the Latin cross — became associated with Christianity later, largely through Constantine.”

“Constantine,” Maria said darkly. “The sun worshipper.”

“Exactly. Constantine claimed to have a vision of a cross in the sky before battle. But Constantine was a devotee of Sol Invictus — the Unconquered Sun. He kept sun worship symbols on his coins until his death. When he ‘converted’ to Christianity, he brought his pagan baggage with him — and the church, eager for imperial favor, accommodated him.”

Michael held up one of the images — an ancient coin showing Constantine’s face alongside the sun god.

“The cross, Sunday worship, December 25th — all of these were bridges Constantine built between paganism and Christianity. He wasn’t converting the empire to Christianity. He was converting Christianity to paganism.”

Carlos looked shaken. “So, when I wear a cross...”

“You’re wearing a symbol that was pagan for thousands of years before it became associated with Christ. A symbol that Constantine

— a sun worshipper — imposed on the church. A symbol that has more to do with Tammuz and Osiris than with Jesus of Nazareth.”

“What should we focus on instead?” Ruth asked quietly.

“The RESURRECTION. That’s the true sign of the Messiah — three days and three nights in the grave, then rising to eternal life. Not an instrument of torture, but an empty tomb. Not death, but victory over death.”

The room was quiet as people processed this latest revelation.

Then Maria spoke. “I’ve been reading Malachi, and I’ve been wondering — the end-time Elijah who ‘restores all things’ — is he one of the Two Witnesses? Or is he a separate individual entirely?”

Michael smiled. Maria was becoming a true student of Scripture — asking the questions that most people missed.

“That’s a very perceptive question. The Two Witnesses have the POWERS of Moses and Elijah — shutting the heavens, turning water to blood, striking the earth with plagues. Revelation describes them clearly. But whether one of them IS the prophesied Elijah of Malachi 4, or whether that Elijah is a separate individual — that’s a question Scripture leaves open.”

“What do you think?”

Michael considered his words carefully. “What I’m certain of is this: the end-time Elijah will be one specific person. Just as John the Baptist was one specific man — not a movement, not a generation of teachers, but one individual — who came in the spirit

and power of Elijah to prepare people for Christ's first coming. The end-time Elijah will be one individual who prepares people for Christ's second coming."

"So, he might not be one of the Two Witnesses at all?" Carlos asked.

"He might be. Or he might be a completely separate individual — someone we've never heard of, preparing people for the return of Christ from the shadows. Scripture doesn't tell us. But what it does tell us is that the work will be done, as God always raises up the right person at the right time to accomplish His purpose."

"The Jews rejected Jesus because they expected a different kind of Messiah," Maria said thoughtfully. "The Catholics buried the truth under pagan traditions. The Protestants started to dig it out but stopped halfway. And now we're here — trying to uncover what's been buried for two thousand years."

"Yes." Michael's voice was heavy with emotion. "And that's exactly what the enemy didn't want. That's why there's been so much effort to suppress these truths, to persecute those who teach them, to label us as heretics and conspiracy theorists. Because every person who discovers the real Sabbath, the real holy days, the real sign of the Messiah — every person who 'comes out of Babylon' — is a victory for God and a defeat for Satan."

He closed his Bible.

"The restoration isn't complete. It may not be complete until Christ returns. But it's happening. Right here, right now, in rooms like this one all over the world. And that's why we keep teaching, keep

studying, keep asking questions — even when the answers shake everything we thought we knew.”

Outside, a cold February wind howled across the Nevada desert.

Inside, seventeen souls drew closer together, bound by truths that were older than Rome, older than Constantine, older than the pagan symbols that had been dressed up and called Christian.

The restoration continued.

* * *

CHAPTER 30

The Black Horse

ANNA

Hong Kong Underground

March 2035

* * *

The children were hungry again.

Anna could see it in their eyes—that hollow look that had become so familiar over the past months. Mei had stopped asking for food weeks ago, as if she understood that asking only made it harder. Daniel still asked sometimes, in a small voice that broke Anna’s heart every time.

“Hopefully soon, baby,” she would say. “Hopefully soon.”

The famine had come so quickly. One moment the world was at war; the next, the crops were failing. Drought in some regions, floods in others, locusts in Africa, blight in Asia. The global food distribution system—already strained by the war—collapsed entirely.

Those with the mark could still buy food, if they could afford it. A loaf of bread now cost a full day's wages—enough to keep one person alive for one day, with nothing left over. The news showed images of mark-bearers lined up for hours outside government distribution centers, receiving their meager rations with grateful tears.

Those without the mark received nothing.

Anna's underground community had dwindled from thirty to nineteen. Those who had left had taken the mark—she couldn't blame them, not really, not when their children were starving. Others had died. Old Mr. Wong had simply not woken up one morning. Sister Catherine had developed a cough that became pneumonia that became death, all within a week.

The rest survived on whatever they could scavenge—rodents caught in the tunnels, rainwater collected from drainage grates, the occasional mercy package from sympathizers above who risked everything to help.

Tonight's meal was a single can of beans, split nineteen ways.

Anna watched Mei and Daniel receive their portions—perhaps two spoonfuls each—and eat slowly, making each bite last. They had learned not to gobble their food. There would be no more until... until whenever God provided.

“A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, but do not harm the oil and the wine.”

The words from Revelation echoed in Anna's mind. She had read the passage a hundred times since the famine began. A “denarius” was a full day's wage in the ancient world. And it would buy

enough wheat for one meal. One day's work for one day's bread. That was the prophecy of the black horse.

They were living it now.

Brother Timothy, who had emerged as the leader of their little community since James's execution, gathered everyone together after the meal.

"I have news," he said quietly. "Some good, some bad."

Everyone waited.

"The good news: I've made contact with a network in the Philippines. They have food. Rice, fish, vegetables. They're willing to share with communities like ours."

A murmur of hope rippled through the group.

"The bad news: getting it here will be almost impossible. Every port is monitored. Every ship is scanned. Without the mark, we can't move freely."

"Then how?" someone asked.

"There are ways. Smuggling routes that existed before the mark—drug runners, human traffickers, people who've always operated outside the system. Some of them are sympathetic to us. Or at least willing to help for the right price."

"What price? We have nothing."

Timothy's face was grim. "They want information. About the underground networks. Safe house locations. Names of believers."

Silence fell over the group.

“We can’t,” Anna said. “If we give them that, they could sell it to the authorities. Everyone would be at risk.”

“I know. That’s why I haven’t agreed to anything yet. But...” He looked at the children—Mei and Daniel, and the three others in the group, all of them thin, all of them slowly starving. “We have to do something. We can’t just watch them die.”

Anna closed her eyes.

Heavenly Father, what do we do? How do we survive without betraying each other? How do we protect the children without endangering everyone else?

No answer came. Just the hollow silence of the tunnels and the quiet breathing of nineteen hungry souls.

Later that night, after the children were asleep, Anna sat alone in a corner of the safe house, reading James’s Bible by the light of a single candle. He had written notes in the margins—observations, cross-references, questions he never got to answer.

She turned to Revelation 6 and read the passage about the black horse again:

“When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” And I looked, and there was a black horse. Its rider held a set of scales in his hand. Then I heard something like a voice among the four living creatures say, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, but do not harm the oil and the wine.””

Balances. Scales. Everything measured, weighed, rationed. Food as precious as gold.

This was the world they lived in now.

But there was something else in the passage—something that gave her a flicker of hope. “*Do not harm the oil and the wine.*” Even in the midst of famine, God set limits. He protected certain things. He didn’t abandon His people entirely.

Anna thought of the manna in the wilderness—how God had fed Israel for forty years in a desert where nothing grew. She thought of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath—how a jar of flour and a jug of oil had never run dry through years of drought.

God could provide. He had done it before. He could do it again.

She just had to trust Him.

“Mama?”

Anna looked up. Mei was standing in the shadows, her thin frame wrapped in a blanket.

“What is it, baby? You should be sleeping.”

“I can’t sleep. My tummy hurts.”

Anna opened her arms, and Mei crawled into her lap—eight years old and small for her age, getting smaller every day.

“Mama, is God angry with us?”

“No, sweetheart. Why would you think that?”

“Because everything is so hard. Because Papa died. Because we’re always hungry.” Mei’s voice was very small. “Did we do something wrong?”

Anna held her daughter close, fighting back tears.

“No, baby. We didn’t do anything wrong. The world did something wrong—it followed the wrong leader, believed the wrong lies. And now everyone is suffering, good people and bad people alike. But God hasn’t forgotten us. He’s going to make everything right someday. I promise.”

“When?”

“Soon. The Bible says soon.”

“How soon?”

Anna didn’t have an answer. She just held her daughter and rocked her gently until Mei fell asleep in her arms.

Outside the safe house, in the tunnels and streets and towers of Hong Kong, millions of people with marks on their hands were going to bed hungry.

Millions more without marks were dying in the shadows.

The black horse rode on, and in its wake, the pale horse was already visible on the horizon.

* * *

CHAPTER 31

The Pale Horse

DAVID

Brussels, Belgium

June 2035

* * *

Two billion.

David stared at the number on his screen, unable to process it.

Two billion human beings. Dead. In less than eighteen months.

The report broke it down with clinical precision:

War-related casualties: 847 million. Famine-related deaths: 612 million. Pandemic deaths (H7N9 variant): 389 million. Civil unrest and governmental actions: 152 million.

The last category was a euphemism. “Governmental actions” meant executions. Mass graves. Camps where people without the mark were sent and never returned.

David had helped design some of those systems. He had written memos about “population management” and “resource

optimization.” He had sat in meetings where bureaucrats discussed acceptable casualty rates as if they were discussing quarterly earnings.

He had told himself he was gathering intelligence. Documenting crimes. Building a case for some future tribunal that would hold these monsters accountable.

But the truth was simpler and uglier: he had been a coward. He had kept his head down, done his job, survived — while two billion people died.

His encrypted journal was now over three hundred pages long. Names, dates, locations, orders. Everything he had witnessed. Everything he had participated in. A confession and an accusation, all in one document.

Would anyone ever read it? Would it matter?

He thought of the passage from Revelation that he had memorized in the early days, when he first realized what Roman Augustus truly was:

“And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.”

A fourth of the earth. That was the prophecy. Two billion out of eight billion was exactly a fourth.

It was happening. Exactly as the Bible said. And David was watching it from the inside.

His phone buzzed. A summons to the Situation Room. Another crisis, another meeting, another chance to watch Roman Augustus play god with human lives.

He straightened his tie, composed his face, and walked to his death.

Not literal death — not yet. But every day he spent in this building, every hour he breathed the same air as the Antichrist, something inside him died a little more.

* * *

The Situation Room was crowded. Generals, ministers, advisors — the entire inner circle of the World Unity Government. Roman stood at the head of the table, Apollyon beside him as always.

“The pandemic is spreading faster than projected,” General Franz Brühl reported. “We’ve lost containment in South America and Southeast Asia. Current models suggest another hundred million dead by year’s end.”

“And our response?” Roman’s voice was calm. Interested. Almost pleased.

“We’ve accelerated vaccine distribution to marked populations. Unmarked individuals are being... deprioritized.”

“Deprioritized.” Roman smiled. “An elegant word. What you mean is that we’re letting them die.”

The general shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Continue.”

David felt his stomach turn. He kept his face neutral.

“There’s another matter,” Apollyon said, stepping forward. “The Two Witnesses. They’ve been prophesying for over a year now. Their message is reaching more people every day. Underground networks are spreading their teachings.”

“They’re becoming a symbol,” someone added. “Martyrs without being martyred. Every attempt to silence them has failed.”

Roman’s eyes narrowed. “They will be dealt with. In time. The prophecy gives them forty-two months. We are patient.”

Forty-two months. David noted the reference. Roman knew the Bible as well as any scholar. He knew the timeline. He was following it deliberately.

“In the meantime,” Roman continued, “we intensify efforts against the underground networks. Every believer we eliminate is one less voice spreading their message. Every safe house we destroy is one less refuge for the deceived.”

“What about the children?” someone asked — a minister from what used to be Germany. “Many of the holdouts have children. Current policy is... inconsistent.”

“Children are the property of the state,” Roman said flatly. “Remove them from unmarked parents. Place them with loyal families. Re-educate them. They are not responsible for their parents’ foolishness.”

David's pen snapped in his hand. He looked down at the broken pieces, his heart pounding.

They're taking children now. Separating families. "Re-educating" kids whose only crime is having parents who refused the mark.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Hartley?"

David looked up. Roman was staring directly at him. Those eyes — the eyes that had changed since the resurrection — seemed to see through every mask, every pretense.

"No, sir. Just a faulty pen."

Roman held his gaze for a long moment. Then he smiled. "Replace it. We have much work to do."

The meeting continued. More statistics. More strategies. More death, catalogued and planned with bureaucratic efficiency.

When it finally ended, David returned to his office and locked the door. His hands were shaking as he opened his encrypted journal and began to type:

June 2035. Two billion dead. A fourth of the earth, exactly as prophesied. The pale horse has ridden, and Hell has followed.

They're taking children now. Separating families. Re-education camps. This isn't just genocide — it's soul murder. They're trying to erase God from an entire generation.

Roman quoted the forty-two months. He knows the Bible. He's following the timeline deliberately. This isn't chaos — it's

choreography. He's dancing to a script that was written two thousand years ago, thinking he can change the ending.

But he can't. I have to believe he can't.

I don't know how much longer I can do this. Every day I stay, I'm complicit. Every memo I write, every meeting I attend, I have blood on my hands. But if I leave — if I run — who will document what's happening? Who will preserve the evidence for whatever comes after?

God, if you're listening — I need a sign. I need to know what to do. I need to know that this isn't all for nothing.

He saved the entry and closed the file.

Outside his window, the sun was setting over Brussels — a red sky, like blood, like fire, like the judgment that was surely coming.

Two billion dead. And it wasn't over yet.

The pale horse had passed, but the trumpets were about to sound.

* * *

CHAPTER 32

Before the Beginning

RABBI ELEAZAR

Petra, Jordan

July 2035

* * *

The Two Witnesses returned at sunset, walking through the narrow canyon as if they had simply stepped out for an afternoon stroll rather than disappearing for six months.

Eleazar had begun to wonder if he would ever see them again. The scroll they had left him — the prophecies of the Messiah — had transformed his understanding. He had read it a hundred times, comparing every passage to what he knew of Yeshua from the forbidden Christian writings that some of the refugees had brought with them.

It all matched. Every prophecy. Every detail. The virgin birth. The birthplace of Bethlehem. The ministry in Galilee. The triumphal entry on a donkey. The betrayal for thirty pieces of silver. The silence before his accusers. The piercing of hands and feet. The casting of lots for his garments. The resurrection on the third day.

Yeshua was the Messiah. Eleazar could no longer deny it.

But he still had questions. So many questions.

“You have been studying,” Ethan said as they sat together in the cave that had become Eleazar’s private sanctuary. It was not a question.

“Yes. And I believe. Yeshua is the Messiah. But...” Eleazar hesitated. “I feel like I’m seeing only a small piece of a much larger picture. The Messiah came to save us — but save us from what? And why? How did everything become so broken that we needed saving in the first place?”

Ethan and Micah exchanged a look — that silent communication that seemed to pass between them.

“You are asking the right questions,” Micah said. “Most people never think to ask them. They accept the world as it is without wondering how it came to be this way.”

“Will you tell me?”

Ethan leaned forward, his eyes holding depths that Eleazar could not fathom. “What I am about to tell you is hidden in the Scriptures — scattered across many books, revealed in fragments and shadows. Few have ever pieced it together. But you asked, and you are ready to hear.”

Eleazar nodded, his heart pounding.

“In the beginning,” Ethan said, “there was no beginning.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Before the universe existed — before the stars, before the earth, before time itself — there was God. But not God alone.” Ethan paused. “There were two beings in existence, and only two. God the Father and God the Son. What you call the Logos. What the Christians call the Word.”

“In the beginning was the Word,” Eleazar whispered, quoting the opening of John’s gospel. ““And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.””

“Yes. The apostle John understood. Before anything was created, before anything existed, there was the Father and the Son — dwelling together in perfect unity, perfect love, perfect fellowship. For how long? There is no answer, because time itself did not yet exist. They simply WERE. Together. Complete.”

Eleazar tried to imagine it — an eternity of nothing but two divine beings, existing in perfect harmony. It was beyond comprehension.

“And then?” he asked.

“And then they created,” Micah said, taking up the narrative. “First, the angels. Countless millions of spiritual beings, created to serve and worship and share in the joy of existence. Among them, three were elevated above the rest — the archangels.”

“Michael, Gabriel, and...” Eleazar stopped, realizing he didn’t know the third name.

“Heylel.” Micah spoke the name carefully, as if it still carried weight after all these millennia. “In your Hebrew tongue, it means ‘Shining One’ or ‘Light Bringer.’ The Latin translation is Lucifer — the Morning Star.”

“Satan,” Eleazar breathed.

“Not yet. That name came later.” Micah’s face was grave. “In the beginning, Heylel was glorious beyond description. The prophet Ezekiel was given a vision of him: ‘Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom, and perfect in beauty. Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering... Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so.’” (Ezekiel 28:12-14; KJV)

“He was perfect,” Ethan added. “Perfect in wisdom. Perfect in beauty. One of the three highest beings in all creation, second only to the Father and the Son themselves. His very name contained the name of God — Heyl-EL, just as Micha-EL and Gabri-EL do.”

“What happened?”

Ethan’s voice grew heavy. “Ezekiel tells us: ‘Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, TILL iniquity was found in thee.’” (Ezekiel 28:15; KJV)

“Till iniquity was found in him,” Eleazar repeated. “What iniquity?”

“Pride.” Micah almost spat the word. “Isaiah records his thoughts: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God... I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.’” (Isaiah 14:13; KJV)

“He wanted to be God.”

“He wanted to be ABOVE God. He looked at his own beauty, his own wisdom, his own power, and he convinced himself that he deserved more. That he should rule. That he should be worshipped.” Micah shook his head. “And he convinced others. A third of the angels followed him in his rebellion.”

“A war in heaven,” Eleazar said, remembering fragments of teaching from his youth.

“Yes. Michael — whose name means ‘Who is like God?’ — led the faithful angels against the rebels. Heylel and his followers were cast out. And from that moment, he was no longer the Light Bringer. He became Satan — the Adversary. The Accuser. The devil.”

Micah continued. "When Heylel led his rebellion, the destruction was not limited to heaven. The original creation — the universe God had made — was magnificent beyond anything you can imagine now. Every planet, every moon, bathed in light and life. Nothing was barren. Nothing was dead. God does not create waste and ruin. He creates life."

Ethan's voice was quiet. "But when Satan's war shook the heavens, it shook everything. The rebellion did not stay in the spirit realm. It tore through the physical creation like a shockwave — like a trillion nuclear bombs exploding throughout the universe all at the same time. The planets were scarred. Their atmospheres burned away. Life was extinguished across the universe — and on this very earth, dinosaurs that had roamed for ages were wiped from existence.

“And the ‘cavemen’ creatures who walked upright and resembled men in their physical form — who had superior brains compared to the animals around them — yet who had never received the spirit of man that God would later breathe into Adam. Without that human spirit, they could not reason abstractly, create, read, or write. They were not men. They were the highest of the pre-Adamic creatures — and like everything else of that age, they were swept away. All of it — gone. Destroyed by the catastrophe of one created being's pride.”

"That is why the earth, when Moses described it in Genesis," Micah added, "was 'without form and void' — a dark, chaotic ruin covered in water. That was not the original creation. That was what was LEFT of it. When God said 'Let there be light' — that was a RESTORATION. A new beginning. Adam and Eve were not the first living creatures on this earth. They were the first of God's NEW creation — made in His very image, with a spirit that no animal before them had ever possessed."

Eleazar stared at him. "The science of our age — the fossil record, the geological strata, the ancient bones they dig from the earth—"

"All real," Ethan confirmed. "Evidence of what existed before. God's first creation, destroyed by Satan's rebellion. The scientists are not wrong about the bones. They are simply wrong about the reason."

Eleazar sat in stunned silence, processing the vast sweep of history that had just been laid before him.

"So, the evil in this world..." he began.

"Began before this world existed," Ethan confirmed. "When Satan fell, he did not simply disappear. He became the enemy of everything God created. When God made the earth and placed Adam and Eve in the garden, Satan was there — deceiving, corrupting, destroying. Every war, every murder, every lie, every act of cruelty in human history traces back to that original rebellion."

"And the man calling himself Roman Augustus?"

"Is Satan's final attempt to achieve what he failed to achieve in heaven — to be worshipped as God. He has possessed a human

body, declared himself divine, and demanded the worship of the world. It is the same sin, repeated one last time before the end.”

Eleazar thought of the Temple — HIS Temple — defiled by that man. That thing. He had built a throne for Satan and called it worship of the Most High.

“But he will fail,” Eleazar said. It was not a question.

“He already has,” Micah replied. “He failed the moment Yeshua rose from that tomb. The resurrection sealed Satan’s doom. Everything since then has been the desperate thrashing of a defeated enemy who knows his time is short.”

“Then why all this suffering? If he’s already defeated, why does God allow it to continue?”

Ethan smiled gently. “Because God is not only just — He is merciful. He is giving humanity every chance to choose. Every soul who turns to Him, even now, even in the midst of tribulation, is rescued from the enemy’s grasp. The delay is not weakness. It is love.”

“And when it ends?”

“When it ends, Yeshua will return — not as a suffering servant, but as a conquering King. Satan will be bound for a thousand years while Jesus Christ reigns on earth. Then, after a final rebellion, Satan and all who followed him will be cast into the lake of fire. And then...”

Ethan’s eyes seemed to glow with an inner light.

“Then comes eternity. A new heaven and a new earth. God dwelling with His people forever. No more death, no more sorrow,

no more pain. The story that began before creation will continue forever — but without sin, without rebellion, without the shadow of evil.”

Tears streamed down Eleazar’s weathered face. “From eternity past to eternity future. The Father and the Son... and all who choose to be part of their family.”

“Yes.” Micah placed a hand on the old rabbi’s shoulder. “That is the story. That is what everything is about. Not just Israel, not just the Temple, not just the Law — but the restoration of all things. The healing of the wound that Heylel inflicted on creation. The defeat of evil and the triumph of love.”

“A teacher once wrote a book about this,” Ethan said quietly. “He called it ‘The History of the World and Beyond.’ An appropriate title. The story goes beyond this world — both before it began and after it ends.”

Eleazar wiped his eyes. “I have wasted so much of my life. So many years serving in a system that I thought was God’s but was only a shadow. So many years rejecting the very Messiah I was supposed to be waiting for.”

“You see now,” Micah said. “That is what matters. The thief on the cross had only minutes to believe, and Yeshua promised him paradise. God does not count the years of blindness. He counts the moment of sight.”

The three of them sat in silence as darkness fell over Petra, the ancient city carved from rose-red stone.

Finally, Eleazar spoke. “What do I do now?”

“You teach,” Ethan said. “You take what you have learned and you share it with the refugees here. Many of them are Jews who still cling to the old understanding. Many of them rejected Yeshua just as you did. They need someone who can show them the truth — someone who walked the same path they walked.”

