A Covenant with Death
(The Peacock Trilogy – Book 3)
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So You Want to be a Published Author (2014)
Six months passed since Ammad al-Sistani’s father died. Ammad put a broad smile on his face and stepped up to a Global Realm induction station. “I wish to become a citizen.”

The administrator glanced upward. “One moment, let me finish closing
my last transaction. The man before you is heading to his testing booth, and the sign-in must be complete before he begins.”

Ammad swallowed his disdain, knowing patience brings great rewards. Once processed, he headed to his testing booth. Forty well-briefed followers would enroll after him and embark on a long-term mission in the
hopes of eroding the Global Realm from within. Ultimately, Ammad planned to end the reign of First Citizen, Arthur Pendleton, and replace him over time. His upbringing gave him a unique understanding of the racial and religious viewpoints in the Muslim region of the world. He selected career paths in communications and
negotiations in Core 412, Pacification of the Non-Citizen World, Division 51-Sociology.

As he answered the questions, thinking as a good citizen would, he reminded himself that all prior human governments began with good intentions and eroded into chaos, evidentially falling into ruin. Why, because they were human governments.
Only a Caliphate run by Allah’s rules was sustainable. He and his followers knew the location of his white garments. One day, however Allah worked things out, Ammad would emerge to bring this world out of darkness. He finished his test and the results placed him in the top 85th percentile, qualifying him to select one of three open positions within
the Global Realm’s Social Sciences Research and Implementation Division.

He turned and followed the signs, still written in both English and Arabic, to the far door to his left. As he opened the door, a guard examined his papers and pointed him to an official with the silver stripes of an upper level supervisor.

“Are you married?”
“No, my family died in the war. I’ve wandered the mountainsides until I came to my senses that under this Global government people seem happier.”

“So you have no family and no ties to this province?”

“No.”

“Very well, Ammad al-Sistani, you will go through six months training here in Mashhad.”
This man wasn’t Persian, maybe Mongolian from his facial structure. The name al-Sistani didn’t leave an impression on him. Ammad refused to hide his background. The Global Realm forgave the enemies who cooperated. Admirable, he thought.

“After six months, you will be relocated. Do you have a preference between
Irkutsk, Bern, or Philadelphia?"

"Bern, Switzerland, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I would prefer, Bern."

"So noted. Here is a housing list. Pick any blue location for housing while you are in training."

"This one." Ammad pointed to a unit near Malek Abad Park. "I’m familiar with
the area.”

The park served as a meeting place. He and his friends could make their plans from there.

The government provided Ammad a uniform, a stripe indicating a trainee, and a room key. Security thoroughly searched his bag. They found nothing of a suspicious nature.

Ammad remembered
the faces of his enemies. He would find them, and with time, kill them all. The advantage he had over his father was his age.

*Allah Akbar. He keeps me strong.*

The face of one person embedded deep in his mind, a fierce fighter with red hair. She killed without hesitation and seemed to enjoy the act—find her and he would find
the others.
Chapter 1

24 years later

“Director Chui,” George Pendleton said. “May I ask a favor?”

“Before you return from the Alpha Command Station or after?”

“I have an uneasy feeling about al-Sistani’s latest shipments to Space
Complex 8,” George said, as he gazed at the universe from 200 miles above the earth. “Could your people assess the carrier shuttle’s climb rate against reported cargo weight?”

“You suspect a heavier payload than reported.” Chui’s voice rang in agreement. “I already had my technicians run the analysis. Heavier than reported by over
a ton.”

“I should let my father know.”

“Which would accomplish what?” Chui cleared his throat. “I’ll tell you what he’ll say. ‘Thank you. I’ll look into it.’ You’ll never hear anything again.”

“We’ll record our findings and amass a set of data to back up our suspicions.”
“Say hello to your mother,” Chui replied.

“Indeed I will.”

George disconnected the call sad to have to agree with Chui. His father would do nothing. He’d be back on Terra Firma soon and deal with his father in person. Being the eldest son of the Global Realm’s First Citizen, Arthur Pendleton, carried with it a heavy burden. A
logical mind, a steady temperament, and an I.Q. of 159 helped him handle the responsibility with ease.

His mother, Laverna-Smythe Pendleton, held a special place in George’s heart. Contrary to her professional ruthlessness as an assassin, she gave her love unselfishly to her children. And George connected with her much more than with his
father.

“Departure time, 2300 hours.”

The charming voice of the automated attendant captured his attention. He still had eleven hours before he was to leave. With a good sleep behind him, he could devote the time to the history he was writing, entitled, *The Global Realm — The First 25 Years.*
Looking at the former world through the eyes of his family, the steps taken by his father seemed necessary and logical. Yet the elder leadership under his father believed much of the soul of humanity had vanished a little at a time. George weighed both as he wrote. On Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, all the human basics were met, but free time left a
great number of the people psychologically disturbed with nowhere to go and nothing to do.

Many conflicting views of history existed. Only one would be taught. His father related his experiences in one-sided commentaries. George wrote a more expansive text, taking the opinions of several prominent observers into account.
From his quarters orbiting the earth, he scoured the oceans via satellite, comparing data from twelve months earlier to the present. The battle to save aquatic animals and plant life had stopped the devastating effects on the oceans from human pollution. Global warming, although slowed, continued, and would for several centuries. One of only
two possibilities remained for humankind. Leave the Earth for Mars or a yet unidentified life-supporting planet. Or stay and face the real threat of human extinction in as few as two hundred years.

His father believed the complexes could last far longer. George doubted that warped view of the science. Arthur Pendleton listened to Hans Van Meer, his second in
command. Van Meer wasn’t a scientist.

“Commander.” The station nurse stepped through the open doorway into George’s living quarters. “Time to take your vitals before reentry.”

“Yes. Yes. Thank you...” He glanced at her nametag. “Nurse Marshall.”

“You’re welcome. Open your mouth and stick out your
tongue.” With one insertion of the medical wand, his temperature, blood pressure, blood oxygen, heartrate, and a mini-EKG were recorded. “Everything’s peachy. Have a good trip.”

George turned back to his writing, which included the achievements and dreams of his family and the builders of the Realm. At age 22, he proposed the Mars
Exploration Project be expanded to full colonization. Since he had already designed a working model of the Stanford Torus, a permanent self-sufficient orbital habitat, the Global Realm Department of Space Science and Exploration appointed him to head up the project. Now at 28, George Pendleton was ready for space exploration.
He meticulously recorded the changing land mass. The portion remaining above sea level varied weekly it seemed. Over the past twenty years, ten percent of the land mass had vanished beneath the deep. Another ten percent of the Earth’s surface would submerge in the next two hundred years, when all the ice in the Antarctic disappeared. Still, from his
vantage-point, the whitish-blue sphere below him offered a breathtaking panorama of light and colors—the gem of the solar system.

Using the trapped methane gas under the Greenland icecap as an energy source dramatically lessened the environmental catastrophe that could have occurred when the ice melted.
The Global Realm’s engineers worked frantically installing equipment in Antarctica to perform the same feat. Swift response was possible. His father unified the world, and mankind had a chance for survival.

Fascinated by the construction miracles, George jotted down the amazing progress made by technology that removed solid rock from
mountains and built new human cities. Following strict environmental standards, demolition and reconstruction crews had worked twenty-four years tearing down the old cities and building gigantic environmentally friendly complexes within sturdier infrastructures to replace the former dwellings of men. These complexes, bordered by eight-foot thick
rock walls adhered together by compounds resistant to weather and erosion extended some three hundred feet into the air.

Supported with steel internal-beam construction and covered with a material that filtered out dangerous solar rays, the living quarters the Global Realm created provided their citizenry with abundant nutrients, renewable
energy, and environmentally safe living conditions.

The only ocean travel came from tourists and a few expedition ships. The roads remaining were made from material unheard of before the Pendleton. Indestructible composites, stronger than diamonds or Graphene, made the new roads capable of handling any weight yet created. Few vehicles traveled
on them. Environmentally safe transportation had been developed replacing pollution-creating vehicles. George’s communicator buzzed and he put down his pen.

“Commander, Thad Cline is holding for you.”
“Put him through.”
“George.” The Director of Global Science’s voice smacked with concern.
“Yes, Thad,” George answered. “How can I help?”

“I need you to convince Global Security to inspect Muslim cargo shipments,” Cline grumbled. “So far I’ve been stymied when I make the suggestion. They say regional procedures are sufficient.”

“We’re all concerned. I’ll be in contact with my father tomorrow.” George
had had little contact with Arthur Pendleton in the past few months. “He’s heading to the Bering Strait. Once I’m debriefed in Taipei, I’ll call him.”

“If he doesn’t listen to you, no one will be able to reach him. Ammad may be a saint. But I think he’s a sinner. Have a safe trip home.”

“Roger that.” George
disconnected the call.

Ammad al-Sistani, the master manipulator. Why didn’t his father see the threat al-Sistani posed? The man exploited the Realm’s major weakness, boredom and lack of vigilance. As a people, mankind exploded the boundaries of knowledge and scientific understanding. Motivated citizens of the Global Realm lived worry-
free. Keep the rules and live at peace. Yes. The right way to live, George thought.

But some citizens did not agree. To them the new way bored them. They overwhelmed the entertainment centers during their free days. Self-centered, godless men and women, he judged them.

Over a billion enemies of the realm fell to Global
forces since the takeover. Enemy combatants now numbered under 500 million, most located in formerly Islamic countries. Ammad wooed them, offering peace and inclusion outwardly. But inwardly—George feared Ammad’s motives.

Many humans, two hundred million of them, chose no side. They roamed free on the face of the planet.
Nomads and loners, they were subject to the elements, other humans, and the growing number of animal predators and disease. Ammad ignored these people. Global citizens called the outsider’s condition “the Second Dark Ages”. They lived Stone Age lives or worse.

Eminent danger concerned George more than
weather or the outsiders. His father, Arthur, ruled as First Citizen, but opposition to him grew from two separate sources. Ammad al-Sistani, the son of the former Grand Ayatollah, gathered power in his role as peacemaker to those outside the Realm. He tested second only to Arthur Pendleton in leadership capabilities. A year ago, Ammad refused to allow
inspection teams into predominantly Muslim-controlled complexes, and his disobedience went unpunished.

The second challenge came from former General Tzu Chui, a close personal friend of George’s. Chui held the Far East Region firmly in his grasp. Over time, Chui had worked behind the scenes, gaining favor as a
man of forward thinking. If any sign of weakness was found in George’s father, Chui would move to grab power. George believed Chui respected Arthur Pendleton. He would strike down Ammad and allow George’s father to retire with honor.

To those outside his inner circle, Arthur Pendleton showed no sign of weakness. But to those closest to him,
the changes were obvious. Since the death of his closest advisor, Milton Rogers, the First Citizen grew more indecisive with each passing day.

George put away his writings. In a few hours, he would pilot Global Orbiter 5 back to Earth from Alpha Command Station 200 miles above the planet. The Global Space Station and Orbital
Space Complexes like Alpha Command, modular in design, formed a network of scientific and defense stations that prepared for interplanetary space exploration. The development of a working habitation wheel design by a joint Russian-American team provided gravity to most space-crafts and stations.

If I could pick any time
in History to be alive, I’d pick now, George thought. A chance to explore Mars, unbelievable. A pacifist, unlike his sister, Connor Ann, he held no interest in mortal combat. Connor surpassed his mother in that skill.

*If I weren’t a Christian, I’d be filled with fear for the future on Earth.*
Chapter 2

“My God, I’m arguing with an apparition, probably from my chemo.” Laverna Smythe-Pendleton, aka Peacock, placed both hands on her mattress and grinned at the tall, glowing male figure towering over her. “After six operations and the meds I’m on, I’m lucky you’re friendly
and not some horned devil.”

“I’m not an apparition.”

He gave her a warm smile.

“You and I have talked four times before.”

“Oh, sorry,” she answered. “I don’t remember.”

“Of course you don’t remember. You don’t remember anything a few weeks after they occur, and you haven’t in over five
Not dangerous, but not of this world. His image could brighten a room at will. Definitely a male. His eyes reflected ages past, and his calm and reassuring manner soothed her. *Handsome? Beyond. There was no way to describe him. The embodiment of wisdom and power, an angel of God most likely.*
He grew taller and spread his arms. “In your private journals, look at Book 5, page 73.”

She’d kept private journals from before the cancer destroyed her ability to recall near-term events. She remembered where the journals were stored, unlocked the bureau drawer, and gasped. Continuous surprise ruled her life. Her
journals numbered seven, yet she only remembered authoring three. Pulling out Book 5, she flipped the pages to page 73.

A half-hour later, she looked up from her reading to see her visitor grinning at her. “Whatever you tell me I’ll write down immediately after you leave. I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“God asks that you
warn your husband his rule is ending. He is to follow God’s command and ready true believers for the Lord’s return.”

The joy in Laverna evaporated. Guilt filled every pore. “You’re delivering messages from God to me, a whore and a murderess. Why would God use me?”

“You were those things.” The room brightened
as he spoke. In a gentle, voice he asked, “What were you doing when I appeared?”

“Praying.”

“Question answered.”

“Arthur won’t listen.”

“God doesn’t hold you accountable for the result. He asks that you obey.”

She gulped, hardly able to breathe. According to her journal, she’d delivered four messages to her husband.
Each time he’d ignored her. Each time God’s message proved correct.

“I’ll do as you wish.” She paused. “Arthur’s a good man. Stubborn, but he loves God.”

The angel’s head tilted slightly left. “Your husband accepted Jesus. That he loves God is for God to judge. Still he is rebellious and that detracts from his
effectiveness.”

“Will I live long enough to see our Lord’s return?”

The figure vaporized and blew away as if a wind carried him. But there was no wind. Laverna fell on her bed face first. Tears rushed forth, and she did not wipe them away. Rahab a prostitute, Ruth a Moabite, and Tamar a seductress, all won salvation and the honor to be included
in the lineage of Christ, yet she couldn’t picture herself in the same light.

\[ I \text{ obey your precepts and your statutes for all my ways are known to you.} \]

A knock at the door startled Laverna. “Lovey, we leave in five minutes.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Wiping her eyes, she rushed into the bathroom and stared into the mirror. Combat scars
and dark blotches marred the beauty she still possessed. She applied her makeup, careful not to look like a manikin. Her figure, curved and alluring, remained her greatest asset. Her husband craved her body. For some reason, she held the same power over him now as she had when they first met. Ignoring the fact she’d turned fifty-three, Arthur saw her as
twenty-five and not a day older.

The pathway to her id remained express-train fast, lucky for Arthur. She smirked, remembering Doctor Beatrice Kolb, the fiend who implanted mind-control devices in her brain—the affects now proven irreversible. One of those devices over stimulated her libido. An advantage to her
ever since.

She changed into her Global Realm business suit stored in her closet, joined her husband in the hall, and grasped his hand. “Lead on, noble prince.”

“King Arthur, Darling,” he said and winked.

“Hardly,” Hans Van Meer poked Pendleton in his ego. “His royal pain in the arse is more appropriate.”
“I’ll call him whatever he asks me to.”

Van Meer huffed. “Yes, you and the other five billion citizens of the Realm.”

Next to Van Meer stood Laverna’s best friend, Felicia Lange-Van Meer, looking drop-dead gorgeous. Van Meer picked Felicia to marry, because she hadn’t minded his earlier indiscretions. One look at Felicia’s beauty and
jealousy rose inside Peacock. She quickly quoted a scripture she used to keep perspective. *Thou Shalt Not Covet.*

All the southwestern block of rooms in Balmoral Castle had been converted into residences for the Pendleton family and their administrative staff. The rest of the castle housed conference rooms and
executive offices. Laverna loved Balmoral and the Scottish countryside. When Arthur traveled, she’d hike up the hillside to a glen he’d shown her on their honeymoon. Though the European Ice Age froze the ground six months of the year, the rest of the time life flourished, plant and animal alike.

The decision to move
Global Realm Headquarters to the Isles came after the eruption of five volcanos in Iceland and Italy. The ash and debris dropped temperatures in Europe an average of twenty degrees and caused snowfall from Norway to Turkey to leap up fifty-five percent. That happened eight years earlier and hadn’t improved much since. The Isles experienced a lesser
cooling of seven degrees on average, so Pendleton moved locations. Laverna didn’t understand the science, but while Europe froze, the rest of the earth continued to warm. North American winters were a balmy 65 on average. Summers reached 118, as far north as Maine.

The four arrived at Boardroom Global Admin A. Before they entered, Laverna
whispered to her husband. “I had another vision. Can we talk about it tonight?”

He pulled her close.

“Remember, you’re traveling to the Bering Strait Bridge tomorrow. I’ll give you an hour. Then it’s to bed by nine.”

“Thank you.” With her cancer and her memory problems, she needed more rest than she received.
Laverna took her seat to the left of her husband at the head of the table. Van Meer positioned himself on Pendleton’s right. Fifteen scientists from the Global Warming Task Force filled out the attendees. Now donning spectacles at age 62, Pendleton scanned several pages of raw data.

“Synopsise this for me.” He frowned and
scratched his head. “Too complicated for a novice.”

The spokesman for the group, a thin Italian with curly black hair, answered, “Bluntly put, we’re winning the battle with the oceans but have already lost the battle of the weather and the land.”

“How so?”

“Through controlling methane and our species harvesting practices, the
oceans are rebounding. That’s not to say they’ll ever return to their former state. But a new, healthy environment for aquatic life will develop.”

“Shouldn’t Global warming be curbed as well because of methane control?”

“Sir,” the curly haired man said. “We’re too late to save the land.”

“Don’t ever say that!” Pendleton flushed.
Laverna rubbed his arm to calm him down.

The researcher took a deep breath, but didn’t flinch. “We’ve seen an increase in the devastation from massive cyclonic storms. The rivers are as pure as we can make them, but still polluted and below par. In another decade, most of North America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East will produce little of
edible value, requiring us to rely on South America and Australia, plus what we produce within each complex to sustain the population. Eventually, the mini Ice Age will end. Earth will repair itself with time, but not fast enough for our present human population to survive.”

“Well, that’s all jolly good. Are you planning for us to have another series of
volcanic eruptions, so the Ice Age goes on even longer?”

Her husband’s sarcasm escaped before he could hold it back. Where was his self-confidence? Laverna thought. “All right.” Pendleton cracked his knuckles. “Save the oceans, but I won’t give up on the land. Double the manpower working on a solution.”

“The top fifty people in
the world have tackled the problem all with the same conclusion.”

“Unacceptable. Put the up-and-coming scientists on the task. Look for a new prospective.” He slammed his fist and waved the team away.

After this group left, Pendleton’s daily schedule flashed by in ten-minute blocks—a meeting, a quick
decision, another meeting. Troubles mounted with few solutions, Laverna leaned in close. “I didn’t think things were this bad.”

The last report on world topics occurred two months ago, far past her ability to recall.

Pendleton’s lips pursed. “For three years now, we’ve followed the land’s decline. We’ve had problems with
rebels. People died. I hate giving up on the land.”

Van Meer’s head tilted. “People died because you put them to death.”

“They weren’t put to death!” Pendleton pounded the table. “Combatants died aiding rebels. Those rebels were assisting Ammad al-Sistani, the sneaky bastard.”

Van Meer touched Pendleton’s arm with a soft,
reassuring gesture. “Milton and your mother are gone, my friend. Your children serve the Realm. I know you miss their counsel. Who can speak the truth to you, if not me?”

The overhead screen rotated into place, announcing the next presenters. The Pacification of the Non-Citizen World Committee and its Chairman Ammad al-Sistani would
soon appear via satellite. Ammad and Pendleton hadn’t met face-to-face in two years, ever since Ammad declared the Muslim complexes to be composed of Islamic believers only. Transferees in must be practicing Sunnis or Shias. Rumors abounded that Shia Muslims and Sufis received preferential treatment.

Ammad, the
peacemaker, earned Pendleton’s ear when civil disobedience broke out in the Global complex of Jerusalem a decade earlier. To maintain control, the Jerusalem governor had limited the Christian Easter pilgrimage to 50,000 visitors. Ammad negotiated an agreement involving Jewish, Muslim, and Christian factions that eased the tension. Still the
single most difficult problem the Realm faced was the zealots on all three sides.

Ammad proposed and negotiated a neutral Jerusalem, with the rest of the Israeli complexes to be Jewish exclusively. Pendleton, believing this to be a road to pacification, bought into the plan. Then Ammad used the Jewish precedent to justify his claim
to Muslim complexes being restricted to Muslims only. Laverna cringed at the sight of the man’s face as it formed on the screen. As Peacock, she remembered this teenage son of Grandayatollah al-Sistani.

Van Meer had warned Pendleton that any al-Sistani was a threat. Pendleton took the position that Ammad was useful. If he became a
problem, he’d deal with him. Thus far, he had not dealt with him.

# 25 years earlier.
“Where are we?” Ammad al-Sistani followed his rescuer along the steep, rocky mountainside.

“Nearing the Valley of the Magi.” Atash Akbari answered. “Our meeting place is in sight. See the
crescent-shaped rock across the gorge, jutting out like a weapon embedded in the ground?”

Ammad squinted. “The whole area looks lifeless and barren. I see the rock you mention, but nothing near it.”

“The entrance to the cave is positioned out of sight. There we will learn our fate.”

Ammad’s teeth
clenched as the wind peppered his face with specks of debris. “Stop a moment. I need to catch my breath.”

He took a drink of water from a goatskin bag given to him as the two fled the ambush that killed his father.

“Pain accompanies your tariq’, my youthful friend,” Akbari said. “Best to thirst and succeed, than satisfy the body and fail.”
“So what my father suspected is true.” Ammad smiled at the words his protector spoke. Only a Sufi cleric would speak this way. His father lifted the ban on Sufi practices, and Ammad was endeared to him all the more. “You are a Sufi.”

“Yes, a spiritual descendant of Imam al-Ghazali in practice. I come to enlighten you to the truth in
this final age.” Akbari touched his shoulder. “Our paths connect for life, and soon you will understand why.”

The two descended the mountain, following a winding trail that weaved snakelike along the western side. Ammad still bled from the wounds of battle. His father died at the hands of the redhead devil-woman. If
not for Atash, he most likely would have suffered the same fate. Minutes turned into hours. Ammad’s eyes moistened from sorrow and pain. But he did not complain. Sacrifice and pain would be his to accept if Allah said so. He would not see disappointment in Akbari’s eyes again.

Finally, his mentor left the path and the two ducked
behind the rock he’d seen from the opposite side of the valley.

“Here.” Akbari slipped into a narrow fissure that split the rock. Ammad followed.

“Behold,” Akbari said. *Behold* echoed in Ammad’s mind, and his senses opened to the faintest sound and beam of light.

The rock wall gave way, revealing an immense
cavern. Two shafts of light illuminated the space inside. Small holes in the rock ceiling allowed eerie, orange rays of sunlight through, appearing like the eyes of a leopard. The wind howled one moment and whistled the next. He swore he heard voices within the streams of air swirling inside the cave.

Akbari fell to his knees as did Ammad.
“Here is the place where the Magi of old spoke to the spirits in *Jannah,*” Akbari said. He bowed low to the ground and chanted his mantra.

“Wait.” Ammad grabbed Akbari’s sleeve. “Allah forbids calling up a spirit.”

“This is the place *Jannah* meets earth.” Akbari pulled away. “I interpret the
Quran differently. We will see. If nothing happens, nothing happens.”

There was no guile in Akbari’s voice. Who was Ammad to question his friend and his father’s closest adviser, even if the man was only six years his senior? Ammad remained silent. The chant continued—hypnotic and melodic. Gradually, the wind quieted and morphed
into a clear whispering of voices. One voice spoke to Akbari. One voice spoke to him. The others echoed eerie murmurs of approval.

At first, images and concepts filled Ammad. Images of power and authority spun in his mind. He was to wait, bide his time, and use deception against the Enemy.

*You are my herald.*
When you have been prepared for the defeat of the followers of Christ, I will reveal myself and reward you.

He saw the flags of Israel and the crossed keys of Saint Peter in flames, as the figure of the Egyptian God, Set, carrying an Ankh, loomed overhead.

I will give you the power to bring Jannah to
Earth for a time. Convert the infidels, using the pleasures of the houri. Fulfill the desires of their hearts. This is your gift.

As quickly as the voices came, they vanished. Ammad wiped the sweat from his brow. Akbari knelt beside him trembling. He opened his eyes and bowed low to Ammad. “The Savior of Humanity Al-Imam al Mahdi.
You are the Twelfth Imam.”

The words The Canon is my word, the order is my deed, and the truth is my interior state, rang in his head. Mohammad, the Prophet, must have spoken in the wind. Ammad knew one thing for sure. He was meant to do something great. The pride of being chosen mingled with the sorrow of losing his father.
“We must go back and bury my father, not run and hide.”

“Of course.” Akbari’s head tilted left and his eyes took on a questioning look. “You know what to say?”

“I do.” Ammad smiled with gratitude. “You shall be my spiritual advisor. But do not say the words Twelfth Imam again. The concept is misunderstood. I have been
reborn, not hidden. And I only realized this now.”

“Then, lead on.”

#

Ammad gulped three deep breaths before Boardroom Global Admin A came into focus. He centered his gaze on the redhead bitch, the She-Devil, who murdered his father. When the On-Air light flashed, he nodded to Pendleton, gaining
pleasure in seeing the First Citizen’s wife scarred and dying a slow death. Only the inner circle knew of her cancer, and he prayed Allah would allow him the pleasure of murdering her when the time came.

“Good morning, First Citizen,” he said, feigning allegiance. “I bring some good news from the Island of Sumatra. Four hundred
outsiders, mostly Muslims, have decided conditions are no longer suitable for them to survive without our help. They request citizenship.”

“Have they gone to the rebuilt Complex of Medan to register?”

