

Seven Trumpets is a fictional account of the Apocalypse, based on Scriptural truth, scientific evidence, and present-day events. Thoroughly researched and brutally honest, it forces a confrontation with life's most important question: "Where will I be when it happens?" Defense Department analyst Dennis Bartlett fails to prevent world-wide nuclear holocaust, which ushers in Revelation's dreaded Apocalypse. He is soon embroiled in humanity's worst nightmare: The Demon Prince has come to claim his earthly throne! Is there really no escape?

Seven Trumpets Book One: Descent into Despair

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What *is* the truth?" Beliano heard himself asking the demon.

*"The truth, human? You wonder where I go at times, yes?"*

"Yes! Yes, I do!" Another low rumble of malevolent mirth followed before the demon answered his host.

*"That is no mystery. Would you not rather learn a far greater truth? The final destiny of all humans, for instance?"*

Now that *was* intriguing. If he had the answer to life's ultimate question, he could use it to great advantage! But why was Abaddon changing the subject? Had he hit on some weakness of the demon? He found himself wondering too clearly about that very thing when a hideous peal of laughter filled his ears.

*"Aha! So you wish to gain some advantage over me? I will tell you what you wish to know, but first you must understand where you will be existing in a thousand years."*

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# **Seven Trumpets**

**Clinton A. Veach**

*“And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth [will let], until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed...”*

*II Thessalonians 2:6-8*

## CHAPTER ONE: FORTY DAYS

Another of the hideous creatures swooped low to join the first, already feasting on the mangled victim twisting futilely within its grasp. The ear-piercing shrieks of the bizarre demonic killers from the abyss mingled with the hopeless wails of the unfortunate humans that had already been seized upon, producing a spine-chilling cacophony of horrible sounds. Winged and huge, they seemed to be everywhere; black, iron-muscle horse-like bodies pranced beneath faces that could've been human, if not so wickedly contorted in malicious glee at their appointed task. These were not mindless beasts. Ghoulish red eyes burned with ancient intelligence and malevolent purpose.

The new arrival thundered to the ground with a deep-throated roar, folding its massive leathery wings onto its back...and then fastened its gaze upon Dennis. The terrified man turned to run, but his feet were like lead weights, dragging him away in agonizing and surrealistic slow motion. In an instant, the monstrous thing was upon him, driving him to the ground and pinning him there with a triumphant snort. Tossing long streams of human-like hair from eyes that held no mercy, the creature paused in obvious pleasure for just a moment...before whipping its scorpion-like tail in to impale the helpless man. Dennis Bartlett covered his face and screamed.

\* \* \*

Dennis jolted awake, eyes wide in terror and heart thumping frantically against his chest. Drenched with sweat, he realized his arms were crossed over his face in desperate protection against the imaginary demon still fresh in his mind. He shuddered uncontrollably. At forty years old, he should've been past the monster-in-the-closet fears of youth, but there was something oddly persistent about this particular nightmare that sent chills down his spine. It was *too* real. *Too* detailed. And he'd been having it for months.

His wife, Amy, was sound asleep. He was sure he *had* screamed, and wondered how she'd slept through it all, but then, maybe that had been all in

his mind as well. Disgusted with himself, he slid his feet off the side of the bed and sat up. His heart was still complaining, and there was an inexplicable fear gnawing at the edge of his senses, like the nightmare was waiting for him to fall asleep again, when the nameless demon would finish the job. He angrily forced the images out of his mind.

Going to the window and pushing a sliver of curtain aside, he instinctively scanned the street below. A blowing rain peppered the window in waves...not a good night for prowlers, but surveillance habits were hard to break sometimes, and in *his* line of work that wasn't always a bad thing. For twenty years, he'd served various government agencies, from his Special Forces days until now, as a top researcher and advisor for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. His specialty was in domestic terrorism and gangs, and he worked closely with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies in his study of terrorist groups suspected of being inside U.S. borders.

He was primarily a scenario writer, a guy who dreamed up all the horrible possibilities...situations that could spell disaster on *any* law enforcement level. He was privy to the information kept back from the American people...classified information that would only incite panic. Terrorists were regularly probing the vulnerabilities of the United States, which they liked to call the "Great Satan". It really was a whole new world from a security standpoint, and after 9-11, Americans had begrudgingly adjusted to the inconveniences it brought.

Dennis wasn't particularly interested in crawling back into bed, and not entirely because of the dream. Today would be his first day of vacation, and he could sleep in till noon if he chose to, so after scrubbing the sweat from his face and chest with a cool washcloth, he went downstairs and clicked the television on. Leaning back in the comfortable recliner, he lazily toggled through channels to see what wonderful programming had been planned for two in the morning.

Across town, a pounding rain battered the rolled-tin roofing of the dock's warehouses, crowded tightly together along East Bay Street in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. At such an hour, there shouldn't have been much activity at all on the wharf, but even if there *was*, it would've been impossible to see anything beyond ten feet away. Between the rain and the eerie fog caused by the sudden temperature change, visibility was near zero...and that had proven most unfortunate for the dead man lying face down in the narrow alleyway between the two old buildings.

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Dennis hadn't realized he'd fallen asleep until he heard the persistent chirping of his cell phone upstairs in the bedroom. He tumbled out of the chair and scrambled to answer it before his wife awoke. When he reached the bedroom, he was amazed that she *was* still asleep. He grabbed for the phone and looked at its screen. There was a stab of annoyance as he recognized his friend's number on the caller ID. Detective Van Ostrund wouldn't have known he was *on* vacation, of course, since he hadn't talked to Joe for months, but Dennis couldn't quite hide the irritation in his voice as he whispered an answer.

"It's two-thirty, Joe. Your house better be on fire..."

There was a beat of silence at the other end. Joe Van Ostrund, a Charleston police detective, had known the Bartletts for more than fifteen years. When Joe's wife had left him several years earlier, the friendship had become strained. Joe and Dennis remained friends...and the wives remained friends. But Joe's wife had run off with a fellow police officer, a man known to *both* families. And it had torn Joe apart. The resulting situation was so awkward that it had become difficult to maintain any kind of relationship between the two families.

"Dennis, you might wanna come down and take a look at this. The docks on East Bay."

Dennis sat heavily on the edge of the bed. He really didn't want to spend the first day of his vacation getting soaked in downtown Charleston, but he also knew that if he was getting a call from his detective friend in the middle of the night, it would be something important. Joe was serious about his job. Bartlett's first thought was to ask questions, but that probably wasn't such a good idea. He wasn't *exactly* law enforcement, and the detective certainly wasn't following protocol in calling him, so he settled for the simple answer.

"I'll be there in twenty, Joe."

"Okay...see ya then."

As Dennis clicked his cell off, his wife awoke.

"I thought I heard the phone. Who was it?"

"Joe Van Ostrund. He wants to show me something."

Amy glanced at the clock's illuminated dial and rolled to face Dennis, already slipping on the tan khakis he'd hung on the bedpost. Amy had long ago abandoned her demands for Dennis to put his clothes away at night. She'd once sarcastically suggested that he might as well just sleep in his clothes, since he'd *look* like he had anyway. She hadn't meant the comment to be funny, but Dennis had laughed uproariously, to her chagrin.

“Joe Van Ostrund? He calls out of the blue in the middle of the night? What’s wrong? What happened?” She was fully awake now, and worried. Dennis turned to his wife. Even halfway through the night, she was beautiful. At forty-one, she could pass easily for thirty and often did. Although they’d had their share of marital problems, and at times argued incessantly, Dennis had never needed another woman, and through twenty years of marriage they had remained faithful to one another. Her dark chestnut hair swirled around a face now creased with worry. Dennis studied her soft features before answering.

“I don’t know, honey. But if he thought it was important enough to call me about...I can’t just ignore it. I’ll be back as soon as possible.” He leaned over and ran his fingers through her hair, pushing it up out of her eyes, and kissed her gently. “Don’t worry. I’ll be okay.”

She watched as her husband threw a shirt on, and considered telling him it didn’t match the khakis, but she knew he didn’t care about that *either*. To him, clothes were just what you did to avoid walking around naked. Within minutes, he was ready to go.

“Be careful, Dennis.”

He turned back and smiled, noting her concern, then softly closed the bedroom door. Before leaving, he peeked in on his adopted son, twelve-year old Tony. He was a good kid, and loved his adopted daddy. He had come from a bad situation into their home six years ago, and the little boy had lodged himself in the heart of his new father from the start. Dennis kissed the sleeping boy gently on the forehead and turned to go.

Tony stirred, recognizing the silhouetted figure in the doorway.

“Daddy?”

“Hey, son. Sorry if I woke you. Just checking on my boy.”

“Mmmm. Love ya, dad.”

“Love you too, son. Good night.”

“Night, dad.” Tony pulled the covers to his neck and curled onto his side.

As Dennis closed his son’s door behind him, he was reminded that a family *was* worth fighting for, and felt that familiar stab of guilt for his part in the endless marital struggle. He wished he’d done a better job at it than he had. Providing a secure home for his family was at the top of his list of priorities, and keeping his family together was the key ingredient in its success. It was too bad that wishes were reserved for fairy tales. As he backed out of the drive, he had no idea that his whole world was about to be turned upside down.



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Charleston was anything but bustling at two-thirty in the morning. The downtown area had somehow maintained the quaint atmosphere of a small town while the population had exploded all around it. Traffic was always a problem, except in the middle of the night, he mused, and with new road construction going on constantly, was worse at rush hours than it had ever been. But early spring in the “low country” was pleasant weather *all* the time. So if you *did* get caught in a traffic jam, at least you could enjoy your misery! Within fifteen minutes, Dennis was rounding the curve on East Bay Street under the Arthur Ravenel Bridge and spotted the sea of blue lights ahead at the entrance to the docks.

The Charleston container port was now the second largest in all of North America. It was known for its well-thought out and integrated security systems, and served as a model for other ports. He pulled as closely as possible to the commotion and parked at the curb. Even though the rain had faded now to a warm drizzle, he popped his umbrella and walked another twenty yards to the edge of the yellow-taped area. A policeman there wasn't letting anybody through, and the new arrival was no exception.

“This area's closed off, buddy. Move along.”

Dennis stood his ground. “I'm here to see Detective Van Ostrund. He around?”

The patrolman narrowed his eyes and looked at the man in front of him. Dressed in tan khakis and sneakers, a light green plaid shirt, and hair tucked under an Ohio State football cap, the bearded man didn't look like he belonged at a crime scene, unless he was *causing* one. Before either man said another word, Detective Van Ostrund appeared and tapped the area guard on the shoulder. He was neatly dressed, maybe even a little overdressed with his jacket, tie and hat. Well, the cowboy hat was a staple for Joe, even when he was in jeans. His clean-shaven face only accented the dark circles under his eyes, and his expression was grim.

“I got him, Frank. He's with me.” Joe pulled Dennis past the patrolman and into the restricted area.

“What's going on, Joe?” Dennis asked.

“Well, I'm not sure,” he began, “but we may have one of your MS 13's here.”

Dennis felt his heart skip a beat. MS 13. Mara Salvatrucha. They were a ruthless gang originating in El Salvador and spreading with frightening speed across the United States, with a membership of more than 25,000. Considered to be the worst of the worst, they were distinguished by their

bold neck and eyelid tattoos and a particular brand of brutality they used against enemies. And they hated cops with a passion.

For the past year, Dennis had been researching the alarming influx of the gang's members into the port city. His scenario was a frightening one for the low country, and given the sheer volume of business the port did, the potential of it being targeted at some point was extremely high. Dennis had played a key role several months earlier in a fiasco of a law enforcement/first responder exercise in which his grading had incensed some major agencies and politicians. His name wasn't exactly a popular one among the city's finest.

The two men reached the body, and Dennis saw immediately that indeed, this crime had the stain of MS 13 all over it. The man lay on his stomach, just inside the building's narrow alleyway, shoved against the base of a dumpster there, the body only partially shielded from the rain by a low overhang. The back of his shirt was ripped and blood-soaked like he'd been stabbed repeatedly from behind, the rain-mixed blood washing a gruesome path to the curb.

But a thickening pool of dark crimson around the upper torso *wasn't* a result of stab wounds. The man's head...was gone. Unmistakably a sign of MS 13. The shadowy gang was tied to several terrorist groups, and had adopted the tactic of sawing a victim's neck in two. Even if it wasn't the actual cause of death, they routinely hacked a victim's head from its torso.

Detective Van Ostrund pointed to the dumpster's lid, where the man's head was purposely left, glazed eyes frozen open in the terror of his last moments. Dennis wasn't a crime-scene specialist, but he'd witnessed enough grisly situations in his military tour to be able to put down the sudden sickness in his stomach. He *did* notice the tattoos on both sides of the Hispanic man's neck, clearly identifying him as a member of the gang.

"Okay, so it's obvious he's MS 13. And they *do* kill their own when things go bad. But what's this got to do specifically with me, Joe?"

The detective led Dennis aside, away from the lab guys desperately trying to preserve evidence, and cops processing potential witnesses. He pulled a crumpled wad of blood-stained paper out of his pocket and handed it to Dennis. As he opened it, his eyes went wide. *His* name and his work phone number were scrawled inside! What was the dead man doing with his contact information? Dennis gaped at it and then looked over at the man's head again, concentrating hard. He didn't recognize him. But the note was in his own handwriting! He decided not to say anything about that for now.

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“Look Dennis, I know you well enough to believe you’re not involved in this. In the murder anyway. But if you know how this guy knows *you*, then you’d better let me in on it now.”

Dennis sank to the curb, still staring at the scrap of paper. “Joe, I don’t know the guy. I swear.”