“And when the time comes,” Micah added, “you lead them. When Messiah returns, there will be those who recognize Him and those who do not. The remnant of Israel must be ready to welcome their King.”

“I will.” Eleazar’s voice was firm now, strengthened by purpose. “I will teach them everything. From before the beginning to beyond the end. The whole story.”

The Two Witnesses rose to leave.

“Wait,” Eleazar called. “Will I see you again?”

Micah turned back, his eyes holding sorrow and joy in equal measure. “We will return when the time is right. Continue teaching. Continue preparing the remnant. The day is coming when all of Israel will see their Messiah — and you will help them recognize Him.”

Then they were gone, vanishing into the narrow canyon as silently as they had come.

Eleazar sat alone in his cave, his mind full of eternities — the eternity before creation when only the Father and Son existed, and the eternity to come when evil would be no more.

For the first time since the Temple fell, Eleazar felt something he had thought was lost forever. Hope.

* * *

PART FOUR: THE TRUMPETS

CHAPTER 33

The First Trumpet

DAVID

Brussels, Belgium

September 2036

* * *

The sky turned to blood at 3:33 in the afternoon.

David was in his office when it happened. One moment, the sun was shining through his window. The next, the light shifted to a sickly crimson, as if the entire atmosphere had been dipped in rust.

Then the fire began to fall.

He ran to the window and watched in horror as streaks of flame descended from the heavens — not lightning, not meteors, but something else entirely. Fire mixed with what looked like hail, blazing trails across the sky before slamming into the earth below.

Brussels erupted in chaos. Buildings ignited. Trees exploded into flames. People ran screaming through the streets, their clothes and hair on fire.

David's phone buzzed with emergency alerts — dozens of them, cascading faster than he could read:

CATASTROPHIC FIRES REPORTED ACROSS NORTHERN EUROPE

SIMILAR EVENTS CONFIRMED IN SOUTH AMERICA, ASIA, AFRICA

GLOBAL EMERGENCY DECLARED

ESTIMATED ONE-THIRD OF VEGETATION DESTROYED

He stumbled back from the window, his mind racing. One-third. The phrase triggered something in his memory — something he had read in those desperate late-night study sessions when he was trying to understand what Roman Augustus truly was.

He pulled out his phone and searched his encrypted files for the passage he had saved:

"The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up." — Revelation 8:7 (KJV)

Hail and fire mingled with blood. A third of the trees.

It was happening. Exactly as written. The first trumpet had sounded.

* * *

The emergency session convened three hours later, after the fires had finally stopped falling from the sky. The damage reports were beyond comprehension.

"One-third of global forests — gone," the environmental minister reported, her face ashen. "The Amazon. The Congo Basin. The boreal forests of Canada and Siberia. All burning simultaneously. We've never seen anything like this."

"Crop damage is catastrophic," another minister added. "Coming on top of the existing famine, we're looking at potential extinction-level food shortages."

"What CAUSED this?" someone demanded. "Was it a solar event? An asteroid? A weapon?"

Silence fell over the room. No one had an answer.

No one except Roman Augustus, who sat at the head of the table with an expression David had never seen before. It wasn't fear. It wasn't confusion. It was... recognition. As if he had been expecting this.

"It was an attack," Roman said quietly.

"An attack? By whom? No nation has weapons capable of—"

"Not a nation." Roman's eyes swept the room, and David saw something flicker in their depths — something ancient and cold. "An enemy I have been fighting for a very long time. An enemy who refuses to accept that his time is over."

Apollyon leaned close to Roman and whispered something. Roman nodded slowly.

"There will be more," Roman announced. "This is only the beginning. But we will endure. We will adapt. And in the end, we will prevail."

David watched the exchange between Roman and Apollyon, his blood running cold.

They knew. They knew what this was. They knew it was coming.

And they were preparing for war — not against any earthly enemy, but against heaven itself.

* * *

That night, David added to his journal:

September 2036. The first trumpet has sounded. Hail and fire fell from the sky, exactly as Revelation 8 describes. One-third of all trees and vegetation destroyed in a single afternoon.

Roman knows what this is. He called it an "attack" from an enemy he's been fighting "for a very long time." He's not hiding it anymore — at least not from his inner circle. He sees himself at war with God.

How do you fight God? You don't. You can't. But Roman — or whatever is inside Roman — is going to try anyway. And millions more will die in the crossfire.

Six more trumpets to come. If the pattern holds, each will be worse than the last. A third of the sea turning to blood. A third of the fresh water poisoned. A third of the sun darkened.

And then the three "woes" — judgments so terrible that even the trumpet plagues pale in comparison.

I don't know how much longer I can stay here. But I don't know where else to go. The whole world belongs to him now.

God, if you're listening — I could really use some guidance.

He saved the entry and stared out his window at a sky still tinged with red, smoke from a burning world blotting out the stars.

Somewhere in Jerusalem, he knew, two men were still preaching.

Somewhere in the wilderness, believers were hiding and praying.

Somewhere in heaven, six more angels waited with trumpets in their hands.

The end was accelerating.

* * *

CHAPTER 34

The Seas Turn to Blood

MARIA

Safe House, Rural Nevada

October 2036

* * *

The ocean died on a Tuesday.

Maria was helping Ruth inventory their dwindling food supplies when Carlos burst through the basement door, his face ashen.

“The sea,” he gasped. “Turn on the radio. The sea—”

Michael was already reaching for the contraband shortwave they kept hidden beneath the floorboards. Static crackled, then resolved into a broadcaster’s voice — panicked, barely professional:

“...confirming reports from every coastal nation. The Pacific, Atlantic, Indian Oceans — all simultaneously affected. Marine biologists are describing it as... I’m told we have footage coming in from San Francisco Bay...”

A long pause. Then the broadcaster’s voice returned, shaking:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I... I don’t know how to describe what I’m seeing. The water is red. Not polluted. Not algae. Red like... like blood. And the fish — thousands of them, millions — floating on the surface. Dead. All of them dead.”

Maria felt her knees weaken. She sat down hard on a crate of canned vegetables.

Michael had his Bible open before the broadcast finished. His finger found the passage without searching — he had been expecting this.

“And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea: and the third part of the sea became blood; and the third part of the creatures which were in the sea, and had life, died; and the third part of the ships were destroyed.” He looked up, his eyes bright with a strange mixture of grief and vindication. “Revelation 8:8-9. The second trumpet.”

“A third of the ships,” Ruth whispered. “That’s...”

“Thousands of vessels. Cargo ships, tankers, fishing boats, cruise liners. A third of global shipping — gone.”

Maria closed her eyes, trying to comprehend the scale of it. A third of the world’s oceans turned to blood. A third of all marine life — billions upon billions of creatures — dead in an instant. The fishing industry, already devastated by the famine, now utterly destroyed.

And this was only the second trumpet. Five more remained.

“How do they explain it?” he asked. “The government — what are they telling people?”

Carlos laughed bitterly. “Volcanic activity. Simultaneous underwater eruptions triggered by tectonic shifts. They’re calling it a ‘natural disaster of unprecedented scale.’”

“And people believe that?”

“What choice do they have? The alternative is admitting that everything we’ve been teaching is true.” Michael’s voice was gentle but firm. “Most people would rather believe the most absurd lie than accept that God is judging the world for its rebellion.”

* * *

That night, after the others had gone to sleep, Michael found Maria sitting alone by the single candle they allowed themselves after dark.

“You’re troubled,” he said, lowering himself onto a wooden crate across from her.

“How can you tell?”

“Forty years of teaching. You learn to read faces.” He smiled. “What’s weighing on you?”

Maria was quiet for a moment. Then: “When I fled Madrid, I thought I was the only one. The only person who saw through the lies, who questioned the Roman Catholic Church, who searched for truth. Then I found you and the others, and I realized there were more of us than I knew.”

“But?”

“But we’re so FEW, Michael. Seventeen people in a basement in Nevada. A few hundred in Hong Kong, a few thousand scattered across the globe. Against billions who took the mark. Against the entire world system.” She looked up at him, her eyes glistening. “Are we really all that’s left?”

Michael was silent for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was heavy with decades of accumulated wisdom — and sorrow.

“Not all,” he said. “There are others. More than you know.”

“Where?”

“Some are hidden, like us — underground communities, wilderness camps, refugees in remote places. The woman in Hong Kong with her children. The rabbi in Petra with his flock. Believers scattered across every continent, surviving in the shadows.”

“But others are dying by the millions. And we’re hiding in basements. How is that a victory?”

“Because this life isn’t the measure, Maria. The resurrection is.” Michael leaned forward, his eyes intense. “Everyone who dies faithful — everyone who refuses the mark, who holds onto truth, who endures to the end — they’ll be raised when Christ returns. The first resurrection. Immortal bodies, eternal life, a place in His Kingdom FOREVER.”

“The great multitude,” Maria whispered, remembering the passages they had studied.

“Yes. Revelation 7 (KJV): ‘After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.’” Michael’s voice grew thick with emotion. “And when John asks who they are, he is told: ‘These are the ones who died in the great tribulation. They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them white.’” NLT

“Millions of martyrs.”

“Millions. Perhaps tens of millions. People who woke up too late to escape the tribulation, but not too late to choose the right side. People who discovered the truth and repented — yes, some of them will be there too, if they truly turned. People who had never heard the full gospel until the Two Witnesses preached it, and then believed and obeyed.”

Maria felt tears sliding down her cheeks. “But they all have to die first.”

“In this age, yes. But death is not the end. It’s a doorway.” Michael reached out and took her hand. “The early Christians understood this. They faced lions in the arena singing hymns. They were burned as torches in Nero’s gardens, praising God. They knew something we’ve forgotten in our comfortable modern world: that to die for Christ is gain, not loss.”

* * *

THE PLACE OF SAFETY

Somewhere in the Wilderness

The Same Night

[A window into another world — 12,000 souls, protected]

* * *

Seven thousand miles away, in a place known only to God and those He had led there, Grace Pham sat beneath a canopy of stars and wept.

Not from sorrow. From overwhelming gratitude.

Around her, the community slept peacefully — twelve thousand souls gathered from every nation, speaking a hundred languages, united by one faith. They had arrived here in the early days of the tribulation, before the mark was mandated, before the borders closed, before escape became impossible.

The Philadelphians, some called them — after the church in Revelation 3, the faithful ones to whom Christ had promised: “Because you have patiently obeyed Me..., therefore I will protect you from the time of Great Tribulation and temptation, which will come upon the world to test everyone alive.” (v.10; TLB)

While the world burned, they were sheltered. While billions took the mark, they remained untouched. While the trumpets sounded and the judgments fell, they lived in a bubble of divine protection that defied every natural law.

But they were not idle.

Every day, from dawn until dusk, the community gathered for teaching. Not casual Bible studies or feel-good devotionals — intensive, systematic instruction in the full counsel of God. The history of the true Church from the first century onward. The prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, explained verse by verse. The holy days and their meaning. The plan of salvation from Genesis to the New Jerusalem.

They were being prepared.

When the King returned, when the Millennium began, someone would need to teach the nations. Millions of survivors — confused, traumatized, their worldviews shattered — would need patient guides who could explain what had happened and why. Who could

teach them God's laws, His Sabbaths, His holy days, His way of life.

The twelve thousand would not be alone in this work. They would serve alongside all the resurrected saints from every age — Abel and Enoch and Noah. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses and David and all the prophets. John the Baptist and the apostles. Paul and Polycarp and Polycrates and countless faithful believers who had died over two millennia of church history.

But the twelve thousand would be the ones who had lived through the tribulation without dying, who had witnessed the beast system from their place of refuge, who could say to the survivors: We saw what you saw. We know what the world became. And we can show you the way forward.

That was why they studied so intensely. That was why the Two Witnesses visited them periodically, appearing without warning, teaching for days at a time before vanishing back to Jerusalem to continue their public ministry. That was why every moment of protection was also a moment of preparation.

Grace had been a software engineer in Singapore when she first encountered the truth — a chance conversation with an elderly American teacher who had explained things about the Bible that her Catholic school had never taught. The Sabbath. The truth about Easter, Xmas, heaven, hell. The identity of the beast. The timeline of prophecy.

She had studied. Prayed. Changed her life. And when the call came — a whisper in her spirit, a certainty that couldn't be explained — she had sold everything, quit her job, and followed the instructions that led her here.

Here. To this place where food appeared each morning like manna. Where water flowed from rocks that should have been dry. Where twelve thousand believers lived in community, studying Scripture, worshipping together, being trained for the work ahead.

“You’re awake.”

Grace turned. Elder Thomas — one of the community’s teachers, a gentle Jamaican man who had been among the first to arrive — settled onto the rock beside her.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she said. “The news...”

“The second trumpet.”

“Yes.” Grace hugged her knees to her chest. “The oceans dying. Ships destroyed. And out there — our families, our friends, everyone we left behind...”

“Suffering the consequences of choices they made.” Thomas’s voice was sad but steady. “We warned them, Grace. We all warned our loved ones. Some listened. Most didn’t.”

“My mother took the mark. My brothers. My nieces and nephews.” Grace’s voice cracked. “They thought I was insane. A cult member. A fool. And now...”

“Now they’re experiencing what we told them was coming.” Thomas was quiet for a moment.

Grace wiped her eyes. “The teaching today — about the Millennium — it made me think about what comes after all this. When He returns, and we leave this place...”

“Then the real work begins.” Thomas smiled. “Everything we’re learning here — all the prophecy, all the history, all the truths

about God’s plan — we’ll be teaching it to the nations. Imagine it, Grace. A thousand years of peace. A world finally living by God’s laws. And us, working alongside Abraham and David and the apostles, helping to restore what sin destroyed.”

“Do you think the Witnesses will visit again before the end?”

“Perhaps. They come when they’re needed — when there’s something specific God wants us to understand. Last time they were here, Ethan spent three days teaching us about the identity of the Lost Ten Tribes — who they became, where they are today, and why God is calling them home right now. Micah taught us about the true identity of Babylon the Great — and he named her without flinching.” Thomas’s voice grew reverent. “To be taught by God’s own witnesses, face to face... our ancestors would have wept for such an opportunity.”

“When they first came here,” Thomas continued, “a woman named Carol Briggs recognized Ethan immediately — they had attended the same university, where he had been a star on the basketball team and she a cheerleader. She hadn’t seen him since graduation, but some people you never forget. And a man named Frank Dolan, from Ohio, nearly wept when he saw Micah. Said he had known him since the nineties. Both of them confirmed what we already believed — that these were real men, called by God, not apparitions, not angels. Just two faithful servants doing what God had asked of them.”

“How long? How much longer until He returns?”

“The Witnesses have been prophesying for almost three years. When their testimony is complete — when the beast is permitted to kill them — then the final trumpet will sound. Months, perhaps. A year at most.”

“And then?”

“And then we leave this place and join Him. The first resurrection for those who died faithful, and transformation for those of us still alive. The marriage supper. The beginning of everything we’ve been training for.” Thomas smiled in the starlight. “Hold on, child. The night is darkest just before dawn. And the dawn is almost here.”

* * *

MARIA

Safe House, Nevada

Later That Night

* * *

Maria found Michael still awake, reading by candlelight.

“You mentioned others,” she said. “Hidden ones. But you said ‘not all’ — like there were some who weren’t hiding. Some who weren’t in danger.”

Michael set down his Bible. “You’re perceptive.”

“Tell me.”

He was quiet for a long moment. Then: “Do you remember the letters to the seven churches in Revelation?”

“The beginning of the book. Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos...”

“Philadelphia was the sixth. The faithful church. The one with no condemnation — only praise.” Michael’s voice grew reverent. “To them, Christ promised something unique: ‘I will protect you from the time of Great Tribulation and temptation, which will come upon the world to test everyone alive.’ (v.10; TLB)

“What does that mean?”

“It means there are some — a small group, a remnant within the remnant — who were spiritually ready when the tribulation began. They had been faithfully keeping God’s commandments, observing His Sabbaths, growing close to Him for years before the end came. And when the moment arrived, He removed them. Protected them. Hid them in a place of safety for the duration.”

“How many?”

“About twelve thousand. A tiny fraction of those who claim to follow Christ. The Roman Catholic Church has over a billion members, Maria. The Protestant denominations have hundreds of millions more. And God’s true church — His little flock — numbers perhaps twelve thousand.”

Maria felt the weight of that settle over her. “And we’re not among them.”

Michael was quiet for a long moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was heavy with something Maria couldn’t quite identify.

“You’re not among them,” he said carefully. “Most of us here learned these things DURING the tribulation, not before. That’s why you’re here, hiding in basements, instead of there, protected by God’s direct hand.”

Maria caught the distinction immediately. “You said ‘you.’ Not ‘we.’”

Michael closed his eyes.

“Michael... were you offered the place of safety?”

The silence stretched so long that Maria thought he wouldn't answer. Then:

“Yes.”

The word hung in the candlelit air like a confession.

“I had been teaching these truths for over forty years,” Michael continued, his voice barely above a whisper. “The Sabbath. The plan of God. The identity of the beast. I knew what was coming. I was ready — spiritually ready — when the call came.”

“Then why...” Maria couldn't finish the question.

“Why am I here instead of there?” Michael opened his eyes, and Maria saw tears glistening in the candlelight. “Because I looked at the people who were just discovering the truth — people like you, Maria, people who were waking up too late to escape but not too late to choose — and I couldn't abandon them.”

“You gave up protection... for us?”

“For everyone I could help. The twelve thousand in the place of safety — they have the Two Witnesses visiting them, teaching them, preparing them. They have each other. But the great multitude? The millions who are finding truth in the fire? They needed teachers too. Someone who understood the prophecies. Someone who could explain what was happening and why. Someone who could help them hold on until the end.”

Maria stared at him. This elderly man — this gentle teacher who had taken her in when she arrived half-starved and terrified from Madrid — had given up divine protection to stay in the danger zone. To teach. To guide. To help people like her survive long enough to be saved.

“Michael...” Her voice broke. “You could die out here. We all could.”

“Yes.” He smiled gently. “But if I die, I die faithful. And the resurrection is coming either way. Whether I’m protected in the wilderness or martyred in a basement, I’ll be there when the King returns. That is, as long as I stay faithful until the end. The only question was where I could do the most good in the meantime.”

“And you chose us.”

“I chose the great multitude. The latecomers. The ones who found truth at the eleventh hour.” Michael reached out and took her hand. “Maria, the thief on the cross had minutes to believe, and Jesus promised him paradise. You have months, maybe years. Your path is harder than the Philadelphians’, but it leads to the same place. Same destination, different journey.”

“And you’re walking it with us. Even though you didn’t have to.”

“A shepherd doesn’t abandon his sheep when the wolves come.” Michael squeezed her hand. “Besides, I’ve been teaching about the end times for four decades. What kind of teacher would I be if I ran away when they finally arrived?”

Maria couldn’t speak. She just held his hand and wept — not from sorrow, but from something she couldn’t name. Gratitude. Awe. The overwhelming realization that she was sitting with a man who

had chosen suffering over safety, danger over comfort, the great multitude over the protected few.

“When the King returns,” she finally managed, “when we’re all standing before Him together — the twelve thousand and the great multitude and all the resurrected saints — I’m going to tell everyone what you did.”

Michael laughed softly. “If you do, I’ll be terribly embarrassed. I didn’t do anything special, Maria. I just did what any real teacher would do. I stayed with my students.”

Outside, the Nevada wind howled across the desert — a world in torment, a creation groaning under the weight of judgment.

But in the basement, a teacher and his student sat in candlelight, their hearts fixed on a hope that no trumpet could destroy.

The second judgment had fallen.

Five more remained.

And somewhere beyond the blood-red seas and the burning forests and the suffering of billions, a King was preparing to return.

* * *

CHAPTER 35

Wormwood

ANNA

Hong Kong Underground

November 2036

* * *

The water turned bitter on a Thursday.

Anna was collecting rainwater from the drainage grate — their primary source of fresh water since the seas had turned to blood — when she noticed the color. Instead of the clear liquid she expected, the water pooling in her container had a faint greenish tinge, like oxidized copper.

She lifted it to her nose and recoiled. The smell was acrid, chemical, wrong.

"Don't drink that!"

Brother Timothy was running toward her through the tunnel, his face pale with alarm. "The rivers — all of them — they've been poisoned. We just heard on the radio. Every fresh water source on earth. Springs, streams, reservoirs — all of it contaminated."

Anna stared at the greenish water in her hands. "But this is rainwater. From the sky."

"The rain too. Whatever fell from heaven poisoned everything it touched." Timothy's voice shook. "They're calling it Wormwood. After the prophecy."

Anna set down the container carefully, as if it contained acid. Her mind raced through the Revelation passages James had taught her before his death.

"And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter." (Revelation 8:10-11; KJV)

The third trumpet. A third of the fresh water — poisoned.

"How are we supposed to survive?" she whispered. "The seas are blood. Now the rivers and rain are poison. What's left?"

Timothy had no answer.

* * *

The community rationed their remaining clean water with desperate precision. Every drop that had been collected before the poisoning became precious beyond measure. They calculated: at current consumption, they had perhaps two weeks.

Two weeks. And then?

Anna sat with Mei and Daniel in their corner of the tunnel, watching them sleep. They were so thin now — both of them, their cheekbones sharp beneath papery skin, their arms like sticks. The

famine had already pushed them to the edge. This new catastrophe might push them over.

"Mama?"

Mei's eyes fluttered open. Even in the dim light of their single candle, Anna could see the fear in them.

"I'm here, baby."

"I heard what Brother Timothy said. About the water." Mei's voice was small but steady — the voice of a child who had learned too young that the world was full of horrors. "Are we going to die?"

Anna pulled her daughter close. How do you answer that question? How do you tell a nine-year-old that yes, they might die — that death was stalking them from every direction — while still giving her hope?

"Do you remember what Papa used to say?" Anna asked softly. "About God's promises?"

Mei nodded. "He said God never breaks His promises. Even when everything looks impossible."

"That's right. And do you remember the promise about the resurrection?"

"That everyone who obeys God will live again. Even if they die first."

"Even if they die first." Anna kissed her daughter's forehead. "So, if we die, baby — if we die — it's not the end. It's just... falling asleep for a little while. And when we wake up, Papa will be there. And Jesus will be there. And there won't be any more hunger or thirst or hiding in tunnels."

"Promise?"

"Promise. God's promise, not just mine."

Mei was quiet for a moment. Then: "Mama, I miss Papa."

"I know, baby. I miss him too. Every day."

"When Jesus comes back... will Papa really be there? Will he remember us?"

Anna felt tears sliding down her cheeks. "He'll remember everything. He'll be the same Papa who used to carry you on his shoulders and sing you songs at bedtime. The same Papa who loved you more than anything in the world. He's just... waiting for us. On the other side of the resurrection."

"How much longer until Jesus comes?"

"Soon, baby. The two witnesses are still preaching in Jerusalem. When their work is done — when the last trumpet sounds — then He will come. And everything will be different."

Mei snuggled closer. "I can wait. If Papa's waiting too, I can wait."