“No, First Citizen.” Ammad said. “They fear the sight of the walls and the massive area of the Medan Complex. Several have had
encounters with your security forces in the past and have been shot with stun guns.”

Pendleton’s hand moved to his chin. “They must base within a complex, be tested, and secured into work details before being allowed to work or travel outside a complex of the Realm. Can we acclimate these people in stages?”

The First Citizen
blabbed nonsense unworthy of Ammad’s time. But not for long. His wait was nearly over. Victory over this madman was only a matter of weeks away.

“We could bring them to a holding area outside the complex,” Ammad answered. “Test them, put them to work in the fields near Medan, and after a month, bring them inside the gates.”
“Agreed.”

Ammad had cultivated over a thousand such groups, indoctrinating them into *Al-jihad fi sabilillah*, readying them to strike for the cause of Allah. That time was now.

As the meeting progressed, the redhead bitch jotted down notes. This irritated Ammad. A man of Pendleton’s stature protected and aided by a *woman*—
unfathomable. But, he wouldn’t have to put up with these infidels much longer. The First Citizen had relaxed his vigilance since his mentor, Milton Rogers, died. Ammad smirked.

*He won’t know what’s coming until it’s too late.*
Chapter 3

After a long day of meetings, a cool shower refreshed Laverna. Her disease hadn’t hindered her ability to keep fit and give sound advice to Arthur on things she could recall. She worked out with the team her daughter Connor assigned to protect the First Citizen—
Peacock’s old team of Shin Mao Ming, Sharesca Baidya, (nicknamed Cher), and Klaus Bruegman. Five times in an average week, Laverna played Peacock again hiding her pain and puffing through the full unit training exercise.

This, however, wasn’t an average week. Tomorrow, she and Arthur would head to Cape Prince of Wales, Alaska to christen the third Bering
Sea Cargo Bridge. The oceans were pristine to the eye. To pollute them as they were recovering would be criminal. Moving cargo across the strait by truck linked together most of the world. This final bridge guaranteed cargo ships would never again sail the Pacific.

She grabbed a towel and slipped into bed next to Arthur. He caressed her as
she satisfied him. Her mind and body pleased him with energy and drive equal to her best years. She understood from the Bible that sex was a gift from God to mankind and was to be enjoyed by husband and wife. She had confessed to God all her many indiscretions and been forgiven.

Arthur nuzzled her close afterward, running his
fingers along the scarred ruts lining her cheeks—compliments of Beatrice Kolb.

“Now tell me what vision you saw this time,” he said.

“My gut tells me I saw an angel.”

“That’s what you said the last four times.”

“I don’t remember those times. I wish...”
A sigh escaped her lips. “All right now,” he whispered. “Whatever you’ve seen or heard has hit spot on. I think you hallucinate. And because you’re brilliant, you’ve been right. So speak to me my oracle.”

“The angel said, ‘God commands you to warn your husband his rule is ending. He is to follow God’s instruction and ready true
believers for the Lord’s return.””

“Ouch!” Arthur’s face reddened. He shot up straight.
“I know you want me to step down. But I’d be a lunatic to off and declared the end of the world. I couldn’t pull it off. It’s a huge undertaking to even identify true believers.”

“Not for you. You reorganized the whole world with lightning speed.”
Her husband’s shoulders drooped. “I’ll have to think on this. Right now all I can visualize is walking through complex after complex with a sign reading, ‘Repent! The End Is Near!’ Maybe I should grow a beard and wear a goatskin tunic. I’m not prepared for the task.”

Laverna wrung her hands. “I’m frightened. I feel
so inadequate, and I don’t trust myself with the way my brain functions. But I believe I’m speaking the truth.”

“I love you, but I don’t trust this vision.” He stroked her hand, and her neck relaxed. “The first time you came to me, you told me to evacuate parts of Boston and New York and move the residents inland. I refused until our own oceanographers
explained the science to me.”

She chuckled. “I get so confused. I know the rising oceans flooded the coast, but I didn’t know I warned you it would happen.”

“That’s the thing. You never give me details. Maybe that’s how God tests my faith. Until I learned differently, my best scientists thought dikes were the answer. Dikes would have been a disaster. So how
do I accomplish this noble task?”

“Nano 7,” Laverna said, brushing her hair back from her eyes. All citizens wore a thin wristband used for incoming transmissions. Selective executive levels accessed outgoing lines for Realm purposes only. A ten-contact personal communication device completed the Realm’s
citizen access. “Spreading the word to believers could happen instantly through the Global Communications Center’s Nano 7 technology.”

She couldn’t explain why those words came out of her mouth. She had little idea of what Nano 7 was. Duh. She glanced to see if an angel had appeared. There was none.

“Dangerous,” Arthur
replied. “Too much chance of being labeled a loony. A call for testing could occur in a fortnight. If the results were close, I might be deposed.”

“We could visit the predominately Christian cities and make direct appeals to the Christian leadership.” She leaned in close, reached beneath the covers to rub his thigh, and whispered, “Give the idea some thought.”
Arthur squeezed her gently. “You’re a temptress. Now let’s get to sleep. Tomorrow we go ‘round the world.”

Tomorrow. Yes. Her people were ready, but she wanted confirmation about her vision. After Arthur fell asleep, she dialed the team’s dorm. Bruegman answered with a gruff, “What? It’s midnight.”
“Sorry to bother you, Klaus, but I need to speak to Cher.” Bruegman pounded on a door, and she heard Cher grab the phone.

“I am here.” A typical response from her best friend save for Felicia Van Meer.

“Sorry to wake you. I needed to talk.”

“I was doing yoga. I’ll sleep later.”

“I had another vision.”
Laverna sighed. “Arthur doesn’t believe I have them. But I do. I even mentioned Nano 7, and I don’t remember why I know what it is.”

Cher chuckled. “What else is new? Men never listen. My family never listened to women until I beat the crap out of my brothers. As to your visions, my Christian faith and former Buddhist
upbringing tell me to judge the outcome. If God is behind them, you will always be right."

"Thanks. I needed that."

"Well, don’t get mushy. I’m not going to hug you."

Laverna relaxed. "Go back to your yoga. Thanks for the reassurance."

A glance at the clock said she had to get to sleep. Where she was going the next
day escaped her.
#
Walking a thin line between belief and doubt, Pendleton formulated a plan to test both. He rolled out of bed at 2 a.m. Physicians knew their work had no time limits. He rang up Laverna’s doctor.

“First Citizen,” the doctor mumbled. “To what do I owe this untimely call?”

“Another hallucination.
Now she thinks Jesus is coming back soon, and I’m to drop everything to prepare a welcome or something. How is the work coming along on restoring her memory and curing her cancer?”

“My word, Arthur. You can’t rush science.” His chuckle irritated Pendleton. “My opinion, a child born today will live 100 years. Your wife will not. Genomic
advances work miracles, but they can’t create areas that have been eradicated. Kolb’s to blame for that. The short-term memory will never be restored in your wife. The cancer is slowed, but inoperable. One more year will verify my opinion.”

“You’re no bloody help.” Pendleton’s jaw tightened. “Are you telling me she’ll be dead in a year?”
“Ah, shoot the messenger, and do it at 2:15 a.m.” A yawn accompanied the words. “In a year, Laverna will either be dead or mimic severe Alzheimer’s.”

“What do you think of these visions she has?”

“Four visions—four direct hits. She’s remarkable. I don’t try to speculate on where she obtains her inspiration. The divine,
however, I’d put last on the list. But go with the facts. She hits the target.”

Pendleton hung up and pounded his fists on his armchair. He’d done everything medically possible to save her life. The least he could do was act like he believed her. After the trip to the Bering Strait, he’d call for a conference of Christian pastors. He’d suggest we live
as though God was coming tomorrow. He’d set *God’s* plan in motion. How hard could it be to pull Christian leaders from 30,000 Complexes of the Realm into a meeting? He would make his wife’s request his mission to fulfill, even if he looked silly doing it. The First Citizen works miracles daily, he thought. What’s another, *if* it’s the Lord’s doing?
“Zip up my outfit, Obie dear. The head of my family’s security team is required to appear smashing at all times.” Connor Ann Uba strutted into the living room of her suite in London’s Global Quarters, a quadrant reserved for gold and silver level Realm personnel.

Her husband of two months, Obadiah Uba,
Director of Agriculture for the London of the Realm Complex, zipped her up and gave her a pat on the behind.

“Don’t be gone long. I’ll miss you. I miss you already, especially your charming ways.”

“It’s the animal in you I’ll miss.” She rubbed his shoulders and snuggled up to her Nigerian husband, adoring his massive arms and
bulwark of a chest. “I’m at my father’s command, and he’s heading to the Bering Straits with Mum. She’s the one I need to watch. I’ll miss you, too.”

“I suppose you will.” He grinned. “I’ll keep busy managing the planting crews. We’ve nectarines and grapes to harvest this week. Keeps your Obie busy.”

The sweet aura of being
a newlywed still flowed through Connor. Taught by her mother that sex was made by God and anything God made was good, she embraced her husband eagerly. Unlike her mother’s former life, she gave herself to one man only as God instructed. If she had her way, she’d take her husband to Aruba and get herself pregnant. Alas, that was not
to be. Her duty to the Realm superseded everything else.

   Connor kissed his full, moist lips and hurried out the door. Just outside, she stopped to bask in the beauty of the gold, emerald, and diamond-studded granite walls lining her path to the main floor transport. When she lived in Zurich, she’d watched that city transform, mixing some of the
traditional old with the remarkable new. Like now, her family’s living quarters were decent, but only a few embellishments better than a service worker’s. Citizens of the Realm enjoyed all its benefits for which she thanked her father.

Located on the 55th floor northwest corner’s outer wall, Connor’s suite and surrounding hallway glowed
with reflected sunlight from the iridescent dome covering this part of the complex. One of five cities of 200,000 people, each having London in its name, The London of the Realm Complex sat where the old city of Reading used to be. The old London had disappeared into rubble a decade earlier, save for the historical buildings. The Thames had become part of
the English Channel and many buildings submerged into the deep.

Hans Van Meer and his wife Felicia met her at the Transport.

“Be nice to your father this trip, *Busty Rusty.*” Van Meer quipped.

“I hate that nickname, whether you’re my dad’s best friend or not.” Connor gave her godfather a loving tap on
the shoulder and boarded the transport. “He’s rarely nice to me. He never accepted Obi, and I challenge him.”

“You are well endowed, Honey,” Felicia quipped. “And no man is ever good enough for a megalomaniac’s daughter.”

“Well, you have the megalomaniac part right.” Connor said, then changed the subject to keep her from
going ballistic talking about her father. “I hear we have some serious issues surrounding the Global Complex of Jerusalem again.”

“Twelve Holy Land cities, actually. Religious factions always believe test scores and management decisions unfairly target them. I’ve advised your father to transfer Muslim and
Jewish citizens out of those cities and replace them with Hindus. He hasn’t responded.”

Felicia grinned as she pushed the Down button.
“Lovey and Arthur won’t take citizens from a land God gave them in the first place, and he won’t treat Muslims like second-class peons by transferring them. The man isn’t prejudiced.”
“He won’t confront al-Sistani, you mean.” Connor’s comment received no reply.

In seconds, the transport opened on the public floor. The twelve square-mile complex sprawled out before them. Broad avenues led to all the conveniences humanity required. Connor checked her watch, an automatic chronograph with so many features the user had
to program their twelve most needed contacts into it and keep the online manual on their computer for reference to other uses. Women wore the garnet-inlaid silver and men wore gold—one style sufficed for all.

Conner pulled a low hanging apple off a tree near the transportation district.

“Obie’s harvesting fruit while I’m gone. Gives the man
something to focus on.”

“I’ll bet you’re proud of him, Red. Our complex is almost self-sufficient.”

Felicia Van Meer flashed her badge and the doors to the Supersonic Rail System opened. “Your husband’s doing a bang-up job. We only import wheat and corn. Tell him how valuable he is.”

“He’s a winner.”

Connor entered, turned left,
and swung into her seat. She fastened the safety harness and pressed an overhead button. Within seconds, a cup of coffee appeared on the tray table in front of her, steaming and ready to drink. “He hates it when I go on a mission.”

“He’s horny,” Felicia quipped.

“Always,” Connor said. “But he worries about my safety.”
“He shouldn’t worry.” Van Meer turned on his overhead light and spread out a map on his tray table. “You’re as deadly as your mother was in her time. And I should know. I trained you both.”

“Never,” Connor replied. “My mother’s the best. Even disabled, she outperforms the rookies.”

“You outperform
everyone.” Van Meer traced their route with his finger. “At nine hundred kilometers an hour, we’ll arrive at our destination in ten hours tops.”

“Onboarding personnel,” The sterile words echoed from an overhead audio system. Through the Supersonic’s entry-doors strutted her mother’s security team, Shin Mao Ming leading
the way followed by Sharesca Baidya, nicknamed Cher, and Klaus Bruegman. The Three Musketeers, Connor dubbed them. She’d assigned them to her mother when she replaced her as Director of Security for Global Realm top-level personnel, since they had protected Peacock for a quarter of a century. She reassigned Loomis and Magnus due to age to less
active positions.

Loomis had an unhealthy crush on her mother that everyone but her father clearly saw. Yet he was loyal and hands-off. Unfortunately, he died of natural causes three years earlier. Her mother was visibly upset, but Connor never broached the subject.

The Pendletons entered when Bruegman signaled
them it was safe.

“Hello, Mum.” Connor called out and waved a welcoming hand.

“Hi, Darling. You look wonderful.”

“Fasten yourself into your seat, Mum. The coffee is superb.”

Her mother scooted into the window seat on the right side of the aisle, and her father slid in next to his wife.
“And a hello to you too, Pumpkin,” he grumped.

“Sorry about not greeting you. But Mum’s the one with memory problems, and you’re not a pleasant fellow most of the time.”

“Change your career path to Global Administration, and I’ll be jovial more often.”

“Sorry. None of your offspring want to ascend to
your throne.”
“Next stop the Bering Strait.” A single horn blast followed.
The Supersonic’s door shut. Without a sound, the hover train departed the station at the speed limit of one hundred kilometers an hour and escalated as it flew through the Channel tunnel and on to mainland Europe. Once out of the tunnel, the
Supersonic lifted two meters off the magnetized track and increased speed.

“Should be an uneventful trip, Pumpkin,” Pendleton said.

“I hope so.” She smirked. “Nothing involving you or Mum is uneventful.”

#

Laverna opened her notebook. Finding her daughter’s page, she
reminded herself her daughter wasn’t fourteen anymore. *Married to a Nigerian?* She hadn’t remembered that. No children. Dedicated to her career as Director of Security for the Global Realm’s top-level personnel. Laverna warmed. Her daughter bested her, even when she was Peacock, both in IQ testing and field course. Her sons excelled in less physical
skills. George was a gold level physicist trained for space flight, and Harry excelled in paleoecology presently studying ancient Biblical archives and ruins for the Global Archaeology Department.

“Let’s pray for a safe trip,” Connor said, as the train raced across the former German countryside.

When Connor led the
prayer, Laverna absorbed the astounding beauty of the landscape. In the distance, the Berlin Complex rose skyward, a towering eighty-foot tall fortress housing 200,000 human beings. The gleam of the bejeweled walls glistened in the sun. Totally reconstructed from the recycled materials of old cities and solid, mountain rock, Berlin had celebrated its
seventeenth year since completion. The European Ice Age transformed the complex into a snow castle with the rays of the sun glistening off its parapets. The surrounding covered countryside thrived with wildlife and newly planted vegetation. Spruce and fir trees hid the dens of fox, the hiding places of wild boar, and many varieties of
deer. But farther away to the east, the land grew treacherous. Little in the way of food could be found for man or beast.

Laverna lowered her head and petitioned the Lord to help her husband reach believers with the angel’s message. How hard could it be communicating with the Christian community? Difficult if Arthur didn’t
believe what she’d told him was the truth.

Amazed, yet honored, that an angel of God had communicated with her—the worst of sinners, Laverna determined to help her husband reach every Christian with the angel’s message. She’d personally met Pope Peter the II. He’d be her first call when this trip was over.
Chapter 4

A figure in white Arctic clothing trudged up a gradual slope to a hedge of snow-covered conifers overlooking the steppes of Central Russia. A Supersonic passed this location forty kilometers south of Norilsk every eight hours.

Under instructions from
Ammad al-Sistani, he must stop the next vehicle regardless of the cost. The same Ammad who fulfilled Islamic prophecy when he interrupted his father’s funeral in the mountains. Ammad with the Sufi Imam, Atash Akbari, at his side stepped into the midst of the mourners.

“Move aside all who would speak.” Ammad had
changed from the boy of days before. “Only the Chosen One shall preside at Grandayatollah al-Sistani’s funeral.”

All present felt Ammad’s power. All present understood that even in defeat came the brightest light—a gift of Allah—the hope of Islam.

The man on the plains on Russia possessed no
weapon capable of penetrating the force-field surrounding the gigantic monster speeding toward him. He only had an electronic device smuggled out of the Shevchenko Complex and a hundred warriors hidden among the trees. Two small boxes that looked like transmitters had been planted twenty-three meters away on each side of
the Supersonic’s path. The technology escaped his understanding. But once the force-field shut off, his people could board the transport. They had many capable weapons to help them destroy their targets.

Once he saw the monster approach, he’d have no chance of stopping it. He had to anticipate its arrival based on the accurate timing
of past runs. A Global timepiece, also smuggled out of Shevchenko Complex, kept precise time—all the time. One minute to arrival, he and his warriors bent in prayer. *Allah Akbar.* Then he pressed the switch.

`#`

Connor analyzed the computer readings from her satellite feed. She glanced over at her mother who slept
soundly in her seat. Laverna’s face held the marks of many battles, yet her beauty clearly radiated through, a quality of innocence that caused wonderful memories of Connor’s childhood to grow within her. Her mum always told her the truth. She understood the pressure of being a girl in a male-dominated home. While her dad seemed preoccupied, her
mum listened and showed her she was loved.

Connor’s eye caught a laser-like flash on the satellite screen. She unhooked her seatbelt, signaled Cher and Bruegman to join her in the back compartment. “I don’t like this reading.”

Cher nodded.

“Something’s interfering with the magnetics at checkpoint Norilsk 8. Have Military
Command magnify the area.” Connor called in the order and reported the flash. The satellite zoomed down to a ground-level view. In an instant, the forms of warriors appeared among the trees.


“Formidable if we’re stopped,” Connor snapped.

“What caused the flash?”
A jolt threw her against the side of the car, as the Supersonic wobbled erratically. “What the hell’s going on?”

“Magnetic stabilizer malfunction,” the control room responded. “I’ve no choice but to stop for repairs.”

“Keep going as far as you can.”

“That would be less
than a minute travel time.” He cut away.

“I want drones now at Norilsk 8.”

“Roger that,” answered a voice from Supreme Military Command. “Ten minutes tops.”

That might be too late. Connor screamed. “Call in the drones. Now!”

Her cargo, more precious than her life,
depended on her making the right calls. The Supersonic’s brakes had been applied, and the vehicle slowed to a crawl, stabilizing as the speed decreased.

“Attention,” Connor called over the main cabin speakerphone. “This is not a drill. Arm yourselves. Set your weapons to kill mode and assume battle positions. Repeat. This is not a drill.”
Her mother was up and into the aisle checking everyone’s position and weapon. Amazing woman, Connor thought, always in attack mode.

The latest laser technology had three settings, a nerve setting, firing extreme lethal charges that destroy the spinal nerves, a blind setting, and a setting for intolerable sound waves. Connor held the
latest model, which had an electrical pulse setting to incapacitate or kill the strongest opponent. “Highest nerve setting.”

“Prepare for a rough stop,” a voice from the control room shouted.

Connor ran from the back compartment and strapped her father into his protection shield developed for the First Citizen only. He
smiled at her as she closed the doors. *The man’s unshakable.*

The Supersonic glided to the ground after losing the speed necessary to maintain its altitude over the guide path. Connor took her position against the right side wall and strapped in. As the lock clicked, snow flew across the windows, and the Supersonic slammed to a stop.
sending anything not contained through the cabin toward the front of the transport.

Connor reacted to the flashing sensors. “The Supersonic’s control room doors have been breached. Shin, Klaus, stay with my father. The rest follow me.”

As she moved forward, the ground shuddered.

*The drones have*
arrived.

“What’s the status?” she whispered into her headset, as explosions rattled the ground.

“No one outside is alive.” The voice was Cher’s, controlled but alarmed.

“Inside, however, you have guests, maybe thirty.”

“Hold your attack. Wait for word from me.”

“Roger that.”

An explosion inside the
transport knocked her and her companions off their feet. Another alarm sounded. The enemy had breached the door from the control room to the engineer’s room. “Cher, seal off the forward compartments.”

Cher hit the wall switch closing the second set of steel doors. Another blast occurred but no breach this time. Cher’s action saved them
momentarily. Connor assessed the situation as her mother, now in Peacock mode, reached her side.

“Where are our friendlies?” Peacock asked.

“You and Cher are here. Klaus and Shin are with the First Citizen. I fear anyone in between the engineer’s room and the front compartment is dead.”

“Van Meer and Felicia
are back with Arthur as well,” Peacock said, as another blast set off the alarm again indicating the enemy only had one door to breach to engage them. “Your father is in the shield. We need all hands available.”

“Hans,” Connor whispered into her cell. “Send my boys to me. You and Felicia use the emergency exit and surprise them at their
rear."

“It’s bloody cold outside, Busty girl. I’m not a spring chicken.”

“Cold or not, do it!”

“Yes your ladyship. I will your ladyship. Right away.”

His chuckle seemed out of place with her mood. Felicia said. “Connor’s right. Let’s move.”

“Oh bloody hell. All
Connor switched her communications to Military Command. “I have two operatives heading outside. Leave them be. Fire at the front compartment now, then divert to area recon.”

Before she received an answer, an explosion outside the Supersonic threw metal against its sides. A partial drone wing ripped a gash in
the ceiling. A final explosion blew out the door between her and her enemies. Klaus and Shin appeared at the doorway behind her, as debris flew.

Peacock met the first man through the door with a chop to the neck, snapping his windpipe.

As Connor rushed to help her mother, a voice yelled, “Grab the witch. I’ll
hold off the others.”

Fat chance of that, Connor thought, as Peacock dashed forward out of her sight. For several minutes, her struggle for survival kept her from tracking Peacock’s movements. Cher and Klaus were occupied with combat. They couldn’t go after Peacock either.

Landing a killing blow to the nose of an attacker, she
looked up to see their cabin free of enemy combatants and stumbled forward. Shin’s hand grabbed her shoulder. “Commander, regroup before racing to your death.”

Van Meer exited the back with Felicia a step behind. Not as spry as he used to be, he exercised caution in his approach. Leaning around the
Supersonic, he saw several body parts strewn about in the snow. The result of the drone, he imagined. Before he and Felicia could move into the field, a flash of light and sound blasted the area and another drone crashed into the field and collided with the front of the Supersonic. Felicia pulled him back behind the train as pieces of metal blew past them.
“What the hell is that?” Van Meer whispered. “A blast of light and sound that brings down a high-tech drone?”

“It’s not ours,” she said. He peered back around to see everything on that side of the train blackened and smoldering. “Come on. We’ve still got a job to do.”

The two headed down the side of the Supersonic
toward the front where the breach occurred, when a flash of light caused them to drop to the ground. Another drone wobbled and crash to earth a quarter of a mile away. Hans raised his head. Men on jet skis, wearing white like the other group, flew into view out of nowhere. Felicia rose up firing her weapon and was hit with multiple rounds of return fire.
Van Meer grabbed her and kept low as the enemy entered through the breach in the supersonic and threw the bodies of the first attack group out of their way as they went.

*A rival group. No. The first group is expendable.*
Chapter 5

Mistake. I’ve gone too far.

Having dispatched three men during her charge forward, Peacock faced two more attackers. A man dressed in a white parka stood behind them. She flung herself, arms wide and head forward, between the first
two, dropping them backwards to the floor. A light flashed as she stabbed the man to her left in the throat. Heat shot through her. She couldn’t reach the man on her right.

Still wide-awake, she couldn’t move—not a finger. Her breathing came in struggling gasps. The man in the parka grabbed her by the feet and dragged her out
through the gaping hole in the Supersonic’s Command Center wall, as a new group raced in and killed those left from the first wave of combatants.

“Sorry,” the man in white said. “There’s not enough room to take you back. Better dead than captured. Allah Akbar.”

Flashes of light shot around her. She heard a
number of thuds. As she was being loaded on to a vehicle, a voice in her head whispered. “Fear not. I will never leave you or forsake you.”

Seven of the enemy still breathed out of the two attack groups. The man in the white parka looked down and spit in her face. The other six followed suit. He bent close and whispered. “You will
regret the day you murdered the Ayatollah al-Sistani. Peace be to his soul.”

#

“Drone down!” Connor yelled.

The Global Center Commander responded to his crew. “Get eyes on them. Now!”

“Recon satellite’s responding,” she heard a voice answer. “Wait a
moment. The area around Supersonic’s location has a Level 9 glare. I can’t make out features on the ground over six-square miles.”

“Shit! How far away is the emergency rescue team?” Connor asked.

“Ten minutes.”

“Do you know what hit the drone?”

“Instruments say a shockwave.”
There’s more than treachery at work here.

“We can’t depend on help,” Connor whispered as she moved her team forward compartment by compartment. Bodies from both sides were strewn throughout the train, over twenty bodies in all. Peacock’s work could be clearly seen by the manner of each enemy’s death. The
Supersonic’s five-person crew had put up a valiant fight, dying with honor in the defense of world freedom.

No sign of her mother so far. She pushed aside the mangled material that made up the command center and exited through the hole in the side. She covered her eyes. A light from some distance away blinded her.

“Pull on your face
shields,” she screamed.