The detective nodded. “I believe you. But Dennis, *this* guy...Victor Romanos,” he hitched a thumb indicating the murder victim, “was an informant. *My* informant. He worked the docks, and just last week claimed that something very, very big was in the works. Only he never got a chance to tell me what.”

Dennis’ head was spinning now. One of the scenarios he’d written had detailed the possibility of a gang like MS 13 smuggling a nuclear device into the Port of Charleston. They’d need help at the port, of course, but the gang’s suspected terrorist connection *was* with one of the most prolific groups in the world...Hezbollah. Right up there with Al Qaeda and Hamas, and fully capable of supporting such an operation. Joe sat down on the curb beside Dennis and pulled another item from his shirt pocket. He pressed it into Dennis’ hand.

“I found this on him too. You know her?”

This time Dennis couldn’t hide the shock of recognition. The girl in the photo was Maria...an Ecuadorian in her early twenties who’d given him some valuable information on certain aspects of the gang’s members in Charleston.

“Y-yeah. I’ve...seen her,” he stammered. “She helped me in my research of MS 13. Gave me some information is all.” He glanced evasively at the detective. “Think maybe she was a girlfriend?”

“That’s what I figure.” Joe hadn’t missed his friend’s furtive glance. “You know how to find her?”

Dennis hesitated. It had been nearly a year since he’d talked to her, and maybe she had moved. “No,” Dennis lied, keeping his eyes carefully at the curb. “I have no idea *where* she’s at.”

“Well, I’m looking for her.”

“Yeah, I imagine.” Dennis looked up in time to see Joe leveling his stare at him.

“And you’d tell me if you *did* see her...right Dennis?”

“Right, Joe.” He handed the items back and stood awkwardly. “Is there anything else you can tell *me*?”

The detective glanced around as he shoved the photo and slip of paper back into his pocket. “Only that I think this has the look of one of your

scenarios. There've been some pretty suspicious rumors around the docks lately, and I'm thinking this could be the tip of one very big iceberg."

Dennis nodded. The hairs on the back of his neck were already screaming. He was afraid this might turn out to be the mother of *all* icebergs. He had no idea how right he was.

When he returned home that night, he kept his explanation brief and calm, leaving out the parts that would invite questions he couldn't answer. There was no sense in sending his wife into a panic by describing what he believed might be happening. It may even be too late to matter.

The next evening he drove down Ashley Phosphate Road past the intersection with Cross County. A nearby car wash was known to be an MS 13 "safe haven", and the group's distinctive logo was graffitied on the wall of the front set of stalls. The wash stalls in the back were in disrepair and blocked off. If a gang member was running from law enforcement, he'd go to the rear of the facility and wait to be transported to a safe house. Dennis turned into the neighborhood behind the car wash and parked discreetly half a block from where he was going. He walked to a small, neatly kept house and up the flowered walkway. He took a breath and knocked on the door.

The tiny Hispanic woman who answered didn't need the heavy makeup to improve her attractiveness. She had a baby in her arms, and failed to recognize her visitor at first, but when Dennis introduced himself, her eyes widened in fear. She nervously peered up and down the street and then quickly motioned for him to come in, closing the door and locking it behind him.

"Maria," Dennis began, "we have to talk..."

In halting English, she interrupted him. "Señor Bartlett, *please*. They will kill me if they find me talking to you. They...they are very...*very* bad people." Her hands trembled as she adjusted the blanket around the newborn's face.

Dennis wasn't sure where to start. "Do you know a Victor..." He realized before she'd even answered that she knew him very well. Her face animated in alarm.

"Victor? W-what happened to Victor?" Dennis stared at her stupidly. "What happened, Señor Bartlett? P-please...tell me."

Dennis couldn't meet the woman's eyes as he replied. "He...he's dead, Maria."

The young mother nearly collapsed. She gasped and clamped one hand over her mouth, still clutching the baby to her chest as she sank into a gaudy, worn couch. Instantly, she was streaming tears. Dennis wasn't

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surprised that she didn't know about the death yet. He sat quietly and let her cry. Her grief soon turned bitter.

"They...*they* killed him! Like they said they would if he did not help," she moaned between sobs. "They...they killed my Victor."

Dennis had not talked to this woman since he'd gleaned some pretty routine information from her almost a year ago, but he felt a deeper sympathy than he suspected he would. She'd given him descriptions of possible gang members and their whereabouts, and relayed bits of the gang's activities. MS 13 was smuggling Islamic jihadists across the U.S. border with Mexico for exorbitant fees. And once they had filtered into the American terrorist cells already in place...well, Dennis knew what came next. But it was information he'd confirmed from others and simply added to the volumes of additional research. No reason for a follow up visit.

He had eventually concluded that there *was* a serious effort to infiltrate the Charleston port facilities. His scenario was based on that research, and it had been sent to local law enforcement agencies, although it was treated as exactly what it was. A scenario. Not fact. Just an educated guess at one possibility. He now feared he'd hit the nail smack on the head with this one.

Maria must've met Victor shortly after that meeting, and Dennis guessed that the gangster was probably the father of her newborn. She wasn't a gang member, but if Victor was, then she was in deep enough that there'd *be* no easy escape. Nobody just walked away from MS 13. There were only two ways out. Disappear without a trace...or be carried out horizontally in a casket.

"What was he doing, Maria? Do you know?"

"All I know is...is that he was supposed to watch for a container of...air conditioning parts or something...and then he was to take a marked box to...somewhere...I-I don't know."

"Please, Maria...this is important. Did he say anything else? *Anything?*"

"He...he said they were getting...triggers. Yes. S-some kind of triggers. And he was scared. They were giving him a suicide mission, I think."

The blood in Dennis' veins turned icy. He hoped he was hearing wrong.

"Triggers, Maria? Did he say...*nuclear* triggers?"

"Yes! That was it! That's what he said! Nuclear triggers were coming from...from Venezuela!"

Dennis felt his hands start to shake. This was the smoking gun. He already knew that Venezuela's anti-U.S. government was actively supporting the smuggling of terrorists across the border. His voice cracked

as it rose in pitch. “When, Maria? *When?* When did he say this Venezuela shipment was coming?”

“I don’t know. I don’t...I don’t think he said...but he was so...scared. He said the gang was getting ready to go inland, and he was ordered to stay.” She broke down and began weeping uncontrollably. “H-he wanted out, I am certain. I-I didn’t know who to tell, and then...I remembered your name. I gave him your name and number. That’s all I know!”

Her baby had sensed the rise in emotion, and also began crying. Maria stopped and turned her attention fully to the infant. She held him close, and between her own tearful sobs, whispered soothingly to the infant, rocking back and forth as heavy mascara streaked her face.

Dennis was stunned. He knew he had to get this information to the authorities, but he feared it might already be too late to stop this insidious plan. Did somebody actually want to nuke Charleston? He was well aware of the fact that there were several kinds of nuclear triggers, but all of them were the final components of the nuclear device. A neutron initiator, or krytron, provided the spark for the chain reaction that would follow. They would be the last items to be smuggled and assembled, needing only polonium 210 and beryllium to finish the sequencing. That is, assuming the terrorists had already smuggled enough enriched uranium into the city for the final fabrication of a nuclear bomb. They wouldn’t risk putting it all together until very shortly before detonation. But why *Charleston*?

He fumbled for his cell phone and dialed the police station.

“Detective Joe Van Ostrund, please.”

“He’s out at the moment, may I help you?”

“Do you know when he’ll be back?”

“No, I do not, sir. If you’ll give me your name and number, I can have him call you. Or I could try to help you myself.” She was just doing her job, but Dennis was not going to accept anybody else’s ‘help’. He wasn’t exactly a celebrity with the local police. Not since he, as the lead evaluator, had helped in giving them that failing grade on the last terrorist exercise only two months earlier. His face might not be recognizable, but his name would surely be known by every officer on the force.

“No thanks. Do you know where he is?”

“Sir, I’m not allowed to give that information out. If you’ll just...” *Click*. He looked up at Maria, and noticed that she had calmed a little.

“Maria, I want you to listen very closely. Get out of town as soon as possible.” When she nodded, Dennis went on. “I gotta ask you, Maria...does Victor have any property here that I could look at?”

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“He...he didn’t keep much here, but he does have a lockbox...in the bedroom closet.”

Dennis was suddenly hopeful. “Please...could I see it?” The young mother nodded and went to get it. Dennis could only pray against all odds that it would hold some answers. Names, connections, phone numbers. Anything at all. She came back with a sturdy, but standard commercial box. He could pry it open. After asking Maria’s permission and borrowing a screwdriver, he succeeded in breaking the lock mechanism off and opened the lid. Inside was a large bundle of cash, all in hundred dollar bills. A glance told him there had to be at least ten thousand dollars there.

He handed the wad to Maria while she gaped. “Here’s your ticket outta here. Make sure you leave...today, if possible.” He continued rummaging through the box. Some phone numbers, a few keys that Maria had never seen, and a name. The name looked familiar to Dennis. Then it clicked. Imad Fayez Mugniyah. He was one of the principal planners for Hezbollah covert operations. Dennis’ face flushed warmly as his fears were confirmed. If Mugniyah was connected to this, it went to the top.

Hezbollah, or “Party of God”, had appeared in the early eighties after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Iran was the financial arm behind the radical group, led by Sheik Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. Their primary goal was the complete destruction of Israel. They didn’t do things on a small scale. If Mugniyah *was* in the mix, then this information had to be given national security priority.

“Maria, can I take these other things?” He indicated the items in the box. She nodded. Dennis stood up and headed for the door.

“Wait.” Maria stopped him. She peeked cautiously out of the living room window before speaking again. “It looks okay.”

“No, you’re right. Lemme go out the back, just to be sure. And Maria, please. I’m deadly serious. You have no idea how dangerous it’ll be to stay here. Get out of town. *Now*.” Another nod demonstrated her understanding.

“I will. Thank you, Señor Bartlett.” Dennis was already slipping into the back yard.

In his car, he phoned his NCIS friend, Stan Kolodjei. He ran the Navy’s Criminal Investigative Unit on the Charleston Naval Weapons Station.

“Hello?”

“Stan? It’s Dennis Bartlett.”

“Dennis! How you doin, man? Long time, my friend. You still getting flack over your whacking of the local AT exercise over there?”

"Yeah....thanks for the reminder, buddy." The other man laughed. "Listen, Stan. There's something very big going on. National security big. I need to talk to you. Right now if possible. I think we might already *have* a nuclear device ready to go here in Charleston." The phone went silent.

"Stan?"

"Whoa, Dennis. You sure about this? That's an issue you can't afford to be wrong about."

"I *wish* I was wrong. I pray I *am* wrong. But I know too much to ignore what just slapped me in the face. Can we meet right now?"

"I'll meet you at the main gate. Fifteen minutes okay?"

"I'll be there. And Stan...you better make some calls. Wake people up if you have to. I'm afraid this is going to be that bad. I'm on my way."

"Okay, Dennis. I'll be there."

Dennis hung up and pulled out. What he felt right now was anger. The United States had long been the world's policeman, always coming to the aid of foreigners who couldn't defend themselves. In recent years, America's citizens had been beaten down by all the anti-U.S. sentiment after the invasion of Iraq to the point where it seemed Americans were supposed to feel guilty about mistreating the poor terrorists! Leftist college professors spouted nonsense about how we *deserved* 9-11, Hollywood stars used their celebrity status to denounce the sacrifices of American troops, and liberal politicians browbeat the entire nation into confusion about how we needed to *soften* our response to radical militant murderers!

The nation that had defended itself after September 11 by unleashing the finest military in the world...was now the *bully*? Terrorist groups had to be laughing themselves into a stupor! Well, now they were firmly implanted on American soil, ready and willing to wreak havoc on a nuclear level...and eradicating them would be like pulling teeth with a pair of tweezers!

Dennis phoned his wife. "Honey, I don't have a lot of time to explain. But I want you to pack up what you can...all the clothes for a long stay at your mom's house. And do it *now*."

"What? Are you *crazy*? I can't take Tony out of school. He's got perfect attendance and everything! He's got a major Math test next week, for goodness sake. You can't just..."

"Amy!" Dennis cut her off. "*Please*. I can't go into details right now..."

"But why do you...?"

"Please, Amy. Just do as I ask. I'll be home later, and I'll try to explain...but I gotta go now."

"Dennis, his test..."



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But he'd already hung up. He wasn't going to get into the argument this time. If he didn't explain all the details fully, she'd keep asking. And he didn't want to go into *these* details over the phone. He needed to be there. Hopefully, she wouldn't be too angry about the hang up.

"Fat chance of that," he murmured aloud.

Stan was already parked outside the gate. Dennis didn't wait for him to get out of his vehicle. He pulled in behind him, walked to the passenger side of Stan's battered Ford pickup and got in. He took a deep breath. Then he explained what he knew from the point of the downtown murder until twenty minutes ago. When he'd finished, Stan was white-faced. Without another word, the NCIS agent made several calls of his own before leaning back with his phone still clutched in his hand.

"My God, Dennis. This is it. This is the day we've all feared, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so. What scares me the worst is the magnitude of this thing. And especially with what's been happening recently in the middle-east."

"You mean Iran?"

"Iran...Syria...the Palestinians...Israel. Take your pick. With the attempt at democracy in Iraq, Iran feels threatened in their own backyard, and I believe this Hidden Imam they keep talking about is gonna spark some kind of preemptive attack on the West. But one thing I can't figure out is why *Charleston*? There aren't any political targets or financial hubs here. Not even any big clusters of manufacturing. Why would a terrorist plot involve a tourist city like Charleston?"