Anna held her children — her thin, hungry, brave children — and prayed silently into the darkness.

Heavenly Father, I don't know how we survive two more weeks without water. I don't know how we survive two more days. But You fed Israel manna in the wilderness. You made water flow from rocks for Moses. You kept Elijah alive by ravens during the drought. If You want us to live, You will provide. And if You want us to come home to You... then we're ready. Just please — please — let my children see their father again.

* * *

Three days later, the sun went dark.

Not completely — not like an eclipse or a blackout. But at noon, when the Hong Kong sun should have been blazing overhead, the light that filtered into their tunnel was dim and sickly, like perpetual twilight.

Anna climbed to the surface to see for herself. What she found made her gasp.

The sun was still there — a pale disk in the sky, barely brighter than the full moon. The blue of the heavens had been replaced by a sickly gray, as if the atmosphere itself had been drained of color. Shadows were muted, uncertain. It was noon, but it felt like the hour before a storm.

"The fourth trumpet," Timothy said beside her. He had followed her up. *"And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise."* (Rev. 8:12; KJV)

A third of the sun's light — gone. A third of the day plunged into darkness.

"What does it mean?" Anna asked. "For crops? For temperatures?"

"Nothing good. Less light means less photosynthesis. Crops that were already failing will fail faster. And the cold..." Timothy shivered, though the air wasn't particularly chill. "Without the sun's full warmth, temperatures will drop. Not everywhere, not all at once, but enough. The famine will get worse."

Anna looked up at the pale, diminished sun and thought of her children huddled in the tunnel below.

Four trumpets now. Four judgments poured out on a world that had chosen the beast. The trees and grass burned. The seas turned to blood. The fresh water poisoned. The sun darkened.

And still, the world refused to repent.

She had seen the news reports — smuggled broadcasts, overheard conversations, fragments of information that filtered down to the underground. Roman Augustus was still in power. The World Unity Government was still functioning, barely. And the marked populations were still cursing God, still blaming the believers, still doubling down on their allegiance to the beast.

How much more would it take? How many more plagues before they saw the truth?

Most of them never will, Anna realized with a chill that had nothing to do with the dimmed sun. They've chosen. They've committed. And now they'll ride their choice all the way to the lake of fire rather than admit they were wrong.

* * *

On the fifth day after the water turned bitter, Brother Timothy called the community together.

"I have news," he said. "Some of it good. Some of it... miraculous."

The nineteen survivors — all that remained of the Hong Kong underground church — gathered close.

"Sister Margaret went to check the old cistern this morning — the one we'd written off as contaminated months ago. She found it full. Full of clean water."

Murmurs rippled through the group.

"That's impossible," someone said. "The cistern was empty. And even if it wasn't, the Wormwood would have poisoned it like everything else."

"I know." Timothy's voice was hushed with wonder. "I tested it myself. It's clean. Pure. No trace of the poison. And there's enough to last us... I don't know how long. Weeks, at least. Maybe longer, if it keeps refilling."

"Keeps refilling?"

"Margaret said she watched it. The level rose while she was there. Slowly, like a spring bubbling up from below. But there's no spring in that location. There never has been."

Silence fell over the group. Then, one by one, people began to weep. Not from sorrow — from relief, from gratitude, from the overwhelming realization that God had not forgotten them.

Anna thought of her prayer in the darkness. *You made water flow from rocks for Moses.*

He had heard. He had answered.

"There's more," Timothy continued. "The network in the Philippines — the one we couldn't reach — they made contact last night. They've found a route. Fishing boats that avoid the blood-zones, crews who are sympathetic. Food is coming. Not much, but something. Enough to keep us alive."

"How?" Anna asked. "Every port is monitored. Every ship is scanned."

"I don't know how. I just know it's happening." Timothy looked around at the ragged group — the thin faces, the hollow eyes, the bodies that had been pushed past every reasonable limit. "Brothers and sisters, we've been asking how we survive. I think the answer is: we don't. Not on our own. We survive because God provides, one day at a time, one miracle at a time. Just like Israel in the wilderness. Just like Elijah by the brook."

"And if the miracles stop?" someone asked quietly.

"Then we go home to the Lord. And we wake up in the resurrection." Timothy smiled — a genuine smile, despite everything. "Either way, we win. The beast can kill our bodies, but he can't touch our souls. And he can't separate us from the love of God. That's the promise. That's what we hold onto."

Anna looked at Mei and Daniel, who were watching the proceedings with wide eyes. They had heard everything — the desperation, the miraculous provision, the talk of death and resurrection.

"Mama," Daniel whispered. "Is God taking care of us? Like He took care of Papa?"

Anna knelt beside her son. "Yes, baby. He's taking care of us. And He's taking care of Papa too, until we see him again."

"Good." Daniel nodded solemnly. "Then I'm not scared anymore."

Out of the mouths of babes, Anna thought. Her seven-year-old had just articulated the essence of faith better than any theologian: *God is taking care of us. So I'm not scared.*

She gathered her children close and held them as the community began to pray — nineteen voices raised in thanksgiving for water that shouldn't exist and food that was somehow coming.

Above them, the dimmed sun continued its pale journey across a darkened sky.

But in the tunnels beneath Hong Kong, there was light.

* * *

That night, Anna wrote in the journal she had started keeping after James's death:

November 2036

Four trumpets have sounded. A third of the earth is burned. A third of the sea is blood. A third of the fresh water is poisoned. A third of the sun's light is gone.

And somehow, we're still alive.

James used to talk about the great multitude — the millions who would come out of the tribulation with their robes washed white. I think I understand now what that means. It doesn't mean we escape the suffering. It means we go through the suffering and come out on the other side still believing.

I'm part of the great multitude now. So are my children. So is everyone in this tunnel. We didn't find the truth early enough to be protected in the place of safety. But we found it early enough to refuse the mark. Early enough to choose the right side.

James, I'm keeping our children alive. I'm keeping them faithful. And when the King returns, we'll all be together again. You, me, Mei, Daniel. A family reunited.

I love you. I miss you.

See you soon.

She closed the journal and lay down beside her sleeping children.

Outside, the world continued to die.

Inside, a widow and her children dreamed of the resurrection.

Three more trumpets remained.

And the worst was yet to come.

* * *

CHAPTER 36

The Locusts

ANNA

Hong Kong

December 2036

* * *

The screaming started at dawn.

Anna woke to a sound she had never heard before — a chorus of agony rising from the streets above, hundreds of voices crying out in unison. It wasn't the sharp scream of sudden injury or the wail of grief. It was something else. Something sustained. Something that spoke of pain beyond endurance.

"Stay here," she told Mei and Daniel, who were clutching each other in the dim light of the tunnel. "Don't come up. No matter what you hear."

She climbed the ladder to the surface, heart pounding.

What she saw would haunt her for the rest of her life.

The sky was black with them — not birds, not insects, but something in between. Creatures the size of horses, with wings that buzzed like helicopters and faces that were almost human. Their bodies were armored like tanks, gleaming in the pale sunlight. Their tails ended in curved stingers that dripped with venom.

Locusts. But not like any locust nature had ever produced.

They swarmed through the streets of Hong Kong, descending on everyone they encountered. And everyone they touched... screamed.

Anna watched a businessman in an expensive suit collapse on the sidewalk, clawing at his arm where a locust had stung him. His whole body convulsed. Foam flecked his lips. The mark on his hand — the UEI that allowed him to buy and sell — seemed to glow with a sickly light as he writhed in agony.

Another locust swooped toward Anna.

She froze. There was no time to run, no place to hide. The creature's human-like face turned toward her, its eyes — compound eyes, insectoid and alien — seeming to evaluate her.

And then it turned away.

It flew past her as if she didn't exist, heading toward a woman fleeing down the street. The woman's scream joined the chorus as the stinger found her neck.

Anna looked at her hands — her unmarked hands — and understood.

* * *

"They're not touching us."

Brother Timothy had gathered the community in the deepest part of the tunnel, as far from the surface as they could get. But it didn't matter. The locusts had found their way underground — through ventilation shafts, through cracks in the concrete, through openings no one had known existed.

And they were ignoring every single one of the unmarked believers.

"I walked right through a swarm of them," old Mrs. Chen said, her voice trembling. "They parted around me like water around a stone. Didn't even brush my skin."

"Same here," another voice added. "One landed on my shoulder. Just sat there for a moment, then flew away. Like it was confused."

Timothy opened his worn Bible to Revelation 9. His hands were shaking.

"And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads." He looked up. "The seal of God. That's us. Everyone who refused the mark — we have God's seal instead. The locusts can't touch us."

"But everyone else..." Anna whispered.

"Everyone else is being tormented. For five months, according to the prophecy. Five months of pain like scorpion stings. Five months of agony so intense that people will seek death and not find it."

"Not find it?"

Timothy read the next verse: *"And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them."*

A chill ran down Anna's spine. She had seen suffering before — the famine, the persecution, James's execution. But this was

different. This was torment without the mercy of death. This was pain prolonged indefinitely, denied even the relief of ending.

"It's the first woe," Timothy continued quietly. "The fifth trumpet brings the first woe. There are two more after this."

No one had anything to say to that.

* * *

The weeks that followed were surreal.

Outside, Hong Kong had become a city of the damned. The streets were empty of movement but full of bodies — not corpses, but living people writhing on the ground, unable to escape the locusts that returned again and again to sting them. Hospitals overflowed. Morgues stood empty because no one was dying — they just kept suffering.

The news — what little they could access — reported the same scenes worldwide. Beijing, Tokyo, Moscow, Rome, Mexico City. Everywhere the mark had been received, the locusts followed. Everywhere people had chosen the beast, the torment found them.

And everywhere people had refused the mark, there was protection.

Anna ventured to the surface daily now — not from necessity, but from a strange compulsion to witness. The locusts swirled around her like autumn leaves, never landing, never stinging. She could walk through clouds of them untouched, a ghost moving through a nightmare.

It was on one of these walks that Mei found her.

"Baby, I told you to stay below." Anna's voice was sharp with fear. "It's not safe up here."

"But it is safe. For us." Mei looked around at the locusts hovering nearby, maintaining their distance. "They won't hurt us. You said so."

"I know, but—"

"Mama, why?"

Anna stopped. "Why what, baby?"

"Why doesn't God help them too?" Mei pointed at a woman lying in a doorway, curled in a fetal position, whimpering. "She's hurting so much. Why does God protect us but not her?"

It was the question Anna had been dreading. The question she had been asking herself every time she walked through the untouched horror of the streets.

She knelt beside her daughter, taking her hands.

"Do you remember the story of Pharaoh? The one Papa used to tell you?"

Mei nodded. "The king who wouldn't let God's people go. And God sent the plagues."

"That's right. God sent plague after plague — frogs, flies, hail, darkness. Each time, He was giving Pharaoh a chance to change his mind. To let the people go. To choose differently."

"But Pharaoh didn't."

"No. He kept hardening his heart. He kept choosing wrong, even when he could see the consequences." Anna glanced at the woman in the doorway. "That's what's happening now, baby. God has been warning the world for years — through the two witnesses, through the plagues, through everything that's happened. He's been saying 'turn back, turn back.' But most people won't listen. They chose the beast. They took the mark. And now..."

"Now they're suffering."

"Yes. Not because God wants them to suffer. But because they chose something that leads to suffering. They chose to follow the Devil instead of God. And that choice has consequences."

Mei was quiet for a long moment, watching the locusts swirl overhead.

"Can they still change their minds? Can they still choose Jesus?"

Anna hesitated. This was the hardest part — the part that kept her awake at night.

"The Bible says they'll curse God instead of repenting. They'll blame Him for their pain instead of recognizing that it came from their own choices."

"That's sad."

"Yes. It's the saddest thing in the world." Anna pulled her daughter close. "That's why we pray for them, Mei. Even now. We pray that some of them will wake up, will see the truth, will turn before it's too late."

"I'll pray," Mei said quietly. "Every day."

They walked back to the tunnel entrance together, mother and daughter, untouched by the plague that tormented the world.

Behind them, the woman in the doorway moaned and cursed the God she had rejected.

* * *

FIVE MONTHS LATER

May 2037

* * *

The locusts vanished as suddenly as they had appeared.

One morning, Anna climbed to the surface and found empty skies. No buzzing wings, no hovering swarms, no nightmare creatures patrolling the streets. Just silence — and the groans of the marked as they slowly, painfully, began to recover.

Five months. Exactly as prophesied. One hundred and fifty days of torment, and then... nothing.

"It's over," she reported to the community. "The first woe has passed."

No one celebrated. They all knew what came next.

Timothy read the passage aloud: *"One woe is past; and, behold, there come two woes more hereafter."*

Two more woes. The sixth trumpet — whatever that would bring. And then the seventh, which would herald the return of the King.

"How much longer?" someone asked.

"The two witnesses have been prophesying for over three years," Timothy said. "Their testimony is nearly complete. When the beast is permitted to kill them — and when God raises them three and a half days later — then the seventh trumpet will sound."

"Months, then."

"Months. Perhaps weeks. We're in the final stretch."

Anna looked at her children — Mei, now ten years old and wise beyond her years; Daniel, eight, still clinging to the simple faith that had carried him through every horror. They had survived the famine. Survived the mark. Survived the poisoned water and darkened sun and five months of demonic locusts that somehow, miraculously, had never touched them.

They would survive the rest. They had to.

Because somewhere, on the other side of the resurrection, James was waiting.

And Anna had promised her children they would see their father again.

* * *

That night, Daniel asked a question that surprised her.

"Mama, when the locusts were here — when they couldn't hurt us — I felt something. Like... like someone was holding me. Keeping me safe." He struggled to find the words. "Was that God?"

Anna smiled through sudden tears. "Yes, baby. That was God. His seal on you — on all of us. It's not just a mark that keeps the locusts away. It's His presence. His protection. His promise that He'll never leave us or forsake us."

"I like that feeling," Daniel said simply. "I want to feel it forever."

"You will, baby. In the Kingdom — in the new world that's coming — that feeling will never go away. We'll be with God always. No more fear, no more hiding, no more plagues. Just... peace. Forever."

Daniel nodded, satisfied. Then he closed his eyes and was asleep within minutes — the deep, peaceful sleep of a child who knows he is loved and protected.

Anna watched him breathe and thought about what he had said. *Like someone was holding me.*

She had felt it too, she realized. Throughout the five months of the locust plague, even as she walked through swarms of the creatures, there had been a warmth around her. A sense of invisible arms. A whisper that said, *You are mine, and nothing can touch you without my permission.*

The seal of God. Not just protection from locusts, but communion with the Almighty. A foretaste of the eternal presence they would experience when the King returned.

For the first time in months, Anna fell asleep without fear.

The first woe had passed.

Two more remained.

And beyond them, blazing on the horizon like the dawn of a new creation, the King was preparing to return.

* * *

CHAPTER 37

The Eastern Army

And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them!

Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea!

For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.

— Revelation 12:7-9, 12 (NKJV)

DAVID

Brussels, World Unity Government Headquarters

June 2037

* * *

The Euphrates had run dry.

David stared at the satellite imagery on his screen, trying to comprehend what he was seeing. The great river — the ancient

boundary between East and West, the waterway that had nourished civilizations for six thousand years — was gone. Not diminished, not reduced to a trickle. Gone. A cracked mudflat stretched where the waters had flowed since the dawn of human memory.

And across that mudflat, an army was marching.

"Two hundred million." General Franz Brühl's voice was hollow. He stood beside David in the command center, watching the same feeds. "We've confirmed it. Two hundred million soldiers from the Eastern Coalition. China, Russia, India — every Asian power united under one banner, crossing into the Middle East."

"That's impossible," someone muttered. "No army in history—"

"Nothing is impossible anymore." Brühl's laugh was bitter. "Rivers turn to blood. Locusts torture the world for five months. The sun goes dark. And now the largest military force ever assembled is marching toward us." He looked at David. "You've read the prophecies, Hartley. You know what this is."

David knew. He had memorized the passage years ago, back when he still thought the Bible was mythology:

¹³ Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, ¹⁴ saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." ¹⁵ So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind. ¹⁶ Now the number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million; I heard the number of them." (Revelation 9; TLB)

Two hundred million soldiers.

The sixth trumpet. The second woe.

And a third of mankind was about to die.

* * *

Roman Augustus addressed the world that evening.

David watched from the back of the broadcast studio as the Antichrist stood before the cameras, his presence radiating supernatural charisma even through the screen. The face that had once seemed merely handsome now appeared almost luminous — a false light, David knew, borrowed from the father of lies.

"Citizens of the World Unity Government," Roman began, his voice carrying the hypnotic resonance that had captivated billions. "We face our greatest challenge yet. The Eastern powers — nations that refused to embrace our unity — now march against us with unprecedented force. But we have faced existential threats before, and we have prevailed."

David felt sick. He remembered the "existential threat" Roman was alluding to — the first strike that had established the UNITED STATES OF EUROPE as the dominant world power. The strike that had eliminated America and Britain.

"We will not surrender what we have built," Roman continued. "We will not bow to those who cling to ancient divisions. And when this is finished, there will be only one power on earth — one government, one system, one humanity united under one vision."

His eyes seemed to blaze with unholy fire. "Our enemies thought they could challenge us. They were wrong. Just as the USA was

wrong. Just as England was wrong. Just as all who oppose the new order are wrong."

The broadcast ended. Roman turned and looked directly at David.

"You doubt me, Hartley."

It wasn't a question.

David's blood went cold. "Sir, I—"

"You've doubted me for three years. Don't insult my intelligence by denying it." Roman walked closer, and David resisted the urge to flee. "I've allowed it because you're useful. Your documentation skills, your attention to detail — valuable assets. But I've always known where your heart truly lies."

"I've served you faithfully—"

"You've served yourself. You've hedged your bets, kept your options open, documented everything in case the wind shifted." Roman smiled — a terrible expression that had nothing human in it. "I don't blame you. Self-preservation is the most basic instinct. But the time for hedging is over, David. What's coming will require total commitment. From everyone."

He leaned close, and David smelled something ancient and sulfurous on his breath.

"Choose your side carefully. The wrong choice will cost you everything."

Then he walked away, leaving David trembling in the empty studio.

* * *

DAVID

Brussels

July 2037

* * *

The dying began three weeks later.

David watched the reports flood in — casualty figures so staggering they seemed meaningless. The Eastern army had engaged Roman's forces across multiple fronts, and the destruction was unlike anything in human history. Both sides were throwing everything they had at each other — and the world was being destroyed in the crossfire.

Fire, smoke, and brimstone poured from the weapons of war — conventional at first, then increasingly exotic. Chemical agents. Thermobaric bombs. Tactical nuclear strikes. And then something else, something the military briefings couldn't explain. Plagues that swept through entire cities in hours. Firestorms that erupted spontaneously in civilian centers. Death that came from nowhere and everywhere at once.

"By these three was the third part of men killed, by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone, which issued out of their mouths." (Revelation 9:18; KJV)

A third of mankind. David ran the numbers obsessively, watching the death toll climb toward the prophesied figure. After the famine and the plagues and the locusts — and after the nuclear annihilation of America and the English-speaking nations at the start of the tribulation — perhaps three billion people remained alive on earth. A third of three billion was another billion souls.

One billion people. Dead in a matter of weeks.

And David wasn't protected.

He understood that now, with terrible clarity. The 144,000 who had been sealed by God were protected — the true believers who had survived the Great Tribulation. But David hadn't committed. He had documented and observed and hedged his bets, exactly as Roman had said.

And now, when the fire and smoke and brimstone came for Brussels, there would be nothing standing between David and death.

Unless he did something.

* * *

The emergency briefing was chaos.

"Munich is gone," someone was shouting. "The entire city — firestorm, no survivors."

"Shanghai reports twenty million dead in the last six hours—"

"Both fronts are collapsing. If this continues, there won't be anyone left to rule—"

David stood against the wall, watching the commanders argue, watching Roman's advisors scramble for solutions that didn't exist. The war wasn't being fought by humans anymore — not really. Supernatural forces were at work, angels of death released to slay a third of mankind, and no military strategy could counter that.

But amid the chaos, David noticed something else.

A junior aide — a young woman named Sarah — had slipped out of the briefing room. David had seen her before, always quiet, always watchful. Always careful to keep her right hand hidden.

He followed her.

She ducked into a storage room on the lower level. David waited a moment, then pushed the door open.

Sarah spun around, terror on her face. Behind her, huddled against the wall, were four other people — an older man with gray hair and weathered hands, a teenage boy, a woman clutching a toddler, and an elderly woman who looked like she hadn't slept in weeks.

None of them had the mark.

"Please," Sarah whispered. "Please don't report us. We're just trying to survive until—"

"Until Jesus returns."

David's voice was quiet. Sarah's eyes went wide.

"You... you know?"

"I know." David looked at the small group — believers hiding in the belly of the beast, waiting for deliverance. "I've known for three years. I've documented every crime of this government, every atrocity of Roman Augustus. I've watched the prophecies unfold, one by one, exactly as the Bible said they would."

"Then why..." Sarah's voice cracked. "Why are you still here? Why are you serving him?"

The question hit David like a physical blow.

Why was he still here?

Fear. Cowardice. The belief that he could do more good from the inside. A thousand excuses that had seemed reasonable at the time but now, in the face of this woman's raw courage, crumbled to dust.

"I was afraid," he said finally. The words tasted like ash. "I was a coward."

"And now?"

David looked at the group — the aide, the teenager, the mother and child, the elderly woman. And the older man, who was watching him with eyes that seemed to see right through his soul.

"Now," he said, "I'm going to get you out of here."

* * *

That night, while they waited for the surveillance shift to change, the older man told his story.

His name was Thomas Whitfield. He had been a pastor in Oklahoma City — until there was no Oklahoma City left.

"I was in Amsterdam for a conference when the bombs fell," he said, his voice heavy with three years of grief. "Spring of 2034. Just after Roman Augustus came back to life on Easter Sunday. I watched on a hotel television as mushroom clouds bloomed over New York. Washington. Los Angeles. Chicago. Dallas." He paused. "My wife was in one of those cities. My children. My grandchildren."

David felt his stomach turn. "I knew about the strikes, but... I never heard details. The government suppressed most of the information."

"Of course they did." Thomas's laugh was hollow. "They couldn't let people know the full scope. America, Canada, Britain, Australia, New Zealand — all of them, hit simultaneously. Over five hundred million people dead in a single morning. The greatest massacre in human history, and most of the world barely remembers it now."

"Why?" David asked. "Why those specific nations? Why not Russia, or China, or—"

"Because they had to be eliminated first. Roman couldn't consolidate power while America and Britain still stood. They would have opposed him, fought back, rallied resistance." Thomas looked at David with eyes that had seen too much. "But that's only the political reason. There's a deeper one. A prophetic one."

"What do you mean?"

Thomas leaned forward. "Do you know who the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel are?"

David frowned. "The tribes that were carried away by Assyria? They disappeared into history."

"They didn't disappear. They migrated. Over centuries, they moved northwest through the Caucasus — that's where the word 'Caucasian' comes from — and eventually settled in northwestern Europe and the British Isles. And from there, they spread to America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand." Thomas's voice grew intense. "The English-speaking nations aren't just political allies."