Cher reached her first, shield on and abled. “I’ve seen this technology before. Outsiders didn’t do this. We have traitors within the Realm.”

“Find my mother!”

A weak voice answered. “She’s gone. Three men took her.”

Connor’s head whipped left. Even impaired, she
recognized the man speaking. Leaning against a part from the Drone, Hans Van Meer cradled the lifeless body of his wife Felicia in his arms. Her upper body wasn’t recognizable.

*The enemy has these types of weapons?*

Cher was right—traitors indeed.

“Hans, I’m . . .”

“She died instantly.” He
wiped at the blood gushing from his wife’s neck unable to control the flood. “Only one of the original attackers took Peacock. Others came in riding on jet skis. They killed six of their own people, shot Felicia, and stunned me, as the second drone exploded. I couldn’t move, but I saw them enter and come out with your mother.”

“Was she harmed?”
“She was stunned,” Van Meer said, as the glare in the sky vanished. “I’d say she’s in no worse shape than I am.” Klaus Bruegman followed the ski tracks until he was a dot in the distance. When he returned, he said. “She’s gone. The glare dissipated, and I realized the ski tracks ended about thirty yards from my position. I believe a chopper picked
them up.”

Connor slumped.

“Release the First Citizen from his protective vault. We need to regroup.”

“A pair of Supersonics is a minute away,” Global Command said. “I’ve conversed with the First Citizen. He’s decided to continue on to the bridge dedication.”

“Understood.”
Gloom surrounded her. What would her mother want her to do? Follow orders—the only logical response. The populace must not know of Laverna Smythe-Pendleton’s abduction. Connor’s charge—protect her father. Her mother’s fate lay with Global Command forces, at least for now.

Bruegman approached her. His jaw set, stone-faced,
he brushed snow mixed with frozen blood off his uniform. Putting his arms around Connor, he whispered.

“Focus on your father and your duty, as will I. Know I’m hurting as you are, but be strong and of good courage, as the Bible says in the Book of Joshua.”

A whoosh announced the arrival of a different Supersonic. For a few
seconds, Connor embraced her mother’s close friend, allowing herself a moment of vulnerability.

“Our transportation has arrived,” she said. “Once this trip ends, I want every resource of the Realm concentrated on the insurgents and on my mother’s rescue.”

# Pendleton wiped away
his tears, a useless act. Lips quivering with rage, he shouted orders into his cell. Three drones flew overhead. Over a hundred Global Realm warriors arrived by helicopter and spread out hunting through the area looking for signs leading to Peacock’s location.

“Where in the hell were you when we were attacked?” he screamed into his cell.
“Sir,” a fatigued voice answered. “We were surprised. We acted as quickly as we could.”

Pendleton threw his cell, bouncing it off a piece of the drone wreckage. “Dammit all to hell! Nothing breaks in this damned new world.”

“Get on the transport, Father.” Connor ran through the snow and shoved him forward. “You’re still a target
here.”

“I’m personally leading the search for your mother.”

“Hardly!”

Fire erupted inside him.

“The bloody hell I’m not.”

“I’ll keep you informed.” Connor reddened.

“I’ll find the villains behind this treason, and you’ll punish them.”

Pendleton sighed, dipped his head down, and
entered the second Supersonic. He didn’t respond to Connor. What was the point? He knew she was right. No words were necessary. She knew she was right as well. He watched as his daughter disappeared into the forward compartment her cell to her ear.

Just like her mother.

Van Meer swung into the seat next to Arthur and
grasped his hand. Pendleton returned the squeeze.

“Felicia?” he asked.

Hans shook his head.

“Better we don’t talk about this right now.”

“Yes. All right.”

Why God? Pendleton thought. Lovey is Your child. She’s a better Christian than I’ll ever be. Hasn’t she endured enough? The silence irritated him. He had to think
on other things. Fighting with God wasn’t a winnable war. Leave her to Jesus and pray. He shivered. Was the time of the end here? The world had been radically transformed in the past twenty-five years by him, without any communication or counsel from the Almighty. Individual human beings inside the Global Realm had their needs met. Why should
there be rebellion? Maybe peace only existed as a dream.

With eight hours left to travel, he threw away the thoughts of the rebellion and concentrated on memories of Lovey. Visions of her teaching Connor the art of self-defense warmed him. While he forged a unified world, Lovey raised three children and still managed to
defend the Global High Command by attracting the brightest and the best into Global Security.

She prayed daily to God. She encouraged him as a lover and never refused him. Then the cancer struck her down, but she fought with a fury to beat the damn thing. Lovey energized and dominated every venture she undertook. George and Harry
took their educational paths in directions disqualifying them from succeeding him. He had objected, but Lovey defended them. If a Pendleton was to become First Citizen after him, Connor had had the best chance. But she wasn’t ready yet.

The thought of losing his partner in life terrified him. She directed his every step until the cancer. How
Thouands of citizens, mostly the builders of this monument to Global logistics, applauded as First Citizen Arthur Pendleton stepped up on to the platform at the North American end of the Third Bering Straits Bridge. Connor joined him on his right, and Van Meer took his position on the left.
Global Security personnel collected videos of the crowd’s reaction, scouring faces for suspicious movements or reactions to Laverna Pendleton’s absence.

“What a glorious day.” Pendleton grinned, hiding his pain the best he could. “What a monumental achievement. Today, by completing this bridge, we’ve freed the seas from human pollution and
fossil fuel waste from ocean freight transports.”

Some citizens chanted, “We love Arthur.” Many carried Global Realm flags of their own making. All wore the colors of their province, industry, and rank. The atmosphere of loyalty and dedication elated him.

“I appreciate your feelings. But, each of you shares in this
accomplishment. Enjoy your achievement.”

With that, he grabbed a champagne bottle, strutted off the platform, and announced. “I christen this bridge, The Glory of the Realm.”

Pendleton swung the bottle, shattering it against a cornerstone beam, foam spewing several feet in the air as the crowd roared. He headed back to the
Supersonic, a deep dread encompassed him. All this way for a swing of a bottle, he thought. My Lovey’s gone. What happens now? He strapped himself into his seat, and Van Meer hooked in beside him. “Tzu Chui is holding for you.”

“Tzu Chui? I hope the curfew problem with the Muslims in his region hasn’t escalated.” Pendleton grabbed
his cell. “Regional Governor Chui, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I know what happened.”

Pendleton sucked in air.

“How?”

“Young son, George, spotted a barrage of light flashes over the area near Norilsk just before departing Space in Global Orbiter 5.” Chui paused.
“Yes. Go on.”

Pendleton held his breath.

“First Citizen, the beam came from a satellite launched from the Basra Complex last year. This is supposed to be a global weather orbiter, not a light or laser weapon. I suspect treachery. I suspect Ammad al-Sistani is behind your wife’s abduction.”

Pendleton mulled
Chui’s comment over. “How did you know my wife was taken?”

“The Space Exploration training facility at the Beijing Complex put eyes on the ground at your location. Using sunray filtration technology, they were able to view the kidnapping and flight. Unfortunately, Mrs. Pendleton and her abductors went underground fifty
kilometers south of the crash site, and we lost track of them.”

“Underground?”

“Yes. I believe they had a tunnel concealed for such a purpose, and they emerged elsewhere out of our range.”

The realization of the enormous scope of the danger confronting the Realm shocked Pendleton. How could he have such a wide
spread insurrection going on and not know? And how did Chui’s people think to use sunray filter technology and not Global Command? “Is there anything else?”

The long breathless silence sickened Pendleton. Finally, Chui whispered, “The signal activating the satellite came from the Grozny Complex. First Citizen, the satellite came
from Basra and the signal from Grozny—major Muslim strongholds. Seize Ammad now, before you lose power and the Realm falls to radicals.”

“Let’s be frank. You are five years younger than I am. You wish to be First Citizen. Is this clouding your judgment?”

“No.” Chui’s voice showed no sign of deception.
“When I become First Citizen, I will have earned the right. If Ammad or anyone else challenges me. I will eliminate him. But while you hold the office, I am at your service, and I am loyal.”

“Give me eight hours to seek other counsel as well. Then I will call a meeting, and you’ll be present.”
Pendleton cleared his throat. “Chui, thank you. I rely on
your talent and your loyalty.”

“You are most welcome, First Citizen. In the meantime, I will share my information with the Global Realm scientists. We will attempt to locate your wife.”
Chapter 6
Peacock picked up voices. She focused on her surroundings. The terrorists boarded a twenty-year old troop helicopter. They threw her onto the floor and shackled her. They flew away in less than five minutes from her initial capture.

The man with the white
parka spoke to the helicopter pilot in Farsi, but she understood. ”Head southwest to the coal mine.”

They flew for what seemed like an eternity. She couldn’t judge time. She couldn’t clear her head. Continuous pain shot through her body. A kick to the head reminded her how hated she was. Spit covered her face. Her restraints failed to hold
her secure. Every dip or air pocket threw her from side to side. A backpack fell out of its compartment and hit her knee. When she could finally move, she’d refuse to show any sign of pain.

A bumpy landing jarred her, and they unlatched her restraints. Their leader shouted. “Smack her until she can move on her own.”

Hard open hands to the
face brought movement to her muscles. She got up and took a step, then they dragged her—half-running half being-pulled along. Down a tunnel into a mine they went. Close to the entrance they came to a track with a mine trolley on it. The men took turns providing the power pushing the mechanical seesaw up and down.

They traveled
underground until most of them looked exhausted. Then the trolley burst into the open and headed down a long sloping hillside until it came to rest in a valley several miles from the entrance. There, an old military truck waited for them.

"You’ve started a long journey, Devil-woman." The leader spoke to her in English. "Pray you survive
She smiled. For the man would never believe her if she told him. Behind him and to his left, her angel stood towering over him.

#

Ammad al-Sistani flicked a piece of lint off his royal robes. Reclining at Ammad’s right hand, his spiritual advisor and closest friend, Atash Akbari. They
listened as the other five at table brought Ammad the news from the Muslim Complexes.

“The genesis of our plan went well.” A tall man, his beard full and his eyes dark, read from a scroll attached around his belt. “The redhead devil is with the Black Force 2 interrogation team as we speak.”

“The team understands I
do not want her killed.” Ammad sucked on a fig. “I want her brought to the edge of death, like an animal broken on the rocks. Squirming in pain. Gasping to breathe. Wishing death would come. But alive until I end her suffering.”

“Pendleton knows of your treachery.” The man dipped his hands into a water dish and wiped them on a
towel. “He will attack you.”

“Pendleton knows only a fraction of our plans.” Akbari clasped the man’s hands. “Our Living Hope has ordered another attack.”

“Allah Akbar,” Ammad’s inner circle responded.

Seven veiled beauties entered the dining hall from the kitchen area as “Alf Layla” played over the sound
system. “What was forbidden is forbidden no more.”

Ammad’s hands spread wide. “Jannah comes to Earth with God’s blessing, a thousand young flowers to grace your harems.”

Nude to the waist, the lower part of their bodies covered with thin beaded strands of cord hooked to a waist belt, the ladies danced for their masters with
abandon.

“Pick any you wish,” Ammad said. “But do not behead them in the morning.”

Laughter broke out. Akbari raised his hand.

“Amuse yourselves. But remember, God loves these creatures as He does you. In Jannah, which you may now experience here, continual pleasures abound for all. Notice the zest with which
these morsels perform. May they live forever.”

His spiritual minister followed his path well. The honesty fed Ammad’s plans. Ammad rose, whisked a dark-eyed Persian girl into his arms, and called out as he left the room, “Order the attacks to commence per plan.”

#

“George, I need my big brother,” Connor pleaded, as
George Pendleton answered his cell.

“I’m in final debrief, Sis. And, yes I know about Mum.”

“I suspect Ammad al-Sistani.” Connor raced up the steps of the London Complex Global Security Center, a brisk wind swirling around her. “Tzu Chui agrees. Dad’s mulling over his next steps behind closed doors.”
“I agree with Chui. I don’t trust the Asian leader. But in this case, he’s correct.” His voice turned to a whisper. “Trust only loyal comrades—Van Meer, Duarte, Ziebach, and Professor Cline.”

“What? Not my own security team?”

“Duh.” George’s tone irritated her. “They can help rescue Mum. They can’t help find her. The others can.”
Even while being a tease, big brother made sense. He always did. Harry was out of touch on a dig near the Kampala Complex. His knowledge of terrain could be of help. “Can you reach Harry?”

“I’ll try. He usually returns my texts.”

“Good. He may be able to narrow the search with his knowledge of terrain, timing,
and distance.”

A sigh from George caused her to purse her lips.

“What?”

“Your lack of understanding of Harry’s career path causes you to underestimate his talent. His knowledge of terrain, timing, and distance exceeds even my brilliant mind. But his usefulness is far greater. Our brother surpasses even your
husband in his ability to communicate with living things. We’ll need him.”

After a pause, George said. “Of course, I’ll be your strongest asset.”

“Dammit. Quit the ego trip. Just have him call me when you reach him.”

“Will do Busty Rusty.”

“God, you’re so crude.”

She cut off the call. Brothers. #
Peacock’s eyes stared down at the cement floor. She relaxed her jaw as her body went limp. A smashing blow from a massive fist shot blood and several of her teeth into the air. The first three blows had loosened them. This one finished the job. Visions of clouds and the sound of songbirds filled her mind, as a voice from someone unseen sang “The Lord’s Prayer.”
“You’ll be toothless when I’m done with you. Then we’ll have a nice chat.” Looming over her, a six-foot tall, hairy figure grinned. “My orders are to keep you alive. Outside of that, I have no orders.”

He flipped off the lights and slammed the steel door on his way out.

She coughed up blood and slid sideways, dumping
the chair to her left and landing face down on the cement. Some time passed. When she opened her eyes, darkness surrounded her. Her wrists were tied behind her back. Her ankles bound together and then to the chair. The iron shackles had cut her skin in several places.

I’m not getting out alive, she thought. The voice that had been singing
whispered, “Yes, you are. You have one more duty to perform.”

“I don’t mind dying.” She tried to change positions—a useless thing to do. She doubted the voice would speak to her again. After all, she was insane. She remembered leaping feet first at an attacker, who collapsed before she reached him. His head blown away. A second
group of insurgents arrived, killing those remaining from the first group. She’d thrown two of the new assailants to the ground, when something flashed and numbed her. She couldn’t move until she was dragged into the mine.

Where was she now? In a cell. A cell—more like a torture chamber. She guessed the area to be 8 by 8 feet. One lone lamp dangled above the
center of the space. The walls and the floor were cement. Tomblike? Yes. Her enemies could encase her and leave her for God to free her, if He wished. On the walls were chains, whips, and one large, green circular symbol with Shia writing on it. Peacock knew the name—Muhammad, the Chosen.

That’s when she saw the writing. On the wall next
to the green symbol.

*Standing, like the Alif.*

*Kneeling, like the Dai.*

*Prostrating, like the Mim.*

Sufi? God help me.

“God is helping you,” the angel said.

The steel door opened. Five men entered. All looked as vicious as the first man. But he was not among them. Two of them set her upright. Their leader asked. “Do you
know where you are?” Should she remain silent or engage in mind games? She decided on the latter. “My guess would be the Grozny Complex. But I don’t know how long I’ve been immobile.”

“You’re wrong.” He lifted her head to meet his eyes. “But you’re on the right track. You’re ninety kilometers east of the old city
of Perm. No complexes near here. The Grozny Complex is involved. They cooperated in orchestrating your capture.”

“Is Ammad coming to pay me a visit?”

In a surprising soft tone, he answered, “Not yet. He sends you a message. ‘Tell the redhead bitch she will die by my hand when this is through.’”

Peacock jerked.
Surprised that she’d named Ammad. Yes. She’d suspected him of having ambition. But to be right on her first guess?

   Remember. You’re not alone.

   She’d go with the voice in her head and see where it led her. The pain from her beating didn’t bother her. Too severe to register in my mind, she thought. “What do you
want with me other than to kill me for Grandayatollah al-Sistani’s death? Eye for an eye, so to speak. There’s not much more you can do to me.”

He tossed a harsh laugh at her followed by an order. “Hoist her up.”

The other men unfastened her wrist restraints, attached the ends to the wall hooks, and pulled her
to where her feet barely touched the ground. Her calf muscles immediately cramped. She bore the pain and attempted to keep from screaming.

*I guessed wrong.*

“Your husband, your daughter, your whole family searches for you. Their anguish gives us a great reason to keep you alive. Information is another. You
possess knowledge we need to know. Also, you will proclaim Allah one way or another before you die.”

“Never. I’m a loyal follower of Jesus. I’m sorry for you. You are forcing the world into a modern day Crusade.”

He yanked on the supporting chain. She winced at the sudden pain. “Think about what I said, as you
hang there. Constant pain until death.”

Her mind clearly remembered her training in Hercules—the waterboarding and other tortures. Her spirit could endure. Her body couldn’t. Even as the pain increased, the voice comforted her. Then the pain vanished.

*Endure to the end. Your reward will be great.*
Chapter 7

Connor Ann Uba strained to follow the technical charts revealed by a 360-degree prism monitor. She clenched her fists at the scope of the treason at work against the Global Realm. Thaddeus Cline, Director of Global Science, Eduardo Duarte, Arthur Pendleton’s
personal Chief of Staff, and Doctor Pederson, her mother’s former personal physician, arrived first. Retired agent Michael Ziebach, nicknamed Polaris, and Far East Regional Governor Tzu Chui came in a few minutes after them. From their positions at the round mahogany table in London, they scanned the overhead computer displays.
Controlling the feed from the Beijing Complex, her older brother, George, provided information collected from satellite and space station sources. “I reached Harry. He said if we can obtain any biological material, plant scraps, pollen, dust from the inside of shoes, we might be able to associate them to a specific terrain and close in on where they’re
hiding her.”

Thaddeus Cline tapped his pencil and arched his back. “Our science team is scrutinizing every bit of evidence. We’ve already found information giving us some clues. The original attackers came from near Norilsk, a harsh, cold climate with only arctic vegetation.”

Cline wiggled and rubbed his leg.
“Damned uncomfortable chairs.” He grumped. “However, we found a tunnel about sixty kilometers south of the Supersonic’s crash site. Near where Chui’s people said it would be. There we found clogs of good material from a much moister climate, and something else.” He paused a moment. “Clonorchiasis!” “Raw fish parasite,”
Chui proclaimed.

“Indeed,” Cline responded. “Since I highly doubt they could have transported her to Thailand, I believe she’s somewhere near the Kama River close to the Urals. The poor population in that area used to be 80 percent infested with these buggers.”

“What complexes would be close?” Connor
“None,” Cline replied. “The old Governance of Perm was located on the banks of the Kama,” George said. “With your permission, I’ll report these facts to Global Security. They’ll attempt to locate and advise on a rescue mission.”

Connor wondered at the brilliance of both her brothers. Her intelligence
quotient surpassed them both, but not in the area of retaining facts. Implementation was her specialty. She pulled out her cell and called Van Meer. “Hans, how’s Dad doing?” “Neither of us is doing well, nor will we for a long time. He’s ordered your team to search for Ammad.” She clutched the arm of her chair. Biting down on her
lower lip, she said. “All the evidence points to Ammad. But we have no proof.”

“He’s cut off contact. That’s evidence enough.” Chui rose and paced the room. “My sources tell me several complexes have halted communications with Global Central Command. They are operating under an independent communications network.”
“We’ve lost touch with one-hundred fifteen Global complexes,” Van Meer continued echoing Chui’s concern. “Ammad sent a message to your father. He requests a meeting at a neutral site to negotiate a separate Muslim Realm independent from the Global Realm.”

“What did my father say?”
“He hasn’t responded. I’ve never seen him like this. All he can think about is Laverna. He can’t make a bloody decision on anything else.” Van Meer sighed. “I’m second-in-command. But in my state of mind, I’m delegating that responsibility to you, Connor, until we meet with our family team.”

“Give me a few hours. I’ll come to you.” She
disconnected the call.

“Gentlemen. Until I speak to my father, I’m issuing you these instructions. Professor Cline, upgrade the space-based missile systems status to Code Red. Report any problems with the power-up to me. Target the rebel Complexes, and wait for further instructions. Mr. Duarte, gather all the information collected so far
by Global Intelligence. Both of you meet me at the Balmoral Complex in four hours.”

Cline rushed off muttering, “God, let’s hope the missiles haven’t been compromised. They couldn’t have been. I’ve three failsafe programs interlocking them. Still, this is nerve racking.”

“Excuse me, Director,” Duarte said, as he turned to
leave. “I’ve served your father for twenty-seven years. I’ll double my efforts.”

Doctor Pederson, Chui, and Ziebach eyed her. Chui’s gaze bore down on her.

“Regional Governor, I’m grateful to you,” Connor said, as her eyes met his. She didn’t turn away. “Assess the scope of the defection in your region and prepare to attack and destroy the offending
Complexes when you receive the word from the First Citizen.”

Chui’s head tilted slightly. “Your mother gained the respect of all who met her. Now is your hour under fire. You have my loyalty, as does your father. But, if Global Command and Control slips. I will act for the good of my region against all enemies.”
As he headed out the door, he added, “There are no defections in my region. I demand obedience. Your father did also, until a few years ago.”

Michael Ziebach waited to be dismissed. Connor pulled a chair next to him and took his hand. She glanced at Pederson. “I need both of you to accompany me to the Balmoral Complex. You two
know my mother better than the others. How she’d react under pressure and what she’d do to help us find her.”

“I have an idea that may help,” Ziebach said, with a comical grin on his face. “She has another implant. She doesn’t even know she has it—a hair filament tracking device imbedded under her right breast.” He scratched his head. “No one has attempted
to make contact with it for years. Whether the damn thing works or not is uncertain.”

“What device could you find to track it with?” Connor asked.

“Any Global device would work, if you know the right frequency.” Ziebach frowned. “Her Herculean file would hold the frequency number.”
“I’ve got that file,” Pederson said. “I’ll try to find the frequency and get it to Global Security before I meet you at Balmoral.”

#

Arthur Pendleton threw a fit. Alone in his bedroom, he flung anything he could get his hands on across the floor or against the walls. Nothing broke. Built to last for eons, the cabinets,
furniture, coffee cups, and even his clothes didn’t crinkle or dent. Blast. How he wished they would. Had he become complacent? Ammad had some acceptance outside the world of Muslim believers. And he, the First Citizen, had allowed him to get a foothold in the hearts of the people.

As if in answer to prayer, Van Meer knocked on his door. “May I come in? I
have a report out of the Damascus Complex. Ammad’s loyalists put down an internal insurrection. The citizens trapped inside the complex have no choice about their situation. Radical Islamists have taken control, forcing Islamic Law on the populace.”

“Conversion by the sword?” Pendleton opened the door.
“Your room’s a bloody mess, Ole Boy.” Van Meer hugged him. “Not the sword. The threat of exile.”

Pendleton held Hans tight. “You should be mourning your wife’s death. Take some time off.”

“Bloody hell I will.” Van Meer pressed in tighter. “Her body’s been cremated and her ashes spread over the Michigan countryside. I have
to work to keep from going crazy.”

“Connor selected a group to meet with us. She’ll be here in an hour.” He let go of his friend and straightened a chair he’d knocked over.

“Lives are improved. We’ve made great progress with technology. How could this traitor have pulled off such a major coup?”

“Two reasons. He’s a
fanatic like his father, and Peacock killed his father.” Van Meer inhaled. “Second, looking back on our procedures at the beginning, we shouldn’t have allowed him admission into the Realm. But we did in the light of fairness. He’s had twenty-five years to construct this plan. And, he’s had help. The scheme’s sophisticated, calculated, and dangerous.
Face it. We have a Civil War on our hands.”

“Let me wash up and we’ll head to the meeting.” Pendleton opened his bathroom door “Pray on what we should do. A civil war is something I don’t want. I have a different mission.”

“I’m not much on the prayer part.” Van Meer shrugged. “Maybe I should be, but I’ve never been sold
on the God thing.”

“You know what I believe.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Heard it. Got the sweatshirt, not interested in more.”

Pendleton closed the bathroom door.

Remember what Lovey asked of you.

Where in the bloody hell had that voice come from? He searched the
bathroom—too small to be hiding anything. The realization struck him that the targets of this Civil War would be Christians, not Hindus, Atheists, or other sects. He knew the Scriptures. He’d sound the alarm as soon as he had all the information on the enemy’s plans.

*Damn. Lovey’s never wrong.*

Lovey. Where was she?
Without her, he couldn’t function.
Showered and dressed in his Global attire, Pendleton headed into the Global Boardroom followed by Van Meer. A strange array of officials had gathered around his daughter. If she had a plan, he had yet to understand how all these players fit. Then it struck him, she
always had a plan, and he usually disagreed with it.

    His daughter was seated at the boardroom table along with Lovey’s former physician, Doctor Pederson, his own Chief of Staff, Eduardo Duarte, and Michael Ziebach, formerly Polaris, whom he hadn’t seen for years.

    “Well, what are we waiting for?” Van Meer
huffed and took a chair. The main door opened the moment Van Meer sat down at the table. An out of breath Thaddeus Cline rushed in. “Sorry. I’m late, but I have good news and bad. Which do you want first?”

“One moment,” Connor said. She flipped on the satellite feed, and her brother, George appeared. “I want my brother in on this discussion.
He needs to hear the update on this insurrection before we can make any decisions.”

“Civil War,” Pendleton mumbled. “It’s a bloody Civil War. Yes. I want to hear what the situation is to date. But then I want a battle plan and a damn good one.”

Connor pointed at her father and snipped, “That’s exactly what we’re doing, developing a battle plan. So
don’t interrupt me. The fate of both my mother and this planet depends on logic and facts. Neither of which you are operating with right now. And don’t assign my team missions without talking to me first.”

Pendleton’s face raged hot, but Van Meer touched his arm.