Stan's eyes went wide. "That's it."

"Huh?"

"Tourists! Lots of em! The Cooper River Bridge Run is...next week! That's gotta be it. Runners from all over the world will be here. Sixty-thousand plus!"

Dennis whistled. "Of course! And this year the vice-president will be here...along with the governor! Stan, that *has* to be the target! The Ravenel Bridge!"

"I'd put money on it. We need to contact Customs and Border Protection, and backtrack on every container shipment coming in from Venezuela."

"I'm willing to bet CBP finds a manifest with air conditioner parts. That is, if we're not too late already." The two men exchanged worried glances.

The next morning Dennis was at the police station waiting for Detective Van Ostrund. The night before, he had somehow convinced his very skeptical wife of the seriousness of the situation without having to go into all the details. The Christian school wasn't exactly happy about Tony's

sudden withdrawal a week before spring break, but Dennis didn't want to explain more than he had to. Today, his wife and son were already on their way north. If it was up to him, he'd evacuate the whole city, but he couldn't go around alarming everyone without real authority to back him up. But he would try to convince Joe.

"What do you mean you lied to me, Dennis? You *did* know her?"

"Yeah, Joe. I did. But like I told you, she's not involved. She's a victim...like the rest of us will be if we don't figure this out." Dennis pounded the nearest file cabinet in frustration. "Look, Joe...we gotta move fast to seal off every chance they have of getting a trigger out of this port."

Detective Van Ostrund watched his friend thoughtfully. "Well, we do have plenty of tools to work with. And given this evidence," he held up the slips of paper Dennis had given him, "and what you told me, we should be able to target anything from Venezuela. We'll get CBP in on it and shut this thing down...*if* it's possible."

Dennis knew that the ports of the United States were better protected than the public realized. The Container Security Initiative of January 2002 had brought a little known process to the forefront in the fight to detect radioactive materials and suspected nuclear fissile materials. Five years later in 2007, high tech Isotope detectors were employed that could differentiate between weapons grade and medical radioactivity, and infrared and x-ray technology could reveal even well hidden compartments within containers, all put into place without fanfare. So, contrary to the public's assumption that only five-percent of sea-borne containers were examined, the real number was closer to seventy-percent. But that un-inspected *thirty*-percent was still a lot of wiggle room for a carefully planned smuggling plot.

Their one ace in the hole was that they could concentrate on containers from Venezuela. And Stan had made sure his national contacts had all the same information, so that every container arriving in any U.S. port from a Venezuela origination would be discreetly halted and thoroughly searched until further notice. They didn't have to wait long for the inevitable.

Four days later, Dennis was on the phone with his wife, who wanted to know when he was going to arrive at her mother's home in Ohio, when the next call from Detective Van Ostrund came. He promised his wife he'd call her back with an answer and clicked over to the detective.

"Dennis, you might wanna come down here." The background noise indicated that there was another situation.

"The docks?"

"Yep. Oh...and comb your hair."

*Seven Trumpets*

“What? My *hair*? What’s going on, Joe?”

“Just get here.” The detective laughed and hung up.

This time it took forty-five minutes to round the curve onto East Bay, but the scene looked eerily similar to the murder scene only days before. But now, when the patrolman spotted the red Camaro convertible Dennis was driving, he waved him through...right up to the cordoned-off section that entered the docks. Van Ostrund was waiting, and opened the car’s door.

“You should’ve taken my advice. Your hair looks pretty sad.”

“Come on Joe, what is it?”

“The media, Dennis. They’ll wanna talk to you. But come with me first.”

The detective pushed through the crowd of microphones and cameras converging on them, and led a bewildered Dennis to another area, yellow-taped and guarded against unwanted entry.

“You’re a hero, Dennis! I don’t know how you put this together so quickly, but we got em!”

Dennis took in the carnage in front of him. Two bodies covered in blood still lay where they’d fallen amid dozens of spent shell casings and an open cargo container in the offload section of the dock. Another body was being zipped into a coroner’s bag. Inside the shipping container were boxes labeled “Air Conditioning Parts”, some of them broken open, with various pieces of tubing lying around.

“Wanna guess what we found in one of the boxes?” Joe was smiling from ear to ear. He slapped Dennis on the back. “And you probably don’t need to see the manifest to know that the shipment came from Venezuela.”

“Thank God!” It was like the weight of the world was lifted from his shoulders. Joe turned him around and pushed him toward the cameras and lights. Dennis Bartlett was indeed a national hero. Two days of frenzied media attention would follow, and interviews on a variety of talk shows were scheduled for the new media darling. It looked like Dennis Bartlett was going to be one busy man. He finally remembered to phone his wife.

“Oh, Dennis, I never realized how serious the situation was. I’m so proud of you. I’m sorry for being such a pain. Would you forgive me?” It was nice to hear his wife’s voice.

Dennis laughed. “You know I could never stay mad at you, honey! And I’m gonna come up there and prove it!” She laughed softly, and after a beat, he added seriously, “I can’t believe how close we came to...to all hell breaking loose down here.”

Her voice belied her own concern. “I know. It’s so scary, Dennis. The world just isn’t the same place it was even twenty years ago when you could travel anywhere without fear of being openly hated or killed...”

“Yeah...and it’s only getting worse. But hey...just so you don’t worry, I’ll be heading up day after tomorrow. I promise. They want me to do a couple more interviews, then I’m on my way.”

“We’ll be here...be careful, Dennis. I love you.”

“Love you too, hon. See ya in a few days.”

Two days later none of it mattered anymore when all hell *did* break loose. The incident averted in Charleston had been only a tiny piece of a much larger plot to bring instability to the world through the decimation of the U.S. economy. And that plan was in turn only part of a larger more sinister plot that had taken *thousands* of years to develop. No human investigator could have apprehended its designer.

Unknown to the outside world, a shadowy and secretive figure had revealed himself to a select group of national and terrorist leaders in Iran, convincing them that he was their long-awaited hidden Twelfth Imam, who had now appeared to usher in the ultimate victory against Israel and the infidel West. The final pieces, the nuclear triggers, were already in place in selected American cities, and a perfidious plan was now put into motion that would plummet the world into chaos.

The existence of electromagnetic weapons had long been the subject of rumor and speculation among conspiracy theorists, but few people knew that they really *were* more than just a “black ops” research project. They’d already been employed in atmospheric testing in the past, sometimes resulting in noticeably odd cloud formations that had gotten only casual media coverage or none at all.

But they had also been responsible for a number of bizarre weather developments...including hurricanes that did full loops in the Atlantic or took dead aim at oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico before flattening cities like New Orleans. Covertly controlled weather. It was a deviously ingenious method of striking at the heart of an enemy. And America was the enemy.

The secretive researchers had also engineered the so-called “Plague of Tornados” in the American Midwest in 2006, and had escalated the freakish weather patterns in the years following. Oddly-timed volcanic events; minor earthquakes in multiple locations simultaneously; randomly odd occurrences of heavy snowfall too early in the season; hothouse winters...the planet’s ecosystem seemed to be in open rebellion! After a few seasons of increased seismic activity in Hawaii, the island chain was devastated by the big one.

### *Seven Trumpets*

EM weaponry could even strategically knock out the electronic systems of the world's most advanced tanks, fighter jets, field weapons, and surveillance platforms...effectively rendering them useless by frying their circuitry. That capability alone had frightening implications on the balance of world power. The actual application of EM weaponry was so precise and targeted, that the public never knew when a military incident had occurred...blissfully ignorant of the true and terrible nature of real war.

But electromagnetic technology could do something *else*. It could disrupt the enormous pressures against the tectonic plates underlying the very continental shelves of the earth's crust miles underground...and that was exactly how it was used *now*.

When the plates of the Pacific Rim abruptly and dramatically shifted, the entire planet was plunged into a series of irreversible events that would threaten to unravel civilization, dragging it to the brink of total annihilation. Oceanic currents were catastrophically altered, which resulted in a sudden melting of polar ice regions. The environmental upheaval that followed spawned multiple and simultaneous hurricanes, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. Hell, in all its fury, was indeed unleashed upon the earth.

Dennis Bartlett, the Charleston hero, was forgotten. A day of terror that rivaled all the media speculation about end-of-the-world scenarios was approaching. No...it was here right now. Television stations stopped carrying entertainment. TV was now twenty-four hour coverage of the advancing mega-storms. A country...and a *world*...paralyzed with fear.

Then the entire U.S. power grid went down, presumably by terrorist attacks on selected high-load substations. The output of power stations ground to a halt as darkness descended over much of the country. Cell phones and land lines ceased to work, and by the time the hurricanes and earthquakes hit the eastern U.S. coast, the rest of the world was already gripped by sheer panic. The forty days had begun.

Atlantic hurricanes in the early spring would normally have been a ridiculous notion. Now an unnaturally dark swirl the size of Texas, spinning at *tornado* speeds, settled over the entire southeast even as the ground in Charleston began to shake apart violently from a 9.9 earthquake along the Ashley River fault. Then the first frantic reports of nuclear detonations in other parts of the U.S. came. Manhattan Island sank into New York Harbor as a massive earthquake crumbled its bedrock foundation and sent millions to their deaths. Washington, D.C. was gone as well, consumed by a super-heated mushroom cloud. Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, Miami, and Dallas were all among major metropolitan areas rocked by nuclear events.

Several gigantic tsunamis were crisscrossing the oceans, plowing over islands and capsizing any vessels unfortunate enough to be out on the open ocean. The military scrambled even as churches and preachers called for prayer. It truly seemed as if the world was coming to an end.

Along with every American, Dennis had listened incredulously to the reports of multiple disasters across the U.S. and the world. He was standing at his back door, staring at the ominous black sky overhead, when the first tremors began. His home wasn't far from the Ashley River and its famous fault line, and he immediately started packing his Camaro with food and supplies.

Every Charlestonian knew the history of the fault. It had absolutely flattened the city in 1886, and more recently had been stirring again, prompting fears that another major quake would cripple the unprepared low country. Fortunately, the car was gassed up, and Dennis loaded another twenty gallons of generator gasoline from the storage shed into the trunk. Not the safest way to travel, but he knew from experience that there'd be a mess on the highways and gas would be at a premium.

He pulled onto Interstate 26 and headed west, but quickly realized that hundreds of thousands were doing the same thing already. They would all be trapped on these highways very soon, and exposed to the atmospheric monster at the gate. With an apprehensive glance at the eerie black of the midday sky, Dennis exited and headed south, away from the exodus and into the farmland outside Summerville, where he knew of a small cave. His cell phone was useless, so there was no way to let his wife know of the abrupt change in plans.

He'd found the tiny cavern while camping out with his son several years before. The earth's intermittent rumbling told him this was no ordinary quake, and navigation was difficult along the tight, winding country road. By the time he got there, the earth had stopped shaking, but the sky had turned into something out of a horror film. The air itself seemed to have been sucked away, and even sounds seemed deadened and flat. Dennis remembered the descriptions of tsunamis...how they'd suck coastal water away and then return in brutal force. He knew this thing would slam back to earth with a terrible vengeance.

He pulled his Camaro under a large oak tree sheltering the cave's entrance, and then hauled his supplies into its darkness. Twenty minutes later, he stood at the cave's mouth and gaped at the approach of the staggering phenomenon, pondering the implications of the last reports before the power went out. Had terrorists coordinated their attacks *with* the

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weather? Or had they caused *both*? Within the hour, rain and hail began to tumble from the sky. He worried about his car, but it was too late to matter. The wind was already howling furiously, and the hail was getting larger.

Suddenly, a loud crash pulled his eyes to the car. Then another. And another. Baseball-sized ice balls were careening crazily, almost horizontally across the small clearing. Within minutes, the Camaro looked as if it had endured a multi-vehicle accident. He watched in stunned silence as the storm's intensity grew.

Once, he thought he saw a *person* fly by in the midst of the maelstrom, but there was no way he could help anyone. Stepping outside to do anything now would be a death sentence. The noise alone was deafening, forcing him to drag his supplies deeper into the cave. He sequestered himself there for three full days, until the immense hurricane had lumbered on. He'd never before heard of such a furious onslaught lasting so long.

When he emerged from his hiding place, "doomsday" would've been an adequate description for what he saw. There was evidence, even forty miles away from the ocean, of severe flooding. It would be far worse in the lower coastal plains to the east...and if indeed the polar ice caps *had* melted, the rising ocean levels would soon reshape the coastlines of the world!

But right here, it looked as if a giant earth-mover had plowed through and left only desolation in its wake. Jumbled piles of lumber, brick, and furniture from homes probably miles away littered the landscape, along with dozens of twisted vehicles. And his car was gone...nowhere in sight.

Dennis could only imagine what the highways looked like. Travelers would've been unable to escape the killer storm as it descended upon them without mercy, and the death toll had to be high. He walked through the wreckage for a half-mile, not finding a single living person, but grimly noting hundreds of body *parts*. Shaken, he turned north along the paved road toward what used to be Summerville. The incredible storm had actually sucked up large sections of asphalt and carried them away!

After thirty minutes, he reached what appeared to be an abandoned electronics store. Most of the building was open to the weather, blending perfectly with the surrounding rubble. Stumbling past the debris, he rummaged until he found a battery-operated television radio. A priceless find! He unearthed several packs of batteries, glancing hopefully at the first two living humans he'd seen since exiting the cave. They were looting foodstuffs from a snack machine, barely acknowledging him before they returned to their task.

He inserted the batteries and turned the TV on. Nothing. He switched to the radio. The details were sketchy, and there were only a few stations broadcasting...but one thing was clear...the low country wasn't alone in its misery; the entire world was immersed in staggering devastation! It was exactly what he *didn't* want to hear.