They're brothers. Descendants of JOSEPH — Ephraim and Manasseh. Part of God's chosen people."

David stared at him. "You're saying America is... Israel?"

"Part of Israel, yes. The nation in the Middle East that calls itself Israel today — they're really Judah. One tribe out of twelve. The Jews are Israelites, but not all Israelites are Jews. Most of the tribes settled elsewhere and lost their identity over the millennia." Thomas shook his head. "The tribulation we're living through — it's God's judgment on ALL of Israel. Judah in the Middle East, yes, but also Ephraim and Manasseh in America and Britain. All of them, being punished for their sins."

"Punished? For what?"

Thomas's eyes blazed. "For EVERYTHING! Over sixty million babies murdered through abortion in America alone. Sexual perversion celebrated as virtue. The name of God mocked in every institution. Marriage redefined. Children corrupted. Every abomination the Bible warns against, flaunted openly and proudly." His voice broke. "I preached against it for thirty years, and nobody listened. The churches compromised. The government embraced evil. And God... God finally said 'enough.'"

Silence hung in the storage room.

"I used to wonder why God would allow nuclear war," Thomas continued quietly. "How He could permit such devastation against nations that were supposedly Christian. But we weren't Christian. We had the name, but not the reality. We had churches on every corner and wickedness in every heart. We called ourselves 'one nation under God' while sacrificing our children to Molech in abortion clinics."

He looked at David with devastating clarity.

"God didn't destroy America. America destroyed itself. The bombs were just the final punctuation mark on a sentence we had been writing for generations."

David couldn't speak. He had known the tribulation was prophesied, had understood intellectually that the plagues and judgments were divine punishment. But hearing it from this man — this pastor who had lost everything, who had watched his nation burned to ashes for its sins — made it real in a way nothing else had.

"Why are you telling me this?" he finally managed.

"Because you need to understand what's at stake." Thomas reached out and gripped David's arm. "This isn't just politics. This isn't just war. This is the final act of a cosmic drama that began in Eden. God is judging the nations — ALL the nations — and separating the wheat from the chaff. Everyone has to choose. There's no more fence to sit on."

"I've already chosen," David said quietly. "I'm getting you out of here."

Thomas studied his face for a long moment. Then he nodded.

"Then may God protect you, son. Because where you're going, you're going to need it."

* * *

DAVID

Brussels

August 2037

* * *

Over the next six weeks, David became someone he no longer recognized.

By day, he continued his work — attending briefings, documenting decisions, maintaining the facade of loyal service. By night, he used his security clearance to forge travel documents, redirect supply shipments, create gaps in surveillance coverage.

The network grew. Sarah connected him with other hidden believers scattered throughout the government complex. Thomas knew safe houses across Europe where resistance networks still operated. The teenage boy turned out to be a genius with electronics, capable of looping security cameras and spoofing biometric scanners.

And one by one, families began to disappear.

Not reported missing — that would trigger investigations. Just... gone. Reassigned to fictional posts in regions too chaotic to verify. Transferred to facilities that existed only on paper. Evacuated during emergencies that David helped manufacture.

Forty-seven people in six weeks. Men, women, children. All unmarked. All believers. All smuggled out of Brussels to safe houses where other networks would protect them until the King returned.

It wasn't enough. It could never be enough. The death toll from the sixth trumpet had passed a billion and was still climbing. The Eastern army and Roman's forces were annihilating each other — and the civilian populations caught between them. The world was being destroyed, and David was saving people by the dozens while millions died.

But forty-seven people would live to see the King return.

And for the first time in three years, David felt something like peace.

* * *

The night before the final transport, David did something he hadn't done since childhood.

He prayed.

Not the formal prayers of his Lutheran upbringing, recited without feeling or faith. This was something raw and desperate, words torn from the deepest part of his soul:

God — if You're there, if You're listening — I'm sorry.

I've known the truth for years. I've watched the prophecies unfold. I've seen the beast for what he is. And I did nothing. I told myself I was gathering evidence, making a difference from the inside, but I was just scared. Scared of dying. Scared of losing everything I'd built.

I don't deserve forgiveness. I don't deserve protection. I know I'm not part of the 144,000 — I didn't commit in time. I'll probably die before this is over.

But if there's any chance — any mercy left for a coward who finally found his courage — please let me see You. Not here, not now. In the resurrection. Let me stand before Your throne and know that in the end, when it mattered most, I chose the right side.

I believe You are who the Bible says You are. I believe Jesus is the Messiah. I believe He's coming back, soon, to end all of this.

Please forgive me. Please remember me.

Amen.

He didn't feel angels singing. He didn't see visions or hear voices. But something shifted in his chest — a weight lifting, a darkness receding. For the first time in three years, David Hartley felt clean.

He didn't know if God had heard him. He didn't know if forgiveness was possible for someone who had waited so long.

But he knew he was done hedging his bets.

Tomorrow, he would lead the final group out of Brussels. Twelve more believers — including three children — waiting for deliverance.

And whatever happened after that was in God's hands.

* * *

Outside, the sky glowed red with distant fires.

The sixth trumpet was still sounding. The army of two hundred million was still locked in combat with Roman's forces. Both sides were being decimated — and somewhere in the chaos, generals on both sides were beginning to realize that if the war continued, there would be no one left to claim victory.

But the war wouldn't continue much longer.

Soon — very soon — something would happen that would make both armies forget their differences. Something that would unite them against a common enemy.

The King was coming.

And when He arrived, every army on earth would turn their weapons toward Jerusalem, convinced they could destroy the God who had created them.

They would gather at a place called Armageddon.

And they would learn how wrong they were.

* * *

CHAPTER 38

The Martyr

DAVID

Brussels, World Unity Government Headquarters

September 2037

* * *

The last transport was supposed to be the easiest.

Twelve believers — three families, including five children — gathered in the basement loading dock at 0300 hours. David had planned everything meticulously: the surveillance loops, the forged transit papers, the supply truck that would carry them to the safe house in Luxembourg. Six weeks of successful operations had taught him what worked and what didn't.

He should have known it was too easy.

"Everyone in the truck," David whispered, helping a mother lift her toddler into the cargo bed. "Quickly. We have a twelve-minute window before the next patrol."

The families moved with practiced silence — they had been hiding for months, learning to exist without making a sound. Within two minutes, all twelve were concealed behind crates of medical supplies, invisible to anyone who didn't know exactly where to look.

David climbed into the driver's seat and reached for the ignition.

The loading dock lights blazed on.

"David Hartley."

The voice echoed through the concrete space like a death sentence. David's blood turned to ice.

Roman Augustus stepped out of the shadows, flanked by a dozen armed guards. His smile was the smile of a predator who had finally cornered his prey.

"Did you really think I didn't know?"

* * *

They dragged the families out of the truck one by one.

David watched helplessly as the children were torn from their parents' arms, as the men were forced to their knees, as the women sobbed and pleaded. Twelve people. Twelve souls he had promised to save. Now they would die because of him.

"I've been watching you for weeks," Roman said, circling David like a shark. "Forty-seven people. Forty-seven rats scurrying out of my headquarters under your protection. I have to admit, I'm impressed. Your security protocols were almost flawless."

"Almost?"

"You trusted Sarah." Roman's smile widened. "Poor, frightened Sarah, hiding in storage rooms, so desperate for a savior. She came to me the day after you found her. Told me everything."

David felt the words like a knife in his gut. Sarah. The young aide who had connected him with the network, who had helped plan every operation, who had prayed with him in the darkness.

"She was never one of them," Roman continued. "She took the mark years ago. But she's very good at pretending. I've found that true believers are remarkably easy to deceive when you tell them what they want to hear."

"The others," David said, his voice hoarse. "The forty-seven who already escaped—"

"Rounded up this morning. All of them. The safe houses weren't as safe as you thought." Roman stopped in front of David and tilted his head, studying him like an insect. "You saved no one, David. All those risks, all that courage you finally discovered — it was all for nothing."

The words should have broken him. Six weeks of hope, erased. Forty-seven people — no, fifty-nine now — condemned to death because he had trusted the wrong person.

But something strange happened instead.

David felt peace.

Not happiness. Not relief. But a calm certainty that settled over him like a blanket, warming him despite the cold concrete and the guns pointed at his head.

"You're wrong," he said quietly.

Roman raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"You can kill their bodies. You can kill mine. But you can't touch their souls. Every one of those people — every one of us — will be

raised when Jesus returns. We'll live forever, and you..." David looked into the eyes of the Antichrist and saw, for the first time, what lay behind them. An ancient hatred. A desperate fear. A being who knew his time was almost over. "You'll burn. Forever. In the lake of fire that was prepared for you before the world began."

Roman's face contorted with rage.

"I am a GOD!" he screamed. "I have conquered nations! I have commanded the worship of billions! I have—"

"You have nothing." David's voice was steady. "You're a puppet. A meat suit for a fallen angel who's been losing the same war for six thousand years. And you know it. That's why you're afraid. That's why the two witnesses in Jerusalem terrify you. That's why every plague makes you angrier instead of humbler. Because you know how this ends."

Roman backhanded him across the face. David tasted blood but didn't flinch.

"I'm going to kill you slowly," Roman hissed. "I'm going to make you beg for death. And when you finally die, I'm going to do the same thing to every believer in this building, in this city, on this planet."

"You can try," David said. "But your time is almost up. The witnesses have almost finished their testimony. When they die, you'll think you've won. Three and a half days later, you'll learn how wrong you were."

Something flickered in Roman's eyes. Fear. Doubt. The knowledge that David was speaking truth.

Then the mask slammed back into place.

"Take him to the execution chamber," Roman ordered. "And bring the families. Let them watch."

* * *

They gave him six hours.

Not out of mercy — Roman wanted time to gather an audience, to turn David's execution into a spectacle that would be broadcast to the world. Another lesson in the cost of resistance. Another demonstration of the beast's absolute power.

David spent the hours in prayer.

Not begging for rescue — he knew that wasn't coming. Not bargaining for more time — his time had run out the moment he chose to act instead of observe. Just... talking. To a God he had believed in intellectually for years but had only truly met a few weeks ago in a desperate midnight prayer.

Heavenly Father, I'm scared. I don't want to die. I don't want the pain that's coming.

But I know this isn't the end. You promised that everyone who believes in You will live, even if they die. I believe that now. I believe it with everything I am.

Please give me strength. Please help me not to deny You when the pain comes. Please let my death mean something — let someone who watches see Your truth through my faithfulness.

And please... take care of the others. The families I couldn't save. Thomas, and the children, and everyone who trusted

me. They're in Your hands now. Keep them faithful until You come.

I'll see You soon. On the other side.

Amen.

When the guards came for him, David was smiling.

* * *

The execution chamber had been a conference room once.

Now it was a theater of death. Cameras lined the walls, ready to broadcast to every screen on earth. Officials and dignitaries filled the gallery, their faces a mixture of anticipation and carefully cultivated indifference. The twelve families David had tried to save knelt along one wall, forced to watch what was about to happen.

The children were crying. David made himself look at them — at their terrified faces, their shaking bodies, their parents trying desperately to comfort them while soldiers held guns to their heads.

Remember their faces, he told himself. *Remember why you did this. Remember what matters.*

Roman stood at the center of the room, resplendent in a uniform that mixed military authority with religious symbolism. Behind him, a massive screen displayed the World Unity Government logo — the globe encircled by a serpent swallowing its own tail.

"Citizens of the world," Roman began, his voice carrying to billions of viewers. "Today we witness the consequences of

treason. This man — David Hartley — served in my administration for three years. He had access, privilege, trust. And he used all of it to betray humanity. To shelter the enemies of progress. To aid those who reject the unity we have built together."

David stood straight, his hands bound behind him, his eyes fixed on Roman.

"The penalty for treason is death," Roman continued. "But death can be instructive. It can remind us all of what we have to lose when we stray from the path of unity." He turned to David. "Do you have any last words for the world that's watching?"

The cameras zoomed in. Billions of eyes focused on David's face.

He thought about saying nothing. About denying Roman the satisfaction of a spectacle. But then he looked at the families — at Thomas Whitfield, the pastor from Oklahoma, kneeling with blood on his face but defiance in his eyes. At the children who would watch him die.

And he knew what he had to do.

"To anyone watching who hasn't taken the mark," David said, his voice clear and steady. "Don't. Whatever they threaten, whatever they promise — don't take it. It's the seal of your destruction. It separates you from God forever."

Roman's face darkened. "That's enough—"

"Jesus Christ is the Son of God!" David shouted, his voice rising above the guards moving toward him. "He died for your sins and rose from the dead! He's coming back — SOON — to destroy this system and establish His Kingdom! Everything in the Bible is TRUE! The prophecies, the promises, the—"

A guard slammed the butt of his rifle into David's stomach. He doubled over, gasping.

"Kill him," Roman snarled. "Now."

They forced David to his knees. A soldier pressed a gun to the back of his head.

In his final moment, David looked at the families one last time. At the children who would remember this day forever. At Thomas, whose lips were moving in silent prayer.

"I'll see you in the Kingdom," he said softly.

"No," Roman said, stepping forward. "You'll see nothing. You'll BE nothing. Just another corpse in a world full of corpses."

He took the gun from the soldier and pressed it against David's forehead.

"Any last words for your God?"

David closed his eyes.

"Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit."

Roman pulled the trigger.

* * *

THOMAS WHITFIELD

Brussels, Detention Center

Later That Day

* * *

They threw Thomas into a cell and left him there.

He knelt on the cold floor and wept — for David, for the families, for the world that was dying in fire and madness. He had watched a man of God die with Christ's name on his lips, and he knew he would be next. They would work through all of them, one by one, making examples until there was no one left to make examples of.

But as he wept, something caught his eye.

A small object in the corner of the cell, half-hidden beneath a pile of debris. Metal and plastic, barely larger than a deck of cards.

A data drive.

Thomas crawled toward it, his heart pounding. He had heard David mention his documentation — three years of evidence, encrypted and hidden, waiting for the right moment.

Had David somehow...?

He turned the drive over. Etched into the casing, so small he almost missed it, was a single word:

TRUTH

Thomas clutched the drive to his chest and began to laugh — a broken, joyful sound that echoed off the cell walls.

Roman thought he had won. Thought he had silenced David forever. Thought that killing the man would bury the evidence.

But David had planned for this. Somewhere, somehow, he had hidden copies. And this one — this one had found its way to a prison cell, to a pastor who had lost everything, to a man who had nothing left to lose.

Three years of documentation. Every crime of the beast. Every atrocity of the false prophet. Every lie, every murder, every act of wickedness — recorded, encrypted, waiting to be revealed.

Thomas didn't know how he would escape. Didn't know if he would live long enough to share what the drive contained. But he knew one thing with absolute certainty:

David Hartley had not died for nothing.

The truth would survive.

And soon — very soon — the King would come to reveal it to the world.

* * *

In Jerusalem, the two witnesses continued their testimony.

They had been prophesying for almost 1,260 days now — calling down plagues, preaching repentance, declaring the coming of the King. The world hated them with a passion that bordered on insanity. Every day, people tried to kill them. Every day, fire came from their mouths and consumed their attackers.

But their time was almost complete.

Soon — in just days — the beast would be permitted to overcome them. Their bodies would lie in the streets of Jerusalem while the world celebrated. Gifts would be exchanged. Parties would be held. Humanity would rejoice that the "troublemakers" were finally dead.

Three and a half days of celebration.

And then the breath of God would enter them.

And then the seventh trumpet would sound.

And then David Hartley — and James Chen, and every martyr who had died faithful — would open their eyes to a new world.

The wait was almost over.

* * *

CHAPTER 39

The Witnesses Fall

ROMAN AUGUSTUS

Jerusalem

September 2037

* * *

For 1,260 days, they had tormented him.

Two men who had stood unmovable in the streets of Jerusalem for three and a half years — shutting the heavens, turning water to blood, striking the earth with plague after plague. Every attempt to kill them had failed — assassins burned alive by flames from their mouths, soldiers struck dead where they stood, armies turned back by plagues that appeared from nowhere.

The world called them the Two Witnesses. Roman called them a humiliation.

For three and a half years, while he consolidated his empire, while he demanded worship, while he crushed every resistance and implemented the mark that bore his name — these two prophets had stood in open defiance. Preaching repentance. Declaring judgment. Proclaiming that a “King” was coming to destroy everything Roman had built.

But today was different.

Today, the voice that guided him — the ancient presence that had empowered his rise — whispered something new:

“Their time is complete. They are yours.”

Roman smiled.

* * *

The Two Witnesses stood where they always stood — in the plaza near the Temple Mount, surrounded by the bodies of those who had tried to harm them over the years. Ethan was speaking, his voice carrying across the city with supernatural clarity:

“The kingdoms of this world are about to become the Kingdom of our Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ! Repent! The day of judgment is at hand!”

Roman approached them alone. No guards, no weapons, no entourage. Just a man walking toward two prophets who had killed thousands with the power of their words.

The Witnesses turned to face him. Their eyes — knowing, filled with a light that had nothing to do with the sun — studied him without fear.

“Roman Augustus,” Micah said. His voice was like thunder and honey, terrible and beautiful at once. “The beast who rises from the abyss. We have been expecting you.”

“Then you know why I’m here.”

“We know.” Ethan stepped forward. “Our testimony is complete. Our work is finished. What happens next has been written since before the foundation of the world.”

“You’re not going to fight?”

“We have never fought for ourselves. Only for the truth.” Micah looked at Roman with something that might have been pity. “You think this is your victory. But you are merely playing the role assigned to you — the beast who kills the witnesses, exactly as prophesied. Even in your triumph, you serve our God’s purposes.”

Rage flared in Roman’s chest. “Your God is DEAD! Your prophecies are LIES! I am the only god this world needs!”

“Then prove it.” Ethan spread his arms. “Kill us. Let the world see the power of the beast. But remember this, Roman Augustus: in three and a half days, you will learn how wrong you are.”

Something cold slithered through Roman’s soul. A warning. A premonition. But the voice within him — the ancient hatred that had guided him since his transformation — screamed for blood.

He raised his hand, and power flowed through him like lightning.

The Two Witnesses died where they stood.

* * *

MARIA

Safe House, Nevada

The Same Day

* * *

The world erupted in celebration.

Maria watched the footage on the contraband television Michael had rigged — images broadcast to every screen on earth. The Two

Witnesses, lying dead in the streets of Jerusalem. Roman Augustus standing over their bodies, triumphant. Crowds gathering to cheer, to dance, to spit on the corpses of the men who had “tormented” them.

“They’re not even burying them,” Ruth whispered, her face pale. “They’re just... leaving them there.”

“Of course they are.” Michael’s voice was heavy. “The prophecy says their bodies will lie in the street for three and a half days. The whole world will watch. They’ll send gifts to each other. They’ll celebrate like it’s Christmas.”

The screen showed exactly that — people in cities around the world exchanging presents, throwing parties, dancing in streets that had been filled with suffering just days before. The death of the Two Witnesses had become a global holiday.

“Why?” Maria asked. “Why are they so happy? The witnesses never hurt innocent people. They only defended themselves against attackers.”

“Because the witnesses spoke truth,” Michael said quietly. “And truth torments those who love lies. Every time they preached, they reminded the world that its choices had consequences. That the mark was a seal of destruction. That judgment was coming.” He shook his head. “People would rather celebrate the death of the messenger than hear the message.”

Maria stared at the screen — at the bodies lying in the Jerusalem street, at the crowds taking selfies with the corpses, at the champagne being uncorked in Paris and Moscow and Beijing.

“Three and a half days,” she said softly. “That’s what you said. What happens after three and a half days?”

Michael smiled — the first smile she had seen from him in weeks.

“Everything changes.”

* * *

DAY TWO

Jerusalem

* * *

The party continued.

Roman had declared a global holiday — “Liberation Day,” he called it. Liberation from the prophets who had tormented them. Liberation from the old religions and their demands. Liberation from guilt and judgment and the threat of divine wrath.

The bodies of the Two Witnesses remained in the street, bloating in the Middle Eastern sun. No one was permitted to move them. Roman had ordered cameras trained on the corpses around the clock, broadcasting the image to every corner of the earth.

“Let them see,” he told Sixtus. “Let them see that there is no power greater than mine. No god stronger than what I have become. These prophets shut the heavens, turned rivers to blood, and unleashed plagues without end — and I killed them with a gesture. If THEY couldn’t stand against me, what hope does anyone else have?”

Pope Sixtus VI nodded, but something flickered in his eyes. “My lord... the prophecies they quoted. About rising after three days...”

“Lies. Wishful thinking. The desperate hope of dying men.” Roman waved dismissively. “They’re dead, Sixtus. Dead men don’t rise.”

“Of course, my lord.” Sixtus bowed. But as he left the chamber, he couldn’t shake the chill that had settled in his bones.

He had seen things in the past three years that defied explanation. Plagues summoned by the witnesses’ words. Fire from their mouths. Attackers struck dead without being touched.

If they could do all that while alive...

What might they do dead?

* * *

ANNA

Hong Kong Underground

Day Three

* * *

“Mama, why is everyone so happy that the prophets died?”

Mei’s question cut through the darkness of the tunnel. Above them, even in ruined Hong Kong, they could hear the sounds of celebration — music, fireworks, the drunken shouts of people who hadn’t had anything to celebrate in years.

Anna pulled her daughter close. “Because they don’t understand, baby. They think the prophets were their enemies. They don’t realize the prophets were trying to save them.”

“But the prophets are going to wake up, right? That’s what the Bible says?”

“Yes, baby. Three and a half days after they die, God will breathe life back into them. And they’ll stand up, and everyone who’s celebrating will...”

“Will be really scared,” Daniel finished, his eyes bright in the candlelight. “Because they’ll know they were wrong. They’ll know Jesus is real.”

“That’s right.” Anna stroked his hair. “And then the seventh trumpet will sound. And then...”

“And then Papa comes back!” Mei’s voice was breathless with hope. “He’ll be in the first resurrection, right Mama? That’s what you said. Everyone who died believing in Jesus and obeying God will wake up!”

Anna felt tears spring to her eyes. “Yes, baby. Papa will come back. James Chen will open his eyes, and he’ll have a new body that can never die, and we’ll be together again.”

“Forever?”

“Forever.”

The three of them huddled together in the darkness, listening to the celebrations above, counting the hours until everything changed.

One more day. Just one more day.

* * *

THE PLACE OF SAFETY

The Same Night

* * *

Grace Pham knelt in prayer with eleven thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine others.

The news of the witnesses' death had reached them yesterday, carried by the same supernatural communication that had guided them here three and a half years ago. They had mourned — how could they not? Ethan and Micah had visited this place, had taught them, had prepared them for the work ahead. To know they were lying dead in the streets of Jerusalem while the world celebrated...

But their grief was different from the world's joy. Because they knew what came next.

"Tomorrow," Elder Thomas said, his voice echoing across the valley. "Tomorrow, at the appointed hour, the breath of God will enter them. They will stand on their feet. And fear will fall on all who see them."

"And then?" someone asked.