“She’s right you know,” he said. “This is why we have
a continual testing program in place. Rely on your own educational system. Don’t try to do all the jobs.”

“Now, Director Cline, give us all the news, the good and the bad.” Connor plopped down, turned toward her father, and glared.

Pendleton bit his lower lip, as Cline rose. Snippy as she could be, Connor never talked to him the way she had
today. Van Meer seemed to agree with her. He must be losing his perspective. Lovey taught him breathing exercises, as a calming technique. He inhaled. He much preferred the old days. Rule by edict. People were too bloody stubborn to fend for themselves.

“The good news is that our offensive and defensive capabilities remain fully
operative.” Holding a micro-mini computer in his hand, Cline paced in front of one of the images being displayed on the screens in the room. Age had matured the once brash Cline. His self-assurance still registered in the 99th percentile, as did his intelligence quotient. “We can strike anywhere on the globe with precision. The bad news is...so can Ammad.”
“Explain that,” Pendleton said. “How in the hell can Ammad strike anywhere in the world?”

“While we prepared for space exploration by building those enormous ships your son will command, a group under Ammad was adding missiles, launchers, and support equipment to the shuttles that supplied our space stations from Muslim
Complexes. His people brought weapons in a little at a time.”

“And we didn’t pick that up?”

“Space Complexes 8, 9, and 10 are manned with 70 percent Muslim workers. Of the thirty-plus livable orbiters, the enemy secretly infiltrated 3.”

“First Citizen,” George interjected. “May I speak?”
“By all means.” Pendleton softened his tone, “Make some sense out of all this mess.”

“The incoming cargo shuttles are massive. Those complexes are heavily manned by Muslim crews. Your misplaced trust in Ammad and his access to such sophisticated weaponry became a deadly combination.” George sighed.
“That being said, the sooner we correct the problem, and neutralize the threat, the better.”

“Recommendation, Thad?” Pendleton asked.

“Destroy Space Complexes 8, 9, and 10, and fire upon the enemies spaced-based missile launchers, before he fires upon ours.”

Connor interrupted.

“Have you analyzed their
offensive and defensive capabilities?”

“Not knowing what kind and how many armaments he has, it’s impossible to do, Director Abu. But each day we delay, the odds increase he will be ahead of us.”

“May I suggest we contact Ammad,” Connor said, “pick the neutral site, and after we have destroyed
his capabilities, accept his surrender?”

“Shades of you in your prime, Ole Boy.” Van Meer slapped Pendleton’s knee. “This will be a good test of our defenses, both in space and on the ground.”

“You agree with her?”

“Absolutely.”

“And you, Thad?”

“You have no choice.”

“But the bastard has my
Lovey!” Pendleton yelled. “Dad,” George chimed in. “That’s a separate issue.” “We avoid a ground war, if possible.” Connor stood and joined Cline in front of the monitors. “We’ve practiced scenarios like this many times.” “All right.” Pendleton slammed his hand on the table. “Tell me how we can find and rescue your mother,
and I’ll blow up any damn thing you want me to.”

Duarte nodded to Ziebach, who said, “Global intelligence combed the mining tunnel the insurgents took Peacock—excuse me—Mrs. Pendleton through. The exit was about thirty kilometers from the entrance. From the examination of the tunnel and the materials in the vehicle tracks, Thad’s
analysis is confirmed. They’re holding her somewhere along the Kama River Basin.”

Cline interrupted. “Michael told us about an implant under your wife’s breast.”

“Both Duarte and I looked for the frequency settings for Mrs. Pendleton’s implant,” Ziebach said. “We didn’t find them.”
“But I did.” Doctor Pederson stood. “Files from Hercules’ experimentation on Mrs. Pendleton contained the frequency code. A Global Security team led by Director Abu is readying to drop into the suspected area and search.”

“Good news!” Pendleton exclaimed.

The doctor pursed his lips. “The chance of that
device working after all these years is remote. But it is worth trying.”

Pendleton turned his attention to Connor. “If you want to reassign your team, it’s your call.”

“I’ve already given them my approval. But they are only to take orders from me.”

Pendleton fought the urge to confront her. Peacock
had earned his confidence 

enough to disobey him. But 

Connor was his daughter.

“Duarte,” he said with a 

shrug. “Make contact with 
Ammad’s go-between. Set up 
a neutral site. I don’t care 
where. Thad, take out their 
missile banks and order 
Space Complexes 8, 9, and 10 
to surrender and be boarded.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And Director Abu, join
your team and bring out your mother.” He lowered an eyebrow. “You will be held personally responsible for the rescue mission.”

“But I’m needed here. My team can perform without me.”

“You’re going. That’s an order.”

Connor’s mouth dropped open. “Yes, Sir.”

Pendleton glared at her,
as she clomped out, slamming the door behind her.

“Everyone is excused, except Hans and Eduardo. George, stay on the line.” Pendleton rubbed his palms over his eyelids, waiting until the others were gone. “I want a meeting of Christian leaders called immediately—tomorrow at the Pope’s residence in Rome. Here’s a list of attendees.”
In the hall outside the boardroom, Van Meer leaned against a pillar in an attempt to clear his head. The most brilliant strategic mind in history seemed on the verge of a breakdown. Connor didn’t make things any better by challenging her father. And where would he find anyone to replace Felicia, who was not only his wife,
but his personal assistant as well?

“Sir.”

He hadn’t noticed Ziebach in his wheelchair a few feet from him. “Yes?”

“I was brought here for only one reason,” Ziebach said. “I’m trustworthy and a good person to bounce ideas off. Sir, I’m underutilized.”

Van Meer chuckled.

“Back all those years ago
when Ursa’s team was brought into our sphere, you were the only one I trusted. Where are you assigned now?”

“I’m not.” He wheeled his chair up to Van Meer. “I’m retired—from Global Security, that is. No one ever retires. Look, I’m healthy for a cripple. I’m intelligent. And I believe you need an administrative assistant. Why
not give me a try?”
   “You’d have to pass the tests.”
   “Have you posted an opening?”
   “Not yet. Felicia bested the competition the last time the test was given.”
   “Test me. If I beat her score, hire me.”

Damn. He’s got spunk for someone in his sixties.
   “You’ve got a deal.”
Chapter 9

Cold water splashing in her face startled Peacock. A bearded man smiled at her holding his hands toward her with his palms up.

“Would you like to be unchained and take a shower in private?” he asked.

The smell of her own urine gagged her. She
recoiled at the realization this wasn’t a bad dream. She couldn’t escape death by herself. She had to trust the voice in her head that sang beautiful hymns to her.

“As you wish,” she managed to say.

“I wish for you to be comfortable. All you have to do is give me the location of the Global Realms’ hidden master computer, Edison.”
“I don’t know. I don’t even know who I am.”

The man grinned.

“What is the name of your daughter?”

Do I have a daughter?

She coughed, then went limp unable to hold herself up and wrenched her shoulder.

“Where is the underground master computer?”

Peacock shook her
head. “Don’t know.”

He poured a glass of water and held it to her lips. She drank.

“Slowly,” he said. “A little sip at a time or you’ll throw up.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Let us approach this in a different way,” the man said. “Tell me what you remember. Anything at all will be helpful.”
Peacock struggled to think. “You’re twice my size. I’d think better unchained.”

He took a key and unlocked her wrist cuffs. She slid to the floor and sat quietly for a moment. Then a hard backhand slammed her head against the wall.

“Just so you know. I’m not a nice guy.” He chuckled.

“Why am I here?”

“You’ve asked us that
too many times to count in the last 10 days. Tell me what you remember.”

Speak. I’ll give you the words.

Her vision cleared. Across the room from her stood a tall figure surrounded by a beautiful light. She remembered him. He was her angel. His hand motioned to her not to mention his presence. “I remember I am
loved by my Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. I remember I’m the worst of sinners without Him. I don’t remember much else, except I believe I’m going insane—an illness or something.”

The man’s face reddened. “You are not to mention that name again. Call him Isa. Mentioning him as being God outside this room will bring death. Isa went to
his people, the Jews. They rejected his message. Now he waits to appear at the coming of Muhammad, the Chosen One.”

“I’m not a scholar of these things. All I know is you are wrong.” Peacock surprised herself with her words. Awareness that she had been a warrior awoke in her.

“In my prime, you and
five like you couldn’t defeat me in battle.” She smiled. “But today I’m helpless. I’m dying. I know that as well.” She reached out her hand. “I forgive you. You’re like I once was, following orders that lead to death.”

The man cocked his head. “Declare Muhammad as the Prophet of Allah, and I will treat you well. Refuse and Ammad will come soon
to kill you himself. You will be hardly human by then. Make things easy for yourself.”

“Ammad won’t change my mind.” Peacock sighed. “Always killing and converting by the sword. My Lord believes in peace. He loves the sinners and offers them life, if only they will believe. Why does the god of Muhammad force his servants
to covert by the sword?”

He hit her so hard in the ribs, an old rib injury cracked again. She groaned as she realized her ability to keep her reaction to pain from her enemy had failed. He yelled at her. “Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by God and His Apostle, nor acknowledge the
religion of Truth, even if they are of the People of the Book, until they pay the tribute with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.”

She managed a breath. "Yet God teaches, ‘Follow peace with all men and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.’"

“How is it you remember Scriptures, but nothing else?”
She looked into his eyes. “I can’t explain. But Scripture comforts me.”

Apparently, he took pity on her. He said something in Arabic into his cell. Two men entered the room carrying a cot. A third man followed with a small plate of figs and cheese. The big man pointed to the plate. “Eat. I’ll bother you no more, and may Allah have mercy on your soul.”
Well done. Your time is short, but heaven awaits you. She wished she could die now. That wasn’t going to happen. Inside her body bones reknit and tears in her flesh sealed. She thought of an old jalopy with tire plugs, radiator patches, and rust.

Yep. That’s me.

# The big man shrugged, as he counseled with the
others. “This woman confuses me. First, she is physically hanging on—three teeth missing, a broken nose and jaw, cracked ribs, and a dislocated shoulder, plus more internal injuries than I can count.”

“She is a professional assassin.” A comrade reasoned. “Her training never leaves her.”

“I have concluded she’s
telling the truth. She remembers little to nothing except her religious beliefs.” He frowned. “She is not going to convert. She is not going to give us any useful information. Beating her further is useless.”

The man in the white parka sitting off away from the circle stood. “Ammad said she is to be beaten daily. You.” He pointed to the big
“Need not administer the punishment. I will—thirty lashes with a prepared grapevine. She will welt and her skin will tear. But she will not die until Ammad kills her.”

“Allah Akbar,” all said in agreement.

Then their PacStar system rang with an incoming call, and their communications man
answered. For a moment he seemed confused. Then he hung up and turned to the group. “That was Atash Akbari. He wants us to bring the woman to him.”

“Ann ru sar et,” their leader cursed and threw a clump of mud at the communications man. “Just when I was going to have some fun.”

“Don’t kill the
messenger.”

“I’ll kill whomever I please. Did he suggest how to transport her? Do any of you have an idea?”

The big man mulled over the question. “Two thousand plus miles. Our truck won’t make it. If we can get help from the Grozny Complex. Maybe air transportation. We might be able to get her to Dubai in a
couple of days.”

The man in the white parka rubbed his beard.

“Possible. We could create a temporary runway east of here and hope they can land an aircraft on it. The ground’s hard enough.”

“Amir.” He waved to the communications man.

“Contact Grozny and ask for help.”

“You’d think, as
important a prisoner as we have, the higher-ups would already have a plan.” He shrugged when no one laughed, and dialed.

# Ammad thumbed through the various suggestions from his scientists and technical commanders. Akbari paced, hands behind his back. He seemed overly concerned to
Ammad, who simply wished to weigh which attack plan to throw against his enemy. Wage a ground war? The people he wished to woo would have reason to fear him. But waging a war primarily in space would strain Pendleton’s capabilities and might reveal Edison’s location.

“Stop pacing.” Akbari skidded to a
halt. “I’m sorry. I can’t shake this feeling I have about that redheaded she-devil. My spirit is deeply disturbed, and I can’t ignore my instincts.”

“Well she hasn’t arrived here yet.” Ammad pointed his finger at Akbari. “Worry when she gets here. Right now I need your advice. Attack London, Rome, Balmoral, and every Christian stronghold, or attack
Pendleton’s space capabilities?”

Akbari went to his knees and prostrated himself. After what seemed like ages, he stood and spoke. “Hit Rome, London, and a few other Christian complexes with warning shots. But draw out Pendleton’s firepower in space. Our intelligence says he hasn’t much to spare.”

Ammad nodded. “Yes.
That is sage advice.”

If he could beat Pendleton by challenging him on the competency tests, he’d force an election or take the job of First Citizen outright. Scare him first. Challenge him. Then, with the man demoralized, destroy what confidence he had left. A fitting plan.
Chapter 10
“Anticipate the worst,” Cline instructed his crew. Housed in the Global Missile Control Center deep under the London Complex., the time had come to attack Ammad. “My thinking is there are several enemy missile banks cloaked as something else. Be prepared
to reorient and fire at a place you’d least expect.”

“Edison can anticipate and reprogram faster than we can,” said a scientist at the far corner of the control room.

“Yes indeed,” Cline responded. “You do the same.”

The element of surprise will work to my favor, Cline thought. What kind of technology they’ve developed
is the unknown factor. Pendleton’s off holding church meetings. He should be here giving instruction. If I screw up, it’s my fault.

A sudden flash of light from what should have been a communications satellite sounded the attack alarm.

“Shit! They’ve fired first.” Cline inhaled a deep, slow flow of air. “Fire on all targets.”
The room darkened and three-dimensional screens depicting a 360-degree view of orbital space illuminated the room. The area above the Earth lit up. A gasp went up as the totality of Earth’s orbiting stations and missile banks filled the screen. Five non-nuclear missiles fired. Cline exhaled. Thin red streaks spread away from each other like fireworks and
headed toward separate targets. The first hit Space Complex 9, which ignited into an expanding orange fireball. The other four succeeded in the same manner. The silence in the room created an eerie chill as glowing showers of debris tumbled down from the heavens along with thousands of human souls.

Someone shouted, “My
god, the radar’s lighting up.”

“Set Edison to React Mode,” Cline yelled. “We’ll intercept those we can and destroy their launch sites.”

“Roger that.” His second-in-command and the stations highly skilled personnel were ahead of Cline’s instruction by training.

The battle was out of his hands. An underground
computer and his staff now controlled the world’s fate. He needed to call the First Citizen.

#

“My wife sees visions.” Pendleton folded his hands and addressed his audience. “I never believe her. Turns out she’s never been wrong.”

Pendleton, Pope Peter, and twelve Christian dignitaries from each of the
twelve governances, faced each other in the Pope’s administrative office in the Rome Complex. The Pope lived in the same size apartment as Pendleton. In fact, Christian leaders followed the Global housing guidelines to the fullest.

“So you’re saying an angel from God told her we need to prepare for Christ’s Second Coming.” The man
speaking came from the Cordoba Complex in South America. “No one knows when He is coming.”

“The Bible is clear on that,” another in the room joined in.

Pope Peter raised his hand. “Neither the day nor the hour, but we will know the season. I, for one, believe the time is close.”

“Yes. Yes,” the
Cordoban scoffed. “But, so did Brother Paul in the 1st Century. It hasn’t come yet.”

“Look at the weather.” Pendleton handed out talking-points. “In the past five years, the sea levels have risen another six feet. Super tornados and gigantic hurricanes have destroyed huge land areas. Even our complexes, mega-fortresses though they are, quake
against these monsters.”

Silence said he’d made his point.

“Look at the droughts and the insects.” He pounded the table. “But the worst of all is the treason of Ammad al-Sistani. He sent word to me he wishes to negotiate a separate realm of his own. My sources say he may promise the Jews he’ll help them rebuild their temple, if
they will not oppose his moves in their region.”

“But what should a Christian do to prepare?” Pope Peter asked. “As I see things, we live our lives with our eyes on God and fear not.”

Pendleton nodded.

“True. We shouldn’t speculate on how God will do things. But we should use reason as His children.
Prepare our intellect to be ready. I didn’t see the angel. Laverna did. The angel told her I should alert God’s people.”

“Then,” the man from Cordoba said, “your job is to run this Realm as God instructs you. And our job is to spread the word to every Christian to rekindle our faith and spark revival throughout the Body of Christ.”
The energy within the room ignited. The faces of those present beamed with enthusiasm. Pendleton handed each of them a small communications device, red in color, magnetized, and the size of a quarter. “I will let you know the moment anything significant happens around the Globe. I believe the time is very short.”

An orange glow
brightened the sky outside their window. Flashes of light and the sound of high-pitched sirens flooded the air. Loud explosions resounded from all sides causing Pendleton and the others to cover their ears. A few members dove under the conference table.

“God help us,” someone yelled.

Pope Peter did not move. He grabbed
Pendleton’s hand and prayed.

“Pater noster, qui es in caelis:

sanctificètur nomen tuum;

advèniat regnum tuum;

fiat volùtas tua,

sicut in caelo, et in terra.

Panem nostrum cotidiànum
da nobis hòdie;

et dimitte nobis debita
nostra,

sicut et nos dimittimus debitòribus

nostris; et ne nos indùcas in
tentatiònem; sed libera

nos a malo.

Amen.

The door to the conference room burst open. A heavyset Capuchin friar dressed in a brown robe with a rosary swinging on his
waist entered the room. “The Rome Complex has come under attack. From where or whom, no one seems to know. The shields held but we have had some structural damage. It isn’t safe here, First Citizen.”

You’re bloody right it isn’t.

Pendleton’s cell buzzed. It was Thaddeus Cline.

#
Calamity reigned both in the skies and on the Earth. As calculations flashed over the screens and statistics piled up, all Cline could do was call Pendleton. The scenario playing out was not in his hands. Thank God.

“What the bloody hell is going on?” Pendleton screamed into the phone. “They’re rushing me out of the Rome Complex. We’ve
had damage here.”

Cline waited a moment. “The Muslim block fired from what we determined was a communications satellite. God. Arthur, we fired back at our predetermined targets. Then the whole sky lit up. I set Edison into React Mode per plan.”

“I want the head of the man in charge of inspecting
the Muslim Complexes for dereliction of duty.”

“S-Sir.” Cline stuttered. “You delegated that duty to Ammad al-Sistani when Sakorov died. You said you would follow up and visit those sites periodically as well.” Silence. Cline’s throat closed tight and his breathing came in short gasps. “We have good and bad news, First Citizen.”
“Go on.”

Cline managed to compose himself. “We’ve been able to intercept the missiles aimed at our space complexes.” He watched the activity slow to a stop as statistics flowed in worldwide. “No enemy satellites remain. And I doubt they have much in the way of ground missiles.

Unfortunately, only two
banks of our own are left functioning, forty-two missiles in all, not nearly enough to wipe out our opponent from space.”

“What about our underground missile silos?”

How could this be the mastermind of world domination? Had Pendleton become senile—complacent?

“First Citizen, we disarmed and dismantled all weapons
of mass destruction years ago, except for the space-based systems.”

“Do you have a damage assessment as far as the enemy’s attack on Earth-based targets?” Pendleton’s voice quivered. Arthur Pendleton never showed fear or hesitation.

“One moment,” Cline said. He explored the data and pulled up visuals.
“Ammad’s people have some plan in mind. Their missiles, besides returning fire on our missile banks, targeted complexes in a swath a few hundred miles wide. Marid, London. Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam—fifty in all—suffered minor damage. These strikes weren’t meant to destroy the complexes, rather to strike fear in the residents. My opinion, First
“Thank you, Thad.” Pendleton said. “I have to schedule a meeting. It looks like we are at war, and ground forces will be required.”

Cline stared at his cell. At war? If that was a war, what was its point? The Realm’s missiles killed citizens in five populated Muslim biospheres. If
Ammad’s missiles killed anyone, it hadn’t been reported to him. Could the point have been to reduce the number of space-based missiles?

But what did that matter now? Pendleton was off to track down his enemy and destroy him. Cline wondered how easy that task would be.

“I can’t be too hard judging him,” Cline said
aloud. “Losing his mother and Milton caused him severe pain. Laverna’s cancer took its toll. Her capture may have broken him. That plus age and complacency. My God!”

#

Connor chewed her lower lip, an unbecoming habit, but one she’d developed living with *King Arthur*. The terrain below her bored her, cold and snow,
gray tundra, and a few green trees. Her orders to bring her mother home from the Kama River Basin took priority, but it also syphoned precious time away from meeting with her brothers and planning for the safety of the rest of her family and the Global Realm executives. Her father wasn’t returning her calls. How did he plan to find Ammad? Or, did he intend to attack
Muslim Complexes, hoping Ammad would come looking for him?  

    “There.” The hover jet’s pilot pointed to a small area where the ground was bare and grass covered. “Your brother Harry says this is as close to ground zero as we can get that isn’t frozen. If the enemy picked up those parasites anywhere, it would be near here.”
“Land and wait there for us,” she said.

Since the European Ice Age formed, this area received over two hundred inches of snow in a year. Wolves roamed in packs. Fewer than four thousand free men ranged the former Russian countryside on the near western side of the Urals. Connor had five orbiting satellites focused in
on her position scanning a fifty-kilometer area for any signs of a camp or underground refuge.

No signal had been detected from the frequency Pederson provided for her mother’s tracking device. After twenty-seven years of aging, corrosion must have set in.

Once on the ground, she knelt on the mud-covered
ground and prayed for success and the safety of her mother. Then Cher, Bruegman, Ming, and Connor headed south toward an area that showed slightly warmer readings indicating possible shelters. The howling of wolves far off sent shivers rushing through Connor’s body. She wished she could wrap herself in her husband’s mighty arms and feel secure.
Being a Pendleton and a genius, her duty to the Global Realm trumped all else.

Cher, who seemed to see and hear things before the others, raised her hand. This Gurkha warrior was a fast-friend of Peacock. Her desire to rescue her from Ammad’s people blazed as strong as Connor’s.

“Noises,” she whispered. “Sounds like
generators.”

Connor waved her crew forward up a steep incline and peered over the top. Below her, two buildings stood like gray sentinels in the gloom. The generator sound had been caused by fan blades mounted outside the first steel structure. The force of the wind turned the blades, not any electrical source.

“Appears abandoned,”
Ming said. “No vehicles. No movement.”

“Be cautious until we know for sure.” Connor waved them forward.

Using rocks and shrubs as protection, they descended the thirty yards, or so, to the closest of what appeared to be pre-fabricated Quonset huts. The wind whipped the pull-strings on Connor’s fur hoodie, as she leaned around...
the corner of the building. Nothing of significance moved. In the distance, she spotted what looked like a landing pad.

She signaled with two fingers for her crew to split up. She and Cher approached the nearest building, while Bruegman and Ming ran the twenty-feet, crossing the open space and entered the second structure. After the two men
disappeared into the steel hut without receiving fire, Connor kicked the door open on the near side of the first building, and the two women entered.

“Must have been a kitchen.” Cher shined her flashlight around the room. “Propane heat. Propane generator. Temporary quarters for maybe eight people.”
“Insulated very well for a makeshift dwelling.” Connor trembled at the thought of her mother being held here. “Warm, but dirty. Let’s move on.”

She punted an empty soup can across the room. A tinny sound rang out. Loud enough to startle anyone close. Nothing moved and no rustling noise could be heard in response. “Open the next
Cher pushed open a wooden door open, revealing a long, narrow hallway that ran the length of the building. Sleeping quarters on both sides held two bunk beds. The walls were scrawled with Islamic symbols.

“Ammad is our culprit,” Connor whispered.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” The Gurkha
chuckled and moved on.  

Halfway down the hall, a room became visible on Connor’s left. The entrance was padlocked and painted black. The smell leaking out under the doorframe shocked her senses. She shot off the lock and kicked the door inward. Both she and Cher donned their gas masks. Broken pieces of chain, fragments of what looked like
steel wool, plus a busted chair lay strewn on the floor. A broken light fixture, which must have hung from the ceiling at one time, hung on a hook by the door. Two wrist irons were fastened seven feet up on the wall.

Cher bent down and picked up three teeth. “I’ll bag these. We’ll test them.”

“They held my mother here.”
“Let’s wait for the tests.”

“I know. I’m her daughter. She was here, and she’s still alive. No one is tougher.”

A call from across the alleyway in the other facility alerted Connor. She and Cher cautiously backed out of Peacock’s holding cell, exited their building, and met Bruegman in an open
doorway. The fifty-three year old, still as fit as when he joined the Global Realm, held a manila folder in his hand.

“Your mother was here. They held her until instructions came from Ammad. His name is specifically mentioned. According to these documents, they left here no more than twelve hours ago.”

Ming ran in through a
doorway leading outside to the back of the grounds. “Confirmed. Their transportation to and from here were electric Snow Cats.”

“These evil bastards were planning this for quite a while,” Cher muttered.

“They hold up to five people each.” Bruegman opened the folder and revealed a photo. “These
tank-tread cars can travel up to fifty miles an hour on snow and maneuver on terrain like nothing you’ve ever seen.”

“They took your mother out via air.” Ming motioned to the right. “They built a runway for a lite aircraft to land.”

“No point in staying here.” Connor headed back outside. “We’re too late.”

The howling of the
wolves grew closer, as the icy wind whipped pellets of stinging sleet against Connor’s face. “Let’s head back to our craft and report our findings. My guess is whatever plans Ammad has for my mother won’t be found out until we capture him, or he executes them.”

The team moved back up the rocky slope from which they came. Within ten
minutes, they were aboard the hover-jet. The pilot point to the west as the jet gained attitude. “I’d say a dozen gray wolves are disappointed we left.”

“No match for our stun guns.” Connor stretched her legs. “Good to know they’re thriving out here. God knows little else can.” She took in a deep breath. “This area is almost a thousand miles from
the attack point on the Supersonic. How did they manage to bring her so far without us seeing them on satellite?”