The American Speaker of the House made a plea for calm and order. The whereabouts of the president and vice-president were unknown, but they were presumed dead. The military was mobilizing as best it could, but there was nobody to strike back against, since no nation claimed responsibility for the nuclear attacks. Frantic politicians turned their efforts to domestic concerns. Disaster management, food and water rationing, law enforcement, and basic survival. It was pitifully little for a catastrophe of this magnitude.

Thoughts of his family flashed painfully through his mind, but there was no way to contact his wife and son. Dennis could only hope that they were safe. The news broadcasts were focusing on only a few things. Disasters, of course, topped the list, and a mass exodus away from coastal areas was creating even more havoc, with millions feared dead. A tsunami had erased much of eastern Florida and parts of the Georgia and South Carolina coasts.

But reports also indicated that some type of worldwide jihad had been declared by extremist Muslim terrorist groups! The long lost nuclear "suitcase" weapons that had been missing from the Soviet era were being found. One by one they were being detonated in all parts of the globe by faithful Islamic jihadists rushing to claim their prizes in the afterlife.

Dennis realized, far too late, that the Charleston job was just one little part of some vast insidious worldwide plot. America had been lulled to sleep again. Hard to believe after 9-11, but numerous false alarms and hoax threats had taken their toll. He'd been suckered like the rest of humanity!

And then there were the reports of some very odd appearances. News reporters were calling them *proclaimers*. They couldn't be what they seemed to be, but they were being described...as *apparitions*! Ghostly-looking people were just popping up in a number of places...and crying out for the world to repent! Some were claiming they were people who were supposed to be dead! One reporter lamented that these...ghosts...were warning that God's impending judgment on the earth was yet to come!

"*Impending* judgment? Who are you kidding? How could it get any worse than it is?" Dennis caught himself thinking out loud. One looter eyed him suspiciously before hauling his bag outside.

Dennis didn't know that the Bible had recorded at least one other such occasion when the dead came back and warned the living. The eerily similar



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event took place after the crucified Jesus arose from the grave. In Matthew 27:52-53, it stated clearly,

*“And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.”*

For some mysterious reason, these “risen saints” had appeared to people in Jerusalem and testified that Jesus had indeed conquered death! The astonishing facts were confirmed and recorded, even by secular sources of the day. After forty days, those biblical witnesses were gone without a trace.

Now the news reports were saying that some of these present day *proclaimers* were supposedly famous figures from the past! A man fitting the description of the great baseball star turned fiery evangelist, Billy Sunday, purportedly was seen in Chicago, where he had died. Despite repeated attempts to silence him, he had reappeared regularly in front of the old Moody Memorial Church, converting some and angering many more with oratory about the end of the “age of grace.”

Across the world in Changsha, China, the capital city of the Hunan Province, a man stood along the Xiang River and extolled the mercies of God. Chinese officials tried unsuccessfully to apprehend the man, but multitudes insisted that he was none other than the famous missionary to China, Hudson Taylor! Disturbing claims flooded in from around the world as one incredulous report followed another.

Many more of the disquieting appearances involved *proclaimers* who were known only to locals. In Lewiston, Idaho, a farmer named Smith planted himself at a crossroads and cried that God’s judgment was coming. In Staten Island, New York, a preacher’s wife named Donna stood for two weeks on Amboy Road, persuading all that came within earshot. In Holyoke, Massachusetts, a young man named Eric stalked the Apremont Highway area, pressing strangers with the gospel. Both devout and marginal believers flooded the altars of churches throughout the world with a renewed awareness of the coming Day of the Lord.

Dennis Bartlett didn’t know that God really *was* making a final call in the waning days before the imminent return of His Son. Because of His matchless love for the souls of men, He was providing one more witness before the hammer of judgment fell on the unrepentant. These “ghosts” were His messengers. Dennis only knew that the entire world had gone seriously haywire. He was jarred from his thoughts.

*“Repent! Believe ye the gospel of Jesus Christ!”*

He whirled around to confront the speaker. There was nobody there. A chill ran down his spine as he squinted out at the figure in the street, more than fifty yards away! It was a young man, standing with hands raised, but he looked odd somehow. Dennis moved to the doorway and stared out. The man was maybe twenty years of age, and staring *back* at him, staring right *through* him. But he still had that strange opaque-like appearance.

*"Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."* The boy was half a football field from him, but he sounded as if he was right beside him! Dennis felt the chill trace its way again down his back. He turned to grab his bag of supplies and stepped out onto the sidewalk, fully intending to question the youth. This far inland, there were now a few other survivors emerging into the street, but by the time Dennis had maneuvered over the pile of garbage and started in the speaker's direction, there was no sign of him. How could he have vanished so quickly? The man's words echoed in his mind as he stood alone in the middle of the street.

"Hey, buddy...did you see...?"

Nobody was interested in social discussions as they trudged through their own personal nightmares, ignoring the disheveled man in the middle of the road. Dennis tore his thoughts away from the puzzling encounter, and back to the immediate. He needed transportation. Most every home had been severely damaged, and they all looked abandoned...so he began searching what was left of a neighborhood in hopes of a drivable vehicle.

At the fifth house he hit pay dirt. The keys to a late model hybrid Ford Escape were still hanging on a wall ten feet from the SUV. The gas tank was nearly full, and the battery was fully charged! It had been a while since Dennis had been so lucky at anything.

Several days of relative calm ensued as the next hurricane gathered strength and headed for the eastern seaboard. Dennis remained at the house where he'd found the SUV. Though badly damaged, there was plenty of dry food, which he piled into the vehicle, ready to move at a moment's notice. The house's garage had weathered the original storm, but it wouldn't survive another one. And according to the reports, the next storm was just as severe. He stayed until the midday light was darkened by the menacing swirl of clouds, and then headed for the cave. Wedging the entire front end of the SUV into the entrance, Dennis made the little cave his home as two more hurricanes swept through.

At some point in the midst of the second storm, Dennis was wrenched out of a fitful sleep by something more than the screaming howl of the winds. There was something else outside. Or some *one*! He scrambled to the

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SUV, which was firmly lodged in the opening, and dove through its driver's window. The portion of the vehicle exposed to the elements was being battered steadily, even sheltered as it was against the hillside. He tumbled over into the back seat and stared out the rear window.

He squinted into the darkness. Incredibly, a ghostly figure stood facing him, not twenty feet away! The image seemed unreal...out of place somehow...for even though the old woman's simple clothing appeared to be driven by the roaring wind, she completely ignored the flying debris and danger as if it wasn't there!

A sudden crack of lightning illuminated her face for just an instant, and Dennis fell back. It *couldn't* be.

"G-grandma?" Of course, he *had* to be hallucinating. She'd been dead for more than thirty years! He gaped as he heard the woman's voice with a clarity that should never have been possible in the midst of such howling.

"Satan wants you, my precious boy...he will sift you as wheat. *Jesus*...and He alone...can save you. Trust Him..."

Dennis tried to push open the latch. It wouldn't budge. He pounded at the door, but it was wedged too tightly to open. And probably a good thing, for he certainly wouldn't have lasted long outside in the storm's fury. But then, only his grandma had ever called him her "precious boy".

"Gramms!" he wailed. The figure took a few steps closer, and hesitated, as if listening to someone else. Her face was clearly pained as she went on.

"Precious, you will suffer heartache, and commit much evil, but the evil will be for your good..." She seemed to flicker for a few moments, and then must have realized what was happening. She raised her hand as if to wave, and disappeared into a wisp of smoke...immediately driven off by the wind.

Dennis lay stunned, unable to move. Was it some sort of trick? No! Who could *do* that? Had he really imagined it? Maybe it *was* a cruel gag of his own making. But what was that about doing much evil? He may not have been the *best* person around, but he didn't consider himself...evil.

He couldn't quite keep the incident away from gnawing at the front of his mind, and it would eat at him constantly for the next few weeks. But he had to go on! He was determined to get to his family!

Survivors were streaming away from eastern coastlines by the millions, and a state of lawlessness was growing with each disaster and every day. With the federal governing structure in shambles, state and county authorities tried to step into the gap, but the situation was rapidly spiraling out of control. Tempers flared at the influx of refugees into local economies

already decimated by the parade of disasters, and confrontations soon escalated into raging territorial violence.

Volcanic ash and a radioactive reddish-gray dust began to blot out the earth's sun for large portions of the day. News reports painted a grim picture of the world in general. Somewhere in Europe, bio-terrorists had unleashed several strains of a deadly virus into the population, and a new mystery plague was sweeping the globe.

Opportunistic politicians tried to stem the tide of anarchy, but failed as governments imploded, and national militaries turned on themselves. The string of natural disasters had far outpaced the ability of countries to deal with them, and soon the activated sleeper-cell terrorists weren't the only groups engaged in violent endeavors. Ordinary people were becoming desperate, and chaos reigned.

For more than a month, the ghostly figures were reported in numerous locations, then disappeared for good. And the newscasters claimed that others had also disappeared. Even in areas where there'd been no nuclear events, people had supposedly come up missing, and in disturbing fashion. Some had just left their vehicles and clothing behind and vanished individually. Others had apparently planned their departure, since large portions of some church congregations simply disappeared without a trace.

Several attempts to claim that it was the 'rapture' of the true Christians only served to stir the wrath of religious leaders. And it *did* seem the least plausible, since most churches had been left surprisingly intact. The rapture explanation was viewed as particularly laughable, especially since scientists had all but proven that there *was* no God! The debate was short-lived.

The disasters and terrorist incidents continued unabated...that is, until *he* stepped onto the scene. The world was not entirely unfamiliar with Julian Beliano. He hailed from Syria, and was of Jewish descent. After being elected to the chairmanship of the European Union, Beliano had demonstrated remarkable leadership skills, and was the acclaimed mediator of the "treaty of the ages," a tentative peace pact between the warring Arabs and Israelis several years earlier.

What the world didn't know was that he had ascended to the position of Grand Master of the Prieuré de Sion, the controller of many secretive organizations like the Illuminati and the Club of Rome, which had openly espoused a New World Charter in 1973 with its publication of the report, "*Regionalized and Adaptive Model of the Global World System*". The document had divided the world into ten political and economic regions, a virtual blueprint of Beliano's new peace program. His widely applauded

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middle-east treaty had brought peace between the ancient enemies, but the old hatreds continued to smolder beneath it.

Now he had a solution to the rash of weather-related disasters *and* the terrorism that plagued the rest of the planet. He even revealed what seemed at first to be a fantastic and unrealistic explanation for the more recent disappearances of so many people across the globe. He calmly asserted that those disappearances and the ghostly apparitions both were the result of alien visitation! It was an absurd claim, but he described these ‘visitors’ as explorers from an alternate dimension, who upon observing the earth, had concluded that the planet *was* on the brink of destruction...because of the atmospheric damage being caused by nuclear holocaust.

The alien visitors, he insisted, had been working on a remedy for the poisonous environmental condition and a resolution to the catastrophic weather, but were not convinced that they *could* save the earth. There were people who had been taken, Beliano said, but only a small cross section of humans had been selected and then transported to another planet in the alternate dimension in order to determine how suitable *that* planet was in the event humanity itself had to be evacuated.

Dennis sat at the cave’s entrance and stared at the static-laced feed from the mini TV.

“...and our visitors, who call themselves Nephaliens...will return any of our people who wish to return. As for the appearances of these so-called “dead people” over the past month...it has been determined that the dimensional gateway, located in the Bermuda Triangle, suffered a malfunction because of massive storm activity in the area. It created what they called an “interspacial singularity” which activated recent transfer patterns in the device’s buffer...and then projected them randomly around our planet. It has been corrected, and will not happen again.”

Dennis, along with the rest of the world, met the news with open skepticism at first, but for the most part, it ended when Beliano actually produced one of these aliens. The decidedly non-human creature stood at over eleven feet tall; his smooth golden-hued skin covered marvelously proportioned humanoid features, but included six-fingered hands...and he had wings! He called himself Golaam, and spoke with an unearthly voice that bordered on hypnotic. The alien ambassador himself offered further video evidence proving without a doubt that they *did* possess technology beyond that of earth science.

The footage revealed a group of humans in the very act of disappearance; their clothing falling to the ground behind them as they appeared to “teleport” into a hovering ship, which promptly vanished into one of the swirling atmospheric gateways. The world then glimpsed a close up of one of their sleek silvery craft, the outside matching the “saucer-like” descriptions given by observers for many years, the inside a wonder of strange and fantastic technology.

Dennis sank back against the cold rock wall, still gaping at the screen. So here it was, the UFO mystery finally revealed to mankind! Man wasn’t alone in the universe! And the visitors were friends, not enemies out to destroy or conquer the world! Obviously, they could have accomplished that goal very easily, had they intended harm to humans.

The Nephalian described how they had spent years in covert observation simply because they feared that the human race was not ready for alien contact, and would view their arrival as an invasion. They had appeared openly now because of the wide-scale destruction that would indeed contaminate the planet beyond any hope of recovery. It seemed reasonable.

Scientists from every country lined up to support the fact that UFO occurrences had been dramatically increasing over the last few years; people who claimed to have been abducted came forth, and the world was forced to consider the overwhelming volume of evidence that supported the claims of the visitor. Soon the great Lie became the accepted truth. The world had swallowed the pill of strong delusion exactly as the Bible had foretold in the second chapter of Second Thessalonians.