"And then they will hear a voice from heaven saying, 'Come up here.' And they will ascend to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies watch." Thomas's voice grew reverent. "And in the same hour, there will be a great earthquake. A tenth of Jerusalem will fall. Seven thousand will die. And the rest will be terrified and give glory to God."

"The second woe," Grace whispered.

“Yes. The second woe is past. And behold, the third woe comes quickly.” Thomas looked at the stars. “The seventh trumpet. The return of the King. The resurrection of the dead in Christ. The transformation of those who are alive and remain.”

“Us.”

“Yes. Us. Tomorrow — or the day after, perhaps — we will leave this place. Not as refugees, but as the King’s honor guard. We will meet Him in the air, alongside every resurrected saint from every age, and we will descend to Jerusalem to witness the end of the beast’s reign.”

Grace thought of Michael Exton — her teacher, who had stayed behind to shepherd the great multitude. Was he still alive? Had he survived the tribulation? She didn’t know. But she knew this: whether alive or resurrected, she would see him again.

“Different path, same destination,” she murmured.

Thomas heard her and smiled. “Amen.”

The twelve thousand settled in to wait — not in fear, but in anticipation. The longest night was almost over.

Dawn was coming.

* * *

JERUSALEM

3½ Days After the Death of the 2 Witnesses

* * *

The cameras were still rolling.

Billions of viewers around the world were still watching, still celebrating, still toasting the death of the two prophets who had tormented them for 1,260 days. The party was winding down, but the satisfaction remained. The troublemakers were dead. The threats of judgment had proven empty. The beast had won.

In homes and bars and public squares across the planet, people raised their glasses one more time, laughing at the corpses on their screens.

And then the bodies moved.

At first, people thought it was a camera glitch. A trick of the light. The bodies had been lying in the sun for three and a half days — surely they were just settling, decomposing, shifting in the heat.

But then Micah opened his eyes.

And Ethan sat up.

And across the world, glasses shattered on floors as billions of people realized that everything they had celebrated was about to be undone.

The Two Witnesses rose to their feet.

And a voice from heaven — heard by every soul on earth — thundered:

"COME UP HERE!"

* * *

CHAPTER 40

The Seventh Trumpet

JERUSALEM

The Day of Trumpets — September, 2037

* * *

The Two Witnesses rose to their feet.

After three and a half days of lying dead in the streets of Jerusalem, broadcast to every screen on earth, mocked and celebrated by billions — they STOOD. Their eyes opened. Their lungs filled with air. Their bodies, which had begun to bloat in the Middle Eastern sun, were suddenly whole and radiant.

And then a voice from heaven — heard by every soul on earth — thundered:

"COME UP HERE!"

The witnesses began to rise.

Not walking. Not climbing. Rising — lifted by an invisible hand, ascending into the sky while the cameras rolled and billions watched in stupefied horror. The men they had celebrated killing, the prophets they had toasted and mocked, were floating upward into a cloud that had appeared from nowhere.

Roman Augustus stood in his command center, watching the feed, his face contorted with rage and disbelief.

"NO!" he screamed. "This is impossible! SHOOT THEM DOWN!"

But even as soldiers raised their weapons, the earth began to shake.

* * *

The earthquake struck Jerusalem with devastating force.

A tenth of the city collapsed in an instant — ancient buildings crumbling, modern towers toppling, streets splitting open to swallow vehicles and pedestrians. Seven thousand people died in the span of sixty seconds, their screams lost in the roar of destruction.

And above it all, the Two Witnesses continued their ascent — disappearing into the cloud, leaving behind a world that had just learned the terrible truth:

The God they had mocked was real.

And He was coming.

* * *

THE SEVENTH TRUMPET

* * *

And then the trumpet sounded.

Not like the trumpets before — not the supernatural blasts that had announced the plagues. This was different. This was FINAL. A sound that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, a note

that resonated in the bones of every human being on earth, a declaration that echoed across the cosmos:

THE KING HAS COME.

The sky split open.

Not like a storm. Not like an explosion. Like a curtain being drawn back to reveal what had always been there, hidden just beyond human perception. Light poured through the opening — light so brilliant that the sun seemed dim by comparison, light that was somehow warm and terrible at once.

And through that opening, riding on clouds of glory, came the Son of God.

Jesus Christ descended from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, with the trumpet of God. His eyes were like flames of fire. His robe was dipped in blood. On His thigh was written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Behind Him, an army of angels filled the sky — millions upon millions, their glory so intense that hardened soldiers fell to their knees and wept.

And in heaven, angelic voices proclaimed the words that the faithful had waited millennia to hear:

"The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!"

* * *

DAVID HARTLEY

Brussels — The Moment of the Resurrection

* * *

David opened his eyes.

The first thing he noticed was that he wasn't in pain. The last thing he remembered was the cold metal of Roman's gun against his forehead, the rage in the Antichrist's eyes, the words he had spoken: "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit."

Then darkness.

And now... this.

He was standing — though he had no memory of getting up. The mass grave where his body had been dumped with a hundred other martyrs was empty, the earth disturbed, the other graves around it similarly vacated. And he felt... different.

Strong. Whole. ALIVE in a way he had never been alive before.

He looked at his hands. They were his hands — he recognized them — but they seemed to glow with an inner light. He touched his face, his chest, his legs. No bullet wound. No pain. No weakness.

And then he heard the trumpet.

Not with his ears — with his entire being. A sound that called to him, drew him upward, filled him with a joy so intense it brought tears to his eyes.

He looked up and saw the sky split open, saw the King descending in glory, saw the angels filling the heavens like stars coming to life.

And David Hartley — the man who had waited too long, who had hedged his bets, who had finally found his courage in the darkness — began to rise.

"I made it," he whispered, tears streaming down his face as he ascended. "I actually made it."

All around him, other figures were rising too — men and women from all nations, their bodies transformed, their faces radiant with joy. The dead in Christ, rising first, exactly as the Apostle Paul had promised two thousand years ago.

David saw Thomas Whitfield among them — the pastor from Oklahoma. They locked eyes and laughed, the pure laughter of those who had passed through death and found life on the other side.

They rose together to meet their King.

* * *

JAMES CHEN

Hong Kong — The Moment of the Resurrection

* * *

James Chen opened his eyes.

The execution platform where he had died was gone — destroyed, perhaps, in the chaos of the tribulation. But he knew this place. He

was in Hong Kong, in the underground tunnels where Anna and the children had been hiding.

He had been buried nearby. He remembered now — vaguely, as if from a dream — the believers who had risked their lives to recover his body, to give him a proper burial instead of the mass grave the government had intended.

And now he was standing, whole and strong, his body pulsing with energy he had never known.

The trumpet sounded.

James felt himself being drawn upward — but something made him hesitate. A pull in his heart. A knowledge that there was someone he needed to see first.

He moved through the tunnels with impossible speed, his new body responding to his thoughts as if gravity and distance were merely suggestions. And there — huddled in a corner of the underground shelter, watching the chaos above through a cracked screen — he found them.

Anna.

Mei.

Daniel.

They turned and saw him — and time stopped.

"Papa?" Mei's voice was a whisper, disbelief and hope warring in her eyes.

"It's me, little one." James knelt down, opening his arms. "It's really me."

The children crashed into him, sobbing, laughing, touching his face as if to make sure he was real. Anna stood frozen for a moment, tears streaming down her face, her hand covering her mouth.

"You came back," she whispered. "You actually came back."

"I told you I would." James rose and took her in his arms, holding her as he had held her on their wedding day, as he had held her the night before his arrest, as he had dreamed of holding her in every moment of his imprisonment. "Death couldn't keep me from you. Nothing ever could."

The trumpet sounded again — insistent, calling.

"We have to go," James said. "All of us. The King has come."

Anna looked at him with wonder. "We... we can go with you?"

"You never took the mark. You obeyed God. You had faith in Jesus. You endured to the end." James smiled — a smile that seemed to carry all the light of heaven in it. "You're coming home."

And as he spoke, Anna felt her body begin to change. The weariness, the hunger, the scars of three years of hiding — all of it melting away, replaced by strength and light and immortal life.

The children rose beside her, their faces shining with wonder.

"Mama, look, I'm flying!" Mei cried out, her voice filled with pure joy.

"Papa, we're really flying!" Daniel shouted, laughing as he reached for his father's hand.

And the Chen family — reunited at last — rose together into the sky to meet their King.

* * *

THE PLACE OF SAFETY

The Same Moment

* * *

Grace Pham felt the change begin.

One moment she was standing in the valley with twelve thousand others, watching the sky tear open as Christ descended in glory. The next moment, her body was transforming — not painfully, but wonderfully, as if she were shedding a chrysalis she had never known she wore.

"In a moment," Elder Thomas whispered beside her, his own body beginning to glow. "In the twinkling of an eye. At the last trumpet."

The trumpet sounded again — and Grace's feet left the ground.

All around her, the twelve thousand Philadelphians were rising — the faithful remnant who had obeyed the call, who had fled to safety 1,260 days ago, who had been protected and trained for this very moment. They rose in a great wave of light, joining the resurrected dead who were already ascending from every corner of the earth.

And there — among the rising saints — Grace saw a face she had longed to see for three and a half years.

Michael Exton.

Her teacher. The man who had stayed behind to shepherd the great multitude. He had died the day after the two witnesses — she could see the marks of martyrdom transformed into badges of glory on his resurrection body — but he was alive now. Alive forever.

Their eyes met across the ascending multitude.

"Different path," Grace called out, her voice carrying with supernatural clarity.

Michael smiled — a smile of pure, unrestrained joy. "Same destination."

They rose together to meet the King in the air.

* * *

THE CLOUDS

* * *

They met Him in the air.

From every nation, tribe, tongue, and people — the saints of God rose to meet their King. The dead in Christ rose first, their bodies transformed in magnificent glory. Then the living who remained — 144,000 in all — who had endured to the end without taking the mark — changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, rising to join their brothers and sisters.

Abel was there — the first martyr, killed by his brother's hand at the dawn of human history.

Enoch was there — the man who walked with God.

Noah was there — the builder of the ark, who had saved humanity's remnant when the world drowned in its own wickedness.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were there — the patriarchs who had believed the promises without seeing their fulfillment.

Joseph was there — the son who had been sold into slavery in Egypt, and whose sons Manasseh and Ephraim would father the mightiest nations of the modern world.

Moses was there — the lawgiver, reunited with Joshua, his successor.

David the king was there — the man after God's own heart, his harp silent at last as a greater song filled the heavens.

Elijah was there — the prophet who had called down fire from heaven and confronted King Ahab and Queen Jezebel over their rank idolatry and pagan perversions.

Elisha was there — the prophet who had healed the sick, fed the hungry, raised the dead, and whose power was so great that even his bones brought a dead man back to life.

Daniel was there — the prophet who had seen this day in visions, who had written of the 1,335 days and the resurrection of those who sleep in the dust.

And then there were Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, extraordinary men of God who suffered greatly and yet remained faithful to the very end.

Stephen was there — the first martyr of the new covenant, who had seen the heavens open and Christ standing at the right hand of God even as the stones rained down upon him.

Peter, John, James, and Paul were there — the apostles who had spread the gospel to the ancient world.

Polycarp was there — burned at the stake for refusing to deny Christ.

Polycrates was there — the faithful elder who had defied the bishop of Rome rather than abandon the truth, his answer simple and unshakeable: "We must obey God rather than men."

And the women were there — those who had followed Jesus from Galilee, who had ministered to Him of their substance, who had stood at the foot of the stake when the world went dark.

Mary was there — the young woman from Nazareth who had believed the impossible and become the mother of the Messiah, and who had looked into her dying son's eyes from the stake when the world did not know what it was witnessing.

Mary Magdalene was there — she from whom He had cast out seven demons, who had been first to the tomb and first to hear her name spoken by the risen Christ.

Mary of Bethany was there, and Martha her sister — the one who had sat at His feet and chosen the better part; the other who had looked into His face at the death of Lazarus and declared, "I believe You are the Christ, the Son of God."

Joanna was there — who had left the comfort of Herod's court to walk the dusty roads of Galilee and support the ministry with her own means.

Salome was there — who had stood at the stake with the other women when darkness fell over the land, faithful when others had fled.

And from Israel's long history came Sarah, who had laughed and then believed; Rahab of Jericho, whose scarlet cord had become a thread of salvation; Deborah, who had judged a nation and led it to victory; Ruth, whose loyalty had become legend; and Esther, who had risked everything with "If I perish, I perish."

And alongside the heroes of faith stood the unknown faithful — the millions of ordinary men and women who had believed and endured, who had kept the commandments of God and held the testimony of Jesus, who had washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb through tribulation and faith.

David Hartley was among them.

James Chen and Anna Chen were among them.

Michael Exton was among them.

Maria Santos was among them.

Grace Pham was among them.

Eleazar was among them.

All of them, together at last, surrounding the King they had served and the Savior they had loved.

* * *

THE DESCENT

The Mount of Olives

* * *

And then they descended.

Jesus Christ — King of Kings, Lord of Lords — led His immortal army toward Jerusalem. Behind Him came the resurrected saints, millions strong, descending like stars falling to earth in slow motion.

His feet touched the Mount of Olives — the same mountain where He had wept over Jerusalem, the same mountain from which He had ascended to heaven two thousand years ago. And as His feet touched the ground, the mountain split in two.

A great valley opened from east to west, exactly as Zechariah had prophesied. The earth itself bowed before its rightful King.

And in the ruins of Jerusalem — amid the rubble of the earthquake, the devastation of three and a half years of tribulation — the remnant of humanity looked up and saw what they had denied, what they had fought, what they had cursed:

God had come to earth.

And nothing would ever be the same.

* * *

ROMAN AUGUSTUS

Jerusalem

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Roman Augustus watched the sky fill with his enemies — and for the first time in his supernatural existence, he felt something he had never expected to feel:

Fear.

The witnesses had risen. The dead were rising. Christ Himself was descending with an army of immortals. Everything the prophets had warned, everything the believers had proclaimed, everything he had dismissed as lies and delusions — it was happening. Now. Before his eyes.

And the voice within him — Satan's voice, the ancient hatred that had driven him to this moment — screamed in desperate fury:

"FIGHT! GATHER THE ARMIES! WE CAN STILL WIN!"

Roman turned to his generals. "Mobilize everything. Every soldier, every weapon, every missile. Contact the Eastern Coalition — tell them the real enemy has arrived. Tell them to meet us at Armageddon."

The generals stared at him in disbelief. "Sir... you want us to fight... GOD?"

"I want us to survive." Roman's eyes blazed with unholy fire. "Now GO!"

As they scrambled to obey, Roman looked back at the sky — at the King descending with His army, at the Mount of Olives splitting

beneath His feet, at the world he had conquered crumbling before true power.

Three and a half years ago, the Two Witnesses had told him the truth:

"You are merely playing the role assigned to you — the beast who kills the witnesses, exactly as prophesied. Even in your triumph, you serve our God's purposes."

They had been right.

But he would not surrender.

Not yet.

Not ever.

* * *

And so the stage was set.

The King had come. The saints had risen. The Mount of Olives had split. And now the armies of the world — the European forces under Roman Augustus, the Eastern Coalition that had been fighting for world supremacy — stopped their war against each other and turned to face a common enemy.

They would gather at Armageddon — Mount Megiddo, fifty miles north of Jerusalem. From there, they would march south to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, to confront the God they had denied and cursed and mocked.

They would fail.

But before that final confrontation, the King had other business to attend to. Seven final plagues to pour out on a world that still refused to repent. A wedding feast to celebrate with His bride. A Kingdom to establish.

And standing beside Him, radiant with eternal glory, the saints waited to witness what they had been promised since the foundation of the world:

The end of wickedness.

The beginning of peace.

The reign of the King.

* * *

CHAPTER 41

The Seven Bowls

JERUSALEM

September 2037

* * *

Christ had returned. The saints had risen. And still, humanity refused to repent.

From His throne on the Mount of Olives, Jesus looked out over a world that had cursed His name, murdered His servants, and taken the mark of His enemy. The time for warning had passed. The time for mercy had ended. Now came the final punishment — the seven bowls of God's wrath, poured out in rapid succession on a world that had chosen darkness over light.

Seven angels stood before the throne, each holding a golden bowl filled with the fury of the Almighty.

"Go," Christ commanded. "Pour out the bowls of God's wrath upon the earth."

* * *

THE FIRST BOWL

Grievous Sores

* * *

The first angel poured out his bowl upon the earth.

Across the globe, every person who bore the mark of the beast — the 666 or Roman tattooed on their right hand or forehead — erupted in foul, loathsome sores. Not simple boils or rashes, but putrid, oozing wounds that spread across their skin like a plague.

In Roman's command center, his generals collapsed in agony, clawing at their flesh as the sores appeared. Soldiers dropped their weapons, screaming. Pilots lost control of aircraft. The machinery of war ground to a halt as billions writhed in torment.

Roman himself was not spared. He watched in horror as the mark on his hand — the symbol of his authority — became the source of his agony. Black, festering wounds spread up his arm, and for the first time, the Antichrist screamed in pain.

Pope Sixtus VI, watching from Rome, fell to his knees as sores covered his body. "Why?" he gasped. "We serve the true god! Why does he punish us?"

But even in their agony, they did not repent.

* * *

THE SECOND BOWL

The Seas Turn to Blood

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The second angel poured out his bowl upon the sea.

Every ocean, every sea, every saltwater body on earth turned to blood — not the color of blood, but actual blood, thick and

coagulating, the blood of a dead man. The stench was overwhelming. The sight was apocalyptic.

And everything in the sea died.

Whales, dolphins, sharks, fish of every kind — billions upon billions of creatures, floating dead in an ocean of blood. The fishing industry collapsed. Coastal communities that had survived the tribulation now faced starvation. The smell of death hung over every coastline on earth.

Still, they did not repent.

* * *

THE THIRD BOWL

Rivers and Springs Become Blood

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The third angel poured out his bowl upon the rivers and springs of water.

Now every freshwater source on earth turned to blood. The Nile. The Amazon. The Mississippi. The Yangtze. The Rhine. The Danube. Every river, every stream, every underground spring — blood.

And the angel proclaimed: "You are righteous, O Lord, because You have judged these things. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. It is their just due."

David Hartley, standing with the resurrected saints on the Mount of Olives, watched the judgment unfold. He thought of all the martyrs whose blood had been spilled — James Chen, beheaded in Hong Kong. Thomas Whitfield's congregation, massacred in Oklahoma. The millions who had died rather than take the mark.

"Blood for blood," he murmured. "They wanted blood. Now they have it."

* * *

THE FOURTH BOWL

Scorching Heat

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The fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun.

The sun's intensity multiplied. Temperatures that had been brutal became lethal. Crops that had survived the previous plagues withered in minutes. The earth itself seemed to be on fire.

And men blasphemed the name of God who had power over these plagues, and they did not repent to give Him glory.

Even now — covered in sores, dying of thirst, fatal heat — they cursed the God who offered them mercy. They shook their fists at the sky. They blamed Christ for their suffering, never acknowledging that they had brought it upon themselves.

* * *

THE FIFTH BOWL

Darkness and Pain

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The fifth angel poured out his bowl upon the throne of the beast.

Roman Augustus's kingdom — the European Federation, the territories he had conquered, every nation that had sworn allegiance to him — was plunged into supernatural darkness. Not the darkness of night, but a thick, tangible blackness that could be felt, that pressed against the skin, that seemed alive with malice.

And with the darkness came pain — fierce, unrelenting agony that compounded the suffering of the sores, the thirst, the burns. People gnawed their tongues in anguish. They screamed into the void. They begged for death.

But they did not repent of their deeds.

In his command bunker, Roman Augustus sat in the darkness, his body wracked with sores and burns, his throat parched with blood-thirst, and he raged against the God who was systematically destroying everything he had built.

"I will not bow," he snarled into the blackness. "I will NEVER bow."

And Satan's voice whispered back: "Then we fight. One final battle. Gather the armies at Armageddon."

* * *

THE SIXTH BOWL

The Euphrates Dries Up

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The sixth angel poured out his bowl upon the great river Euphrates.

The ancient river — which had marked the boundary between East and West since the dawn of civilization — dried up completely. Its waters evaporated in an instant, leaving a cracked, barren riverbed that stretched for hundreds of miles.

And the way was prepared for the kings of the East.

The Eastern Coalition — China, Russia, India, and their allies — had been fighting Roman's European forces for supremacy even as the tribulation raged. Now, with the Euphrates gone, nothing stood between their massive armies and the Middle East.

But something changed their purpose.

Three demons — spirits like frogs — emerged from the mouths of Satan, the beast, and the false prophet. They spread across the earth, whispering to the rulers of every nation, performing signs and wonders, gathering them for one final purpose:

War against God.

The Eastern armies that had been fighting Roman now joined him. Every military force on earth — regardless of prior allegiance — turned their weapons toward a single target:

Jerusalem.

They gathered at a place called in Hebrew: Armageddon.

* * *

From the Mount of Olives, Christ watched the armies of the world converge.

Behind Him stood His immortal army — the resurrected saints of all ages, radiant with glory, awaiting their King's command. They had no weapons, no armor, no military strategy. They didn't need any.

The battle would not be won by human means.

David Hartley stood near the front, still marveling at his resurrection body, still overwhelmed by the reality of his salvation. Beside him, James Chen held Anna's hand, their children pressed close, the family that death itself could not separate.

"They're actually going to do it," James said, watching the distant dust clouds of approaching armies. "They're going to attack Christ."

"They have no choice," Michael Exton replied. "Satan has deceived them completely. They actually believe they can win."

Grace Pham looked at her former teacher with wonder. "How do you know so much about all this?"

Michael smiled. "I spent fifty years studying it. But I never imagined I'd be standing here watching it happen."

The seventh angel raised his bowl.

The final judgment was about to fall.

* * *

CHAPTER 42

Armageddon

THE SEVENTH BOWL

Mount Megiddo — The Valley of Decision

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The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air.

And a voice from the throne thundered: "IT IS DONE."

The earth convulsed.

An earthquake unlike anything in human history tore across the planet. Not a local tremor, not a regional disaster — a global cataclysm that split continents, leveled cities, and reshaped geography. The great city of Rome — Roman's capital of commerce and pleasure — split into three parts and collapsed. Cities that had stood for millennia crumbled to dust. Islands sank beneath blood-red seas. Mountains flattened into plains.

And from the sky came hailstones.

Not ordinary hail — stones weighing a hundred pounds each, falling like bombs from heaven, crushing everything beneath them. Tanks crumpled. Aircraft were swatted from the sky. Soldiers who had survived sores and thirst and darkness and scorching heat were pounded into the earth by ice from above.

And still — impossibly, insanely — they blasphemed God because of the plague of hail, since that plague was exceedingly great.

* * *

MOUNT MEGIDDO

The Staging Ground

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Armageddon.

The word literally meant "Mount Megiddo" — a strategic hill overlooking the Valley of Jezreel, fifty miles north of Jerusalem. For millennia, it had been a crossroads of conquest. Babylonians, Egyptians, Canaanites, Israelites, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans — all had fought here. The blood of countless armies had soaked this ground.

Now it would host the final battle.