“A more important question,” Cher answered. “Where are they taking her?”
Chapter 11

George Pendleton arrived back at the Global Realm Command Space Station in earth orbit after leaving earth from the Beijing Complex. He briefly greeted the commander and headed to the Space Observation and Exploration Room.

“Put a 360 degree scan
up for me, Charlie,” he said as he entered.

The tech complied. The lights dimmed and the room reflected one degree of orbital space, starting at the Prime Meridian and moving west one degree each minute. For six hours, he charted the number of satellites intact, those damaged, and those destroyed. The carnage evidenced a horrifying toll on
human life. Nearly 50,000 human beings had died when the rocket destroyed the Muslim Space Complexes. Yet few, if any, casualties on the earth occurred, only damage to structures and people’s sense of security.

Ammad’s attack destroyed seven communication satellites that connected to Edison’s brain network, blocking key
transmissions of transportation data, such as the whereabouts of cargo in transit globally. The real damage from his attack was the Global Realms misuse of valuable missiles that could have been deployed in a future conflict.

Sadly, George resigned himself to authorizing cleanup efforts. “Deploy the sweepers,” he ordered. Debris
field magnets and tightly woven nets orbited the globe for such a purpose. Large pieces of shrapnel posed a real threat to lives on undamaged space complexes.

If his father didn’t have a follow-up strategy, he’d better put one together soon, as world conditions deteriorated fast.

# The setting sun shone
brilliant and full over the Persian Gulf. From his quarters atop the executive floors of the Dubai Complex, Ammad al-Sistani took in the splendor of the view. Rising to power took much patience, subterfuge, and tactics. An avid reader, he absorbed most of the major works of the military arts and studied the greatest tactician of all—Arthur Pendleton. Several
years after joining the Global Realm, he received the promotion to Chairman of the Pacification of the Non-Citizen World Committee, a position whose reach extended primarily throughout the Muslim World.

Milton Rogers had objected to his elevation a few months before he died. Pendleton, however, viewed
him as the best man for the job by test results and performance. The next five years, Ammad worked to develop the trust of all the major players in the Global Realm. He wooed the Jewish Complexes by planting the seed of cooperation. The Sons of Abraham could be reunited and live in peace.

Pendleton had destroyed both key Hebrew
and Islamic holy sites during the holocaust that brought him to power. So Ammad used the ploy that, working together in peace, the two religions might be able to co-exist and rebuild The Holy Lands. Privately, he advocated that the Christians were the real enemy. While helping Christian leadership on minor issues, he plotted their downfall long-term.
He even tossed out the idea of rebuilding the Jewish Temple, using the common western wall as the dividing point between a new Jewish Temple and the grounds of the Dome of the Rock. Yes, strictest Jews objected wanting even more concessions, but the moderates leaped at the idea. For the last fifteen years, Ammad secretly built
space-based weaponry. He brought the greatest Muslim scientists within his sphere of influence and planned for the eventual demise of Arthur Pendleton’s reign. The Global Realm had proved to be the perfect world within which to unify all mankind to Allah. Peace reigned. Science created possibilities beyond the wildest dreams of humankind. The evil of self-
indulgence outwardly all but disappeared. Inwardly, people wished to be elevated and recognized. He would capitalize on their longings soon. Yes, there were the entertainment centers, but within the predominantly Muslim complexes, the men enjoyed these pleasures as being entitled to them.

People’s view of a Christian heaven paled to
Ammad’s concept of *Jannah*. The Chosen was to bring *Jannah* to earth for a time until Allah made all things new. In Jannah, whatever one desires one may have. A man, a woman, will be rewarded for their sacrifice here on earth. He would change the name of the entertainment centers to *Jannah’s Gate Parlors*.

There was one worldly
woman he knew would never see *Jannah*. His greatest prize had been brought to him. The redhead she-devil lay imprisoned just outside the Dubai Complex. He and she needed to have a little talk. He instructed his valet. “Bring my escort team. I wish to go to Al Aweer prison.”

Only ten minutes away outside the Complex’s fortification, Ammad arrived
and entered without another word to anyone. He ran his affairs on a need-to-know basis, and he reasoned he’d been successful in concealing his plans to overthrow Pendleton by doing so. Once inside Al Aweer, he motioned to the officer-in-charge. “Take me to Cell Block 42.”

The officer paled. “Yes sir. Do you wish to wear a mask?”
“No.” The gruff response given, the officer grabbed a set of rusty keys. Ammad followed him through the maze of dimmed halls and locked iron gates until he stopped at Cell Block 42.

“Which compartment?” the officer asked.

“Nine lower level.”

“She’s quite mad, you know.”
“Good.”

Without another word, the two headed into Cell Block 42. An immediate stench of human waste and mold filled the air. On the upper level, the women were chained to an eight-foot leg shackle, which allowed them the freedom of lying on cots and sitting to eat meals. The meals consisted of dates, rice pudding, and occasionally
tuna.

Ammad chuckled.

“Less comfortable living conditions than in Pendleton’s prison colonies.”

“Worse than Abu Grebe.” The official headed down the stairs guided by a 25-watt bulb. At the bottom of the stairs, the walkways divided into pitch black tunnels. The official turned on a flashlight and slowly
guided his feet long the narrow concrete floor.

“Here—she’s in here.”

Peacock pulled herself up off the cold floor. She rested her back against a stone wall in the far corner of her compartment. Nothing else was inside with her, except the urine drain and a water bucket for feces. Ammad’s people came close
to killing her before they locked her away. She overheard the men torturing her say she must be insane. Well, no surprise to her, she had been most of her life. But that beating had been different. She felt nothing when punched or whipped. Her body bled and bruised, and her bones cracked. But no pain came with the beating.
Her angel sang and spoke words of comfort to her. Most amazing to her was her memory. She couldn’t remember her own name a few days ago, but now her mind leaped with remembrances when she needed them.

A creaking at the door caught her attention.

“How has room service been?”
Peacock knew that voice. She did not respond.

Ammad placed his flashlight on the floor to illuminate the room. He let out a shriek.

“Do I look that bad?”

“He sees you as you were the day you slew his father.” Her angel stood against the far wall and smiled.

Ammad stepped back.
“This can’t be.”

He took a whip from his belt and went to strike her, but the whip fell from his hand.

Peacock heard her angel whistling a joyful tune. She responded. “The Lord is my shield.”

Ammad quoted from the Quran. He named each verse as he spoke *Al Faqua* 113.1, 113.2 and so on. Then
he said. “Your black magic has no effect on me.”

His face told a different story.

Peacock had no strength to stand upon save what God provided. She knew without her angel, death would be swift. *Allow him to see me as I am.*

Ammad’s eyes widened. He sneered, picked up his whip, and swung.
Again, the whip flew out of his hand, and he grabbed his shoulder. A cry of pain escaped his lips.

“Keep trying to hurt me and you’ll never become First Citizen.” Peacock smirked.

“You want me alive for some purpose?”

“I live for the death of your husband and the end of your reign, you redheaded bitch.”
“Not much of my hair is left.” She sighed. “Don’t attempt to hurt me again. My protector will not allow you the pleasure.”

“You mumble nonsense, crazy woman. The Global Realm will go on, but without you or your husband leading it.” Ammad walked up to her and bent to meet her gaze. “When the time comes, I will kill you myself.”
Fat chance.
Her angel had a sense of humor.

“Why do you want to ally with the Israelis?”

A sinister chuckle filled her compartment. “You know more than you let on. You may be insane, but you’re cunning.”

“Why do you want to find Edison?”

He pursed his lips.
“Why are you in league with Iblis? True Muslims abhor your concepts and teachings. But you will bewitch them.”

“You bitch.” He flung himself at her and wound up smashing into a stone wall across the room from where she sat.

He turned and fled, taking his flashlight with him. Peacock heard him tell the
guard. “No one is to enter here. Slide her food and water in under the door.”

#

“I must be suffering from low sugar.” Ammad ordered a snack be brought him and ordered a speedy return to the Dubai Complex. As he reentered his suite, his aide raced in from the adjoining room. “Our missiles created the desired
damage on the selected targets and complexes. The Global Realm only possesses fifty or less space-based rockets.”

“I want a unified world when we’re done.” He lowered an eyebrow. “Unified under me. Any indication Pendleton knows where I am?”

“No, Your Eminence. The Dubai Complex,
according to our computer Sayyid, would not rank near the top of places he’d look.”

“Let us hope Edison calculates things the same way.”

“Sir,” his aide said, “Governor Chui rejects any partnership with you. He clearly supports the First Citizen. But he will not come to the aid of either side militarily, saying the issue is
one for the people to decide by combining testing profiles and a Global Realm vote with Edison doing the math.”

“That plays into my hands if my adversary is as weak as I think him to be.”

“Agreed, Eminence.”

“Put me through to Pendleton.”

The aide pressed the Summit Button on the communications system and
waited. Ammad possessed one of only twelve direct lines to the First Citizen.

“Van Meer speaking.”

“Chairman Ammad wishes to speak directly to First Citizen Pendleton.”

Silence followed. “I’ll convey a message.”

Ammad spoke up.

“Either your boss agrees to a competency challenge and Global Realm citizens’ vote,
or he faces all-out war. All-out war serves no purpose. If he wishes his wife back unharmed, he’ll agree. He wins the challenge. She comes back safely.”

“Hold on.”

Nothing but static and background bumps echoed over Ammad’s system. Ammad glanced at the time. Van Meer had been gone over ten minutes. Finally, he
returned. “In fourteen days, per the operating rules of the Global Realm. All executive level leaders are eligible for consideration. If you lose, you will be arrested for treason and imprisoned for life.”

“Not unless he wants war and the death of his wife to settle the conflict.”

“He wants to see his wife to be sure she is in good
health.”

“The day before the citizens’ vote, but after the competency challenge, I’ll allow her to talk to the First Citizen.” The connection cut to silence. Ammad shouted. “Program Sayyid to run five variations of the test Edison will prepare. A Muslim-built computer will trump a pagan one any day of the week.”

“Well,” his aide
chuckled, “his rules state ‘No applicant can run a computer test study.’ But then, he doesn’t know Sayyid exists. Does he?”

“Have Akbari come in.” Ammad couldn’t wait any longer to confide in his friend about the she-devil.

A few moments and Akbari strode in as thought the world’s weight had fallen on him. “Don’t speak,” he
said. “What you know I know. What you’ve seen I’ve seen. I suspect vast witchcraft at work. Allow me to study the books. Give me time to align my spirit with Jannah and its holiness. Then we will speak.”

“But . . .”

Akbari stomped his foot. “Cease your protest. Only on these issues am I in charge. Understood?”
Ammad lowered his head. “Understood.”
Chapter 12
First Citizen Arthur Pendleton flung a wastebasket across his boardroom. It bounced harmlessly off the solid rock wall. “Dammit. I wish something would break.”

“You say that every time you get mad. Pull yourself together. You have a
meeting with your family and staff.” Van Meer straightened up the room and buzzed Duarte.”

“Send in the family.” Connor entered first, eyes flaming red and hips swiveling.

“I love it when you’re intense, Busty Rusty.” Van Meer said with a wink accompanying. He gave her a pat on the behind.
“Seriously, pervert,” Connor scooted away.

“Felicia hasn’t been gone that long.”

“Ouch.” Van Meer’s face reddened.

One thing his daughter learned from her mother was how to handle men—one tough woman, that one. George strutted in behind her, self-assured and handsome. He never desired a position of
political power much to Pendleton’s dismay. He craved the adventure of space exploration and commanded the respect of the top astrophysicists in the world. Ah, Pendleton thought. Now for the tree hugger.

Strolling in, hands in his pockets, his Global Realm shirt sticking out of his pants in the back, Harry Pendleton offered a nod, and said, “The
prodigal returns home.”

“Harry,” his father answered, wondering how someone so brilliant could be so laid back. “How was your trip in from Kampala?”

“Concerning.” Harry wiped curly red strands off his forehead. “I viewed the damage to three major complexes from the Supersonic. They’re built to last. But how many missiles
did we waste fighting that—skirmish, police action, or thingamabob?”

Pendleton grumbled. “There are times I wish the things I do would just be accepted for what they are. We defended ourselves.”

“As I see it, we’re leading in the death count. Is that what you want the world to know?”

“Well, no.” Pendleton
rubbed his lower jaw and cut off the conversation, as Duarte entered, notepad in hand. “We have little time to waste,” he continued. “Allow me to bring you up to speed. Ammad requests a competency challenge and vote. He has your mother, and by the law of the Realm, I can’t refuse even if he didn’t have her.”

Connor blurted out.
“The bastard woos the Jews. Chui will remain neutral or run against you both. If Ammad wins, there will be religious war and persecution, as we have never seen. I say we destroy him.”

“I agree with your daughter.” Van Meer sighed. “Find him and destroy him, before the Global Realm falls from within.”

“It’s not just Ammad.
Over one-third of the world has already been influence by him.” Pendleton shrugged. “Kill one radical and you create millions more. We had that situation before I blew up half the world.”

“We’ll have it again if you don’t act now,” Connor said.

“No.” Pendleton had already mulled over his options. He remained
resolute. “My plan worked. An improved humanity runs this planet, except for the fanatics. The system requires we practice what we preach. Last night I prayed. Your mother had a vision of the coming of Christ. She told me to prepare the Christian believers for His coming, not kill more people. That is exactly what I’m going to do. Prepare believers.”
“Poppycock,” Van Meer blurted out.

“No. He speaks wisdom.” George Pendleton stood, pulled himself full height, and flexed. Brilliant, good looking, and persuasive, this Pendleton carried himself with assuredness. “If we have no dignity, we have nothing. However, we must plan for all eventualities. We win, someone other than Ammad
wins, or Ammad wins. Worst-case scenario, Ammad wins and declares *Jihad* on Christianity. What would our game plan be?"

Van Meer bristled. "How the bloody hell could Ammad win?"

"I asked. What if he does win?"

Silence. But Pendleton’s smile broadened. "We leave." George
passed out detailed diagrams of the number, size, and locations of transport shuttles around the globe. “I head up the sub-surface colonization branch of Mars Research Program Warlord. Presently, we have thirty environmentally sound human biospheres being readied for departure to Mars. Our advance teams have equipment in place on the
Martian surface and have started building underground complexes similar to our Earth Complexes.”

“If Christianity is threatened, how many people would those ships hold?”

“Each has room for over a hundred thousand onboard, plus the orbiting Space Complexes hold thirty thousand each. They’re miniature cities in
themselves.” George placed his hands on his hips. “There are Earth shuttles capable of transporting us up. A few million Christians could leave soon with the proper planning.”

“How soon is soon?” Pendleton asked.

“We could be ready in two months.”

It wasn’t what the Bible said should happen. But with
the Christian leadership already alerted, what difference did it make whether Christ came to Earth, or Christians left the Earth? The latter, not being the preferred plan, but a sensible one. Either way, Christians would be safe.

Pendleton smiled. “My orders to all Christian leaders are to prepare for Christ’s coming through prayer and
peaceful spreading of the Gospel. I’ll add that as many as possible be ready to evacuate at a moments’ notice, if world conditions warrant.”

“Understand a few million represents only a fraction of believers.” George sighed. “I’d hate to be you, Father.”

Duarte rose. “I’ll prepare the necessary
communiqués for your signature, First Citizen.” As he stepped toward the door, he said. “The word will eventually get out.”

“Hopefully not, at least until after the election.”

As Duarte left, Michael Ziebach came in and rolled his wheelchair up next to his boss, Van Meer. He handed him a file and stayed at his side.
“Preparing for an evacuation is only a precaution,” Harry managed. “You aren’t going to lose the challenge.”

Pendleton slumped. “I don’t know that I will or I won’t. Look at what’s happened without my knowledge.” His eyes moistened. “I lost Milton. He was my eyes and ears on the changes going on in the
world. Sir Jarvis Franks developed Alzheimer’s disease. Over time, I relaxed, overconfident since we were making such positive progress.”

Connor folded her father’s hand in hers. She could be a nasty witch or a loving daddy’s girl. He never knew to whom he’d be talking. “Specifically, how do we precede, Dad?”
“Here’s the plan,” he said, as she helped him to his feet. Slightly off balance, he steadied himself with his hand on the table. “First, set September 12th as the date for the vote. Set the date of the competency challenge for September 6th. Second, notify all Tier 1 executives they must apply by September 5th. How many Tier 1 Executives
are eligible?” Duarte reentered the room and answered, “Fourteen, besides yourself, First Citizen. The twelve governors, Mr. al-Sistani, and Mr. Van Meer.”

“Four will run.” Van Meer pushed his chair back and tossed a foot up on Pendleton’s best boardroom table. “Ammad, Chui, Arthur, and me.” He pointed a finger
at his boss. “Let’s even the odds.”

Pendleton cocked his head, but didn’t respond. Let’s even the odds?

“Hans, alert all our governors to prepare their defenses just in case. Arm defensive weaponry, and reinforce complex perimeters with a second line of concrete barriers. Connor, provide increased protection for Van
Meer and myself until after the election. Finally, George, full speed ahead with preparing both the remaining Space Complexes and the shuttles for Martian colonization.”

“I’ll start the preparations,” Ziebach said.

“Begin by developing a combat plan for me, Michael.” Van Meer said, and shook his head. “I’m not a
military strategist.”

Ziebach grinned. As Polaris working for Hercules, he exceeded most in offensive strategy. Defense, not so much.

“You forgot me, Dad,” Harry said, grinning like a Cheshire cat. “Of course, I’m invisible to you most of the time.”

“I need Harry.” George stepped to his brother’s side.
“To achieve the optimum from the biospheres for sustaining life, Harry’s knowledge is vital.”

I guess I’m not one to toss out compliments, Pendleton thought. “I’m proud of every one of my children.”

He gave Harry a nod. Unfortunate none of them qualify to run against me. Maybe one day in the future,
however long the future would be, a grandchild would wish to rule. “Harry, follow your brother’s directions. Now, let’s prepare.”

Connor Uba arrived back at the London Complex for looking forward to a day’s rest. Then she would be about the task of providing each candidate for First Citizen the full protection of the Global
Realm Security Forces. The lack of evidence of another planned attack had her wondering what the purpose was for Ammad’s missile strike. Within a minute, the terror in the eyes of the average citizen cleared up the question. Global citizens’ faith in their security had been shaken.

Yet, only a few complexes experienced the
bombardment. The rest of the world knew nothing about it, save for the Muslim Complexes, which only heard the version Ammad sold them. Connor clenched her fists. Ammad had created the ideal time for a play to become First Citizen. Upwards of 90,000 deaths, mostly Muslims, assured him of their vote.

When she flew through
the open bedroom door, Obie was on his communications cell. She planted a kiss on his cheek and heard him grunt a reluctant, “Yes. I’ll prepare to leave August 30th. But you’ll have to clear this with the Complex Administrator.”

A few more grunts and he hung up.

“Your brother, Harry, commands me to some secret meeting near the San Diego
Complex. I leave in a week.”

“Yes, I know.” She rushed to the bathroom and undressed. “We’ll talk about the world situation later. I’m horny as hell. So be prepared after I clean up.”

“Yes, my love. Your Obie is always at your service.”
Chapter 13
Still shackled at her feet, Peacock stumbled out of the hole that was 9 lower level. Forced to wear a burka, she dragged herself along the hallways and up several flights of stairs for what seemed to be an eternity, following a hairy male guard who smelled of garlic. She
reached the upper level of Cell Block 42. Prisoners of both sexes whistled at her and shouted obscenities. Perverts came in all shapes, sizes, and religions.

At the main entrance door, two women stood waiting. “Make her look respectable.” The guard accompanying her instructed the women. “Then take her to Cell Block 12 for a
Videotaping?

“I’m to weigh you.”

The woman on her right gently led her to a scale.

“45.8 kilograms,” the woman said. “Write it down in pounds as well. 101 pounds counting the rags she wears.”

Peacock fell as she stepped off the scale. The younger of the two, holding a notepad, helped her up. I
weighed 142 pounds the day of the attack, she thought.

Down twisting halls on concrete and dirt floors she hobbled, humming tunes the angel had taught when he was with her. Of course, he was always with her. She just didn’t see him.

“Sad,” the younger woman whispered. “This one was beautiful once.”

“No one’s beautiful
“Here,” the other woman snapped. “Walking corpses they are.”

Brilliant idea her husband had, forcing everyone to use English or Mandarin. She could understand the gravity of the place she was in. “Grant these souls peace,” she whispered. The angel’s voice called out, “For now, yes. Soon peace will vanish from the earth.”
Arriving at Cell Block 12, two male guards grabbed her and forced her into a kneeling position. A dentist affixed a temporary set of caps over her broken teeth. A hairdresser fit her with a matching red hairpiece, and a cosmetologist hid the pallor in her face with lipstick and blush.

“Put this on.” An ogre-like, elderly woman handed
her a Global Realm outfit. “Be sure to smile for the camera.”

“Step over here.” The cameraman pointed to a chair. “Sit. Turn to your left and relax with your mouth slightly open.”

She complied. If she guessed correctly, the pictures would go to her husband to show she was alive. Her uniform was that of
a hotel worker by color and stripes. She placed her right hand with her little finger pointing at a small label on the waist.

“Hold the pose.”

He didn’t spot the signal.

After the cameraman snapped three photos, the woman in charge ordered Peacock removed from Cell Bock 12 and taken back to
her pit. Once locked back in, she noticed the light was on. A single 10 watt bulb illuminated the cell, usually kept dark. In the corner lay a tray with a cloth tucked under the corner to keep out rodents. She peeled the cloth back to find dates, figs, cheeses, and a glass of Global Realm nectar drink. A note accompanied her present.

Enjoy. I need to fatten
you up for the slaughter. Love, Ammad.

#

Connor held her husband’s hand as they disembarked from their transport and headed into the Global Space and Exploration Center. The Center, located in the San Diego Complex in the North American Region, held the core projects for Mars colonization. Her brothers
were already at work refining the control room protocols for a possible, massive launch of biospheres.

“Obi!” Harry Pendleton shouted and raced up to greet him. “I’m facing several problems here. I needed you last week.”

“And here I am,” Obi answered, grinning like a smitten schoolboy. “Let’s get to work.” He turned and gave
Connor a passionate kiss. “Call me when you have time. I know it may be weeks until we see each other. I’ll miss you every minute.”

“I love you,” Connor managed, before Obi was whisked away and vanished in the rush of workers milling about the area.

“Come on,” her brother George said. “Update me on the preparations for
Tuesday’s competency challenge.”

“Chui threw his candidacy into the race, as we expected. Ammad remains hidden, probably studying. Van Meer seems nonchalant about the whole thing. I worry that when the voting takes place he might take away from Dad’s base.”

Her brother cocked his head. “Dad’s survived two
challenges before.”

“Both those challenges were before Milton died.” Sadness deepened within Connor. “Gram and Milton both going in the same month has crushed his spirit. I’ve watched him grow more indecisive the last five years. I’m afraid for him.”

“Mom keeps him focused.”

“Mom’s not here,”
Connor snapped. “Twenty-five years of peace and progress could crumble in a day, if Ammad outscores Dad on the test.” She shuddered. “Show me the escape plans.”

George led her up a set of spiral metal stairs to a master control room on the 2nd floor of the building. From her vantage point looking through the glass at the brain center of Project
Warlord, she gasped at the immensity of the endeavor. “My God, I didn’t realize how far we’ve come.” “You couldn’t have.” George gave her that naïve little sister look. “No one could have predicted humanity rebuilding our cities into these complexes in twenty-plus years. Or our going to Mars and finding the protection of the underground
She nodded. Further evidence of man’s ability lay before her. An area the size of four soccer fields filled with enough technology to launch hundreds of biospheres into space with time. Humans milled around analyzing data real time. Her brother pointed to a cluster of screens at eye level with their position. “Twenty-five earth-based caves.”
biospheres are completed, stocked, and ready for deployment to Earth orbit for docking with our motherships.” He gave her a pair of binoculars to view the far end of the massive manufacturing area. “The rest are within weeks of completion.”

“So you’re monitoring the assembly around the world.”
“Every location. Dad’s alerting Christian communities to select individuals for transport on the basis of skill and family consideration. Obviously, we can’t transport everyone.” His brow furrowed. “How prepared are we for a ground war?”

“Virtually defenseless against one,” Connor said. “We have law enforcement,
drone capabilities, and fifty orbiting rockets—no standing armies. The drones’ capabilities were crippled when the rocket attacks commenced. So while they’re functional, their precision is questionable.”

George turned to head back down the stairs. “We need to leave this planet. My bet—Ammad has armies. We relied on our space-based
weaponry, and now all we have are those fifty or so rockets you mentioned. Capable of doing damage? Yes. Capable of winning a ground-fought war? No.”

As she descended the stairs, she whispered. “Will you accompany me on an unpleasant assignment?”

“What kind of assignment?”

“Dad’s contemplating
shutting down all the entertainment centers.” She shook her head. “I’ve never been in an entertainment center. I may be closing them in a few weeks, if Dad has his way. I need to find out how difficult and unpopular a task that will be.”

“Sure. I’ll go with you. But I won’t like it.”

George headed off to arrange for their trip. She
waited at the entrance to the facility trying to catch a glimpse of Obi. Obi was off with Harry to hug trees and dream of botanical gardens, the responsibilities inside the Global Realm left little time for them to bond as married couples should. She yearned for someone to share her innermost joys and struggles. She married Obi with that in mind, but the physical came
first for him, and a couple of days were all they had before traipsing off to one assignment or another.

He yearned for her body. She yearned for his compassion and understanding. Neither of them was completely satisfied. A quick glance at their schedules said they wouldn’t be for quite a while.

#
“Dammit!” Ammad slammed the door to the testing room. “Tear Sayyid apart. The piece of junk isn’t worth the powder to blow it to hell.”