Beliano’s ensuing argument for peace was both passionate and persuasive, and international cooperation was the key. The visitors would leave this representative behind until it was determined whether earth *could* be spared. But one thing was made clear. The nations must disarm. Beliano’s solution offered a way out for all the combatants if they would just lay down their weapons of mass destruction and dedicate themselves to rebuilding the only planet they had. He convinced the leaders of the world that this would be their one and only chance to get it right, and that the alternative was unthinkable devastation.

Within days of Beliano’s confirmation as the world’s mediator with its new alien friends, the earth’s weather systems subsided noticeably. The world’s new savior managed to bring the major terrorist leaders together for peace talks that would bring an immediate end to the horrific acts of jihad. And just like that, the world had been turned from the brink of destruction, literally in a week!

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Though Dennis was glad for all that, he didn't believe for one moment that terrorists already in the U.S. would suddenly become docile. But he would use this lull in the weather to reach his family. He packed all his remaining supplies into the SUV, along with his precious nine-millimeter pistol, a Glock 17, and headed east to his house for more ammo and cash. The rain came in intermittent poundings, which faded to dull gray cloud cover. He hadn't seen the sun in weeks. It soon became apparent that the water level had risen enough to make ground transportation impossible much further eastward. He'd have to find another way to the house.

He spent the next whole day searching for a boat...any boat...to carry him to his neighborhood. There were plenty of boats scattered around, just none that would float. Somewhere near twilight, he found the little dinghy, amazingly intact, and threw it atop the SUV, carefully driving through water until it nearly touched the undercarriage. He hid the vehicle inside what used to be a house, and set off in the dinghy. He noticed that the sky had again turned sullen, and within fifteen minutes, he was engulfed in another deluge.

An hour later, soaked and miserable, he paddled wearily through the debris-strewn water, murky-brown and reeking of death. The rain had slackened some, but jagged fingers of lightning still tore holes in the angry sky. He barely noticed. He'd even stopped counting the bloated bodies floating by. The dead were the lucky ones. It was all he could do to keep from jumping into the poison muck himself and ending it all, but his Special Forces training refused to let him go so easily. If he was going to get his ticket punched, he'd most likely do it while punching back.

It had been forty days since the first nukes had detonated. He had no inkling of the significance of the number, even though he was faintly aware of its biblical association with trial and testing. He'd heard the stories as a child and the sermons later when his wife dragged him to church on special occasions. Nineveh was given forty days to repent...Jesus was tempted for forty days by Satan...and the Jews had wandered for forty *years* in the wilderness. The forty days he had just survived certainly seemed like forty years.

He still wasn't sure whether that biblical boogey man was real, but the red-suited pitchfork-wielding figure had always been such a vague threat that it was absurd to think he could have engineered *this*. Nevertheless, the crazies were all claiming that the devil himself was responsible for the devastation of the past month. Not likely, though.

Dennis knew that the real enemies were the terrorists, particularly those already in the country. They were the ones who'd just killed millions of

Americans and sent the world's economy into a tailspin, and he had discovered the plot far too late to make a difference. He wished he could go back and have a second shot at it. He'd been so close to uncovering the larger plan of the shadowy terrorist known only as the Twelfth Imam! But that really *was* just wishful thinking. It was kill or *be* killed now. He'd head north in the morning, away from the carnage around him, as soon as he recovered the rest of the ammunition from his home.

Charleston and its low-lying areas for twenty miles inland were now buried under four feet of water. The landscape was bizarre. There were still some tiny islands visible, like highway overpasses and various mounds of earth dotted with tangled trees and ruined buildings, but homes stood permanently flooded, and for as far as the eye could see, personal belongings, household items, pets...and people...all dead, bobbed eerily in the brackish seawater.

A few scattered residents had stayed after the initial flooding, apparently attempting to salvage what they could from homes half submerged in the swollen surf. Most of *them* had left once it was obvious that the rising ocean had permanently reshaped the eastern seaboard. The once-popular tourist destination endowed so richly with American history...was simply gone. It had been replaced by this hellish scene from "*Waterworld*".

The human scavengers had come out of the woodwork then and had driven the very last survivors away. At this point, chance encounters with another person would most likely end in bloodshed. The west coast had fared no better when a massive 10.5 quake along the San Andreas Fault collapsed a section of the continental plate, digging a swath of destruction across California. The images on the tiny TV depicted an America that was absolutely unrecognizable.

The previous two years had been incredibly active years for hurricanes in the Atlantic. But going back even *further*, Dennis tried to remember the very start of the odd weather patterns. Hindsight told him the earthquake-spawned tsunami of 2004, which had killed almost three hundred thousand human beings, had been the advent of things to come.

The next year, 2005, was called the year of the hurricane...more massive and destructive than any in history. Katrina obliterated New Orleans, and along with Emily and Rita, displayed something previously unheard of in hurricanes...intense lightning. Scientists were understandably baffled at the impossibility of the occurrence...horizontal winds *never* produced electrical charges around a hurricane's eye wall. The explanation behind it would've revealed an absolutely diabolical plan that staggered the imagination, but the



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world at large would never learn of it...for its inception was in the realm of the supernatural, beyond the detection of human science.

Then the earthquakes in Pakistan, Japan, China, Bolivia, and Chile hit in quick succession, displacing millions of people...followed by “the year of the tornado” in the American Midwest. Dennis should’ve known that Charleston would not escape untouched. He thought back to that first innocent rumble of the ancient fault line under the Ashley River in November of 2005. It had been the early warning of impending doom for the low country.

The following years removed all doubt that Mother Nature had gone insane. Dennis had heard the scattered cries from pulpits and street corners that God was bringing judgment upon America and the world, but those preposterous claims were ridiculed loudly and often. He had attended church faithfully when he was younger, yet he could hardly be called a churchgoer now. But it seemed his wife was at church all the time, and to hear her tell it, you’d think that the world *was* coming to an end. He wished now that he’d taken her more seriously. The world as he knew it...*had* ended.

His cap pulled low on his forehead, Dennis cupped his hands and squinted into the reddish haze. This was his neighborhood. And that was his house, or what was left of it. It was ironic that he’d been an “entry specialist” in the Marines. An expert with locks and picks. Only now there weren’t any locked buildings within a twenty-mile radius.

He *was* glad for one thing...he’d sent his wife and son north in time to escape this nightmarish hell around him. There certainly would be no safety for a woman and child here. He’d find them as soon as possible, but didn’t relish the five-hundred-mile trip through whatever was left of the Carolinas and Virginia.

Suddenly, a flash of movement caught his eye as the hair on the back of his neck stiffened. Dennis couldn’t tell exactly where the voice came from.

“Hey! This is *my* territory!” A gunshot rang out and Dennis dove into the bottom of the dinghy. Another shot. “Go ahead...stick your head up so’s I can blow it off!”

Dennis inched his hand under the metal seat for the nine-millimeter he’d put there...with only three rounds in the clip. Closing his fingers around its grip, he mentally approximated the location of the voice.

“Look friend,” Dennis called out, “I’m not here to take anything of yours. I just wanna get some things out of my own house and I’ll be on my way. Whatcha say?”

“Here’s what *I* say,” the man shouted back. “Come on out and lemme put a hole in your face and then *I’ll* take care of your stuff!”

The voice belonged to somebody with nothing left to lose. One of the scavengers. Still pressed against the boat’s belly, Dennis slid his cap off and stretched it as far away as possible, raising it slowly into the gunman’s view. Crackkk! The hole in the cap assured him the shooter wouldn’t miss the next time. But now he was pretty sure of the man’s direction, and as he popped his head up, he caught sight of him crouched behind a rooftop chimney.

\* \* \*

Watching the confrontation from their other-dimensional advantage, a group of demons awaited the inevitable outcome. Time itself progressed differently here. It was as if the humans moved in slow motion, or more precisely, that a nether creature could insinuate itself into the world of humans at any point along linear time. No angel or demon could travel back in time...they were also locked into a forward timeline, only with the ability to travel to any spot on earth within seconds.

The nether world, or the Realm of Principalities...was highly ordered. Just as the six-winged Archangels governed the ranks of angelic warriors, messengers, and guardians, so did the demonic Council of Six govern a host of lesser demons. But demons of *any* rank reveled in mischief, and flocked to the scene wherever humans were in misery. And misery was in abundance these days.

The highest-ranking demon in this particular collection was Belphegor, a demon of First Degree under the Order of Molech. Belphegor carried authority over a multitude of low demons. The demons of Molech delighted especially in the death of the unborn, the killing of God’s most precious creation before it had a chance to emerge into the world of humans. But murder of any kind was delightful to these creatures, and they were attracted to its act like flies to a dung pile.

Belphegor had a gloriously wicked history. He had asserted himself originally as Baalpeor among the ancient children of the Creator as they wandered in the wilderness, and had caused them to eat “the sacrifices of the dead”, which was an abomination to their God. Belphegor’s superior, Molech himself, had already won his own acclaim as a god of the Ammonites, who eventually succeeded in the spiritual destruction of God’s man, Solomon. The hapless king, who had once enjoyed the honor of being the wisest man on earth, set up worship groves to the gods of his many

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wives, and dedicated one of these “high places” to this horrid god of child sacrifice. Solomon’s actions turned many of his own people against God, bringing the prophet Jeremiah to lament the terrible sin of causing sons and daughters to “pass through the fire unto Molech.”

Belphegor smiled as he assessed the familiar scene. Two human wretches, both with weapons. He knew the encounter would end with the severing of at least one soul. These kind always did. Two would be a bonus. His money was with the man on the roof, for he remembered him from previous kills, and had often directed lesser demons to possess the man in the performance of that exquisite act of murder. They settled in for the show.

None of them saw the angel of God glide silently in from behind them. Ariel wasn’t here for the show. In fact, technically he wasn’t here at all...only a flash at the corner of a man’s eye. He was one of the Special Assignment Angels, the S.A., and his presence was shielded from even the demons. It had not always been that way though. Up until very recently, all angels and demons operating on earth could identify each other as they struggled in the nether realm to gain supremacy in the hearts of men.

Heaven’s angels never took spiritual control of a human, for that was a sacred thing to God, who indwelt only by His Holy Spirit those men who had surrendered themselves to Him by the blood of His Son. But it *was* the goal of every demon, high and low, to possess and direct a human host, an act of defiance and blasphemy against the Creator they had denied eons ago.

They knew they could not dwell within a man who was already indwelt by God’s Spirit, but through ingenious devices and strategies developed by their master, Lucifer, they were often able to overtake the bodies of those men who had rejected God. Any of God’s angels could recognize these usurpers instantly.

But mankind had entered a new age, and changes had occurred in the unseen world as well as upon the earth. With the removal of the Holy Spirit and the recall of the Guardians, those angels who protected the children of God, demons would now outnumber angels by a tremendous margin on the earth. The demons, though, were kept unaware of any change. Now Ariel was as much a ghost to them as *they* were to the men they oppressed. He was invisible in the realm of the invisible!

Ariel didn’t know everything. No angel did. But then, neither did the demons. Ariel did know that the two men below were both “living under present condemnation”, or *lost*, as some termed it. The demon knew that too.

Ariel's assignment this instant in time was a simple one. A hit and run. He'd hover just above the man in the boat, then stare directly into the eyes of the man on the roof...for a micro instant making himself visible only to *him*. Then he'd be on his way.

\* \* \*

Cursing, the gunman flattened himself against the chimney. The boat guy had a gun too! But now the fool was raising himself up in plain sight! He smiled crookedly as he steadied his weapon for the fatal shot.

"Just another inch higher, sucker," he hissed quietly. "Just one more...whaaa?"

For only a moment he thought he saw two horrible eyes staring at him! He gaped at the spot above the boat where an after-image of two fiery orbs burned his own eyes into blindness. The hair stood up on the back of his neck as abject terror froze him to the spot. In that moment, a darkness blacker than the blackest night enveloped him.

Dennis saw the gunman freeze in his crouch, his eyes widen like he'd seen a ghost. Killing did that to a man. He'd killed enough men in years past to know that first-hand death had a way of sticking to a man's gut, regardless of the fact that your country had legitimized the killing in its time of war. He'd seen his share of ghosts.

He squeezed off a single shot before the shocked man on the roof could react. The gunman slumped forward, clutched at the chimney, and then cart wheeled into the water. He thrashed desperately for a few long seconds, churning up the frothy mix, and then became one more bobbing piece of debris on the watery scene from hell.

Belphegor wasn't quite sure what had happened. He would've guessed the roofed man's advantage should've given him the victory, but the wretched moron had simply frozen. Nevertheless, he didn't dwell on the outcome. He and his demon brothers savored the terror of the man as his soul was immediately collected by one of God's death angels, and cast directly into the blackest and hottest part of the abode called Hell, located near the molten center of the planet.

The demons only wished that the process of entering that abyss could have been longer than the twinkling it took to transport the man's essence into it. But they would eagerly glean that microscopic bit of time...milking it for the moment of pleasure it provided from the condemned man's agony. When the human opened his eyes an instant later, he would be lifting them

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up in a place of excruciating torment and despair...a worm-like creature reduced to an existence of eternal weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth.

The death angels had been busier recently than at any other time in history, and as the collector flashed on to his next appointment, Belphegor reflected joyfully in the fact that soon...very soon...the pitiful men of earth would bow down to *his* master, Lord Lucifer, when the final piece was played in the cosmic game against the Creator. Mankind had no idea what was about to be unleashed upon them!

Dennis numbly pushed through the fallen, half-submerged tree limbs angling up out of the water and grounded the little boat against his front porch. Stepping out onto the elevated landing, he waded through knee-deep water past the broken doorframe into what used to be his living room. It had the unmistakable flavor of his wife.