Roman Augustus stood on the ancient hill, surveying the forces that had gathered. Despite the plagues, despite the destruction, despite the obvious reality that they were fighting God Himself — the armies had come. European divisions, battered but operational. The Eastern Coalition, millions strong, their tanks and artillery stretching to the horizon. African militias, South American brigades, the remnants of the American military — all united under the demonic influence of the three frog-spirits, all convinced that this was their only chance for survival.

"How many?" Roman asked his commander.

"The largest military force ever assembled in human history."

Roman nodded, his body still covered in sores, his eyes burning from the residual darkness, his skin blistered from the scorching

sun. Every movement was agony. But the hatred that drove him — Satan's ancient, implacable hatred — overrode the pain.

"March south," he commanded. "To the Valley of Jehoshaphat. To Jerusalem. To the so-called King of Kings."

The armies began to move.

* * *

THE VALLEY OF JEHOSHAPHAT

The Kidron Valley — East of Jerusalem

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Jehoshaphat.

The name meant "judgment of the Eternal."

The deep ravine bordered Jerusalem on the east, running between the city and the Mount of Olives. It was here — according to the prophet Joel — that God would gather all nations for judgment. It was here that the final confrontation would occur.

The armies poured into the valley like a flood — tanks and troops, missiles and mortars, weapons that could level cities filling every inch of available ground. They looked up at the Mount of Olives, where Christ stood with His immortal army, and they prepared to attack the Creator of the universe.

Pope Sixtus VI had joined Roman at the front. Despite his agony, the false prophet still believed. "Our god will give us victory," he wheezed through cracked lips. "The true god always defeats the false."

Roman said nothing. Deep within him, buried beneath Satan's possession, a small voice whispered that this was madness — that he was leading millions to slaughter. But that voice had grown too weak to matter.

"ALL UNITS," he broadcast to the assembled armies. "ATTACK."

* * *

THE BATTLE

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It wasn't a battle.

It was an execution.

As the armies surged forward, Christ spoke a single word.

The saints never heard the word — it was beyond human comprehension, a syllable of divine power that unmade reality itself. But they saw its effects.

The attacking soldiers dissolved.

Their flesh melted while they stood on their feet. Their eyes dissolved in their sockets. Their tongues rotted in their mouths. Exactly as Zechariah had prophesied — instantaneous, total, inescapable destruction.

Millions of soldiers died in a single moment.

Their blood flowed through the valley — not trickling, but flooding. Rivers of blood poured through the Kidron, overflowing its banks, spreading across the land. For two hundred miles, the

blood rose as high as a horse's bridle — five feet deep, exactly as John had seen in his Revelation.

And the birds came.

Every vulture, every crow, every carrion bird on earth descended on the valley — called by an angel who had cried with a loud voice: "Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, both small and great."

The great supper of God. The feast of judgment. The end of human rebellion.

* * *

THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

* * *

The resurrected saints watched in stunned silence.

David Hartley had seen violence in his life — had experienced it firsthand when Roman's bullet ended his mortal existence. But nothing had prepared him for this. The sheer scale of the destruction. The absolute totality of God's judgment. The reality that human military might — the accumulated weaponry of all nations, the combined force of millions of soldiers — had been annihilated in a single instant by a single word.

"I thought it would be like this," Michael Exton said quietly. "But seeing it..."

"It's different when it's real," Grace Pham finished.

James Chen held his children close, shielding their eyes. It was instinct, the protective love of a father that death itself could not erase.

Anna pressed against his side. "Is it over?"

"Almost," James said. "But not quite."

He pointed to the valley below, where two figures still stood amid the carnage — miraculously preserved from the destruction that had claimed their armies. Roman Augustus and Pope Sixtus VI, the beast and the false prophet, alone in a sea of death.

Christ descended from the mountain.

* * *

THE BEAST AND THE FALSE PROPHET

* * *

Roman Augustus faced the Son of God.

Covered in sores, blistered by heat, weakened by thirst, standing ankle-deep in the blood of his annihilated army — he still refused to bow. Satan's pride, six thousand years in the making, would not allow surrender.

"You think You've won," Roman snarled. "This changes nothing. Humanity will always choose us over You. Give them a thousand years of Your rule, and they'll rebel again the moment they're free. We KNOW them. We MADE them what they are."

Christ looked at him with eyes that held no hatred — only sorrow. The same sorrow He had shown when He wept over Jerusalem two thousand years ago, knowing the destruction that was coming.

He gestured, and angels seized Roman and Sixtus — pulling them from the blood-soaked ground, binding them with chains of light.

"NO!" Sixtus screamed. "We served you! We built your church! We preserved your traditions for two thousand years!"

The ground opened.

Not an earthquake — a deliberate parting, revealing a lake of fire that burned with brimstone, flames that somehow seemed alive with judgment.

The angels cast the beast and the false prophet into the lake of fire.

They were the first — but not the last — to enter that eternal prison.

* * *

The battle of Armageddon was over.

It had lasted less than an hour. Six thousand years of Satan's scheming, three and a half years of tribulation, the combined military might of human civilization — all ended in a single moment by a single word from the King of Kings.

But one enemy remained.

Satan himself — the ancient serpent, the dragon, the deceiver of nations — still inhabited Roman's discarded body somewhere in

the spiritual realm. He had been defeated, but not yet bound. His punishment awaited the Day of Atonement.

And after that — a wedding.

* * *

PART FIVE: THE KINGDOM

CHAPTER 43

The Day of Atonement

JERUSALEM

October 2037 — The Day of Atonement

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Now came the seventh holy day of God's sacred calendar: the Day of Atonement.

For three thousand years, this day had pictured a mystery — the removal of sin's ultimate author, the binding of the one who had deceived humanity since Eden. The ritual of the Azazel goat, sent into the wilderness bearing the sins of the people, had foreshadowed this moment.

Today, the symbol would become reality.

* * *

THE DRAGON

* * *

Satan knew what was coming.

Stripped of his human vessel, cast out of Roman's body when Christ spoke the word of destruction, the ancient serpent had retreated to the spiritual realm. For nine days since the return of Christ he had raged in impotent fury, watching his carefully

constructed empire crumble, watching his servants thrown into eternal fire, watching everything he had built over six millennia reduced to ashes.

He had been so close.

Three and a half years of ruling the world through Roman. Billions wearing his mark, worshiping his image, cursing the true God. The saints hunted to near-extinction. The Two Witnesses killed. Victory within his grasp.

And then the final trumpet had sounded.

Now the being who had once been Lucifer, the light-bearer, the covering cherub who had walked among the stones of fire — now he cowered in the shadows, knowing that an angel was coming for him.

Satan's power, which had seemed so formidable when wielded against humans, was nothing compared to the authority of heaven.

* * *

THE BINDING

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The resurrected saints gathered on the Mount of Olives to witness the event.

Maria Santos stood near the front of the assembled saints, her immortal mind finally able to hold what her mortal mind had only grasped in fragments. Beside her, Eleazar watched in silence, his

priest's eyes recognizing what he was seeing before the words came.

"The Day of Atonement, the goat representing Azazel sent into the wilderness — picturing the day when Satan would be taken away," Eleazar said quietly. "And now we're watching it happen."

"You performed that ceremony," Maria said. "With your own hands."

Eleazar nodded slowly. "Many times. And every time — I knew it pointed to something greater. I simply did not know I would live to see it."

An angel descended from heaven.

He was not Michael or Gabriel — not one of the great archangels whose names had echoed through human history. But he was magnificent nonetheless, moving with the quiet authority of one entrusted with a momentous task. In one hand, he held a key — ancient, massive, radiating authority. In the other, a great chain that seemed to be made of solidified light.

The angel spoke a word, and Satan appeared.

Not in his full glory — that had been stripped from him long ago, when he was cast out of heaven. But the saints could see him now, in the spiritual realm made visible: "a being of absolute corruption, his once-glorious form twisted and hideous after six thousand years of rebellion and hatred."

The dragon.

The serpent of old.

The devil.

Satan.

"You cannot do this," Satan hissed, his voice echoing across both physical and spiritual realms. "I am the god of this world. I have rights. I have authority."

The angel replied calmly. "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ."

The angel moved with impossible speed — wrapping the chain of light around Satan, binding him in coils that could not be broken by any power in the universe except the One who had forged them.

Satan screamed — not in pain, but in rage. "A THOUSAND YEARS! You're giving me a thousand years! And when I'm released, I'll prove I was right! Humanity will follow me again! They ALWAYS follow me!"

The ground opened — not to the lake of fire, but to something deeper. The bottomless pit. The abyss. A prison designed before the foundation of the world for this exact moment.

The angel cast Satan into the pit.

He then shut and sealed it over the devil, so that he could deceive the nations no more until the thousand years were finished.

* * *

THE SILENCE

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And then... peace.

For the first time in six thousand years, the earth was free from Satan's influence. No whispered temptations. No spiritual warfare. No demonic oppression clouding human minds and hearts. The broadcasts of hell had been silenced.

Grace Pham felt it immediately — a lifting of weight she hadn't even known she was carrying. The constant spiritual pressure that had been the background noise of human existence simply... stopped.

"Is this what it was supposed to feel like?" she whispered. "Is this what Eden was like?"

"Better," Michael Exton replied. "Eden was a garden. This will be a kingdom. And we will help Christ rule it."

James Chen held Anna close, their children pressed between them. "A thousand years," he said. "A thousand years of peace, joy, and prosperity. A thousand years to raise our children without fear. A thousand years to learn and grow and help others."

"And after that?" young Mei asked, looking up at her resurrected father with eyes full of wonder.

James smiled. "Eternity."

* * *

THE SURVIVORS

* * *

Not everyone had died.

The armies had been destroyed, yes. The marked had died. But scattered across the earth, hidden in caves and bunkers and remote villages, were survivors — people who had neither taken the mark nor been among the saints. People who had simply tried to stay alive, to stay neutral, to avoid choosing sides in a war between powers they didn't understand.

Now they emerged, blinking in the sunlight of a changed world.

They found the cities destroyed, the armies gone, the infrastructure of civilization in ruins. They found blood-red seas and poisoned rivers slowly returning to normal. They found a world that would need to be rebuilt from scratch.

And they found the King.

Christ sent His resurrected saints among them — not to conquer, but to teach. Not to punish, but to heal. The survivors had a choice to make: accept the new King, learn His ways, rebuild under His guidance — or face judgment.

They chose wisely.

They had seen what rebellion brought. They had lived through hell on earth. They were ready — finally — to try something different.

* * *

But before the work of rebuilding could begin, there was a celebration to attend.

Christ gathered His bride — the resurrected saints, transformed and glorified — and prepared to ascend.

"Where are we going?" Carlos asked, still getting used to his immortal, radiant, glorious spiritual body.

Michael Exton smiled — a smile of pure joy, anticipation, and love. "To a wedding feast. OUR wedding feast. The marriage supper of the Lamb."

And the saints rose into heaven, leaving the earth to heal, leaving the survivors to rest, leaving the sealed pit where Satan raged in impotent fury.

The Day of Atonement was complete.

The wedding was about to begin.

* * *

CHAPTER 44

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb

HEAVEN

October 2037

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David Hartley had imagined heaven many times.

As a child, he had pictured clouds and harps and endless hymn-singing — the sanitized version taught in Sunday school. As a young man, he had dismissed it entirely, too busy with career and ambition to worry about the afterlife. During the tribulation, serving as one of Roman's personal assistants in Brussels, he had begun to believe again — but his imagination had been shaped by fear and desperation.

Nothing had prepared him for the reality.

The throne room of God was not a room at all — it was a dimension, a reality, a state of being that mortal minds could never have comprehended. But David was no longer mortal. His resurrection body processed information that would have destroyed his human brain. His transformed eyes saw colors that had no names, heard harmonies that had no earthly equivalent.

And at the center of it all — the Father.

Not a physical form, but a presence so overwhelming that David fell to his knees instinctively. Love, Light, and Holiness that made everything else seem pale and hollow.

David rose, tears streaming down his glorified face, and for the first time in his existence, he felt complete.

* * *

THE BRIDE PREPARED

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The saints were gathered — millions upon millions, from every age of human history.

David saw them arranged not by era or nationality, but by something else — a spiritual order that reflected their relationship to God. Abel stood near the front, the first martyr, his blood having cried out from the ground for six thousand years and now finally answered. Abraham was there, the father of faith, finally receiving the city he had sought — the one with foundations, whose builder and maker was God.

Moses conversed with the apostle Paul, the two great teachers comparing notes on how their writings had been misunderstood. David the king laughed with the prophets of his time. Peter and John, the fishermen from Galilee, embraced the church leaders of later centuries who had built on their foundation.

And scattered among these giants of faith were the ordinary believers — the farmers and carpenters, the servants and slaves, the mothers and fathers who had simply believed, obeyed, and

endured. They wore the same white robes as the patriarchs. They shone with glory, though some brighter than others — for as the stars differ in brilliance, so too did the saints differ in reward. Yet all were radiant, all were transformed, all were His.

Grace Pham found herself standing next to a Chinese woman from the seventh century — a believer who had kept the faith through the Tang Dynasty, who had preserved the seventh-day Sabbath when the institutional church had abandoned it.

"You are Church of God?" the ancient woman asked, delighted.

"I am now," Grace replied, thinking of the journey that had brought her here. "I am now."

* * *

THE WEDDING

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A voice like thunder and rushing waters echoed through heaven:

"Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns! Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him the glory. For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready."

Christ stepped forward — not as the suffering servant who had died on a cross, not as the conquering King who had destroyed armies at Armageddon, but as a Bridegroom. Joy radiated from Him, a delight in His people that made every heart swell with answering love.

He looked out over the assembled multitude — seeing each face, knowing each name, remembering each struggle. And in His gaze, each saint understood: they had been chosen before the foundation of the world. Called in their generation. They had answered. Endured. Overcome.

Some had believed when He walked the earth. Some had believed centuries later, trusting promises they could not see. Some had come to faith in the darkness of the tribulation, when believing meant death.

His eyes found David Hartley in the crowd.

David felt the Savior's gaze pierce through him — not with judgment, but with complete understanding. Christ saw everything: the years of serving Roman, the hedging, the refusal to commit until the gun was at his head. And yet there was no condemnation. Only acceptance. Only love.

David wept. Not from shame at his late conversion, but from the overwhelming reality of grace. He had wasted so many years. He had hedged his bets until hedging was no longer possible. He had come to faith through fear rather than love.

And still he was here. Still he was counted among the bride. Still he wore the white robe of righteousness.

Different paths. Same destination. The Father's house has many rooms — and there was space for all who had come.

* * *

THE FEAST

* * *

And then the feast began.

Not eating from necessity — their resurrection bodies needed no sustenance. But eating as celebration, as communion, as joy. The finest wine, the richest food, flavors that had never existed on earth. Tables that stretched beyond sight, seating arrangements that somehow allowed everyone to converse with everyone else.

James Chen found himself at a table with his wife Anna — and also with believers from across Chinese history. There was the apostle Thomas, who tradition said had brought the gospel to the East. There were faithful men and women from dynasties James had only read about, who had kept God's truth alive through centuries of persecution.

"You are James Chen," Thomas said, extending his hand. "The one who was beheaded in Hong Kong."

James clasped it, overwhelmed. "You know about me?"

"We all do. Your witness reached millions. Your death broke the beast's spell over China. Because of you, many are here who might not have been."

James looked at his wife, his children, his fellow believers. "It wasn't me. It was God working through me."

Thomas smiled. "Yes. It always is. And that's why we celebrate — not our achievements, but His grace."

* * *

THE TEACHER

* * *

Michael Exton wandered through the feast in a state of wonder.

For fifty years, he had taught Bible prophecy from books and scrolls, from archaeological findings and historical research. He had traced the sequence of events that would lead to this moment — the seals, the trumpets, the bowls, the resurrection, the wedding feast. He had believed it all with his whole heart.

But believing and experiencing were two different things.

He found himself at a table with Paul and Peter and John — the very apostles whose writings he had studied for decades. They welcomed him like an old friend, eager to hear how their letters had been preserved, how their teachings had endured, how the truth had survived two thousand years of corruption and persecution.

"You stayed behind," Paul said. "When you could have gone to the Place of Safety, you stayed to teach the great multitude."

Michael nodded, remembering the choice he had made — the choice that had ultimately cost him his life. "They needed someone to explain what was happening. To help them understand. To give them hope."

"That's what we did too," Peter said, gesturing to his fellow apostles. "We could have hidden. We could have stayed safe. But the sheep needed shepherds."

"Different path," John added with a knowing smile. "Same destination."

Michael laughed — a laugh of pure joy, free from the weight of mortality for the first time. "I always wondered if I was making the right choice. Staying behind, I mean. Trusting that God would count me among the great multitude even though I wasn't sealed with the 144,000."

"Look around you," Paul said. "You're here. That's your answer."

* * *

FOUR DAYS OF JOY

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The feast lasted four days.

Four days of celebration without exhaustion. Four days of conversation without awkwardness. Four days of music and laughter and stories shared across millennia. The saints learned of each other's struggles and triumphs, their fears and their faith, their paths that had all led to this same glorious destination.

David Hartley spent hours with martyrs from every era — hearing how they had faced death, how they had overcome fear, how they had kept faith when everything seemed lost. He no longer felt ashamed of his late conversion. He understood now that everyone's story was different, that God met each person where they were, that grace was not diminished by timing.

Maria Santos — the Catholic woman who had found truth in a Nevada farmhouse — sat with former Catholics from centuries past who had made the same discovery. They compared notes on how they had recognized the deception, how they had found the

courage to leave, how they had embraced the Sabbath and all of the other truths when everything they had been taught said otherwise.

Eleazar, the Temple priest who had turned from Judaism to follow the Messiah, found fellowship with Jews from every century who had made the same journey. They discussed how the scales had fallen from their eyes, how the prophecies had suddenly made sense, how the rejection they had faced from family and community had been worth the truth they had found.

And through it all, Christ moved among them — not as a distant King on a throne, but as a friend at a wedding, sharing in the joy, delighting in His people, loving them with a love that had no beginning and would have no end.

* * *

THE RETURN TO EARTH

* * *

On the fourth day, Christ stood before His bride.

Every saint understood what was coming. The Feast of Tabernacles would begin tomorrow. They would return to earth — not to visit, but to stay. Not to observe, but to rule. The Kingdom of God was about to begin.

A murmur of excitement rippled through the assembled saints. They had celebrated in heaven. Now they would work on earth. They had received their reward. Now they would share it with a world that desperately needed healing.

In Christ's presence, they understood their calling: kings and priests. They would teach the survivors His ways. They would rebuild what was destroyed. They would plant and harvest, govern and guide. For a thousand years, they would show humanity what could have been — what will be, when sin is finally erased.

He extended His hands, and the saints began to descend — millions of immortals returning to a broken world, carrying with them the light of heaven and the love of their King.

The marriage was complete.

The Kingdom was beginning.

* * *

CHAPTER 45

The Kingdom Begins

JERUSALEM

The Feast of Tabernacles — October, 2037

* * *

Christ and His bride returned to earth on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of God's calendar.

It was the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles — the sixth annual holy day of God's sacred calendar. For thousands of years, this festival had pictured the millennial reign of Christ, a time when God would dwell with humanity, when peace would cover the earth as waters cover the sea.

The picture had become reality.

The survivors emerged from their hiding places — ragged, traumatized, but alive. They had endured three and a half years of tribulation, seven devastating bowl plagues, and the earthquake that had reshaped continents. They had watched armies march to Armageddon and never return. They had seen the sky split open and the King descend.

Now they stood before that King, uncertain what to expect.

What they found was mercy.

* * *

DAVID HARTLEY

The European Territory

* * *

David Hartley received his assignment on the third day of the Feast.

He would help govern the European territory — the very region that Roman Augustus had ruled, the heart of the beast's empire. Where once the Antichrist had demanded worship, David would teach the ways of the true God. Where once the mark had been required, David would offer healing.

The irony was not lost on him.

He stood on a hill outside what had been Brussels — now mostly rubble — and looked out over the land he was charged to restore. Roman had executed him here. Roman had put a bullet in his brain for refusing to take the mark. And now David was back, immortal and powerful, given authority over the very territory his murderer had claimed.

"You could have been one of the 144,000," a voice said behind him.

David turned to find Elder Thomas approaching, his resurrection body glowing with the same soft light that David had come to recognize in all the saints.

"No," David said. "I couldn't have. I wasn't ready. I hadn't learned to trust God completely."

"And now?"

David smiled. "Now I have a thousand years to practice."

Thomas laughed. "Different path."

"Same destination," David finished. "I'm starting to think that's the whole point."

* * *

THE CHEN FAMILY

China

* * *

James Chen was sent home.

Not to Hong Kong — that city lay in ruins, devastated by the tribulation and the earthquakes. But to China proper, the vast nation where over a billion had died. The survivors there needed teachers desperately, and James — who had given his life for his faith — was the perfect messenger.

Anna and the children went with him, of course. Their family — separated by death, reunited by the resurrection — would never be parted again. Mei and Daniel, not yet transformed into immortal beings, as that was reserved for adults, would grow and learn and eventually receive their own assignments someday. But for now, they stayed close to their father and mother, helping them teach the survivors the ways of God.

"Papa," Mei asked one evening as they sat on a hillside overlooking a village that was slowly being rebuilt, "will you ever have to die again?"

James shook his head. "Never. None of us will. We're immortal now — like the angels, like Jesus, like God the Father. We'll live forever."

"And we'll always be together?"

"Always," Anna said, pulling her daughter close. "Always and forever."

Daniel, who had been quiet, looked up at the stars. "I want to teach people about God like you did, Papa. When I'm older."

James felt his heart swell with pride. "You will, son. You have a thousand years to learn and grow. And then eternity after that."

* * *

GRACE PHAM

Jerusalem

* * *

Grace Pham remained in Jerusalem.

She had been part of the 144,000 — the Philadelphians who had been sealed and protected, who had fled to the Place of Safety and been trained for three and a half years. Now she was given a position in the rebuilt Temple, serving as a teacher of God's laws to pilgrims who would come from every nation.

The Temple that Zerubbabel's descendants would build — greater than Solomon's, greater than Herod's — would be the center of worship for the entire world. Every year, representatives from every nation would travel to Jerusalem for the Feast of

Tabernacles. Those who refused would receive no rain; those who came would learn the ways of the Eternal.

Grace stood on the Temple Mount — cleared of rubble, being prepared for construction — and marveled at how far she had come. From a young woman searching for truth, to a believer who fled to safety, to an immortal being who would teach God's ways for a thousand years.

She thought of Michael Exton, her teacher, who had chosen a different path. He was somewhere in the American territories now, helping to rebuild a nation that had been devastated by nuclear fire. Their paths had diverged — she to safety, he to martyrdom — but they had reached the same destination.

Different paths. Same destination.

She smiled, knowing that in the age to come, they would work together again — teaching and learning and growing for all eternity.

* * *

THE WORLD REBORN

* * *

The transformation began immediately.

The blood-red seas returned to blue. The poisoned rivers ran clean. The scorched earth began to heal, faster than any natural process could explain, as if creation itself recognized its Creator's return.