“Calm yourself.” Atash Akbari strolled across the hallway to Ammad’s side. “Patience. You still have a few days. What you are failing to do is invoke Allah’s peace. Don’t think too much.
Let Him guide you.”

Ammad grimaced. The redhead witch shook his confidence with her evil craft. His shoulder still hurt.

“You must understand,” Akbari said. “My walk has given me powers of a seer. I see what you see. The jinn, the Marid who protects her, plays with you. Maybe he’s a cousin of Satan. Recite the four Quls and pray two rakat
namaz a Hajjats. Pray fervently to Allah, and all fear will vanish.”

Ammad fell to his knees. Akbari knew far more than he did of the spirit world and the people of fire. The bitch must be possessed. Maybe even a sex slave to the Marid. Surely Allah would help him conquer this demon.

“I’m Allah’s servant. I will not be swayed. He will be
with me. I need him everywhere and in every situation.”

“You will defeat this Global Realm—this monster of Pendleton’s creation.” Akbari pulled Ammad to his feet. “In your hands, the monster will be tamed. You will rule the world, and I will serve you. Now take Sayyid’s test again.”
Chapter 14
With her main team busy securing the Global Realm test procedures, Connor traveled in the company of security guards that usually protected the Western Regional Governor. Four sturdy hulks accompanied her and George. They boarded a hovercraft
and traveled the 12 miles from the Global Space and Exploration Center to Entertainment Center CA-19. Located closer to the old City of Palmdale, the Entertainment Center sat where the San Gabriel Mountains shielded it from the Pacific Ocean.

Parts of the Los Angeles and San Francisco locations had to be relocated
east because of seismic activity, and none too soon. Only three years earlier, a massive earthquake destroyed the Bay Area and flooded the Napa Valley.

CA-19 took up an area of thirty-six square miles. Over 30,000 workers lived permanently in the Center. From the air, the mountains, the valley, and the lights of the Center appeared like a
painting by Emo Co, one of the artists who decorated the London Complex.

The hovercraft landed on a pad outside the back entrance. If a guest developed a serious medical condition requiring a major procedure, they were medevac’d out. Everyone else checked in and out at the main gate.

“Right this way.” A lady in her late forties led
Connor and her team into the back of the Center and down a hall to the administrative quarter. “Please change into Center attire. You can’t grasp the scope of our capabilities walking through in an official capacity. If you really want to understand what happens here, come as a guest.” She waved her arm. “Vargas, escort the lady. Have your female staffers accompany
the men. How long do you need?”

“Why am I accompanied by a man?”

The lady’s head tilted and she scoffed. “You want the real feel. Men’s eyes will be on you 24/7.”

“How long is a complete tour?”

“Three hours to see everything, but no time to taste the life.”
“I don’t need to taste the life. My life is full. But I’ll need more time. I’m going to interview people at random.”

“As you wish.” The lady extended her hand. “My name is Jessica Sparks. I’m the Center’s Chief Administrator. Here is a schedule of today’s events.”

Connor perused the sheet. A Global circus troop
performed three shows daily. Two magicians held live performances in a ballroom called, “Now You See It. Now You Don’t.” An orchestra would perform an all Bach program that evening in the CA-19 Concert Hall.

“What is The Global Field Football League?” Connor asked, not familiar with team sports.
“Field football is a sport formerly known as soccer. The Realm developed twelve six-team leagues, one league for every Region. At the end of the season, there will be playoffs between the winning teams in each region until we have a Global winner. The Rio Complex plays our team at four p.m. Care to watch?”

Intrigued as Connor was, her interest lay in the
process. How were people screened for admission and exit, as well as, the seamy side of life within the Center? “Where do I change?”

“Right this way.” She pointed down a hallway. “Mr. Vargas, please accompany her to the dressing rooms.”

“You’re sure these pictures were taken recently?”
“Yes, First Citizen.”
“And you can’t blow them up any larger?”
“Not without distorting them.” The man talking pointed to Peacock’s finger. It may be nothing, but she’s wearing a hotel uniform with a label on it. Her finger seems to be pointing at the label. “The label is solid red, as was the old Dubai Emirates flag. Mr. Van Meer believes she is
being held near or in the Dubai Complex.”

Pendleton’s hands trembled. His Lovey looked ghastly, and not from poor photography. The woman in these pictures had endured unimaginined suffering. He read the note accompanying the photo. In it, Ammad gloated over his accomplishment in capturing Peacock. He threatened
Pendleton not to try to rescue her. But assured him she would be released after a fair vote of the people. He called her his trump card.

*Pure bullshit!*

“Give Hans my best wishes on his test performance,” he said. “And, thank him for the heads up. We can do nothing until the tests are taken and the election is over.”
Once Pendleton was alone, he made a call. “The First Citizen for Pope Peter. Please let him know I’m on the line.”

Dressed in civilian clothes that showed off her figure, Connor left her dressing room and motioned to Vargas who would conduct her tour. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”
“I tested top in my division.” Vargas strolled at leisure toward the main entrance. “I play the trumpet in the symphony orchestra and assist Jessica as a tour guide.”

Connor’s brother and two of the security people had headed in a different direction. She and two others followed Vargas. Center security personnel armed with
stun guns were posted at every aisle and intersection. Connor mused that she could kick their asses, stun guns or not.

“Have you worked at other Entertainment centers?” she asked her guide.

“Four in all,” he said.

“This one is the crown jewel.”

“Why so?”

“Offerings—we have
more venues for human outlets than most other centers.”

Connor leaned against a pillar and observed the entry procedures. Scanning devises found any item, no matter how small, that a person forgot to check in with security. A piece of chewing gum would not go unnoticed. Satisfied no weapons could be brought in other than those
possessed by Center security, she followed Vargas on to the checkout area.

As they ambled long like tourists, her mouth jarred open. The ceilings within the Center glimmered from the beams of light reflexing on their gold plating. The sound of laughter, music, and a din of human noise overwhelmed her mind. She thought she caught a glimpse of her
brother ascending a staircase toward the magicians’ venue and wondered whether this might be too much for him, bachelor as he was.

   Alcohol, she thought. I smell alcohol.

   She and Vargas passed under a large pink sign pointing to the exit. In front of her an area opened up with several lines of people weaving their way toward
medical personnel. “My God, this looks like the emergency room of a hospital.”

“Good observation. No one leaves CA-19 until they pass the medical checkout.” He grinned. “These facilities have virtually eliminated a multiple number of infections and sexually transmitted diseases. Plus, the Realm receives an emotionally well-adjusted individual back into
society ready to work.”

Hum. Her definition of emotionally well-adjusted differed from his. Why would a happy citizen come to a place like this?

Most people exiting passed their tests and left. A few were pulled aside and required to wait before being released. Connor approached a woman sitting alone in a holding area and sat down
next to her. “Hi, this is my first time here. How about you?”

The woman, mid-thirties, slender, with a pleasant face, glanced up. “I come here on my time off. I’m not married and it’s dull at home.”

“What do you recommend I see, while I’m here?”

The woman lowered her
glasses.

“Why did you come?”

“Curiosity.”

“They have everything. I see you have an event calendar. Try it all.” She looked at Connor’s hand.

“Nice ring. Open marriage?”

“My husband’s on an assignment.”

“The Center has anything you desire sexually. Follow the purple signs to
Club Fantasy. But don’t drink too much. Dulls the senses.”

“Describe everything.”

The woman laughed.

“Are you serious? If you can think of it, it can be arranged. Let your imagination roll.”

She touched Connor’s leg.

“The personnel here know how to please you, if you get my meaning.”

“Thanks,” she said, and moved on following Vargas.
“Make Club Fantasy your last stop. See the more sophisticated sights first. Mary, whom you just spoke with, is a regular. She’s a biochemist. She obtains an escort from the Club, attends the attractions, gets laid, and leaves.”

“What did she mean everything?”

Vargas pointed to a petite woman dressed in a
tight fitting outfit. She looked like a fifteen-year old, freckled, blue-eyed, and an innocent smile. “She comes here once a month for the sole purpose of having sex with as many men as time allows. She’s a computer logistics operator, a tense job. Here, she lives out her fantasy. If you’re bent toward women, we have alternate preferences too.”
Working with men all her life, nothing shocked Connor. She pointed to the computer logistic operator. “I suppose she gets to look at their genitals first.”

“No need. Job requirements are sufficient.”

*Good God.*

After two hours of observing the games, entertainment, restaurants and bars, Connor followed Vargas
to Club Fantasy. She was greeted at the entrance by four gorgeous examples of male and female humans. Wearing see-through casual attire, the male on call stepped forward. “Welcome to Club Fantasy, beautiful one. Where did you find her, Vargas? And why have I not seen her here before?”

“Be careful where you put your hand.” She flashed
her I.D. card, and the young man turned pale and jumped back.

“I apologize.”

“Don’t. I’d like to speak to you privately.” She turned to a tiny, delicate blonde trying to tiptoe away, and said, “I’ll be interviewing you too, after Romeo and I are done talking.”

Vargas hustled Connor and the young man into one
of the private suites down a red hall with psychedelic lights flashing. Once in the room, Connor pointed to a chair. “Have a seat. I don’t bite.”

“You could,” he said, “if you’re gentle.”

“I’m here on realm business.” She pulled a robe off the massive white bed and tossed it at him. “Put this on. You’ll be more comfortable.”
“You’ll be more comfortable. I’m perfectly fine.” He complied. The moment he did, he appeared like a sheepish schoolboy caught kissing a girl in the hall.

“What would you like to know?” he asked.

“Tell me about yourself. Where you’re from, and how did you start working in the sex profession.”
“My name’s Hal Perkins from the Tulsa Complex.” He grinned and folded his hands with a relaxing motion. “As a teen, I planned to be a molecular scientist. But I had a hard time with solid geometry. I was the guy who cracked-up my friends with jokes and comic routines. So I switched to the entertainment core studies and flew up the
“What are your duties here?” Connor asked.

Hal looked away. “I wish you were a client. I would feel more natural talking about this.”

“Like I said, I’m here on realm business and I don’t bite.”

“Twice a week I perform with the main vocal attractions at the Melody
Auditorium as a backup singer. Here, with my equipment, the ladies flock to me as an escort.” He laughed. “My ego couldn’t be healthier. All in all, I’m having a ball working here. One day I hope to become a headliner and take a starring role. But I’ll never stop working with the ladies.”

“Do you believe in God?”
He cocked his head.

“The State has no business knowing my personal beliefs.”

“I’m curious.”

He moistened his lips.

“God created and moved on. Whatever He or She is has nothing to do with how I live my life. I’m composed of matter and an unseen force. I’ll live again somewhere at some other time. That’s what
I believe. I won’t change my opinion.”

“So having sex with anyone assigned gives you no cause for shame?”

“Shame? Why? I have fun. They have fun. No one gets hurt. It’s a perfect world.”

“What kind of Global testing did you have for this job?”

“For the Entertainment
Career Module, business management, finance, organizational development, and human resources and human behavioral psychology. The musical in-house performances are by audition.” He grinned. “For health purposes, everyone here is screened weekly for STD’s. But with today’s medical advances, there hasn’t been a case in this
center in the past six years.”

After nearly an hour with Hal Perkins, Connor released him back to his supervisor and brought in the tiny blonde, who had Aphrodite radiance beaming around her.

“How old are you?” Connor asked.

“Twenty-three,” the girl replied and slid on to the edge of the bed. At least she’d put
a robe on to hide her nudity.

“And your name.”

“Lexi Lee.”

“Global Realm name.”

“Lexi Lee. It’s the only name I got.”

Another “Hmm” escaped her mouth. Lexi’s use of the verb *got* said her test scores would be low.

“How long have you been here at CA-19?”

“Since the day I turned
sixteen.”

Connor’s head jolted back. Then she remembered the realm’s legal age of consent was sixteen. “What Educational Core did you take?”

Lexi looked down at the floor. “I only passed Elementary Basics.”

My God, that was the beginning level children age five took to establish a
baseline. “And after that.”

“Ma’am, I have an IQ of 74. I cleaned rooms.” She grinned. “I test each year. I hope the stuff I learn here will help me learn to cook.”

“Did you choose to be a sex worker?”

“No. The test center said the jobs as fruit pickers needed a stronger person. Plus, they said my body was suited for this work. So I took
this and just kept my mouth shut. Why? Did someone complain?”

Connor’s face burned.

“No complaints. Do you like what you do?”

“Yes. When people like me, I’m happy. Besides, cleaning the rooms is lonely.”

She grinned. “Here I’m touched and appreciated. I need to be touched and appreciated.”
“Lexi, do you believe in God?”

The young lady’s eyes widened. “Yes. I talk to him every day.”

“Who is God?”

She looked up and to the left, then grinned. “He is the one who made everything. He is love.”

“Does he have a name?”

Lexi’s eyebrows
furrowed. “God.”

“Where will you go when you die?”

“I’ll go to God and ask him, ‘What’s next?’” Lexi sat eyes wide and mouth open, gazing at Connor.

Connor warmed to this innocent girl. “I hope you never change.”

She took Lexi to the door. “Vargas, give me the files of every female sex
worker here. Now!”

Lexi turned to her and said, “Don’t take me away from here. I can’t clean rooms all my life.”

“I don’t make those decisions. So don’t worry.”

Vargas already had several files in his hand. “I anticipated your request. Global law states, ‘Every citizen must perform work of some type equal to their
ability and attitude.”

“How many girls here are like Lexi?” she asked as Lexi hurried off to work.

“Of the ninety-two at this facility, twenty-seven are mentally challenged.” Vargas sighed. “You have to understand. The waiting list to work here is back loaded two-years out. Some of those waiting have IQ’s of over 130.”
“Bring someone working here with that type IQ.” She didn’t think Vargas could. What would an intelligent woman want in a place like this? The lines of men and women waiting for appointments grew by the minute, as late afternoon approached.

“Fine.” He moved close to Connor and whisper so those in line couldn’t hear.
“Lexi is fortunate to have this job, and she is the best of the best. She’s happy. The clients are happy, and this is the best match for her according to Global Standards.”

Vargas left and returned with a tall beauty. From what Connor had seen, only the cream of human physical sexuality worked here. This lady glided in gracefully, reached out her hand, and
said, “My name is Connie Ivaconni.”

Her wrist sported three gold bands encircled with pink Realm emblems. Each saying this woman excelled as a specialist in three fields of expertise. Connor didn’t ask which.

“Call me Connor.” She replied. “Why . . .”

“Why am I working here? First, I thrive on male
attention. Second, I’ll run the Western Hemisphere Entertainment centers by the time I’m forty. Third, Everything fun is here. Sports, you’ve got it. Classics, you’ve got it. Fine food . . .”

“I get it.” Connor motioned for Connie to sit down and pulled up a desk chair to sit across from her. “Describe a typical day for
me.”

“I sleep in. One of the guys brings me breakfast around 10 a.m.” She pointed her finger at Connor. “Rapes under the Global Realm are rare. Why do you think? Except for one day a week off and a week’s vacation a year, our citizens work 75% of the time and sleep the other 25%. That’s why time off is vital for them. My job is seeing to
it they get exactly what they want and stay productive citizens.”

Lowering her brow, Connor said, “Stick to my question. I’m not looking for you to defend what you do.”

“Six days a week, I entertain walk-in clients from eleven to five, with ten minutes off for lunch. At five, I hook up with an off-duty executive client, and we go
out about the Center enjoying the festivities. We return about midnight, He leaves about 3 a.m. and I sleep until ten.”

“And your seventh day?”

The woman smiled a broad, winning smile. A laugh escaped her lips. “I take the transport to the Los Angeles Complex and spend time with my mother. She’s a
nurse and we have our days off together.”

Vargas stuck his head in the door. “Your company, particularly your brother is anxious to leave.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Connor stood and shook Ms. Ivaconni’s hand. “What do you think of the girls like Lexi?”

“She has the best deal she can get for herself. She’s
not bright, but she’s giving. The men love her, so what’s the harm?”

What’s the harm?

“Do you believe in God?” Connor asked, as Connie glided to the door.

“Remember, the Global Realm doesn’t force religion on its citizens.”

“Just a question.”

“Maybe. Have him come over to meet me and
we’ll have a little chat.” With that, she went out the door and disappeared into the ever-growing throng. Disgust and envy filled Connor. *She’s too perfect.*
Chapter 15

Pendleton’s sweat dripped freely down his face. The damn computer threw scenario after scenario at him. Edison mixed a multitude of situations together involving personal issues, family, religious convictions, and world complexities. The machine demanded the
selection of only one course of action. Six hours now, he’d struggled.

“Time.” A mechanical voice spoke and the screen faded to black.

All participants started and ended at the same time. Pendleton rose to a standing position and almost collapsed. He’d rarely been challenged. Less than a handful of competitors ever
scored high enough to force him to take the test. His original grade on Edison, a 99.4% logically accurate, exceeded all other test scores previously recorded by 2.6%. He waited for his result to pop up on the screen.

Such self-doubt. He never second guessed his decisions until Milton passed away. Then there were the tremors in his hands. Bloody
hell. Early Parkinson’s. Opponents could not know.
His score flashed on the screen. He did a double-take 98.9%. The second highest score ever recorded. His chest puffed out. I’m not going down without a fight, he thought.

He emerged through the door and gingerly strode across the room. “Haven’t lost my edge. No sir. I’ve still
got it.”

Duarte pointed at the 70” screen showing Edison’s final tally of the results. Chills ran down Pendleton’s spine and he stopped mid-stride.

“My God,” he gasped. “This isn’t possible.”

Hans Van Meer exited from his testing area. “Well, I didn’t score high enough to make the ballot. Wow, will
you look at that. I guess my 92% really sucks.” He poked Pendleton in the arm. “Jolly good show, 98.9%, Ole Boy.”

“A 92% is the fifth highest score ever recorded on this exam until today, Mr. Van Meer.” Duarte shook his hand. “Over eleven hundred citizens took this exam in the early testing stages. You should be proud.”

Pendleton slumped into
the nearest chair. “Ammad has a 99%. Chui has a 98.8%. By the rules, the variance puts us in a virtual tie.” How could Ammad have scored that well?

“Ammad’s a devious bastard.” Van Meer poked Pendleton again. “Devious bastards are aces at ruling the Realm. Look at yourself. You’re as devious as they come.”
Duarte interrupted with a wave of his hand. “The Realm has only six days to prepare to vote. I’ll have to notify the public and instruct them on how to use the voting application on their universal communications devices. No one has voted for the First Citizen before. They’ll be confused.”

“Whatever.” Pendleton fidgeted. He’d gone from
elated to glum. “When are Connor and George arriving?”

“Within the hour,” Duarte replied. “Shall I show them in when they arrive?”

“Yes, please do,” Pendleton said. “And draft notes to Chui and Ammad, offering them my congratulations.”

Duarte stopped and turned. “Are you serious,
First Citizen? Ammad almost forced us into war.”

“My enemy or not, his achievement is extraordinary.”

“One moment,” Van Meer said. “Rather than doing an elaborate tutorial with them. Show them real time. Develop a few basic pictures of the universal watch, and they can follow the steps with you on voting day.”
Duarte reflected for a moment. “I know this isn’t proper in a Global Society, but I like the idea that everyone in the world will watch me.”

He pivoted on his heel and strutted out of the room.

Within the hour, the door to the testing facility opened. His daughter and oldest son rushed in. Before they could sit down,
Pendleton addressed them. “You’ve heard the news by now. There will be a three-man runoff. I’m required to give a one hour address to justify why I should be retained in power.” He hugged Connor and shook George’s hand. “I’m conflicted by the entertainment center issue. Should I keep them open or close them if I continue as
First Citizen? Ammad will certainly address the issue. What do I say?”

George chuckled.

“Well, they’re quite a dilemma. As a Christian, I’d never have created them.” He pointed his finger and shook it at his father. “But you did.”

“I regret that decision.” Pendleton let out a deep whoosh of air. “The best advisors believed the
populace needed an outlet and the Realm provided little except for the Centers.”

“ Probably true.” George patted his father’s back. “Eighty percent of what happens there is terrific entertainment. Twenty percent is debase, the lowest form of human debauchery. It’s depraved and demeaning. So I say let 80% remain and close the bloody rot down.”
Connor collapsed onto a chair. “Don’t preach to Dad, Big Brother. He never wanted to be a moral policeman.”

“So tell him your take, Sis. Don’t hold back.” George took a seat next to Van Meer, as far from his sister as he could get for fear of repercussions.

“If you want to please God, you follow George’s lead.” She inhaled a deep
breath. “If you want to win the election and make friends around the world, you keep the centers as they are.”

Pendleton leaned forward and made eye contact with her. “Why say you so?”

“Honestly, from a human viewpoint, you were right 25 years ago and you still are. You can’t be a moral policeman. From God’s viewpoint, He would never
agree. You have to choose.”

Looking more like her mother every day, he thought—perky, bright, and passionate. How he missed Lovey.

“I feel disdain for the prostitution and alcohol use.” Connor looked at the floor.

“But those who take part, immoral though they are by our standards, will become troublemakers without those
outlets. The world population will become unmanageable. What goes on within the centers will spill out on the streets.”

Pendleton rose to his feet. “Ammad positioned himself well. When we discovered his deceit, he attacked. He destroyed enough of our space-based technology to render a complete victory for either
side impossible. In the process, he ruined enough of the countryside to put fear and doubt in people’s minds. I must point that out to a waiting world.”

“Take five minutes doing that,” George said. “The rest of the time denounce war, point out the achievements of the past 25 years, and outline a plan to move forward.”
He sipped some Global nectar from his glass. “And, continue preparations for Christian evacuation in case we lose.”

Lose? Pendleton was tired. Not only physically, but mentally as well. His mind responded a step slower than it had in years past.

“Where’s Harry?” he asked, suddenly desiring to have all his children around
him.

“With Obi,” Connor brooded. “They’re making final preparations on the biospheres for space flight. I’ll probably never get more than a couple of days with him at a time the way things are going.”

“I’m sorry, Honey. I hope the projects he’s working on will turn out to be unnecessary,” Pendleton said.
“But I fear the worst. When I saw my score posted from Edison, I regained strength. Now, I see I was premature in celebrating.”

“Our question should be. How did Ammad do so well?” Van Meer chimed in.

“Yes. How indeed.”
Chapter 16
Like fireflies in the darkness, the shimmering lights around Peacock held her gaze. “Pretty.”

She’d become aware of her surroundings. Time had ceased to be for her. She’d forgotten to breathe a day ago. Her mind shutdown and surrendered to total darkness.
Death is peaceful, she thought. Now my angel brings me back to life long enough to comfort me.

Then she remembered. Yes. She actually did die. Her breath left her and her spirit rose above her cell. People talked about moving toward a bright light and seeing family and friends. But for her, she watched herself lying dead on the floor of the cell, and then
nothing. That is, until now.

“It’s time to go.” The light grew, and she could make out her angel’s shape in the far corner of her cell.

“Are you taking me to heaven? I’m ready.”

A bubbling spring-like laughter filled her ears and in it the words “Not yet, but soon,” spoke to her mind.

“Why did I seem dead until you roused me?” she
asked, and knew the answer without a response. “I did die. Didn’t I?”

He smiled. “God has a purpose for you, and you will not go to heaven until you fulfill it.”

“Lead on.” She found herself on her feet moving through the solid door of her cell, a door bolted from the outside and far too heavy for her to move. She felt no pain,
and when she looked down, a clean pair of jeans and a white shirt covered her. Tennis shoes adorned her feet. She stopped and ran her hands down her body. The skeletal wraith had vanished, and she was healthy and whole.

Up the stairs she walked to the upper level of Cell Block 42. A guard slouched down by the exit door.
Another strolled along the hallway. The angel led her past them without their noticing, and out she went into the fresh air. She inhaled a comfortable breath and turned to her guardian.

“Where to, kind Sir?”

“To a meeting, that will happen in a week. Until then, goodnight.”

A voice called to her from what seemed light years
away. “We’re waiting, Donna.”

“Mother?”

No one had called her Donna in the last thirty-three years. Her mind fell into a deep sleep and nothing disturbed her.

#

Pendleton watched Pope Peter walk unassisted up the stairs to his private quarters in the Rome
Complex. Aides tried to help him, but he’d shoo them away with the wave of his hand. Sharp in mind, quiet in manner, Peter was a friend, not a religious figure. He extended his hand to Pendleton saying, “Congratulations on your test score and good luck with the vote. Luckily, no one dares vote me out of office.”

“We’ve prepared
Christian leaders worldwide for either the rapture of The Church or their escape by shuttle launches to the biospheres.” Pendleton shook his head. “The press I’m hearing says you and I received strong approval. A few scoffers, but no one thought we were weird.”

“What does it matter what scoffers think? If God is in this, He will judge them.”
Peter sighed. “My staff will stay to lead whatever resistance we can muster. I do have several non-clergy who I’ve encouraged to go. Be sure your people take good care of them.”

“Certainly, I will.”

Pendleton entered the Pope’s quarters and edged into a leather armchair, simple in style and color. “Keeping this low key has been stressful.
Luckily, Ammad is busy preparing to defeat me in the election and not trying to blow up space transports.”

Pope Peter grunted as he lowered himself onto his wing-backed chair.

“Arthritis,” he said, “an easier condition to keep secret than your plan to evacuate the Christian population.”

“Probably so.”

Nothing was easy
anymore. What would the populace do—riot, refuse to go, comply? Maybe there wouldn’t be a need. Laverna’s previous visions came true. So, maybe the people would be taken to heaven before any evacuation was necessary.

“I can’t worry about anyone’s reaction to our plans. I can only do what God said.”
“A wise decision.” The Pope grinned. “You truly are helpless when it comes to outcomes. All you can do is what you’re told. That’s how God works.” Peter leaned forward. “My sources say Ammad is holding a meeting with the Israelis. He’s presenting them with a plan to rebuild their temple. Sound like something you’ve heard before. Huh? Like in the
Ammad peered out the window of his transport as it sped toward the Tel Aviv Complex. The temperature exceeded 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Not a soul could be seen outside along the road. The Jewish Complexes housed 99.4% of the native Jewish population. Only a few nomads refused shelter
under the Global Realm.