She loved to design and create a good room, but seeing it now in this condition was painful, knowing it would bring tears to her eyes. A rank odor of fish mixed with that nauseous death stench assaulted his nostrils. He forced the thoughts of his wife out of his mind and concentrated on his security sweep, and then satisfied, sloshed tentatively upstairs.

Most of the roof had been blown off and their possessions sucked away by the ferocious winds, but he was able to scrounge up some dry clothing in the bedroom's closet. He tucked a photo of his wife and son into a baggie, along with all the cash he could find. Then he gathered up the rest of the ammunition for his Glock, and stacked it all beside the bed in the spare room. That room was still fairly dry and he'd spend the night there before leaving the low country for good in the morning, and head north himself.

North and inland to the home of his youth...a tiny nothing town called Belpre, Ohio. His wife and son would be at her mother's house in nearby Little Hocking. Surely they had fared better. They certainly wouldn't have had to weather hurricanes and floods so far inland. He sank into the unmade bed, exhausted from his ordeal.

Where had this nightmare begun? It was a rhetorical question, and one he didn't want to argue with himself about, but the answer would've been "thousands of years ago." The devastation around him was the culmination of the plans of God's first enemy, who had made himself known to man in the Garden of Eden. Dennis wouldn't permit himself to think in that direction; his mind was full enough with the memories of the past *days*. Had it been only a month since life on earth had been so irrevocably changed?

As he drifted off in the spare room of his ruined home, Dennis reviewed his plan. Paddle out to where he'd stashed the SUV, and then make his way

north. It sounded simple enough, but he was sure it would fail in that department. Americans had never had to deal with nuclear holocaust or its aftermath, and there was no telling what he might encounter on a five-hundred-mile trip through the country's interior. But the interior states were now the safest places to be, away from the coasts. Of course, with the national infrastructure so decimated, law enforcement was going to be sporadic at best. Lawlessness would most certainly rule the days to come.

The nightmares returned with a vengeance that last night in what had once been his home. Dennis spent most of it waking up from that same dream-demon haunting his mind. Only now the demon seemed closer than ever, and as ridiculous as it might have been, he made three more searches of the entire house during the night. There was the unnerving, but unmistakable feeling that...a presence...was lurking close by. Every shadow contained a shape...every sound indicated the movement of something evil.

He was grateful for the morning, dismal as it was, and after packing the dingy with the meager treasures he'd come to rescue, Dennis set out grimly for the vehicle, sparing one last glance at the ruined neighborhood before paddling west. The SUV was still where he'd hidden it, and already loaded with its own supplies and fuel, so he wasted no time in making his way inland to drier ground and onto Interstate 77 north to Ohio.

The weather's devastation reached well into North Carolina, but the first nine hours of the trip were remarkably uneventful, even though the distance he'd traveled would've been a *four* hour trip two months earlier. Many times he had to pick his way delicately through debris, and once even stopped to give a young man a lift to a nearby exit. Transportation department workers were already on the highway, attempting the impossible...clearing the road surface of wreckage and rubble.

The worst parts of the drive were the all-too-regular piles of dead motorists dragged to the side and haphazardly stacked. Twice more Dennis stopped to give assistance to road crews, obviously overwhelmed by the magnitude of their task. But it was either help...or sit and wait. Smaller obstructions were simply left, and drivers had to maintain constant vigilance in maneuvering through the endless obstacle course.

Dennis had never seen such total destruction in all his life. It was like living in a waking dream...a bizarre episode of "*The Twilight Zone*"...but an episode with no ending. Crossing into Virginia brought some improvement in road conditions, even though the highway was increasingly jammed with traffic. Dennis brightened at the thought that Ohio might have escaped the worst of the damage inflicted on the rest of the country.

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Exiting the mountain tunnel and entering West Virginia, he saw that there was a major traffic jam more than a mile down the graded interstate, where a sea of vehicles had snarled to a stop. Thinking quickly, he swerved onto the shoulder and drove up an embankment to an access road in search of an alternate route. He smiled at his smart decision and drove on.

Twenty minutes later along the twisting two-lane highway, he wished he hadn't. Ahead was a barricade completely across the road. It didn't look like random clutter, though. Someone had put it there. As he slowed to find a way around, a head popped up from behind the man-made wall...and then an arm...with a gun attached to it!

Desperately looking to either side, it was a crapshoot as to which way was safest. Both shoulders tapered off sharply, so instinct made the choice. Dennis gunned the Ford's engine, yanked the wheel sharply to the right, and careened off the corner of the barricade. Then the bottom dropped out as he flew off the road, momentarily airborne, until the bone-jarring thud told him he was back on solid earth.

He'd made it more than halfway to Ohio with only minor difficulty, and now *this*. He gripped the steering wheel tightly, trying to counter the sudden jerks of the SUV's tires against the rocks layering the steep slope of the embankment he was flying down. Somewhere in his descent, he was torn from the wheel and thrown up under the dashboard. The next few seconds were a blur as the unmanned vehicle battered and banged its way to the ravine's bottom. It came to an abrupt rest fifty yards from the interstate, where Dennis found himself looking up from the floorboard, the engine straining against the boulder that had stopped it.

Dazed, he shook the fog from his head, and felt around for injuries. Other than a nasty gash on his forehead, he seemed ok...but his foot was wedged firmly under the seat. He heard the shouts an instant later.

"There he is! Come on!"

"After imm!"

Dennis jerked his head up in time to see a group of men descending from the roadway. Some were waving clubs. The guy with the gun was bringing up the rear, waving the weapon crazily over his head. This was not going to be pleasant, however it turned out. Feeling for his Glock under the seat, he slid it out, instinctively checking the magazine, knowing it had been loaded only hours before. Those habits died hard.

With his free leg, he kicked at the passenger's door until it slammed open, then tugged frantically at his foot. No use. They'd be upon him within seconds, so he hastily tucked the pistol into the back of his jeans and lay

against the dash, looking as pitiful as possible. Pity may well be his only chance to come out of this alive.

“Woo hoo! We got us a real fine ride!”

“Oh, yeah!” Several renegades raced each other to the battered SUV, the first two reaching the driver’s side together and looking in for its occupant.

“Hey, is he dead?”

“Don’t think so, but he might *wish* he was when Paulie gets here!” Laughter came from behind them.

One of the gang came around to the passenger door and motioned. “Git out! Now!”

“I’m stuck. Can’t move,” Dennis groaned.

By now the guy with the gun had arrived. He was clearly the boss. The others backed away from the door while he leaned in toward Dennis. He reeked of sweat and alcohol. And quite obviously, he was liquored up at the moment. Dennis noted that fact, contemplating a way to exploit it to his advantage.

“Cmm on, misster...git out. We’re gonna have smmm fun,” the drunk slurred.

“I just told your friend here...I’m st...”

*Whaaaap!* The man smacked Dennis hard with the butt of the gun.

“Look...I sssaid...”

“I can’t! I’m stuck!”

The gunman laughed then, realizing the helplessness of Dennis’ situation. “Maybe I’ll juss plug ya now...”

Someone behind him spoke up. “Paulie, the truck looks drivable. And it’s gonna stink with this guy’s brains all over the dash!” Mumbled agreement from others was added to the plea.

“Alright, alright...Help the ole guy out...git im loose.” Two men rushed up and one of them used his metal club to pry up the seat frame while the other tugged roughly at Dennis’ leg. His foot popped free and Dennis wiggled it tentatively to check for any injury. He was fine...for now. One guy reached through the driver’s window and switched the key off.

“Okay, old man...git yer butt outta there...” The gunman backed away, holding his weapon unsteadily in Dennis’ general direction. He couldn’t see the muscles on Dennis’ arm tense for his next act.

Now freed, Dennis rolled easily out onto the ground, and in one fluid motion, reached back for his Glock, pointed and fired into the man’s chest.

“Whaaaa?” The startled thug dropped to his knees, staring at the hole made by the nine-millimeter. He sucked in one very surprised breath, but his



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exhale was a rasping gurgle. Still clutching his own weapon, he fell face down into the rocky soil, quivered for a moment, and lay still. For a beat, nobody moved. Then pandemonium struck as the rest of the gang scrambled for cover. One man stopped to glance at the fallen man's pistol...and then back at Dennis, now on his feet.

"Go ahead, *punk*. You feel lucky?" Dennis smiled wickedly at the Clint Eastwood reference.

The man put aside his thought and tore out after his comrades. Dennis couldn't help himself, and called out after the running man, "Well? *Do ya?*"

When he was sure they were gone, Dennis turned his attention to the SUV, and confirmed that there was no major damage to the vehicle, although it would never win a car show ribbon now. But it was drivable, and that's what mattered. Glancing at the dead drunk, Dennis climbed in and drove along the ravine's bottom until he found a gentler patch of slope where he could ascend out of the valley.

Once he was clear of any immediate danger, he stopped to rearrange the mess that used to be his neatly packed supplies, and then headed west on an intercept course with the interstate.

"No more detours," he muttered, as he scooped a pack of crackers and a can of tuna to his side.

Nine hours later, he crossed into Ohio from Parkersburg, West Virginia. Driving down from the old bridge into the little city of Belpre, Dennis noticed with dismay that the area had not escaped tragedy. True, there had not been the magnitude of natural disaster here...but the industry-rich Mid-Ohio valley had obviously been the target of somebody's nuclear weapon. Low-level dirty bombs, he figured. Exactly what an unscrupulous terrorist might use to target any of the dozens of industrial and chemical plants nestled along the Ohio River.

A sickening pit formed in Dennis' stomach, and he gunned the SUV west through Belpre on Washington Boulevard and then up onto Route 50 into Little Hocking to his mother-in-law's home. He grinned widely though, when he caught sight of his wife's car in the driveway. He'd made it!

Jerking to a stop after pulling halfway into the front yard, Dennis bolted from the car and bounded up the front steps. Finally! A reprieve from the insanity of the past month! He stopped on the porch for a moment as an odd sensation went through him. Something wasn't right. It was too quiet. As he pushed open the unlocked door, his heart began pounding. Even as he called their names, he feared the worst.

“Amy! Tony!” Nothing. Not even that pair of incessantly yapping chihuahuas his mother-in-law loved. The house was a mess...not normal. The pit in his stomach grew into a wrenching knot. “Mom!” No answer...but no need to panic yet. Maybe they’d gone to somebody *else’s* house? He ran outside and scanned the streets. The entire neighborhood was too quiet, but he saw an old man sitting on a porch across the road, watching him passively. He ran over to the man’s house, remembering him from a visit several years before.

“Uh...Mr. Anderson?”

The man didn’t seem to share any recollection of Dennis, but looked up at hearing his own name.

“Mmm, hmmm?”

“Sir, have you seen Mrs. Navarone...or *anyone* from over there?” Dennis pointed back to the house.

“Can’t say I have, son. Not in a while, anyways.”

“How long ago, sir? When did you see them last?”

The white-haired old man stroked a grizzled chin and wrinkled his nose. He answered around a pipe he’d made no attempt to remove from his mouth. “Musta been more’n a couple weeks, boy.”

Dennis knew his mother-in-law did not drive. And Amy’s car was still in the driveway. Why would they walk to somebody’s house...for several *weeks*? It made no sense! His son’s hand-held Game-Boy was still in the house. And that thing was surgically attached to his body at every opportunity! No, something had happened here that was *very* abnormal.

The next three weeks proved even more frustrating. Dennis knocked on every door he could, and discovered that plenty of people had seen his family...only never more recent than weeks before his arrival! At one stop, he encountered a young man who confirmed his suspicions about the presence of active terrorists in the U.S...and right here in Ohio!

He’d approached the ramshackle house in a drizzle, had seen movement inside and banged away until the door was opened. The youth who let him in closed the door immediately, as if he was afraid of something outside. And the guy was wrapped in a heavy plastic bag. Dennis ignored the eccentricity, and launched into a description of his family. The boy’s only interest, though, was terrorists!

“Mister, believe me. These guys are bad...and they don’t mind dying. Course, we don’t mind killing them, either...”

“But you haven’t seen my...?”

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"No, mister. I haven't seen anyone that answers to the description of your wife and kid. Sorry."

Dennis was at the end of his rope. Three weeks and not one lead. He was already dreading the alternate possibility...one he wouldn't have accepted at all before he'd seen the "ghosts" in South Carolina. The rapture. Could his wife and son actually be forever out of reach? He refused to think that they were lying dead somewhere, but if they had truly been raptured like his wife believed, they would have been just as permanently...gone. Dennis emerged from deep thought to notice the young man scrutinizing him.

"Mister, we need good men like you. I joined of the new regional law enforcement units...called Seal Five...you know, named after the..."

"Yeah, I know," Dennis interrupted, not really listening...but hearing the words, at least.

"Well, we hunt terrorists..."

Dennis caught that last part, and stared at the boy, barely out of his teen years. "How old are you, son?"

The young man bristled enough to show he was offended at the reference to his youth, and narrowed his eyes at the older man, while tossing his blonde shoulder-length hair out of his face.

"Old enough, pops." He laughed hoarsely. "Like I said, if you wanna join up, we could use some good men. And hey, we get to travel." He pointed through the window at an old country store just in sight at the top of a rise. "Just show up at Doc's store and tell em you talked to Stoner."

"Stoner?" When the boy smiled crookedly, Dennis understood, and shook his head. Fighting terrorists with whacked-out druggie *kids*? Somebody was scraping the bottom of the barrel in the war on terror. The offer itself *was* tempting, but his efforts were going to be concentrated on finding his family first. Maybe later he'd consider it. After all, he did need a new line of work now. And killing bad guys wouldn't be the worst job he could find. As he turned to go, the youth grabbed his arm.