The wolf lay down with the lamb. The lion ate straw like the ox. Children played near cobra dens without fear. The curse that had fallen on nature in Eden was being lifted, slowly but surely, as the King's presence spread across the earth.

Weapons were melted down and reforged into farming tools. Armies disbanded. Borders that had divided nations for millennia became meaningless as the whole earth came under one government — the Kingdom of God, administered by Christ and His immortal saints.

Disease began to disappear. Lifespans lengthened. Children born in the Millennium would live for at least one hundred years, healthy and strong, learning God's ways from immortal teachers who had all the time in the world to explain.

It wasn't perfect — not yet. Human nature remained, and the survivors' children would still need to choose their path. Some would rebel, eventually, when Satan was released for humanity's final test at the end of the thousand years.

But for now — for a thousand years — peace reigned.

* * *

The Eighth Day — The Last Great Day

* * *

On the eighth day of the Feast — the Last Great Day, the seventh and final holy day of God's calendar — Christ gathered the saints one more time.

Every saint knew what this day pictured. The Great White Throne Judgment. The resurrection of all who had ever lived — everyone who died without a full opportunity for salvation. They would live again. They would be taught the truth. They would have their chance to choose.

Thomas Whitfield thought of his parents, who had died before the tribulation, who had never really understood. They would live again. They would have their chance.

Brother Thomas thought of friends who had not taken the mark, who had died in the plagues, who had never had a real opportunity to choose God. They would live again. They would have their chance.

Ruth Goldstein thought of the billions throughout history who had never heard the truth — isolated tribes, deceived masses, children who died before they could understand. They would live again. They would have their chance.

But that was far in the future. A thousand years from now. For now, there was work to do. A world to heal. A people to teach. A kingdom to build.

Christ looked out over the assembled saints — the faithful of all ages, transformed and glorified, ready to serve.

And they understood their commission: Go. Teach all nations. Baptize them in the name of Jesus Christ. He would be with them always, even to the end of the age.

The saints went forth.

The Millennium had begun.

* * *

CHAPTER 46

A Thousand Years

ELEAZAR

Jerusalem

Year 500 of the Millennium

* * *

The old priest — though he no longer felt old — sat on a hillside overlooking the most beautiful city in human history.

Five hundred years. Half a millennium since the King returned. And still, every morning, Eleazar woke with wonder.

Jerusalem spread below him like a jewel. The Temple gleamed in the center, its glory visible for miles. The desert that had surrounded the city for millennia now blossomed like a rose. In the streets below, children played without fear while the elderly sat peacefully in the sunshine. The blind could see. The deaf could hear. The lame leaped like deer. Sickness and disease had become distant memories. Families sat under their own vines heavy with grapes, beneath their own fig trees, and no one made them afraid.

And everywhere, people.

Jews and Gentiles living together in peace. Children playing in streets where no danger lurked. Old enemies working side by side, their ancient hatreds healed by centuries of proximity and the presence of the King.

The lion lay down with the lamb. Literally. Eleazar had watched it happen — predators transformed, their very nature changed. The lion now ate straw like the ox. Wolves grazed alongside sheep. Bears fed peacefully beside cattle. A child could put her hand in a viper's nest and receive only gentle curiosity in return.

This was what Eden had been. What the whole world was meant to be before sin corrupted it.

"You're brooding again."

Eleazar smiled as Maria Santos sat down beside him. Five hundred years had passed since their resurrection, yet time meant nothing to them now. Their glorified bodies were perfect in every way — no gray hair, no wrinkles, no weakness. Whatever age or infirmity they had known in their mortal lives was gone forever. They would never grow old, never fall ill, never die. This was eternity."

Not brooding. Remembering."

"The tribulation?"

"Yes. And before. My life in the old world, serving in a Temple that was only a shadow of this one. Rejecting the Messiah who now rules from its throne." He shook his head. "I wasted so many years."

"And gained eternity," Maria said gently. "That's the trade He offers. Our wasted years for His endless ones."

"Still. When I think of what I almost missed..."

They sat in comfortable silence, watching the sun move across the sky. Somewhere below, music was playing — one of the endless celebrations that marked life in the Millennium. There was always something to celebrate now.

"Have you heard the rumors?" Maria asked.

"Which rumors?"

"About the thousand years ending. About what comes next."

Eleazar nodded slowly. "Satan released. One final rebellion. Then the judgment, and after that..."

"The new heavens and new earth. The final transformation."

"Yes." Eleazar looked at the city below — the beautiful, healed, glorious city that had been his home for five centuries. "Sometimes I can hardly imagine anything better than this. And yet the scriptures say what comes next will make even this look like a shadow."

"That's what Michael always says. Five hundred years of teaching, and he's still at it — the watchman who never stops watching." She laughed softly. "He told me once that the Millennium is like a rehearsal. A preview. The real show hasn't even started yet."

Nearby, Michael Exton and Ellen walked hand in hand, watching their great-great-grandchildren ride on the backs of lions as if they were ponies. Nearly six hundred years of marriage, and they still found new joys together. Ellen laughed as a little girl tugged a lion's mane, and the great beast simply yawned and padded along contentedly.

Eleazar smiled. Michael Exton had become somewhat of a legend over the centuries — the watchman who had seen it coming, who had warned and taught and prepared so many for the return of Christ. And now, glorified and tireless, he continued his work — teaching the survivors and their descendants the truth that had nearly been lost.

"Five hundred more years," Eleazar said. "Then we'll see."

"Are you afraid? Of the final rebellion?"

"No." Eleazar was surprised to find that he meant it. "I've seen the enemy bound. I've seen the King's power. Whatever comes, I know how the story ends."

Maria took his hand. "Then let's enjoy the next five hundred years. I hear they're planning a jubilee celebration next month. All the tribes gathering to worship at the Temple."

"All the tribes." Eleazar laughed. "When I was young, I would have said that was impossible. Jews and Gentiles, together, worshipping the same God in the same place."

"And now it's just... normal."

"Yes." He stood, pulling her up with him. "Normal. The most wonderful word in any language. A thousand years of normal life, normal peace, normal joy. No war. No famine. No beast demanding worship. Just... life."

They walked down the hillside together, two ancient souls in renewed bodies, heading toward a city that had become the capital of the world.

Behind them, the sun continued its path across a sky that had not seen darkness in five hundred years.

In another five centuries, the final chapter would begin.

But for now, there was music and celebration and the simple, profound joy of existence in the presence of the King.

* * *

CHAPTER 47

The Final Rebellion

DAVID

Jerusalem

Year 1000 of the Millennium

* * *

The seal broke at midnight.

David felt it before he saw it — a wrongness in the air, a chill that had been absent from the world for a thousand years. He woke in his home on the outskirts of Jerusalem, his heart pounding with an alarm he had almost forgotten how to feel.

Fear.

He hadn't experienced fear since the tribulation. A millennium of peace had softened that reflex, buried it under layers of joy and security. But now it came rushing back, a reminder that the enemy was not yet destroyed — only bound.

And his time of binding had ended.

* * *

The rebellion gathered faster than anyone expected.

Despite a thousand years of the King's rule, despite the visible presence of God on earth, despite every blessing and miracle and proof of divine love — there were still those who chafed under it.

Children of the Millennium, born into peace, who had never known the old world's horrors. They had grown up under authority they hadn't chosen, serving a King they had never had to accept through faith. For most, the millennium had been paradise. But for some...

For some, it had been a prison.

Satan found them. Whispered to them. Promised them freedom, autonomy, a world where THEY would be gods. The same lie he had told in Eden. The same lie he had told through Roman Augustus. The same lie he would apparently tell until his final breath.

And millions believed him.

They gathered on the plains outside Jerusalem — Gog and Magog, the scriptures called them, though they came from every nation and every generation of the thousand years. An army of the deceived, marching against the beloved city, convinced that this time the rebellion would succeed.

David watched from the walls of Jerusalem with the other faithful. He was over a thousand years old now, his body preserved by the King's power, his mind holding memories that stretched back to the days of smartphones and television and a world that seemed almost impossibly primitive from this vantage point.

He remembered Roman Augustus. Remembered the mark.
Remembered two billion dead and a sky that rained fire.

And he knew — with absolute certainty — how this would end.

* * *

The fire fell at dawn.

Not fire and hail, like the first trumpet. Not gradual destruction, like the plagues. This was simply... ending. Divine fire descended from heaven and consumed the rebel army in an instant. One moment, millions of deceived souls were charging toward Jerusalem. The next moment, there was nothing but ash.

Satan stood alone on the plain, stripped of his followers, facing the King he had defied since before time began.

There was no battle this time. No dramatic confrontation. The King simply spoke.

But this time, there was no pit. No prison. No waiting.

The lake of fire opened.

And Satan — Heylel, the Light Bearer, who had once been beautiful beyond description, who had walked in Eden and covered the throne of God — was cast into it.

His screaming lasted for what felt like hours. Then it faded into the eternal fire, and the enemy of God and man was gone forever.

David wept. Not for Satan — never for Satan — but for the millions who had followed him. For the tragedy of beings created for glory who chose destruction. For the relentless, insane persistence of rebellion against a God who offered only love.

"It's over," David said. "It's finally over."

"Almost," Maria replied. "One more thing remains."

* * *

THE GREAT WHITE THRONE

All Nations

The End of Time

* * *

The throne appeared in the sky.

Great. White. Terrible in its purity.

They stood before the judgment seat of Christ. Books were opened. The Book of Life was opened. And each person was judged according to what they had done. The sheep were separated to His right and the goats to His left.

Those placed on His right were the faithful who had lived during the millennium and had overcome. Their judgment was not condemnation but reward. They received what the faithful of the previous age had already received — eternal life, a glorious spiritual body, and positions in the Kingdom of God forever.

Those placed on His left fell into three groups: those who had lived during the millennium but rejected God; those who had died in the previous age, repented, but returned to their sinful ways; and those who had committed an unpardonable sin.

Their judgment was simple and final.

The lake of fire.

David did not watch that part. He knew the justice was perfect, the sentences deserved. But knowing didn't make it easier to bear.

Now for those still waiting in their graves...

* * *

CHAPTER 48

The Final Resurrection

MICHAEL

The Plains of Jerusalem

* * *

Michael Exton had been waiting for this moment for over a thousand years.

He stood on a hillside east of Jerusalem — a hillside that had once been barren and war-scarred and was now blanketed with flowering grasses that swayed in a warm eternal breeze. Below him, the New Jerusalem gleamed on the horizon, impossibly beautiful, its jasper walls catching the light of God's glory. Behind him, the rest of the redeemed gathered in quiet reverence, tens of thousands of them, watching the plain below.

The plain was empty.

It would not be empty for long.

He had taught about this day for about fifty years. Had written about it, preached about it, warned about it, wept over it in the small hours of the morning when the weight of all the people he

loved who were not yet saved pressed down on him like a stone. He had sat across kitchen tables and looked into the eyes of friends and family members and tried to find the words that would make them understand what was coming. Sometimes they listened politely. More often they changed the subject. A few had laughed.

Now the day he had described ten thousand times was actually here.

And nothing — not one word of everything he had ever written or spoken — had come close to preparing him for what it felt like to stand here and wait for it to begin.

* * *

It began not with thunder or earthquake or any of the dramatic signs that had marked the earlier resurrection.

It began with a breath.

A single, collective intake of air across the entire plain — the sound of billions of lungs filling for the first time in centuries, some of them for the first time in millennia. The ground itself seemed to exhale as the dead returned to it no longer, as every grave on earth released what it had been holding.

Michael pressed his hand to his mouth.

They were rising.

Not scattered and confused the way he had sometimes imagined it, but in an orderly, unhurried procession — as though God was calling each name individually, giving each person a moment to orient themselves, to breathe, to look around and understand where they were and what had happened. The plain below was filling

with people. Thousands. Hundreds of thousands. Millions. Every nation, every generation, every language and tribe and era of human history represented in the vast, endless multitude that was waking up.

There — Michael caught his breath — there was a woman in ancient Egyptian dress, blinking in bewilderment at her own hands. There, a man in what appeared to be a Roman toga, turning in slow circles as if trying to find his bearings. Children. Old men. A young soldier in a uniform Michael didn't recognize, then another, then a dozen, then hundreds of soldiers from wars he had studied and wars he had lived through and wars that had been fought long before any living person could remember.

A face he recognized from photographs.

Abraham Lincoln stood perhaps two hundred yards away — tall, angular, unmistakable — looking up at the sky with an expression of absolute wonder on his lined face. Michael had read his speeches, had wept over his words, had wondered his whole life what kind of man could speak that way about binding up the nation's wounds. Now he stood just down the hill, very much alive and very much himself, and Michael had many years to get to know him.

Beside Lincoln, though they did not yet know each other, stood a small dark-haired woman in Victorian dress — Harriet Tubman, Michael realized with a jolt, the woman who had led hundreds out of slavery and then spent the rest of her life fighting for freedom. She was already helping the people around her find their footing, organizing the confused, speaking quietly to the frightened.

She couldn't help it. Even in resurrection, she was still leading.

There — the compact, confident figure of Babe Ruth, squinting at the New Jerusalem with an expression somewhere between awe and amusement. There — Ludwig van Beethoven, who had composed some of the world's most transcendent music while completely deaf, now standing in a world filled with the sound of heaven, his head tilted as though trying to take in every note at once. William Shakespeare. Benjamin Franklin. Helen Keller, her face alight with a joy that made Michael realize that she could already see.

And then he stopped cataloging.

Because somewhere in that vast multitude was his mother.

* * *

He found her the way he had always found her — by the sound of her voice.

His mother had always had a voice unlike anyone else's. Clear and strong, with perfect pitch and perfect enunciation — every word she spoke landed exactly as intended, nothing swallowed, nothing mumbled. And lively. That was the word for it. Even in ordinary conversation she carried an energy in her voice that made people turn their heads. Michael had grown up hearing strangers even comment on it.

He heard that voice rising above the crowd below — animated, alive, unmistakable — and his heart simply stopped.

She looked young. Not a child — herself, but herself in her prime, the way she had looked in the photographs from before Michael was born. Dark hair, not gray. The lines of worry and age that had accumulated over her long life were gone. She was looking around with wide, alert eyes, trying to make sense of what had happened,

where she was, why everything seemed so impossibly bright and clean and beautiful.

Michael was already moving.

He pushed through the gathered crowd, murmuring apologies he barely heard himself making, his eyes locked on that familiar figure below. A thousand years. A thousand years of knowing she would be here someday, of holding that promise close in the dark moments of the Millennium when he missed her with an ache that never fully went away, of trusting God with what he could not control.

She turned at the sound of his voice.

She didn't recognize him at first — of course she didn't, he had a glorified body now, he had been transformed for a thousand years — and he watched the confusion pass over her face, followed by a slow, dawning, incredulous recognition as something deeper than memory responded to something deeper than appearance.

"Michael?"

He couldn't speak. He simply opened his arms.

She walked into them the way she had when he was a small boy frightened by a thunderstorm, and Michael held his mother for the first time in over a thousand years and wept — great, heaving, absolutely undignified sobs that he made no attempt whatsoever to contain. Around him, others were having their own reunions, and the plain had filled with the sound of weeping and laughter and names being called across distances that had seemed permanent but turned out only to be temporary.

"You were right," his mother whispered against his shoulder. She sounded stunned. Awed. "You were right about all of it."

"I know," he managed. "I know, Mom. And I am SO glad that I was!"

"I should have listened."

"You're here now." He pulled back and looked at her face — his mother's face, young and unlined and full of a light he had never seen there in her earthly life. "That's all that matters. You're here, and you have time, and I will explain everything."

She reached up and touched his face the way mothers do.

"My boy," she said softly. "My wonderful, faithful, brilliant son."

Michael laughed through his tears. Some things, apparently, survived even a thousand years.

* * *

His father came next — taller than Michael remembered, with the same face Michael saw every time he looked in a mirror. Michael hugged him tight and held on, shaking, unable to speak, all the sadness he had carried for his father's suffering pouring out of him at once. He had waited so long for this moment — to see this man who had spent so much of his life alone and broken in VA hospitals, robbed of everything life should have given him, finally free, finally whole, finally at peace. His father kept gripping his shoulders and looking at him and shaking his head, as if he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing. And he was smiling — a huge, wide, unstoppable smile, the smile of a man who had forgotten what it felt like to be happy and was just now remembering.

"How long?" his father asked finally.

"Over a thousand years," Michael said. "But it will feel like a breath once you understand where you are."

His father looked at the New Jerusalem glowing on the horizon. Looked at the millions of people filling the plain. Looked back at his son.

"The Bible," he said slowly. "It was all true."

"Every word."

His father was quiet for a long moment. Then: "I always thought you were a little crazy, you know."

"I know."

"I was wrong."

"I know that too." Michael smiled. "Come on. There are people you need to see."

* * *

Vicki saw him before he saw her.

His big sister — the one who had protected him and loved him with the fierce, bossy devotion of a second mother, and with whom he had enjoyed so many wonderful conversations on her backyard patio — came through the crowd at a pace that suggested she had been looking for him specifically. She was young again, too, and vibrant, and she grabbed both his hands and talked so fast that Michael could barely follow her, which was not very consistent with every memory he had of her.

"I have so many questions," she announced.

"You have a hundred years to ask them," Michael told her. "And then eternity after that."

She stared at him. "A hundred years?"

"Yes. I guess you never read any of my books."

"Books? What books?"

Michael laughed so hard that people nearby turned to look.

* * *

He found Johnny Mastelli the way you find old Philadelphia friends — by hearing the accent before he saw the face.

The voice carried across fifty yards of crowded plain, unmistakably Southwest Philly, saying something pointed and colorful about the general impossibility of everything that was happening. Michael made his way through the crowd and there was Johnny — his childhood friend, his oldest friend, the one who knew him before he had any ideas about prophecy or the Sabbath or any of it — looking exactly the way Michael remembered him and nothing like it at all.

"Johnny."

Johnny Mastelli turned around, squinted, and then did a full double-take worthy of a stage performance. "No. No way. Mike?"

"Way."

"You look — " Johnny gestured wordlessly at Michael's glorified form. "You look like you."

"I am me."

"But — " He looked around. "Are we dead? Because if this is dead, I had completely the wrong idea about dead."

"You're not dead. Not anymore." Michael gripped his old friend's hand — the same hand that had thrown a baseball with him in the streets of Philadelphia sixty years ago, more than a thousand years ago. "You've got a lot of catching up to do. But the short version is: everything I told you was true."

Johnny looked at him for a long moment with the frank, appraising look of a man who had known him since they were boys and had heard some of his more ambitious claims over the years.

"Everything?" Johnny said.

"Everything."

Johnny exhaled. "I guess you were right, Mike. But what happened to your Philly accent?"

They both had a good laugh over that one.

* * *

Zeke, Michael's best friend in high school, and a runner too, materialized out of the New Jersey contingent — that was how Michael thought of it, the clusters of people from the same region and era finding each other by instinct — and there was an embrace and the kind of rapid-fire reminiscing that happens when two people have many years of missed conversation to compress into the first ten minutes.

Bill Arata was there too, the cross-country teammate from college, a man who had run hundreds of miles beside Michael and

understood without explanation why a man would push his body to its absolute limit just to find out what he was made of. They looked at each other across the years and the resurrection and found that the friendship had not aged at all.

"We could run again," Bill said. "Couldn't we? You have a new body, right?"

"Perhaps we will. Perhaps we will."

Michael put a hand on his old teammate's shoulder. "Come on. Let's find the others."

* * *

He almost missed Debbie.

She had been his first real love — eighteen years old and the world opening up before them both like a door swinging wide — and he had carried the memory of her like a pressed flower in a book, carefully preserved, occasionally examined, always tender.

She was standing quietly at the edge of a group of people, looking slightly overwhelmed, which was so unlike the girl he had known that it took him a moment to place her. Then she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear in a gesture so perfectly, specifically hers that fifty-plus years collapsed in an instant. And she was as beautiful as ever.

"Debbie."

She looked up. There was the polite, uncertain smile of someone who can tell they ought to recognize a face but can't quite get there.

"I'm Mike Exton," he said gently. "From South Jersey. A long time ago."

The uncertainty cleared. Not all at once — it moved across her face like the sun coming out from behind a cloud, slow and then sudden. "Mike." She shook her head slowly. "You're... you look..."

"A thousand years will do that." He smiled. "You look amazing, Debbie."

"What is this place? What's happening?"

"I'll give you a hint. It's not hell."

"Well, I can see that! Is it heaven?"

"Not quite. But just as good."

* * *

He was looking for Mai when he heard his name.

Not his full name. Not Michael. Instead —

"Mr. Exton!"

The voice was small and high and cut through the noise of millions like a needle through silk, and Michael turned and saw a young woman of about twenty-five, dark-haired with bright eyes, pressing through the crowd toward him with an expression on her face that could only be described as joyful desperation.

He knew her in an instant.

"Lily."

She was not a first grader anymore. Of course she wasn't — she was a grown woman in her twenties, but the eyes were exactly the same, the same earnest, curious, lit-from-within eyes that had looked up at him from a small desk in a classroom that suddenly seemed like it had existed in another universe. She had been six years old when he taught her. He had taught her older sister Kim as well, and loved her too — but Lily had claimed her own particular corner of his heart.

She had been small enough to need help opening her lunch box. He knew, because they spent that whole year eating lunch together on the outside picnic tables. And he had loved his students the way a man without children of his own can love them — fiercely, and from a slight distance, and with a particular kind of heartache when the year ended and they moved on.

And he always dreamed of eating lunch together one more time.

She hit him like a small freight train.

“Mr. Exton” caught her and held on, and for a moment neither of them said anything because there was nothing to say that the embrace didn't say better.

"You remembered me," he said finally, his voice unsteady.

"Of course I remembered you." She pulled back and looked at him with shining eyes. "You were my favorite teacher."

He pressed his lips together hard. A thousand years, a glorified body, an eternity of service to the King — and those five words still hit him like a wave.

"There is so much I want to show you," he said. "So much to explain. You have time now, Lily. All the time in the world. A hundred years of it, and then forever after."

"I want to know everything," she said simply. "Tell me everything."

He laughed. "That's going to take a while."

"Good," said Lily. "I'm not going anywhere this time."

"And neither am I," chimed in Kim.

* * *

He found her by the sound of weeping.

Not his weeping — hers. A woman sitting on the grass at the edge of the multitude, her face buried in her hands, crying with the particular exhausted relief of someone who has just been told that the worst thing they ever feared was not the final word after all.

Beside her, holding her hands, was a young man Michael had never met but recognized immediately from the photographs she had shown him — the brother. The brother who had been killed in the Vietnam War. The brother she had been mourning for years when Michael had sat across from her one evening in 1982 and tried to find the words to tell her what he believed.

The brother was home.

Michael stood a respectful distance away and waited. This was not his moment. This was hers. He had no more right to intrude on the reunion of Mai and her brother than he would have had to walk into someone's house without knocking.

But she looked up.

She looked up and she saw him across the grass and her expression changed into something Michael had no word for — a recognition so deep it bypassed the face and went straight to the soul — and she said his name in a voice that contained several years and a whole world.