The Tel Aviv Complex looked like a Star of David from Earth Orbit. A part of him admired the splendor of the towers at each point of the Star. The Global Realm emblem graced the main entrance, a two-headed eagle etched in gold and black. As a compromise, the former emblem of Israel emblazoned in blue and white was
encased within the Realm’s emblem.

Another part of Ammad trembled in anticipation of the coming meeting. His plan to unify the Sons of Abraham and their ancient Persian conquerors might be the very move needed to win the election, now only two days away. As his entourage entered Tel Aviv, they were met by Rabbi Levinson of the
Greater Sanhedrin from the Tiberius Complex.

“Welcome Chairman al-Sistani.” Rabbi Thomas Levinson, eighty-two years old and still a figure of good health, greeted Ammad. “We speak for the Greater Sanhedrin and hence for the true Sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We wish to preserve our heritage and rebuild our holy sites,
especially the Temple Mount. Thank God it still stands.”


Behind Levinson stood sixty-nine other rabbis all from Tiberius of Galilee. Anxious to rebuild their temple and bring back the old
religion to its former greatness, Ammad saw these fools as the means to win control over the entire Middle East vote.

A broad smile formed on Levinson’s face. “We greet them as well. Let us move to a more secure location and discuss how a union might be possible. Remember we have a reputation for negotiating a
lot of extras.” He shrugged. “We’re rusty in this Global Realm. No room to Gentile anyone out of their money. There isn’t any money.”

Levinson’s comment amused Ammad. Truly, the man was an idiot. He and his delegation followed the Greater Sanhedrin into the complex to a reserved meeting room. The sign outside said, Welcome
Pacification of the Non-Citizen World Committee. A good way to hide the true purpose of the meeting, Ammad thought.

Strange to see so many Muslims inside a Jewish Complex. The average citizen might have suspicions. The meeting room divided into three sections, Levinson and three of his top people sat on the far side of a rectangular
conference table. Ammad and Akbari sat on the other side. Behind Levinson, the rest of the Sanhedrin filed into chairs. The five remaining members of Ammad’s delegation sat in a row of chairs behind him. At each corner, a legal secretary was seated to record the proceedings.

“What is most important to you, Rabbi
Levinson?” Akbari asked. “That our temple be rebuilt and that we may practice our faith in the place of its birth.” Levinson pointed a finger at Ammad. “Are you a man of peace? Or, are you a liar?”

“What man isn’t a liar? The question is am I lying now? The answer is no.”

“Let me be blunt.” Levinson pounded the table.
“Either you’re using us to gain power, only to betray us. Or, you’re using us to convince your followers you are the great peacemaker. Convince me I’m wrong.”

Ammad’s insides boiled at these statements, but he managed a contrite smile and responded. “I understand your distrust. Millennia of strife between our people are embedded in our genes. I
offer peace. If I win the election, you can receive the go-ahead to rebuilt Herod’s temple using the remaining wall as an anchor point.”

Akbari reached into a suitcase he’d place under the table. He pulled out ten copies of a peace proposal already signed by himself and Ammad. Ammad watched the eyes of his adversaries scouring the document.
They’ll ask for time, but they’re intrigued.

Levinson and two of his advisors looked over the papers and consulted together. Then Levinson said, “Give us until after the election to read the fine print.” Levinson neatly reassembled the papers he had rearranged while reading them. “You agree that the Jerusalem Complex will be a
free zone available to the Jews as well as the Muslims? No preferential treatment.”

“With no other religions having entrance,” Ammad said. “When you read closer, you’ll discover this is true for all remaining holy sites of our people worldwide.” Now Ammad pointed a finger back at Levinson. “Signing the agreement is a formality. I want to leave here knowing
we have one. So you have until tomorrow morning at nine o’clock. I give my address to the world then, and what I say will depend on your agreement.”

Levinson rose abruptly. “Then we have no time to sit here talking. You’ll have your answer by eight o’clock.” He waved to a security detail in the back of the meeting room. “Marshall Perez will see you
and your delegate to your quarters.”

“I want tomorrow’s broadcast to be well attended.”

“I’ll see to that, and we’ll broadcast from the Tel Aviv Global Event Center. It’s Romanesque.”

Ammad nodded. “How delightfully to my liking.”

#

The leader of the
Teheran Complex and the Organization of Persian’s for Islam grunted audibly over the phone. “On face value, your pact with the Israelis looks like we’re giving in to their demands. How do I sell this?”

“Are you uncomfortable, Sadaam?” Ammad asked. “Let me put this in perspective for you. I will defeat Pendleton. I will
destroy Chui. But we must speak of peace first. I can replace you when this is over. Or you can sell this program. Say, ‘Trust Ammad. Think long-term. One day the Jews will bow to him without hesitation.’”

Ammad relished the fearful silence. In it, he could feel the sweat running down Sadaam’s face. “I understand.”
His raspy voice attempted to hide his terror.

“I’ll have Akbari pray for you in person,” Ammad whispered. That statement alone should seal Sadaam’s loyalty, he thought.

“Not necessary. I’m a willing servant.”

“I made them this offer yesterday, and I’m giving my speech soon. So, that is our offer.” Ammad licked his
lips. Challenges to his authority irked him. These idiots didn’t understand the big picture. “Rest assured, a few years from now, the pact’s merit will be fully understood.”

He hung up. Having Akbari prey upon you—too horrible to comprehend. A knock at the door disrupted his thoughts. “Yes.”

“Their delegation’s
waiting.” A pause. “Levinson made two corrections.”

Only two? They were more eager to agree than Ammad anticipated. “I’m coming.”

He glanced in the gold-framed bathroom mirror one last time. Hair worn per Shia standards. Dressed in white from head to foot, he admired his image in the mirror.

Akbari’s voice cut off
his self-adulation. “Coming?”

Through the doorway he went, then lost his breath for an instant. Atash Akbari, his green robes draping over his outstretched arms, embraced his master with a bear hug. “Give them the speech of your life, Allah’s Chosen One.”

On Akbari’s robes, every symbol of Islam, the star and crescent moon in
emerald and in gold and the name of Allah written in Farsi, gave him the appearance of an ancient Magi, with powers behind the King.

“Follow me,” he said to Ammad and bowed low.

“Lead on.”

As he walked behind his mentor, Ammad wondered at Akbari’s open revelation. “Is it too soon to
announce me?”

“To the whole world, yes. To the wise among our followers, no.” Akbari didn’t miss a stride. His words rang clear in the hallways. “Your appearance alone says who you are.”

Into the conference room strode Ammad. Levinson and his delegation, already seated, rose to greet him.
“Welcome, Chairman,” Levinson said.

“Let’s get down to business. I’m scheduled to give my address in two hours, and I hope to have good news.”

Ammad scanned the faces in the room. Zealous Jews wore their votes in their eyes. Of The Seventy, the majority gathered favored Levinson’s position. But a
small group of twelve stone faced men, Hasidic in background, sat away from the others, eyes scowling at Ammad as he approached.

One cleared his throat and said, “I will not agree to this, unless the construction begins immediately, grounds are cleared and the foundation put in.”

“As a show of good faith?” Ammad asked.
“You might say so,” he said.

“You know what they say about the Children of Abraham,” Akbari said.

A silence followed. Finally the man said, “What do they say?”

“That you have big noses because air is free.”

Raucous laughter followed.

One day I’ll make this
man pay for his insolence, Ammad thought, but not today. “You have my word. The moment I become First Citizen. I will sign the order to break ground.”

“Rabbi Shamir,” Levinson said, his face still reddened from the man’s outburst. “I have the votes to sign this agreement without your demands.”

Ammad seized the
opportunity to feign peaceful intentions. “Peace, brothers.” He sighed as if their dispute pained him. “We are all bullheaded we sons of Shem—you, the offspring of Arphaxad, and we the offspring of Aram. One thing Pendleton did to unite us was to destroy our key holy places. He showed his disdain for both our beliefs. When he could not settle disputes
between us, I settled them, and not all in favor of Muslim groups. To have peace we must have trust. Tell me your demands.”

The Hasidic acquiesced. Levinson spoke with his hands palm up as one accepting a gift. “We have a hand carved cornerstone. Moses Law demands this. We ask that stone be the first stone lain. And…” a hush fell
on the Israeli delegation.

Ammad waited, keeping an even countenance.

“Jerusalem, and particularly East Jerusalem, must not belong to any people. It must be The Lord’s City.”

Levinson swallowed and sat quietly. The tremor in his hands showed he didn’t believe Ammad would agree.

Ammad laughed so
loud his voice echoed around him. “After 25 years of unsettled peace, these are all your demands?”

He tossed a map onto the table. Levinson and his counselors reviewed it. The Hasidics hovered over it.

“We don’t understand the circles within circles. They overlap the whole eastern side from north to south.”
“From Herod’s Gate to the Dung Gate and eastward shall be God’s State.”
Ammad rose to his full height, towering over the assembly. “How you explain this to your people is up to you. God will show Himself one day. If the God of the Hebrews shows up, I will personally submit to Him. If Allah through his prophet shows up, you will submit
yourselves. Until then, God as we believe in Him shall rule, either in the Temple or in the Dome of the Rock. As to the complex of Jerusalem, The Global Realm shall provide for its citizens in a free zone.”

“Let me hear your vote, one by one,” Levinson said. Akbari counted the votes as Levinson polled his delegation. Of The Seventy,
all but three voted in favor. The three Hasidic men, beards trimmed, hair braided, and wearing black dresses, declared as one, “Never shall we agree to equality with an Iranian.”

“Then I strip you of your position in the Sanhedrin!” Levinson scowled.

“We resign.” They were out of the meeting room in
less than a minute.

“Jews,” Levinson quipped. “You can’t fire them.”

Ammad handed a pen to Levinson. “You sign first. I have a Realm photographer here for such a time.” He waited until all had signed, then took the pen and signed his name. “This day will change the history of our people.”
He flashed a huge smile and the photographer snapped photos. A surge of energy ran through him. He stood and shook hands with each signer saying, “Peace between the Sons of Shem,” until Akbari tapped him on the shoulder. “Your broadcast is in fifteen minutes.”
Chapter 17
As First Citizen, Pendleton would speak to the world last. He scrutinized his notes again. The brightest minds in the world prepared the talking points for him. But these weren’t the words he wished to say. He scribbled a one-page list of key points and slumped
forward, hands pressed against his forehead. The love of his achievements had blinded him to the reality of deception. He’d basked in the adulation of his own circle of friends and ignored his critics. So he had to accept his failure and rely on God. Ruling a sinful world was an impossible job.

Regional Governor Chui wrapped up his speech
in forty minutes. He spoke in English, translated into Mandarin for those whose primary language was Chinese. Well liked, polite, Chui extolled Pendleton’s virtues, pointing out the huge accomplishments of mankind in 25 years by working as a team. He praised the First Citizen’s role in abolishing money and cleaning up the oceans and the air.
Chui defended his own capabilities and the successes within his Region, which led the world in almost every measurable category. He never mentioned Ammad. But his closing statement threw a knife directly at him. “Arthur Pendleton keeps his word. He did what he said he’d do. But his time is at an end. If he wins, I will continue my support of him."
But do not be misled by flowery words and promises. Do not be swayed by false statements and pipedreams too good to be true. Rely on your intellect when you vote, not your emotions.”

Dressed in his gold and black Global Realm uniform, Chui waved at the camera and the feed from the Beijing Complex ceased.

“Score from Edison,”
Pendleton whispered to Van Meer.

Van Meer raised a hand. “One moment.” Then his eyebrows furrowed. “Ninety-two percent effective. The best since your speech in twelve years ago. In fact the best rating ever.”

“Let’s hope the people don’t think like computers,” Pendleton said.

The feed connected in
from the Tel Aviv Complex, and Ammad al-Sistani appeared. Relaxed, self-confident, he spoke words of comfort and peace. In the first fifteen minutes, he used the word *reconciliation* eight times. “I forgive Arthur Pendleton and Global Realm personnel for their attack on Muslim Space Complexes,” he said. “And apologize for any unintended damage in
response.”

“Pope Peter is on the line for you,” Duarte called from the doorway.

Van Meer handed Pendleton his cell.

“Yes.”

“The Devil speaks of peace with the Jews. Listen to the tone. His words are sweet as honey, but laced with arsenic. He hasn’t mentioned you except to allude that it
was you whose attacks killed people when the altercation occurred. He’s speaking to only Muslims and Jews. It is as though the rest of the world doesn’t exist.”

“He’s getting to us. But I’m not sure what he’ll say.”

He heard Peter sigh. “Nothing good. Prepare to flee if you lose, my dear friend. And may God have mercy upon us all.”
Ammad went on, “I have a message for my Christian citizens. The hour of decision is upon you. Life in the Global Realm will not change under my rule. The only exception will be emphasis on finding common agreement in our faiths, as the Jews and I have arrived at.”

The cameras rose a bit, showing Akbari in his green robes, arms stretched wide in
a welcoming pose.

“Together, the Sons of Shem will work for a common purpose, even rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem.” Ammad matched Akbari’s pose. “We extend the same offering of peace to our Christian brothers of the Book. I personally will take up residence in Rome and allow for the reopening of the Vatican as a separate State as
to sovereignty. Rome will be as Jerusalem will be. Ruled by God. The God who shows Himself true shall be adored in both.”

As Ammad was closing, the cameras rolled in for a close-up. He clasped his hands together. His eyes were the center of focus. “Our First Citizen has long debated the closing of the entertainment centers, at least the pleasure
houses. He’s told me a number of times he doesn’t want to be a moral policeman.”


“I fear he, like many Christians, has a skewed view of why God created sex.” Ammad smiled. “What happened when the tribe of Benjamin was close to
extinction? How were women treated? During the Crusades, didn’t the Christian armies rape and plunder? God did not wish for women to be treated so.”

“Where is he going?” Van Meer asked.

Pendleton shook his head.

“Here is a fact, when the blessed prophet is revealed. He will create
Jannah, or Heaven, on earth. Believers in Jannah may have their heart’s desire, both men and women. Sex is one of the greatest of God’s gifts for both. It is not to be withheld.” Ammad motioned to Akbari, who nodded approval. “This is why Mohammed agreed to Mut’a, the temporary marriage. His warriors had no wife with them during the holy war. In his mercy, the
Prophet allowed them to marry a woman (*temporarily*) by giving her a garment. *Mut’a* as a practice exists today. If a man and a woman agree to marry temporarily, and she accepts his gift without questions. They are married until they agree to separate."

He pointed his finger and wagged it. "Entertainment centers
achieve this same purpose. May Allah bless you.”

The feed cut. Even Pendleton sat mesmerized. So eloquent and reassuring, the man offered everything without really offering anything. No specifics except the promise of the restoration of the primary religious sites to their former glory and keeping the entertainment centers open. Not a speech
anyone on his staff had expected. He wondered how he would sound speaking after such an orator. “How did Edison rate him?”

Van Meer shook his head as he stared at the screen. “Edison says Ammad’s speech was not measurable. His voice tones did not emotionally translate.”

“What?”
Pendleton shuddered. He tried to hide his shaking hand. He had no gauge to measure Ammad’s effectiveness, plus the speech gave him nothing to combat, except the entertainment centers and the attack on Muslim sites. If he denied the specifics of the attack, he’d sound defensive, and he would be.

“You’re on in five
minutes, First Citizen.”

God. Give me your words, not mine.

He almost chuckled aloud. In his most dire hour, he reached out to the Almighty. Why had he not done this before? His own pride. Calling on Him meant losing control. Pendleton figured he would only ask God for a favor when all seemed hopeless and save His
Sovereign the trouble of bailing him out. He threw away his prepared speech. Time for faith. His problem—he had more head knowledge than faith.

Pendleton took his position at the podium of the Global Realm, gold and black outfit—gold and black podium. He inhaled a long breath of air. The count started down as the red light
flashed, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The green light came on. Pendleton moistened his lips and said. “As of this moment, I am no longer First Citizen. I am candidate Arthur Pendleton. I could speak for a long time about our accomplishments over the past twenty-five years. But each of you has your own opinion.”

Many old enemies were
dead. Many old friends as well. He stood for a moment wondering where they were keeping his wife. He could always look to her for reassurance. No Lovey, no Milton, no Mum, only himself and God. “My daughter tells me the entertainments centers serve a realistic purpose and should remain. However, I regret allowing them, because God
dislikes the acts that go on within them. If you retain me as First Citizen, I will close the sex parlors. The rest of the entertainment can remain.”

He may have destroyed his hope of reelection by that statement. But God told the Israelites to tear down the pagan altars. They disobeyed and suffered His wrath. Pendleton wiped his
forehead. He thought about making his plea for Christians to prepare for Christ’s return. But couldn’t speak the words. Instead, he said. “We, as humanity, will never agree on religion. So I will not make it an issue. Believe what you will. If you are happy with the way the Global Realm is run, keep me in power. If not, choose Director Chui. I’m comfortable with him in the
Pendleton called for a close up. “As for Ammad al-Sistani, when his lips are moving he is lying. Neither Director Chui nor I will lie to you. Thank you. God bless you all.”

Van Meer’s mouth dropped open. Duarte, who was near the door, hurried to Pendleton’s side as the green light went out ending the
broadcast. He wiped his mentor’s forehead and smiled. “Well, now the people will vote.”

“All that preparation,” Van Meer shouted, face red and sweaty. “Why did you bother to appear at all? You practically told people to vote for Chui instead of you.”

“Edison gave him an 85%.” Duarte said, pointing at the screen.
“I’m surprised he did that well.” Van Meer wadded up Pendleton’s prepared speech and flung it across the room. “Too late to change things now.”

“God told me what to say, and I said it.” Pendleton rushed to the door and left. “I’m going to reach out to my kids.”

As he went, Van Meer called to him. “At least you
landed a punch on Ammad’s jaw. I’ll say that for you.”

Pendleton dashed across the hall to the loo, went in, slammed the door to the nearest stall, and sat down with his hands cradling his head. His life’s work flashed through his mind. Millions dead. The Earth failing. Miscalculating Ammad’s intentions. His Lovey might be dead. His daughter
opposed his decisions. Only George, Harry, Hans, and Duarte remained on his team, and Hans was pissed at him.

*God. What do I do? Repent!*

Pendleton choked mid-breath. The sound of a mighty voice rang in his mind. He wanted to run, but there was nowhere to go. Confined and helpless, his lips trembled and streams of tears flowed down
his cheeks. “I . . .”

Silence.

Pendleton gasped for air.

“You are a vapor but for Me. Did I not know you before the creation of the world?”

He’d heard that all his life. God knew everything Man would do and created him anyway.

“You cannot know My
plans. Your plans will fail. Now speak. Be sincere in what you say.”

“Forgive the sinful man I am.”

The voice he heard softened to that of a father speaking to his son.

“Already done. I forgive your deeds and will save your soul. Consequences are a different matter. I cannot interfere with what is already
in motion.”

“Tell me what to do?”

“Your reign is over. Go to Rome.”

A chill rolled over Pendleton. He understood. Without saying the words, God told him to go. He would do only that—seek no advice—tell only Duarte. As he rose, he snickered. The snicker became an outright laugh. Leave it to God to
speak to him on the pot in the loo. Heaven must be a wonderful place.
Chapter 18

“Where is my father?” Connor tapped her foot, a bad habit. She gave a bitchy impression when she did it, but didn’t care. “He was supposed to call us after his speech, if you could call it that.”

“I’ll have Ziebach look into it.” Hans Van Meer’s
rasping irritated her. “He left three hours ago, saying he was getting in touch with you guys. Hasn’t he?”

“No,” She wanted to scream at him. She wouldn’t be calling him if her dad had called first. “Fine. Take care of yourself, Hans. Read your Bible and rethink your position on God. As of right now, you’re on your own, as am I.”
Connor disconnected and turned to her brother, George. “How do we get the people to the transports or the transports to the people?”

“I’ve already dispatched the biospheres via all possible means. Your husband is in charge of sixteen units being relocated to sites in the Americas. Harry controls nineteen units heading for cities in Australia, Africa,
Europe, and Asia.” He smirked. “Once the biospheres are launched and dock with their motherships, shuttlecrafts will transport citizens into space to join them. Who will actually show up to board them? Only God knows.”

Maybe five million plus could leave. Not nearly enough to save those left behind from the wrath
Ammad will bring upon them. “Father’s disappeared.”

George paled and shrugged his resignation.

“Events are on the move. The people will vote, and we’ll do our duty. You have to give him credit. He called Ammad out for who he is.”

Head aching, stomach in knots, Connor kicked a Vapo-Waste trashcan and sent it flying against the wall.
of her brother’s London laboratory. The thud and subsequent rattling echoed throughout. A technician casually retrieved it unharmed, tossed a ream of paper into it, and watched the paper vanish.

“I’ll be chugging along.” He walked away with a brisk Citizen of the Realm step in his gait.

The world was about to
collapse, yet the common citizenry took little notice. Programmed to the comfort of predictability, they didn’t find a change in First Citizen to be distressing.

With only five hours left to the vote, Connor hadn’t heard one comment from an executive or a worker as to a favorite. What would be would be. Her father achieved his dream, an
efficient world without war. The sterile atmosphere of the Realm made the life of the normal citizen—well, boring at best. Yet those engaged in fascinating professions found the freedom to push the edges of possibility, while the common citizen lived for the entertainment centers and an escape from the drudgery of normal life.

Being a Pendleton
meant excelling at everything. Although never pushed by her parents, she pushed herself to uphold the family legacy of excellence in everything she touched. George and Harry didn’t outwardly share the same urge. But they did yearn for the knowledge to be the best in their respective fields. The fact that they were men took a certain pressure off them.
Perhaps because the top Realm officials considered her mother the #1 contributor, she felt the extra pressure, and her mother offered her all the help necessary, smiling and encouraging her throughout.

“What are you daydreaming about?” George touched his sister’s shoulder. “We can’t reach our father. We don’t know where
Mother is. But we do have duty. Right now our duty is to God and every Christian on this planet.”

“I’m committed to protecting the Executive level.” She pursed her lips and looked away.

“Which executive level?” He turned her and raised her head. “Your people will not protect Ammad or Chui. They are in place for
threats against the existing leadership. So forget your earthly obligations and concentrate on those that bring rewards in heaven.”

Acid stung her throat. Obviously, her father’s security team obeyed his orders before considering hers. They didn’t answer her queries about his whereabouts. A deep breath and a sigh of resignation
answered her brother.

“Good,” George said. “I need you with me at the implementation of our evacuation plan. We’re leaving in six days.”

#

“Yes. Yes.” Sunnis will

Many Sunnis were angered by your statements.”

Akbari paced the boardroom in Tel Aviv, with Ammad seated eating an orange.

“Yes. Yes.” Sunnis will
never be satisfied. “Radicals also despise me. Ask me if I care.”

“Too late one way or the other.”

“You’ve prayed and meditated on the election.” Ammad wiped his hands and stood. “What visions have you received?”

“You will win, but war will come in the future.”

“From Chui, yes. We’ll
prepare for that when the time comes.”

“If we have time.” Ammad laughed.

“Don’t be a naysayer.”

Stan Kaplan adjusted his microphone. He had become Van Meer’s face to the world since he aided the Realm in the early months after the destruction of the United Nations Building.
Stan relished the drama of a 24-hour vote. After Duarte explained the mechanics, the world would only see his face and hear his voice. At seventy-one, Kaplan’s energy level and spirited voice earned the love of billions around the globe.

“Greeting citizens.” He smiled into the camera. “Today marks a milestone in Global Realm history. This
election is a first. It sets the guideline for all to follow. Every candidate has committed to a peaceful transition of power.”

Peaceful? *Hmm.* Kaplan didn’t hold much faith in that outcome. As compartmentalized as the world was, only the elite, thirty or so individuals, knew the infighting and posturing going on within their ranks.
Kaplan understood full well the religious divide and fanatical factions vying to win this election. He also knew of the preparations for launching the Mars Colonization Project. He highly doubted the mission was really to colonize Mars.

“Starting at the International Date Line,” Kaplan said. “Voters will register their votes when their
time zone stands at noon. Each citizen will have one hour in which to vote.” He grinned and added. “There is no possibility of cheating. Once you enter your vote, your connection will cease to exist. Edison, our master computer will keep an ongoing tally, but will not reveal the vote until all time zones have been counted.”” His head tilted. “Twenty-four
hours and seven microseconds from the starting point. Amazing.”

He pointed a finger at the clock and said, “You’ve all been instructed by Eduardo Duarte on the use of your devices. Time Zone 1, begin voting now.”

He poured a cup of Arabian coffee and leaned back to relax. The regular programming continued
showing a massive hurricane bearing down on the Philippines. Winds approaching 235 mph only two hours from coming ashore near Daet and expected to impact Manila a few hours after making landfall. Kaplan would come back every hour to start the next time zone voting.

Years before, journalism held a tainted
reputation, and rightly so. Sensationalism drove the industry—all money-motivated. Now, without a money motivation, he and others like him reported the facts, helped people understand them, and actively improved lives. Kaplan loved the Realm.

When the final time zone had voted, he reappeared with a precise
count of 92 percent of the world’s population watching. Ammad al-Sistani’s face appeared on the upper left corner of Kaplan’s screen, Regional Governor Chui on the upper right, and Hans Van Meer in the lower left, representing Arthur Pendleton. Kaplan watched intently as the votes by time zone scrolled along the bottom of the screen and a
total appeared and fixed. Kaplan stared at the results attempting to understand the implications.

“One moment,” he said. “I need to consult with the Head of the Election Board.”