"And mister, watch out for the drizzle out there. It's dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"*Radioactive* dangerous. Been hearing it on the news. They advise people to stay out of it...here...for your *own* good." The boy shoved a plastic bag at Dennis, indicating he should wear it upon his departure.

"Great," Dennis muttered. "One *more* problem now. Trying to keep my fingers from falling off."

The look from the kid told Dennis that the thought was no joke.

*“And I will send a fire on Magog, and among them that dwell carelessly in the isles: and they shall know that I am the LORD. So will I make my holy name known in the midst of my people Israel; and I will not let them pollute my holy name any more: and the heathen shall know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel.”*

*Ezekiel 39:6-7*

*“And I will plead against him with pestilence and with blood; and I will rain upon him, and upon his bands, and upon the many people that [are] with him, an overflowing rain, and great hailstones, fire, and brimstone. Thus will I magnify myself, and sanctify myself; and I will be known in the eyes of many nations, and they shall know that I [am] the LORD.”*

*Ezekiel 38:22-23*

## CHAPTER TWO: BATTLEGROUND

Lieutenant Amos Cohen dragged himself to his knees, his nostrils burning from the acrid smell of sulfur. He had an overwhelming urge to vomit, but suppressed it by swallowing hard. Wiping the blood from his face to survey the horror of the landscape around him, he stared at the tangle of human flesh that now littered the expanse of the low rolling hills of the Plain of Esdraelon.

Some bizarre death ray from above? Or something else? He'd never believed in hell, but the scene before him could not be described with any other language. If there *was* a hell, he was standing knee deep in the middle of its indescribable carnage.

The attack had come despite the promise of peace and the assurances of the new World Prime Minister, Julian Beliano. But somebody...or some *thing*...had intervened. For any man who'd ever seen combat, the stench of death and the sounds of dying men were unmistakable, seared into one's memory for a lifetime.

For Amos, the old memories resurfaced every time a new one was created, those hollow staring eyes of soldiers who had died on his battlefields leering back at his own every night. Even for a man who had become used to killing without pause, it was unnerving. At his first glance around him, he knew that every other battlefield he had ever seen would pale in comparison to what his eyes still refused to acknowledge right in

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front of him. The lowest pit of the most horrible hell could be no worse, he thought.

“David! *David!*” He shielded his eyes against the now hot glare of a cloudless day and scanned the nearest hill, straining to locate his cousin among the heaped and smoking bodies. He’d promised to protect the younger man, and suddenly felt a stab of guilt germinating deep in his gut. David had never quite *lived* yet. He hadn’t so much as dated a girl, and had never even been drunk! He’d always been considered a bit prudish by the more hardened members of the unit. Amos had promised to change him.

Some would have called David “soft”, but they would have been profoundly mistaken. David was extremely good at soldiering, and certainly a man to have by your side in a firefight. Yet now he was nowhere to be seen. Amos raked the bizarre landscape with his eyes, searching for an outstretched hand, the face he could easily recognize. *Anything*. But there was nothing.

The soil was muddy, and peppered now with the ragged globes of ice that had crashed down from the sky. The dark, red-hued mud had been caused by the blood of thousands of combatants and warhorses, some of the poor beasts still struggling pitifully in their agonized death throes. The Northern Alliance, a loose confederation of anti-Israel nations including Iran, Syria, Russia, and China, had been forced into using the battle steeds since their war vehicles had been rendered useless by some unknown weapon. Amos would love to get a glimpse at such a weapon.

The lieutenant stared at those men nearest him, most of whom lay mangled and unrecognizable, unseeing eyes still open and frozen in terror at whatever they’d seen. Trails of smoke wafted lazily upward from many of the bodies where they literally had been seared apart by that mysterious devastation from above.

He glanced nervously up at the improbable blueness, but the sky had become tranquil, an absolute impossibility when compared to its raging of the past thirty minutes. And an even bigger impossibility when one considered that for the last few months nobody had even *seen* the sun clearly in the atmosphere. Ever since that bizarre forty-day period, and the appearance of the aliens, the sky had been at best a grayish blur, swirling with radioactive debris and dust.

The aliens, claiming to be from a world called Nephalia in some alternate dimension, had promised that the scientists among their race had been working on an atmospheric cleansing device, but there had been little apparent progress, or at least no public demonstration of such a device. And

Golaam, the alien representative, was rarely seen in public. Very secretive, Amos thought, for people who were trying to help save a planet.

Still on his knees, Amos tried to remember where he had last seen David. It was just before he received that urgent communication about the failure of the U.S. to stop the Alliance advance. The invader from the north had swept into Palestine, bringing Israel's ancient enemies with it, mustering a military force of inconceivable size. They had only hesitated when the United States threatened to retaliate against Russia, the alliance leader, and then triggered the exchange of nuclear strikes that vaporized millions of people from *both* countries almost simultaneously.

Only an hour earlier Amos had received the discouraging intel that Israel's last ally had been neutralized. That distraction barely slowed the enemy's advance in the field as the juggernaut regained momentum and closed in on the beleaguered nation. At a point when it appeared that Israel faced certain annihilation, the incredible happened.

Dark clouds had rolled in over the enemy so quickly that it seemed like the clouds themselves were being forced along by some gigantic unseen hand. Darkness turned to an even deeper blackness, and the battlefield became such a disorienting pitch black that it was palpable. Thickness you could *feel*. Then the sky had started rumbling...and crackled with electrical intensity...furious enough that combatants from both sides had frozen, paralyzed with fear as brilliant bursts of light gave an eerie strobe effect to the battle. All eyes were locked on the heavenly spectacle overhead.

Then it happened. First, the sky peeled back and belched out a torrent of pelting rain that mercilessly beat the enemy soldiers to the ground. The puzzling thing about the rain was that it appeared to fall in bunches, clumped together like a bucket being overturned and poured out on individuals. And the streams of rain seemed to target only the enemy! Immediately following that, a barrage of hailstones the size of *grapefruits* had pounded the Alliance positions while somehow completely avoiding the defensive trenches of his own company! That decimation went on for nearly twenty minutes as the northern army, along with its weaponry and battle mounts, had quite literally been hammered into the very soil!

But the most horrific part was yet to come. The hail stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and in the brief lull, the enemy tried to recover from its crippling blow, as battered and bloody men rose from the mud to engage them again. What happened next could only be described as intensely-white fingers of snaking lightning appearing from every corner of the sky.

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It was as if thousands of lightning bolts had been aimed individually and directly at every enemy soldier who was still alive. The air itself erupted in electrical charges, ripping the “Northerns” apart with the force of the strikes. In one instant there were terrified expressions on surprised enemy faces...the next instant only dying men writhing in tangled pieces of flesh and bone on the ground. And that acrid, burning sulfur smell that assaulted one’s nostrils so violently.

Amos was no stranger to Old Testament accounts of some vague future salvation of Israel, but he was convinced that those were just myths passed down by the superstitious few who clung to the idea that God would one day ride to the rescue of His people. He couldn’t understand how God could possibly have had a part in this. The so-called “God” of his people had abandoned them long ago, from the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersal of its Jews to the hideous reminders of Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps.

The world seemed to be trying hard to rewrite the history of the Jews, and many “new age historians” speculated loudly that the Holocaust had never happened at all. It was described as a “conjured up attempt” from Jew-lovers to make Israel appear to be the poor and persecuted nation they claimed they were! But world opinion in the last few years had continued to shift away from any sympathy for Israel.

Amos wandered mentally through the recent events that had brought them to this surreal place of slaughter. It had seemed their only hope lay in the man some called the Peacemaker, Julian Beliano. He was the one who had negotiated the historic “Treaty of the Ages” that finally secured true peace for his homeland. The Northern Alliance had been openly bitter about the treaty initiated by this benevolent “Friend of Israel”. Until now though, they had been unable, or unprepared, to act.

Beliano had supported Israel’s rise to a major economic power with the agricultural advantage they now held as the most prolific exporter of grain products in the world. The Israeli botanist’s discovery of some miraculous growth hormone had allowed Israel’s deserts to bloom while the rest of the world was suffering horrible droughts and blight. Even though Israel’s exports were helping to reverse the march of famine across the globe, her enemies were seething with jealousy and rage over the tiny nation’s increased international clout.

Others inexplicably referred to the world’s new Prime Minister as the “Evil One”, but there was no evil in Beliano, only good intentions toward

Israel. Amos was sure of it. Hadn't he brought that great peace to the land? *Nobody* could argue with that.

It was always said that peace with the Arabic nations was absolutely impossible. But that was exactly what had happened! After generations of bloodshed, suspicion, and hatred between the Arabs and Jews, the people of Israel had finally found rest in their land. There were no more suicide bombers. No more border skirmishes or hidden terrorists to root out. Gaza and the West Bank were peacefully inhabited.

That peace was so prevalent that internal security was not the overwhelming priority it had once been. People had returned to trivial pursuits, and the land was beginning to flourish once more, a welcome change to all of Israel's citizens. Scientific achievements now outstripped military advancements, and many wonderful things had happened in the tiny slice of land at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean. For the first time in thousands of years, people had begun using the phrase "a land flowing with milk and honey" again.

The Temple had been rebuilt on the site of the Dome of the Rock, and regular sacrifices had begun again on that historic Chanukah, the Feast of Dedication. The Sanhedrin and priesthood had been reestablished and those who desired to do so, could journey to Jerusalem and partake in the rituals that had been instituted thousands of years before. The exhilaration of a revival of national pride was enjoyed by every member of Jewish society, and the new World Authority's Prime Minister, Julian Beliano, was the driving force behind it!

But as a military man, Amos had sensed that there was trouble in their little paradise at the navel of the world. The Northern Alliance had somehow seen the vulnerability of a nation at rest and had seized upon the opportunity to invade Palestine for the plunder it promised. This amazing weapon that had torn them apart today had to be some new technology, perhaps engineered by the Nephalians, but capable of controlling and directing the weather itself! He had heard of such research and development of fantastic electromagnetic weaponry like this, but still could not quite believe it. It certainly wasn't a weapon that *his* government had developed.

If Beliano and the World Authority possessed this kind of power, it was wise indeed that Israel had aligned herself with him. Hopefully, the few years of peace they had known would be shattered only temporarily. After the bodies and debris were cleared from the land, Israel could return to her homes, being even more secure now that the Northern Alliance had been utterly decimated.



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His rifle lay beside him, partially buried under a body, and Amos reached down to tug it loose. Using it to steady himself, he stood shakily to his feet and took in the battlefield on which generations of soldiers had already died. The hill of Megiddo stretched before him, now covered once again with dead and broken men. Amos was well aware of the history of the place, and knew that Old Testament Scriptures pinpointed this location as the site of the last “battle of that great day of God Almighty”. Surely *this* could not have been *that* battle, for he had seen no “glorious appearing” of a promised Messiah.

Lying west of the Jordan River and ten miles south of Nazareth, the Plain of Esdraelon had seen many of Israel’s battles. It was here that Napoleon Bonaparte had pitched his army’s tents on that disastrous march from Egypt into Syria. It was legend that he had presumptuously cut across God’s land, and had paid dearly for it.

But the plain had been the site of many ancient battles as well. Deborah and Barak had defeated the Canaanites here, and Gideon had triumphed over the Midianites with only three hundred men using trumpets and pitchers with lights inside them. That particular story was a little hard to swallow, but it was told and retold so much that most young Israelis simply accepted it. But now, with the evidence of extra-terrestrials absolutely confirmed, the God of the Jews seemed more and more like *He* was the new myth!

The Plain of Esdraelon had also hosted the death of the first ruler of Israel, King Saul. He had foolishly enquired of a witch at Endor, and was treated to a ghostly apparition that resembled the prophet Samuel. Saul was told that he was to die on that plain at the hands of the hated Philistines. And so he had, in Gilboa. The Philistines had slain Saul’s three sons, Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua right before his eyes, and as Saul retreated, an arrow struck him.

Mortally wounded, he had directed his armour bearer to run him through so he wouldn’t fall into the hands of the Philistines alive. The armour bearer was afraid to comply, so Saul fell upon his own sword, followed immediately by the suicide of his faithful bearer. Saul’s army was slaughtered to the very last man that day, and Saul’s decapitated body was taken to a wall in Bethshan and displayed publicly, along with the bodies of his slain sons, until David and his men stole them away and buried them.

Amos could only imagine what the plain might’ve looked like in the battles of yesteryear. His eyes now confirmed the picture that had been conjured in his mind when he remembered the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel and his description of the invaders who would “cover the land”. The

land *was* covered now, and very literally, with the corpses of those who had invaded from the north. He knew only that he was a witness to a great and historic battle today...but certainly not the *last* battle.

His mind flashed back to a time some years before, when his little sister had urgently called him into the living room of their home along the border of the West Bank. The neighborhood they lived in had always been particularly dangerous. Hamas “sleepers” came out of the shadows regularly to conduct their tireless campaigns of violence and murder against the Israelites.

Nobody was safe, but women and children were targeted specifically. The terrorists delighted in boasting that they would destroy Israel’s future by killing its children. So young Israelis by necessity grew up in a forced state of readiness, which unfortunately resulted in a fearful and angry populace, suspicious of all foreigners. That only fueled the hatred on both sides.

He could picture the inside of his home in those days. It looked very much like a miniature fortress, the windows and doors barricaded against unwanted entry, and a cache of weapons within easy reach. Even the younger children knew how to disassemble, clean, and re-assemble almost every type of handgun or rifle in the home. Of course, they also knew how to use them. It would have been foolish *not* to teach them. His little sister, Rachel, who was eleven years old at the time, had been playing on the living room floor with the TV running, when the program had been preempted by the breaking news out of the United States.