"Mike."

He walked to her. She rose from the grass and took both his hands and looked up at him with wet eyes and a trembling smile.

"You told me," she whispered. "You told me when we were both still young. You said I would see him again." Her eyes moved to her brother, standing nearby with a wondering expression. "You said there would be a future world and I would see him again."

"Yes, I know."

"I didn't believe you fully." She shook her head. "I wanted to believe you. But I couldn't quite..."

"I know that too."

"But you were right." The tears were falling freely now, and she made no move to stop them. "You were right, and I'm here, and he's here, and Mike — " She squeezed his hands hard. "Thank you. Thank you for telling me. Even when I couldn't believe it entirely. Thank you for saying it anyway."

Michael thought of every conversation he had ever had that felt like it landed nowhere. Every article he had written that he wasn't sure anyone had read. Every time he had tried to explain what he believed to someone who smiled politely and changed the subject.

He thought of the long years of the Millennium when he had served faithfully and trusted God with the people he couldn't reach.

He thought of a young Vietnamese woman sitting in the dark, grieving a brother she thought she'd lost forever, and a young man with a heart full of prophecy trying to offer her something real to hold onto.

"Thank YOU," he said quietly. "For listening. Even a little."

She introduced him to her brother. They embraced like old friends, though they had never met, because in the family of God that was exactly what they were.

* * *

He was looking out across the plain, when he spotted three of his running superstars.

Yong-Sung Leal, Chris Dominic, and Ava Padilla had found each other somewhere in the multitude — athlete instinct, Michael suspected, the same herd sense that made his runners unconsciously cluster at practice — and they were standing together looking out at the New Jerusalem with the expressions of people who ran toward things that scared them and were now confronted with something more magnificent than fear.

Michael had been watching them for several minutes, smiling, remembering the particular joy of coaching — the way you could see a young person find out what they were capable of, the way that discovery changed their face, the way it stayed changed. He thought he heard them jokingly debating who was the greatest runner among them, and who Coach Mike liked the best.

He had not yet approached them.

Because walking toward him from the other direction, with the slightly overwhelmed look of a man and woman trying to absorb too much beauty at once, was Lance and Mary Anne Padilla, Ava's proud parents.

Lance stopped when he saw him. Just stopped, as if his legs had made the decision before his mind caught up.

Michael walked the last few steps between them.

For a moment neither man spoke. There were too many things. A thousand years of them.

"You waited," Lance said finally. His voice was rough.

"I knew you were coming," Michael said simply. "I always knew you were coming."

Lance and Mary Anne looked past him and saw Ava.

Michael stepped aside.

He watched them walk toward their daughter — the daughter they had not seen in a thousand years, the elite runner, the multi-national champion, the girl they had raised — and he watched Ava turn and recognize her father and mother, and he watched the three of them come together the way people do when they have given up and then been given back.

He stood there a moment longer, letting the Padillas have their time. Then he turned back toward Yong-Sung and Chris.

They had spotted him.

Chris reached him first — of course he did, he had always had that explosive first step — and Yong-Sung was right behind him, and

for a moment it was all arms and laughter and everyone talking at once, the way it used to be after a big race when the adrenaline was still running and nobody could quite believe what they had just accomplished together.

"Coach Mike," Yong-Sung said, shaking his head with a grin. "You were right about everything, weren't you?"

"I had the best Teacher there is," Michael said.

Chris laughed. "You always said that."

"And I always meant it."

"And I was a greater runner than both of you and Ava combined," Michael added. "I mean — *am* a greater runner."

"I don't know about Yong-Sung, but I'm ready for the challenge," Chris replied.

"Count me in!" Yong-Sung exclaimed.

Ava, overhearing from a few yards away, called out: "Don't start without me. That is, if you aren't afraid of racing an 8-time National Champion."

This was what the second resurrection was.

Not doctrine. Not prophecy fulfilled. Not a chapter in a book or a lecture in a Bible study.

This. Right here. This moment, multiplied by billions.

* * *

Later — much later, when the initial chaos of reunion had settled into something gentler — Michael sat on the hillside with his

mother's hand in one of his and Lily sitting cross-legged in the grass beside him, and he tried to explain what came next.

The hundred years. The open books. The chance that had been waiting for every one of them since before they were born.

The people in the vast multitude below had never had a real opportunity to know the truth. They had been born into deception, raised in it, surrounded by it their entire lives. The churches had taught error for centuries. The world had suppressed the truth. God was not a God who condemned people for what they never had the chance to know.

So Christ was giving them the chance now.

One hundred years — Isaiah 65:20 had said so thousands of years ago. One hundred years of life in a restored world, with the full truth available, with the King accessible, with every question answerable. One hundred years to decide, with full knowledge and no deception, whether they wanted the God who had been waiting for them all along.

"And then?" his mother asked.

"Those who choose Him — and I believe it will be most, Mom, I genuinely believe that — will be born into the Family of God. Into eternity. They'll have what I have now, what all of us in the first resurrection already have." He smiled at her. "They'll have forever."

She was quiet for a moment. Then: "And those who don't?"

Michael's expression was gentle but honest. "Those who decide to reject God will face the second death." He paused. "But hopefully

just a few. If they choose that, Mom. Choosing it, knowing exactly what they are choosing — God honors even that choice."

His mother absorbed this. The New Jerusalem blazed on the horizon. Millions of voices rose and fell around them in a murmur that sounded almost like music.

"I have more questions," she said finally.

"I know." He squeezed her hand. "I have answers. And Jesus has answers I don't. And we have a hundred years to work through all of them before you have to decide anything."

She looked at him with the expression of a mother who is seeing her child clearly — perhaps for the first time. And on her face, unmistakably, was the look of a proud mom.

"You really did know," she said softly. "All those years. You really knew."

"I really knew," he agreed. "The Bible told us everything. Not just the judgment and the fire — all of this too. The reunions. The hundred years. The mercy, the forgiveness, the love, the joy, the prosperity."

He looked out over the plain below, at the millions of resurrected souls learning to breathe again, at families running toward each other across distances that death had made permanent and God had made temporary. "He never intended to lose any of them. That was never the plan. The plan was always to save as many as were willing to be saved."

Lily leaned her head against his arm the way a small child leans against a teacher she trusts.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," she said quietly.

Michael looked at his mother. At Lily. At the plain below where Ava and her parents were still together, where Chris and Yong-Sung were reuniting with their family and friends, where Johnny Mastelli was laughing loudly enough to be heard from here, where Mai and her brother sat in the grass talking with the focused intensity of people with decades of silence to fill.

He looked at the New Jerusalem, glowing eternal and perfect on the horizon.

He thought of forty-seven years of studying, writing, warning, pleading. He thought of the long Millennium of service. He thought of every person he had loved and prayed over and trusted to God's keeping.

Every one of them was here.

"Yes," Michael Exton said to Lily.

"It is breathtaking."

* * *

CHAPTER 49

New Jerusalem

ANNA

One Hundred Years Later

The hundred years had ended, the final judgment had been rendered, the unrepentant had met their end, the last of the redeemed had been welcomed into the Family of God, and the old creation had finally given way to the new.

Anna had thought the Millennium was beautiful.

She had been wrong.

The New Jerusalem descended from heaven like a bride adorned for her husband — but no earthly bride had ever been arrayed like

this. The city was a perfect cube, fifteen hundred miles in each direction, its walls made of jasper, its foundations adorned with every precious stone imaginable, its gates carved from single pearls.

It was impossible. It was real. It was home.

Anna walked through the gates with James beside her, Mei and Daniel close behind. They were all transformed now — resurrection bodies that would never age, never tire, never know pain or sorrow or death. Perfect spiritual bodies.

The street beneath their feet was pure gold, transparent as glass. The river of life flowed from the throne of God, crystal clear, lined with trees that bore twelve kinds of fruit and leaves that were for the healing of the nations.

And everywhere — everywhere — there was light.

Not sunlight. Not moonlight. The glory of God illuminated the city, and the Lamb was its lamp. There was no night here. No shadow. No darkness of any kind.

"Mama." Mei's voice was hushed with wonder. She was a woman now — had been for centuries — but in this moment, she sounded like the eight-year-old girl who had asked if her papa was in heaven. "Is this... is this where we live forever?"

"Yes, baby." Anna's voice caught in her throat. "Forever and ever."

"And Papa never has to leave again? And we never have to hide?"

James knelt beside his daughter — his grown daughter, his eternal daughter — and took her hands. "Never again. No more hiding. No more running. No more death. This is what I died for, Mei. This is

what all of us were waiting for. The new heavens and new earth, where God lives with His people, forever."

"I like it," Daniel said simply.

Anna laughed — a pure, free laugh that seemed to echo off the jeweled walls and multiply into a symphony. "I like it too, son. I like it too."

* * *

MARIA

The Tree of Life

* * *

She stood before it for a long time.

The tree of life. The tree that had been in Eden, that Adam and Eve had been barred from after the fall. The tree that had been waiting, all these millennia, for humanity to return.

Its fruit hung within easy reach. Its leaves rustled in a breeze that carried the scent of eternity. There was no angel with a flaming sword now. No barrier. No prohibition.

Maria turned. The King stood there — not on a throne, but simply beside her, as a friend walks with a friend.

She could eat. She knew it. But she almost couldn't believe it. After everything — all the running, all the hiding, all the years of

being afraid — to just... be here. To eat from the tree of life. It didn't seem real.

And yet, in His presence, she understood: this was more real than anything that came before. The old creation had been the shadow. This was the substance. She had spent her life reaching for something she couldn't quite grasp. Now she could hold it.

Maria reached out and picked a fruit. It was cool in her hand, pulsing with life.

Would she understand everything now? All the questions she had — about suffering, about evil, about why things happened the way they did?

In His gaze, she saw the answer: Yes. Though the questions would matter less than she expected. When she saw the full picture, the parts that seemed random or cruel would reveal their purpose. Every thread would make sense when she saw the tapestry complete.

Maria bit into the fruit.

The taste was indescribable — every good flavor she had ever experienced, combined and perfected and elevated beyond anything she had imagined. But more than the taste, she felt something change inside her. The last traces of mortality, of fallenness, of the curse — burned away like morning mist.

She was complete.

Truly, finally, eternally complete.

Her heart overflowed with appreciation. For everything. For finding her in Madrid. For the people who helped her. For Michael and his teachings. For never letting her go.

And she understood, without words needing to be spoken: she had always been His. From the foundation of the world. He had known her name before the stars were born. He had counted every hair on her head through every year of the tribulation. And He had never — not for one moment — stopped loving her.

Maria wept. But for the first time in her existence, the tears were pure joy, uncontaminated by sorrow.

In the New Jerusalem, even weeping was transformed.

* * *

MICHAEL

The Throne Room

* * *

He had been raised in the first resurrection, at the beginning of the Millennium. He had served the King for a thousand years, teaching and guiding and helping to restore the world.

And now he was here.

Michael Exton — eighty-two years old when the tribulation ended, now ageless and eternal — stood in the throne room of God and wept like a child out of sheer, overwhelming gratitude.

The Father sat on the throne. The Son sat at His right hand. And around them, in circles that extended beyond what the eye could see, the hosts of heaven worshipped.

Angels. Saints. Creatures that had no name in any human language. All gathered, all singing, all celebrating the completion of the plan that had been set in motion before time began.

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!"

"Blessing and honor and glory and power to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!"

Michael added his voice to the chorus. After all those years of studying, teaching, waiting, watching — this was well worth it. This moment. This presence. This eternal worship of the God who had saved him.

He thought of his website — TheBibleComesAlive.org — and smiled. The name had been truer than he knew. The Bible hadn't just come alive. It had come TRUE. Every prophecy, every promise, every word — fulfilled before his very own eyes.

And this was only the beginning.

Eternity stretched before him like an ocean without shores. Infinite years to explore the new creation. Infinite depths of God's wisdom to plumb. Infinite joy, infinite love, infinite life.

No more death.

No more crying.

No more pain.

The former things had passed away.

And God was making all things new.

* * *

CHAPTER 50

Eternity Begins

ALL

The New Creation

Forever

"Then I saw a new earth (with no oceans!) and a new sky, for the present earth and sky had disappeared. ² And I, John, saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down from GOD out of heaven. It was a glorious sight, beautiful as a bride at her wedding.

³ I heard a loud shout from the throne saying, "Look, the home of GOD is now among men, and HE will live with them and they will be HIS people; yes, GOD HIMSELF will be among them. ⁴ HE will wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain. All of that has gone forever."

⁵ And the ONE sitting on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new!" — Revelation 21:1-5 (TLB)

Did you catch the incredible significance of verse 3? For the past one thousand years, Jesus Christ — the Son — has been ruling here on Earth during the Millennium. But now, something even

more astounding occurs: God the FATHER — not the Son, but the Father Himself — comes down from heaven to make His eternal home among humanity! "The home of GOD is now among men, and HE will live with them." The Father and the Son will dwell together on the renewed Earth with redeemed mankind for all eternity. This was God's plan from the very beginning.

* * *

They gathered on the banks of the river of life.

Not by appointment. Not by command. Simply drawn together by the bonds that had been forged in tribulation and perfected in glory. The scattered remnant, now united. The refugees, now home.

Eleazar sat beneath a tree whose leaves shimmered with colors that had no names, reading from a scroll that contained all the prophecies that had come true. He was teaching again — he would always be teaching — but now his students were angels as well as humans, and his subject was the faithfulness of God across all ages.

Maria sat beside him, no longer a student but a fellow teacher. The girl who had fled Madrid with nothing but a Bible and a desperate faith had become one of the great chroniclers of the tribulation, her testimony preserved for all eternity.

David Hartley was there too, his journal transformed into an official record of the beast's crimes — not for punishment (that was already accomplished) but for memory. So that the ages to

come would never forget what rebellion had cost, and what truth had overcome.

And there was Grace Pham, one of the 12,000 who was protected in the Place of Safety during the Great Tribulation. She sat nearby, her quiet presence a reminder of what faithfulness in the darkest hour looked like.

Anna and James walked hand in hand along the riverbank, their children — grown now into magnificent beings of light and joy — playing nearby with the same abandon they had shown as toddlers. No more hunger. No more fear. No more goodbyes.

Michael Exton sat slightly apart, watching them all with the satisfied smile of a man whose life's work had been vindicated beyond his wildest dreams. His books, his articles, his warnings — all had been proven true. But more than that, the people he had taught were HERE. Safe. Home. Forever.

"It's strange," David said, breaking the comfortable silence. "I spent years documenting evil. Recording every crime of the beast, every atrocity of the system. And now..." He gestured at the crystal river, the jeweled trees, the radiant sky. "Now it all seems so small. So far away."

"Not small," Eleazar corrected gently. "Important. But complete. The story needed a villain to have a hero. The darkness needed to exist so the light could overcome it."

"I used to wonder," Anna said quietly, "why God allowed it. The tribulation. The deaths. My husband's execution." She squeezed James's hand. "Now I understand. He wasn't allowing evil. He was defeating it. Every soul that chose Him was a victory. Every martyr was a seed that produced an eternal harvest."

"And those who didn't choose?" Maria asked. It was the question that still ached, even in paradise.

"They chose," Michael said. "That's what makes it just. God gave every person a chance — often many chances. The two witnesses preached for forty-two months. The angel flew through heaven proclaiming the gospel to every nation. The plagues themselves were warnings. Those who rejected Him, rejected Him with full knowledge."

"Free will," Eleazar murmured. "The terrible, necessary gift. Without it, love is meaningless. But with it, some will choose destruction."

They sat with that truth for a moment. It was sobering even in paradise — the knowledge that not everyone was here. That some had chosen the lake of fire over God's way of life. That rebellion, once embraced, could become eternal.

But the sorrow didn't last. It couldn't, in a place where God Himself wiped away every tear.

"What now?" Daniel asked. He was centuries old but still had the curiosity of youth. "What do we DO for eternity?"

Michael laughed. "Everything! Discover. Create. Dream and then do the dreaming. Explore the entire universe — the trillions of planets, moons, stars, black holes, wormholes, cosmic strings, nebulae, star nurseries — infinite in every direction. And we can go anywhere we want at the speed of thought. There's virtually no limit to what we can do."

"We have forever," Maria added. "Not just endless time, but endless depth. We could spend days studying a single flower and still not exhaust its wonders."

"Or we could read every book that has ever been written, and write new ones," Eleazar said with a scholar's gleam in his eye.

"Or perhaps we could go back in time," Grace Pham added. "And personally witness the Garden of Eden, Noah's Flood, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and many other exciting times in world history. Or we could view the creation of the angels, the universe, the dinosaurs, cavemen such as Neanderthals and Cro-Magnon. The wonders never end."

"After a thousand years," Ellen said with a quiet smile, "I have learned that the best is always still ahead. And I cannot wait to see it all!"

James stood and helped Anna to her feet. "Speaking of which — the King is teaching by the sea of glass tonight. Something about the mysteries hidden from the foundation of the world."

"I hope He also explains to us about the dinosaurs and the cavemen," Anna said. "Who created them? Why were they created? What happened to them?"

"Before the beginning," Maria whispered, remembering the lessons she had learned in the Nevada safe house. "The Father and the Son, before anything else existed."

"And beyond the end," Michael added as he held Ellen's hand. "Eternity future, stretching forever before us."

They walked together toward the throne, joining streams of others heading the same direction — people from every nation, tribe, language, and generation. Martyrs from the tribulation. Saints from the early church. Believers from every age of human history. All united. All home.

Above them, the light of God's glory illuminated a city whose beauty increased with every viewing.

Beneath them, the golden streets rang with the footsteps of the redeemed.

And before them, the Lamb who had been slain waited to reveal more of His infinite love to those who had chosen to receive it.

The story wasn't ending.

It was just beginning.

* * *

CHAPTER 51

The End is the Beginning

* * *

*A Final Word from Michael Exton. Written before his rest.
Preserved for the ages.*

* * *

If you're reading this, you survived.

Or perhaps you're reading this before the events described in this book have taken place. Perhaps you found it in a bookstore, or a library, or on some forgotten corner of the internet. Perhaps you think it's fiction — an entertaining story about the end of the world.

It's not fiction.

Everything in this book — every prophecy, every judgment, every promise — is based on the Word of God. The Bible told us these things would happen thousands of years ago. Some of it has already come true. The rest is coming.

The question is: which side of history will you be on when it does?

* * *

I spent my life studying prophecy. Not because I enjoyed predicting doom, but because I wanted people to be ready. The tribulation didn't have to catch anyone by surprise. God gave us the playbook. He told us exactly what would happen — the rise of the Antichrist, the false prophet, the mark of the beast, the judgments, the return of the King.

He told us so we could prepare. So we could choose wisely.

The choice is simple, but it's not easy.

Choose the world's system — its convenience, its acceptance, its promises of peace — and you'll find yourself trapped when that system reveals its true nature. The mark seems like nothing at first. Just technology. Just economics. Just the price of participation in modern society. But once you take it, there's no going back.

Choose God's system — His Sabbath, His way of life, His commandments, His Messiah — and you'll face persecution. Ridicule. Exclusion. Maybe death. But you'll also have something the world can't give: truth. Peace that doesn't depend on circumstances. A future that extends beyond the grave.

* * *

If the tribulation hasn't happened yet when you read this, there's still time.

Study the Scriptures. Not what churches tell you the Scriptures say — the actual Scriptures. Compare what you've been taught to what's written. You may be surprised by what you find.

The seventh-day Sabbath is Saturday, not Sunday.

The holy days of God are in Leviticus 23, not the pagan festivals Rome adopted.

The true sign of the Messiah is three days AND three nights in the grave — not two days and two nights that the false Friday-to-Sunday tradition gives you.

The cross was a pagan symbol long before the Christian era ever began.

The Ten Commandments in your catechism may not match the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20.

666 = Lateinos = Roman. The Roman Empire. The Roman Catholic Church. The Counterfeit Messiah.

These aren't conspiracy theories. They're documented history. Anyone willing to look can verify them.

* * *

If the tribulation HAS happened — if you're reading this in some underground bunker, some wilderness hideout, some refugee camp where believers are clinging to faith while the world burns — then take courage.

You know how the story ends.

The beast loses. The false prophet loses. Satan loses. They've already lost, actually — the outcome was sealed when Jesus rose from that tomb two thousand years ago. Everything since then has been the enemy's desperate, doomed attempt to change a verdict that can't be changed.

Hold on. Stay faithful. Refuse the mark, even unto death. Because death is not the end — not for those who belong to the King.

The resurrection is coming.

The Millennium is coming.

The New Jerusalem is coming.

And compared to eternity, the tribulation is just a moment. A breath. A labor pain before the birth of something glorious beyond imagination.

* * *

I wrote many things in my life. Books about church history. Books about prophecy. Books about the great deception and how to escape it. Articles, teachings, warnings, pleas.

But if I could leave you with only one message, it would be this:

God is real. His Word is true. And He loves you enough to tell you the truth even when it's hard to hear.

Everything else — all the details about Sabbaths and holy days and prophetic timelines — flows from that foundation. If you believe God is real and His Word is true, you'll study that Word for yourself. You'll discover what He actually said, not just what you've been told He said. You'll find the narrow path that leads to life, even when the broad road seems easier (but leads to death).

And if you don't believe yet... I pray you will.

Before it's too late.

* * *

*“The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!’” — Revelation 22:20
(NRSVCE)*

* * *

The teachings referenced in this book are available at:

www.TheBibleComesAlive.org

Including:

The History of the World & Beyond

The Shocking History of the Great False Church

The Startling History of God's True Church

When Was Jesus Crucified?

Antichrist & The Final 7 Years

America, Britain, & Israel in Prophecy

Do Christians Really Follow the Bible?

Revelation Comes Alive!

And many other books and articles.

May God bless you and guide you into all truth.

* * *

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael H. Exton has spent 47 years in independent biblical research — studying the prophecies of Daniel, Revelation, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the words of Jesus Christ Himself. He is the author of 22 books spanning biblical prophecy, church history, and natural health, and has been called one of the most fearless independent voices in biblical scholarship.

He does not write from a denomination. He does not write from tradition. He writes from Scripture alone.

ROMAN: The Counterfeit Messiah is the culmination of nearly half a century of research — rendered as a story the world is not yet ready for, but soon will be.

TheBibleComesAlive.org

BACK COVER

A Man.

An Empire.

A Church.

For centuries the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation have warned of a coming world ruler who will rise during humanity's final days.

But what if the forces preparing his arrival are already moving behind the scenes?

ROMAN – The Counterfeit Messiah is a sweeping prophetic thriller that follows the rise of a man destined to captivate the world.

As political power shifts across nations and ancient alliances awaken, a revived empire begins to take shape—an empire built on the legacy of Rome.

Behind the scenes, powerful figures within the world's most influential religious institution maneuver to guide the course of history.

Three forces begin moving toward the same moment.

A man the world will embrace.

An empire determined to rule.

A religious authority prepared to crown him.

To billions, he will appear to be the long-awaited savior of humanity.

But prophecy has already given him another name.

The Antichrist.

**The final seven years of human history are drawing near—
and the world is about to meet its counterfeit Messiah.**