“Amos! Come quick! Look at this!”

Rachel looked and sounded terrified as her little waving arms tried to speed up her big brother’s progress from the den into the living room. Amos dropped the model of the American F/A 18 Hornet he was working on, and ran into the other room as the TV announcer continued.

*“...appears to be an American passenger jet, and must have malfunctioned somehow. The aircraft impacted the north tower of the World Trade Center at about 8:45, more than fifteen minutes ago. Our cameras are now live on the scene as...Oh, my God! A second plane has...has just slammed into the south tower! This is...horrendous! I can’t believe what we are seeing...this is...I can’t describe...”*

Amos had stood numbed by what he’d seen. The rest of the announcer’s words were lost as his mind was suddenly flooded with images of the thousands of people who were dying right before his eyes. This was no

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accident. One plane, maybe. But not *two*. The only explanation had to be that this was a terrorist attack. And likely the very same militant extremists that hated the Jews were the ones behind it.

At twenty-two, he had been preparing to enter the Israeli Special Forces that next month, and the thought of fighting the enemy of his people was a major motivation in his plans. He had already completed his three-year term of conscription, and had now finished officer training as well. He was qualified both physically and academically for the elite advance teams that were sent to engage terrorists on their own ground, and he would enter that service as an officer. He had desperately wanted to hasten the procedure that would make his goal a reality.

His next few years had been lost in a whirlwind of activity. He was recruited into the *Sword Hand*, a secret Israeli strike force that specialized in precision hits on individual terrorists or cell groups. The Jewish cause was finally being aided by the decisive action of the American president when he invaded Afghanistan and engaged the dreaded Taliban, one of the most extreme militant Muslim groups in the world. They had outlawed music and games for the people under their control. Women were viewed literally as slaves to their men, and young girls were prohibited from any formal schooling, purposely left uneducated.

The Taliban was sent packing as the American force decimated them, and the country moved toward democracy and free elections. The next American action had utterly astounded Amos by the very boldness of the plan, and was exhilarating at the same time, because he would get to be a part of it.

The United States, acting in spite of the cowardice of the U.N. and other nations like France and Russia, invaded Iraq with the stated aim of deposing the murderous dictator, Sadaam Hussein. Hussein had a record of cruelty that was unmatched by few others in history. When Sadaam's name was mentioned in most Israeli homes, it had the same impact as that of another infamous leader. Adolf Hitler. Germany's madman would have operated quite comfortably within the regime controlled by Sadaam Hussein. Sanctions leveled at the Iraqi dictator from the first gulf war had not only been ignored by him, but he had managed to prosper from them!

Under the guise of the "oil for food" policy, and incredibly with the help of some self-serving politicians within the U.N., he was able to line his own pockets by trafficking the food, which then funded the further slaughter of untold thousands of his own citizens. He viciously targeted even members of his own family when they presented themselves as a threat to his absolute

authority. Sadaam was known particularly for his unbridled brutality, committing his first murder at age eleven, when he slew the relative of a teacher who had offended him.

As Iraq's despotic ruler, he raped and murdered at his whim and funneled wealth into his own accounts while ignoring the poverty in the streets of his cities. His sons, Uday and Qusay, followed in the steps of their barbaric father, setting up torture rooms where they could develop their own hellish cruelties against any who displeased them, which they did with vigor. Whether the U.S. acted in error or was justified in the invasion, it was a *good* thing that Sadaam was no longer in power.

Amos was among the first covert operatives to enter Iraq along with their U.S. counterparts. After the devastation of the opening period of outright battle, the *Sword* went to work silently and unheralded as part of Task Force 121, known as "The Raiders", which was dedicated solely to the pursuit and capture of Sadaam Hussein. Their particular assignment was to provide surveillance of high-ranking officers within Saddam's military remnant and pass that information to U.S. Marine intelligence, which would then go in and conduct their own raids.

He and his men could operate more effectively than the Americans because they passed easily as "middle-easterners", and eventually provided the bulk of the intel that showed there were about five "families" responsible for sheltering the fugitive Ace of Spades. But the *Sword* was to stay out of the limelight on these operations at all costs, for if it became generally known that Israel was involved in covert ops within Iraq, it would certainly jeopardize the effort of the U.S. military to maintain some semblance of décor with the Arabic world. This "décor at all cost" policy of the U.S. administration would eventually mean the suppressing of the overwhelming evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Revealing the truth about the WMD's would expose critical U.S. allies like Russia and France to the facts of their complicity in assisting Iraq in their removal only weeks before the U.S. led invasion.

The finest moment in recent memory for Amos was when his own team had supplied the critical information on where the dictator was hiding. *Wolverine One* was the code name for the location of the little shack where Sadaam had been keeping his change of clothing and a meager food ration. Nearby, marines found the \$750,000 in cash that Sadaam had stashed away in order to finance his comeback. Amos was there when the deposed despot was pulled from his "spider hole", disoriented and confused. He was tempted to put a clean quick bullet through the head of the dirty, disheveled

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old man they had pulled from the hole. The Americans though, had brought their cameras and began filming the entire thing, and he and his pack of “ghosts” had to exit the area before they were captured on some newsreel.

For the rest of his Iraq tour, he and his comrades lived as Iraqis, shadowing various individuals and groups while relaying critical intelligence to the Americans. He had operated for days inside Falujah, disguised as a civilian, before the U.S. operation that routed the insurgents within the city was initiated there.

Although violence certainly continued after Falujah fell, the foreign “al Qaeda friendlies” began to give ground, due to the loss of many of their leaders, including Al Zarqawi, the most wanted man in Iraq among the insurgency. The U.S. dumped two 500-pound bombs on his hideout near Baqouba and left a crater in the surrounding date-palm forest as Amos watched from his hidden recon position. Once the handover of authority to the interim Iraqi government had been accomplished, the *Sword* had returned to Israel, and left the task of training a new Iraqi security force to the Americans.

Then, just before the preliminary elections were to go forward in Iraq, a giant tsunami struck the Indonesian Bay of Bengal. An earthquake centered near the island of Sumatra triggered the seismic event that devastated the coastlines of India, Thailand, and other coastal nations. Some said it was the worst single disaster in human history since the ancient Biblical flood. The death toll kept rising until it was clear that there could be no real accuracy in the numbers, but at nearly *three hundred thousand* souls dead, it should’ve been a grand opportunity for Muslim and Christian nations to work together in resolving the human crisis that remained. Instead, the event had only served to deepen the hatred for the West among radical Muslims, who went as far as to accuse the U.S. of engineering the disaster!

But that was yesterday’s news. Now standing amidst the smoking rubble of men and machines, Amos was still not quite sure how the attack today had failed exactly, other than the heavens had opened up and fire and ice had rained down on the invading army. He staggered further uphill in search of survivors. One by one, and in small groups, men began to stand shakily across the battlefield. They appeared to be ragged corpses rising on unsteady legs, but were in fact soldiers pushing aside the bloodied body pieces of the fallen as they stared about in utter bewilderment.

Amos gaped at an obvious fact. Every standing man was an *Israeli*. What was beyond rational reason had indeed happened! The few minor injuries suffered by these survivors were from falls or from being struck by debris.

Not a man could recall being hit by even one hailstone! The men looked around at each other and then, realizing that they had somehow been miraculously spared, broke into cheers. Suddenly animated, they ran to each other, embracing and hopping around like children, firing their weapons into the air. One of the men saw Amos standing alone and ran over to him, a concerned look on his face.

"Lieutenant Cohen, are you injured?" He asked, while at the same time examining Amos for himself. Amos recognized his company corpsman, Eli Feldman.

"No, I don't think so, Feldman. Just a little...shocked, I guess. Trying to figure the odds of something like this happening."

"Uh, sir? Exactly what *was* it that just happened?"

Amos grunted and shook his head. Not a single Israeli soldier had been killed once the airborne assault had started. A number had been killed or wounded in the battle as the two enemies engaged each other, but now, as both men scanned the field, there wasn't an enemy Alliance soldier standing upright. There weren't even any living wounded! Every last one of them had perished!

"Sir, this just doesn't add up. *Nothing* could have done this," the corpsman indicated the battleground with a sweep of his hand and added, "without intelligent thought, anyway."

Amos leveled his gaze on the young man. "What are you trying to say, corporal?"

The soldier shifted his stance uneasily. The men under Amos' leadership knew they could speak freely, but the soldier was struggling with his answer. "Sir...I think this was the direct hand of God Himself."

Amos bristled, and then exploded in anger, "You better bottle that talk up right now, you understand me? God had *nothing* to do with this today!"

The corpsman's wide-eyed stare irritated Amos even further.

"*What?* You don't read your history books? What kind of God would allow millions of *His* people to be slaughtered in miserable concentration camps? What kind of God would gather us together as a nation just to be devoured by those who hate us? Are you insane, man?"

"Well, sir, I..."

"That's enough! I don't want to hear it. Period. Get the men together. Let's get our dead and wounded found, and taken care of. The sooner we get outa here, the better I'll feel. Rendezvous at the top of that hill."

Amos pointed to an outcropping of rock not far uphill, shook his head angrily and stalked away. He knew he had overreacted to the soldier's

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comment, but Feldman was the one guy in his outfit that was always talking about religion, and he had often wanted to shut him up. It actually felt good to vent some of his frustrations, anyway. His anger abated even as he strode away from the corpsman, and his mind refocused on more important matters. He had to locate David. He wasn't sure if he had survived the initial attack, but he was determined to find him regardless. David was his first cousin, and he had pulled some strings to get him in his company. They had grown up together, and the two were like brothers.

Men began to sift through the human wreckage, pulling several bodies from the rubble. Every time another man would surface, Amos made his way to his side to help in the identification. Some of the newly discovered were found babbling about what they had seen, and had to be convinced that the situation was clear. It *was* a bit difficult to believe that only an hour before they had been hopelessly outnumbered and now there wasn't a live enemy in sight.

Amos moved to another man being pulled from beneath a pile of Alliance bodies. His heart stopped when he saw the blood-smeared nametag. He couldn't make the man's face out because it was covered in gore, but this *was* David. He signaled for the men to lean him back against another body and knelt beside him. There was a small entry wound in his chest where a bullet had found its mark, but feeling David's back for the larger exit wound, he found nothing. Amos numbly reached for the man's wrist to check for a pulse, knowing there would be none. A warm nausea began spreading over him as he contemplated the death of a man he had wanted most to protect. Just then, the stricken man groaned.

"Corpsman! Corpsman! Over here!" Amos shouted up the hill.

Corporal Feldman, finishing up on another fallen man thirty yards away, gave hasty instructions to a fellow medic and ran down the hill to where the little group was. He knelt and examined David for a few minutes, finding a serious leg injury as well as the chest rupture.

"Lieutenant, we're gonna need chopper evacuation. We've got at least three other guys that need to get out of here fast!" Amos looked up to give the order.

The communications officer broke in. "On it, sir. I've already radioed for evac pickup. They're on their way now. Shouldn't be more than a few minutes." Thank goodness for men who knew their job and did it with such precision.

Feldman administered a shot for pain, then stood and wiped his forehead. Looking around, he saw another newly discovered wounded man, and picked his way over to him, leaving Amos at his cousin's side.

David's eyes fluttered open and his mouth worked. Supporting the man's neck with his arm, Amos looked down at his cousin.

"Hey, take it easy. You took a round in the chest, but you're gonna be all right. Chopper's on its way now. Just hang in there, and we'll get you outa here."

Another groan escaped as David tried to raise his head. He looked up at his older cousin and managed, "Amos, you won't...believe...what I saw. I'm not even sure...I...believe it!"

Amos smiled thinly. "David, we *all* saw it. Unless it was a mass delusion, we were witnesses to one of the most potent weapons ever designed. I know *I've* never seen anything like it!"

"W-weapon? It...looked to me like...the sky itself split open...and then hurled ice balls and lightning at us!"

"Yeah, that's exactly what we saw too. I think it was some sort of weather control device."

"The Nephelians?"

"That's possible. I don't know. What I *do* know is that we were rescued. Dramatically."

"If the aliens did develop some kind of...weapon, why...use it *now*? Why let the Northern Alliance...get this far?"

"David, I'm sorry. I just don't have the answers for you. I do remember reading something a few years back about the development of weather control weapons...only I didn't realize they were so advanced, or even ready to use in combat. At any rate, I'm glad they were used. A lot of lives were saved here today."

"I don't know, Amos. I..." David began drifting off as the shot took effect. "Uhhnngh..." In a few moments he was out, breathing evenly.

The pounding rhythm of the arriving UH 60-A Black Hawk medivac choppers was comforting. Two of them set down in a clearing near the hill's pinnacle, and soldiers scurried into action as the wounded were hoisted to the safety of the aircraft. The men on the choppers were used to seeing casualties, but they had just overflown the battlefield, getting a bird's eye view of the carnage. Their faces were white. Once the injured men were secured into the rescue choppers and the doors slid shut, they lifted away, disappearing into the distance.



Seven Trumpets is a fictional account of the Apocalypse, based on Scriptural truth, scientific evidence, and present-day events. Thoroughly researched and brutally honest, it forces a confrontation with life's most important question: "Where will I be when it happens?" Defense Department analyst Dennis Bartlett fails to prevent world-wide nuclear holocaust, which ushers in Revelation's dreaded Apocalypse. He is soon embroiled in humanity's worst nightmare: The Demon Prince has come to claim his earthly throne! Is there really no escape?

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