A moment later, Kaplan returned. “As you can see, Arthur Pendleton can no longer claim the title, First Citizen. His vote count did not reach 25 percent.”
Chairman al-Sistani has 37 percent and Regional Governor Chui has 38 percent. The computer has factored in test scores and declared Chairman al-Sistani the winner by virtue of the test scores.”

Kaplan scrunched up his mouth. He perused the copy handed to him and said, “According to the Law. Chairman al-Sistani will
assume power by transition in one week. The present staff will remain until they are told otherwise by the new First Citizen. Each candidate may make a two-minute statement. Chairman al-Sistani, please go first.”

Ammad’s face appeared onscreen. “Fellow citizens of the Realm, you have no reason to fear. I am a man of peace, and peace shall reign
supreme over the world. Today is a New Age. I welcome the cooperation of Regional Governor Chui. I have promised the Children of Shem the right to express their beliefs freely. This includes the rebuilding of the Hebrew Temple in Jerusalem and unrestricted pilgrimages to the Holy Sites of Islam throughout the world. I will have more to say after my
official induction as First Citizen.”

Short and sweet, Kaplan thought. But he disliked the man. Sly. Tricky looking eyes. No, he didn’t trust Ammad at all. Why there was no runoff where there was no majority didn’t make sense. But that was the law.

Regional Director Chui appeared on the screen, but only for a moment. “I reject
the decision of a computer. My region voted unanimously for me. There are two other regional governors in my camp. Our lands connect and so will our commerce. Regions 9, 10, and 12, respectfully secede from the Global Realm.

Van Meer’s face no long appeared on-screen. No announcement came from Arthur Pendleton’s camp, and
the video feed switched to hurricane coverage.
Chapter 19

Arthur Pendleton, accompanied by Duarte and his personal bodyguard, arrived in Rome without fanfare and was escorted directly to Pope Peter’s quarters.

“So tell me about the voice,” Peter inquired after the appropriate papal hug.
“I’m dying to know what’s going on.”

Pendleton gulped. The last 24 hours had been a blur of activity. If he looked like he felt, people ought to be shying away from him, not badgering him for details.

“I’m sorry, Holy Father. Forgive me, but I’m struggling. Let me rest. Then I’ll tell you everything.”

“I’m a good listener,”
Peter said. His brown eyes sparkled, and it seemed to Pendleton as though the weight of his thirteen-year reign as Pontiff had lifted from him. Younger in looks and in tone, Peter gave a strong grasp to Pendleton’s hand. “The sooner you release the tension inside. The brighter things will seem.”

“In the morning,” he said. “I’ll hold nothing back
over tea and scones.”  
  “One thing is certain,” Peter said, as Pendleton turned to leave. “The average citizen outside Chui’s control will accept Ammad and blindly go on with their lives. Scripture is never wrong.” 

That night after a three-hour rest Pendleton grabbed a pencil and pad and jotted down a confession of sorts. He listed those things he had
no remorse over and those he wished he’d done differently. He pondered how many times David had fallen into sin, only to rise back up into favor with God. How many times had he done the same thing? Too many. Thankfully, he knew heaven was his home. Hell was his fate right here on earth for the evil he’d done both knowingly and unknowingly.
Occasionally, he listened to the voting results and secretly beamed with pleasure at Chui’s actions. He didn’t trust Chui to be a benevolent leader, but he admired Chui’s stand against Ammad, knowing he would not live long enough to see the outcome. An alarm clock buzzer woke him at eight a.m. He was dressed and at breakfast by nine o’clock.
The time alone to sort things out made him eager to talk to Peter now. The patient pontiff joked and bantered with Duarte and others at table. Then, maybe sensing Pendleton’s mood change asked. “Are you ready to tell us about the voice?”

With six men present including two from the pontiff’s inner circle, Pendleton let down the
barrier that had surrounded him for years. “I heard the voice of God. He told me my reign was over and to go to Rome.”

“And this very morning your reign officially ended.” Peter leaned back in his chair and inhaled steaming tea from his chalice-shaped cup. “Ammad is First Citizen over 68 percent of the population. But Chui opposes him.”
Ammad says nothing about retaliation. I’m not sure how this will play out.”

Pendleton fingered the gold chain around his neck. “God allowed me to come to power. But I never consulted Him on what needed to be done. Lovey became the worshipper I never was.” He shook his head. “I was a fool to act without God in my camp.”
“He was in your camp.” Peter chuckled. “He wasn’t in charge, but He was there. The things you did that lined up with His word gained you favor. But they were few.”

“Right you are, old boy.” Pendleton let out a muffled groan. “I listened far more to the words of Milton Rogers, my mum, Hans Van Meer, and Lovey, than I did to the Word of God. Yet He
forgives me. He told me so.”

“Yes. God is a forgiver of the righteous.” Peter pointed to the masses collecting in the streets below his window in front of the Vatican Gardens. “You cannot tell the saved from the unsaved from my room. Many stand before these windows hoping for direction. But only faith in Yahweh, King of King and
Lord of Lords, can save you.”
“I know. Because I confess Him as my Lord and Savior, I’m saved. But my deeds are another story. He told me this.”
“And unfortunately, my uncomely deeds follow me as well.” Peter offered him a crumpet. “Ah, the crumpet. The one and only thing the British can proudly offer as an excellent addition to the
international cookbook.” Pendleton grinned.

“Touché. We’re not known for the culinary arts.”

“God wants you with me. So I assume something important will happen here. I believe this is the place from which you will direct Operation Ascension.” Pope Peter’s head tilted left. A slight grin appeared, giving him a mischievous look. “I
doubt Ammad’s government will be Christian-friendly.”

“No. Not at all.”

“To paraphrase the American author, George Orwell, words are a conduit to thought. Destroy the word and the idea dies with it.”

Ammad plucked a grape from a vine in the Dubai Complex and popped it in his mouth. “Delicious,” he said.
“Amazing, this food technology that feeds the people.”

Akbari and the guards surrounding Ammad kept the crowd back, many calling out, “Great is Ammad, the Chosen.” Akbari led the procession up to the entrance to the Dubai Festival City Business Center, the business and living quarters of al-Sistani and his inner circle. A
huge gathering formed outside. The Global Realm proceeded to set-up a major broadcasting center right next door. Akbari and his staff already had several hours of programming planned each day to encourage the Muslim and Jewish worlds and educate the children of Ham and Japheth on ancient history.

“Keep the outbursts
describing me as the Chosen within Muslim Complexes. Not a mention of this to others, particularly the Jews.”

Ammad moistened his lips. “I want every broadcast to change the words used to typically describe Christian life. We no longer will use words like salvation. Rather replace it with happiness. We have nothing from which to be saved. Allah wishes us to
attain happiness with him.”

“Sin denotes a thing to be ashamed of.” Akbari added. “Allah is not to be questioned, nor is his messenger. Therefore sin shall be disobedience of the commands of Allah and you, and the breaking of a covenant with Allah and you.”

Ammad chuckled, “Like the one the eager sons
of Jacob made with us.” He raised a glass of wine.

“During my seven years before Allah judges all men, I vow to make the Earth like the Heavenly Garden. My followers shall reap the good life early. Those who rebel will suffer. Pleasure is to replace toil. Hedonism is to be pursued as virtue, while puritanism is to be declared sinful.”
“Gradually, Ammad. Not tomorrow.”

“The fact is that mankind suffers from the fallen flesh.” He paused to gather his thoughts. “I want the words sinful, damnation, and evil applied to those who seek moral perfection. When Allah calls us home to judge us. He will make us perfect. Those to try to perfect themselves now are infidels,
trying to be godlike when they cannot.”

He sat for a few minutes, his hand up not permitting Akbari to speak. Within the first year of his reign, word engineering would transform thinking. In the second year, he would impose new laws conforming to his stated premise. The pursuit of happiness is the greatest good. The
entertainment centers would triple in size, catering to every desire of the flesh. He would manage the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple himself, providing the Jews every possible tool to complete it.

He handed Akbari a 500-page directive. “Prepare to implement these as soon as possible. But don’t release anything until I tell you to.” Akbari left, his green
robes trailing behind him.

Ammad spoke in the dark to the spirit of his father. “Pendleton unknowingly laid the foundation for controlling the world. He did it by force. I will speak only of peace. Chui comes against me. I will woo him—toy with him like a mouse. Then I’ll attack him.”

Destroy Pendleton and the red witch now.

“But I tried. Akbari says
she has a Marid guarding her. 

*Destroy Pendleton, you destroy her.*
Chapter 20

As he gazed out at the mountainous landscape of northwestern China, Regional Governor Chui tapped his fingers on his desktop. Big dog and little dog—his names for Ammad and Akbari—wallowed in conceit. But the big dog wasn’t the only one who’d built plans over the
past two decades. Chui had learned from the best. Arthur Pendleton did the impossible through manipulation and power-brokering. He’d played the ultimate game of *Risk*, thrown the dice, and won. Chui now was positioned to do the same.

If Pendleton sought asylum, Chui would grant it to him. Next to Sun Tzu, Pendleton and his inner circle
were the finest military minds the world had ever seen. All morning Chui busied himself confirming his alliances. The West was lost. They soon would crumble under Ammad’s demands. Leaders west of the Urals were once Pendleton’s loyalists. With Christians gone, they would oppose Chui. An even fight, he thought, in the terms of manpower. The advantage
would go to the one who attacked first, when feigning peace.

He dialed his secure phone.

“Yes, Regional Governor, how may I be of help?” George Pendleton’s voice remained as sure and steady as always.

“Any word from your father?”

“No. He has his own
agenda. I have mine.”

“Your biosphere ships are ready in our provinces.” Chui had no belief in a god or a god-man. The best he could muster was a belief in making the utmost of one’s life. “I presume both of you are focused on taking as many Christians off the planet as possible.”

George’s silence answered his question.
“I have a favor.”
“Ask. If I can do it for you, I will.”
“Fifty rockets escaped destruction.”
“Correct.”
“You’ll have no need for them when you leave.”
Chui held his breath.
“In the Beijing Complex in my locker,”
George said. “The firing codes are taped to the back on
a list. I’ll give you the combination to unlock the security device when I leave.” Chui heard a sigh. “And Governor Chui, any attempt to open my locker without the code is useless. I tell you this only for your safety.”

Yes, that response was expected. George planned ahead, as his father used to do. “Understood. Thank you.”
“I hoped you would have won outright.”

“Regrettable, but there are too many Muslims in the world, and whatever Ammad promised the Jews seems to have worked.” Chui listened for a reaction or additional information.

“My father may know the details. Other than what Ammad said in his speech, I do not.”
“Tell him if his plan fails, the Global Realm’s present leadership, including you and your family, have safe refuge with me.”

“I speak for my family.”

George sounded sad. “Once we embark on this perilous journey, I doubt you’ll be able to reach us if we fail. But we appreciate your offer.”

“I have more capabilities than you think.”
Chui hated lying. He doubted he could give them asylum, unless they left for his Region now. “So long as I can, I’ll help.”

After he disconnected, he called his head of security. “Now we implement the call to service. I want two-hundred million highly trained combatants, and I want them ready for war.” He paused. “By highly trained, I
mean like no ground force ever before.”

Connor bit her lip, as George agreed to give the codes to Chui. Van Meer slouched on a couch in the Balmoral Tactics Room. With her husband and Harry traveling to assure the readiness of the launch vehicles, she, George, Hans, and Ziebach strategized the
broader picture. How could they hold off attacks on the Pendleton family strongholds of Balmoral and London?

“How do you plan to defend us if . . . no when, Ammad attacks?” Connor asked.

George disconnected from Chui and shot her a mischievous grin. “Watch your blood pressure, Busty Rusty. We’ll have no use for
them once in Earth orbit. Chui’s welcome to them. Would you rather Ammad have them?”

“I’d rather we kept them, mobilized Global Realm forces, and fought against Ammad and his fanaticism.”

Van Meer looked up at her and reached out his hand. She grabbed it. “Clear your head. Your father vowed the
killing was over once the Realm was secure. It is secure. The vast majority of its citizens don’t much care who the First Citizen is. Or at least, they won’t until it’s too late.”

Hans was right, and she knew it. Damn her father, racing off without a word. What would Ammad’s next steps be? Who would run his government or make up his
cabinet? She sulked for a moment. Where was her father? Maybe his absence was his way of diverting Ammad’s attention away from Balmoral.

“"You’re right," she said with a sheepish grin. "We need to move forward with our own plan for evacuation and nothing else."’ She plopped down next to Hans and Ziebach and asked
George, “What are our options?”

“Not many,” Ziebach said. “George has the only realistic one in process.”

George pulled out a schematic, 6’ by 6’, and pinned it onto a large corkboard on the north wall. He placed thirty-five colored pins on the board representing each ship and biosphere. “We’ll be loading
and launching these in four days.” He grinned. “They don’t fire into orbit, because these aren’t motherships. The motherships are already assembled and in orbit tethered to the Omega Space Station. The biospheres will lift up gradually to an altitude of 60,000 feet. Then down-force thrusters will take them into orbit.”

Connor studied the
schematic. “What are these other 100-plus markers with figures written under each unit? They look like math symbols.”

“We were rushed. These are shuttle transports. Some are fully operational. Others have only limited space readiness. All transports will attempt to make four or more launch-and-return trips to evacuate
the citizens who want to go.” George pointed to four areas circled in red. “Ammad won’t be able to stop every launch. But I believe he’ll target these four complexes in an attempt to capture the present leadership before they can escape.”

“He’ll be glad we’re gone,” Connor offered. She studied the circled areas. London, Balmoral, Rome,
and Dallas were highlighted.

“I understand Ammad’s purpose for launching an attack of some sort on Balmoral and London. These are the Pendleton family strongholds. Rome is the hub of Catholicism. The Pope would naturally be a target. But who lives in Dallas?”

“But who lives there, but what goes on there.”

George stared at her like a
father would stare at his daughter when she said something immature. “Over 70 percent of all Christians are Evangelicals. The Dallas Complex is the major training center for Evangelical Christians, producing thousands of new ministers a year. While most denominations are stagnant, Evangelicals continue to grow. Hold their leaders
captive and the growth ceases. Of course I didn’t come up with the theory, Edison did.”

Connor’s logical side kicked in. Ammad might be able to coerce her father into publically supporting him, using her mother as a bargaining chip. She’d protected both her parents for five years, but had lost control when the Supersonic
was attacked. Swallow your feelings, she thought. Concentrate on protecting the evacuation process.

“All right. If Edison is correct, those complexes need to be notified. I’ll call Global Security and put them on alert.” She punched in the security code and waited. No connection. Before she could redial, her emergency line lit up. “Yes.”
“I may have thirty seconds.” The voice was that of her second in command, the Assistant Director of Global Security. “Ammad’s people are here. They’re replacing everyone, directing us to leave immediately and wait for reassignment.”

“Edison has predicted that Balmoral, London, Rome, and Dallas will be attacked by Ammad. Can you
warn them or divert any loyal forces to those locations?”

“I’ll try.”

She didn’t bother to respond as the line deactivated. “Our security lines are cut.”

George checked his cell. “I still have a routing through the Far East system. It pays to be Chui’s friend. I’ll try to get a warning out before Ammad cuts the line.
He has to have someone inside each complex to do that.”

Connor nodded. How had life become so dark in such a short time? The treachery of Ammad must have been festering a long time to have his people so entrenched. Without communications, her control was at an end. She dialed Cher, Ming, and Bruegman.
Chapter 21

“If anyone speaks to you, say ‘Let me be, saith the Lord.’”

The words registered in Peacock’s brain, as forms and figures appeared around her. The Port of Terracina, Italy lay off the right side of a vessel she didn’t remember boarding. How she knew the
port’s name escaped her. The presence of her angel told her this was his doing. Craggy white-stone cliffs passed by, revealing a sandy expanse. The long seawall extended out almost a half-mile, forming a quiet bay between the sandy shore and the ocean. Her vessel entered into the bay and proceeded to dock.

Laverna realized she
was herself again. Peacock vanished when not in Ammad’s prison or fighting for a cause. Had he found out she was missing yet? His visits were rare, and food was passed beneath the door. He might not discover her absence for a while. The sun warmed her. She ventured out onto the deck, wearing her Global Realm black and gold outfit. How she’d acquired it
could only have been a miracle.

“Please have your travel permits available for checking as you disembark,” yelled a crewmember with a megaphone. The vessel only carried thirty vacationers plus crew, maximum. How long she’d been onboard was a mystery. Time seemed to have little meaning to her.

“Papers,” barked a short
muscular man.

“Let me be, saith the Lord.”

She walked past, and the man greeted the next vacationer. “Papers.”

War begins. A battle is coming. You can’t win the battle. But fear not, God will win the war.

I don’t like losing battles, she thought, then disappeared into the throngs
of people filling the streets. Only seventy-five miles from Vatican City up SR 148. Ninety minutes by car. Her destination grew closer. Who she’d meet and what lay ahead were of little concern. While the angel walked with her, she was safe.

“What’s your name,” she asked him.

“Custos.”

“What does it mean?”
Laughter was the angel’s only response. Angels! Wonderful creatures, but tight-lipped.

# “Evaluate our situation. I want feedback on the response of the populace to the change of power.” Arms behind his back, Ammad paced at the head of the boardroom table robes
swishing. Twelve Imams of the Shia faith, two with Sufi leanings, and four military advisors sat around him.

“Chui and his allies have cut communications with us.”

“We anticipated he would. The move hurts the East more than it does us. They will suffer hardships, particularly in food supplies.”

“Yes, First Citizen.”
The man speaking continued his report. “In the rest of the world, only the radical Christians oppose us. Our intelligence says George Pendleton is planning to evacuate many Christians to the Space Platform connected to Operation Warlord, the Mars colonization project.”

“We didn’t plan on their evacuating.” He pondered that move and rubbed his
beard. “No other threats of rebellion?”

“None. The Christians are not going to fight. Some are going to leave. Others will conform to the new government.”

“Yes. They will come in line one way or another.”

Ammad grinned. “What action, if any, do you propose at this time?”

“Pendleton appears to
be in hiding. He may be with his right-hand man in Balmoral. From what communications we’ve been able to trace, George and Connor Pendleton are there as well. But we doubt for long.”

“How ready are the launch vehicles to carry Christians?” Ammad brow lowered.

“Most can leave in a matter of days.” The man
speaking grimaced and lowered his head. “Their numbers are too widely dispersed for us to stop them all.”

A knock on the boardroom door interrupted the conversation. Atash Akbari appeared with his hands raised and his body bowed. “Master, the redhead witch is gone.”

“What!” Ammad swung
his arm sending a pitcher of water flying across the room, drenching two of the Imams nearest him. “How can that be?”

“No one knows. Her cell door remains locked. The slop man reported no empty tray and no sound from her cell in almost a week.”

Akbari trembled, his face wane and gaunt. “They pulled back the shield over the glass
and shined a light, expecting to see a dead body. She was gone.”

“Kill them both. The slop man and the guard. One of them must be a traitor.”

“No,” Akbari begged. “The jinn, the Marid who protects her, must be behind this. An evil is at work here. A slop man is no match for a Marid. What colors did you see when confronting the
redheaded witch?”

“No colors. I did not see the jinn. But . . .” Ammad reached back into his memory. He’d held a light, but it had changed color slightly upon entering the room. “My light took on a violet tone alternating blues and reds.”

“No doubt an angry Marid. What she has promised him for such a favor
I cannot guess.” Akbari rubbed his chin. “What say you Elders?”

The oldest among them raised his hand. He rose and stroked his long beard. “Our lore is sometimes truth. It is said Solomon had a ring crafted of iron and brass. The metals weakened the jinn’s power so the being could be controlled. So Solomon could see its crafty lies and
mischief. The jinn helped him build and hold his kingdom.” The old Imam swayed, eyes closed. “You cannot kill a jinni, and of them, the Marid is the most powerful. But you can weaken him and perhaps break the pact the redhead witch has with him.”

Akbari leaned close and whispered. “Allah Akbar, forge a ring.”

Sweat ran down
Ammad’s face. “Yes. Yes. Do it. I’ll need all the power I can muster against this thing.” He composed himself. The group settled down, and he sat. Akbari placed a green turban on his head and edged in on Ammad’s right.

“Back to the subject,” Ammad said. “We must strike where we can destroy the evangelists who can incite the citizens by preaching false
doctrine. Also, we must keep as many Pendletons as we can here. We can convert them by the sword and use their testimonies as positive propaganda.”

The old Imam raised his hand. “The how is the question. We preach peace. So we come to power peacefully. The wonderful thing about the Global Realm is that none of the bad news
travels across the world. When our plan was discovered and the missiles fired, London, Balmoral, and Rome suffered minor damage. The Pendletons will be in one of those places or scattered among the three. The evangelists will be in Dallas. We strike with SWAT teams. Seek out our enemies. Kill or imprison them. And proclaim a peaceful Realm
without mentioning the incidents.”

Crafty, Ammad thought. There are many things I won’t mention, even to you, old man.

#  

Akbari rose from his incantations. The oven, heated to 2200 degrees Fahrenheit, held the mixture of iron and brass ready for pouring. The inside liner of
super-duty, high alumina hardened air-rammed material had done its job to perfection. A *model* sculpted from wax with all the details he wanted the ring to have was prepared. He dipped the wax ring into a glass ceramic powder and fired the mold. As the wax evaporated in the oven, the mold shattered exposing the ring.

Trimmed, buffed, and
polished using a high speed dremel-type tool, Akbari held up his recreation of Solomon’s ring. “As of old, the power of the ring shall protect my master from the power of the Marid. He shall be victorious over the she-devil. Allah Akbar.”
Chapter 22

“Now that you’re settled here,” Pope Peter said. “Let your family know. Help them coordinate the evacuation plans. Use your contacts from here to assist in a maximum turnout when the ships are ready to depart.”

“You’re right,” Pendleton said. “My inner
circle should know. I also should throw my weight toward Chui and support his defection.”

Too late for that. And not in My plan for you.

Pope Peter’s head tilted.

“I thought I heard something.”

Pendleton smiled, but remained silent. He had his orders. There would be only a little time to help muster the
word to the Christian communities that an evacuation was underway. He felt like a heavy load had been lifted off him. He wasn’t a ruler anymore. He was a servant. Why didn’t God want him to support Chui? No point second guessing God. He dialed George and noticed in the right hand box that all the regional governors and official personnel were
gone from his list. Ammad moved quickly, the slimy rat.

“Father, where the hell are you?”

“Not for you to know. Ammad’s moving fast, replacing his enemies as quickly as possible. My official line to the government is gone.”

He heard a sly chuckle.

“Our phones have a name memory backup.”
George said. “Connor had them installed for just such an occasion.”

He heard Connor in the background say, “Someone has to be the brains in the family.”

“The problem is,” George continued. “You can only make a call to an individual once, and the master tracking system will turn off that connection.”
“I want to help insure that as many Christians as possible get on those transports.”

Silence. He supposed George was evaluating the situation.

“All right,” George’s breath came in short rasps. “I’ll have Hans call the teams at each location to have a speaker hooked up for a broadcast from you. That way
you can make one call and be heard by as many as can be brought to one place. And Father . . .”

“Oh.”

“London, Balmoral, Rome, and Dallas are the four targets Edison predicts Ammad will strike. He or an emissary will come in peace. But, he’ll have a strike force to capture or kill the people he fears most.”
“Does Ammad know where Edison is?”

“No. If he did, we’d be cooked.” George paused. “I don’t even know where Edison is. Thaddeus Cline and his team are the only ones in the know. Save for the workers stationed there.”

“All right. I’ll try to contact you later.”

“Or, I’ll call you when Hans has made all the
Cline. Why hadn’t he thought of Cline earlier? He called Cline and got an abrupt. “What!”

“It’s me, Arthur.”

“They’re after me. I’m on a Supersonic to Rome. I’m going to Vatican City to seek refuge.” Cline sighed.

“Arthur, twelve of my teammates are dead. Three are with me. I can’t talk
further until I’m safe. I’ll call you when . . . if I make it to the Vatican.”

The line disconnected.

“I heard,” Pope Peter said. “I’ll have a security detail meet him at the station.”

#

Cline examined his phone. *Damn. Arthur can’t call me again.*

He had one chance
when he reached Rome to give his boss the information he needed. Things had gone horribly wrong in London. Ammad, the scourge of the earth, came smiling and waving to the populace. He preached peace and prosperity. He told the people not to fear. The transition of government would be peaceful. He apologized for the missile attack of a few
weeks earlier. Blaming a missed communication between two satellites in orbit.

People believed him. Global Realm media presented events on a need to know basis. The brief military exchange between Ammad’s people and Global forces didn’t make a ripple, except in the cities affected.

Cline and his team were
finishing instructions to Harry on entering the underground living centers advance crews had built under the Martian surface when an intruder alarm sounded. He disconnected the call and headed for the Center’s emergency exit chute, grabbing his file on Edison as he went. Whatever Ammad’s men were firing at his people, the weapon made no noise.
Only the results—body parts and blood remained etched in Cline’s mind.

Three of his team escaped with him, the last man closing and locking the chute’s door as he left. Within an hour, the four men were on the Supersonic heading for Rome. Cline had no time to warn anyone, except the crew guarding Edison. They in turn would
gather together the well-trained force prepared by Peacock and Connor themselves. A hundred bodies strong to hold off an attack, if Edison was ever found.

But who would look around Supai, Arizona? Located at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, about four miles outside Supai, and built into the rock, Edison operated in an environmentally perfect
world of its own. Guarded by fifteen Global Realm combat units loyal to the old regime, the brains of the world continued to function as though nothing had happened.

Why did the citizenry accept this asshole, Ammad? In Cline’s opinion, the world had made advances by working together that surpassed what mankind
could have done without Pendleton in 500 years. But the main complaint was simple. No one’s ego got stroked. Yes, there were certain privileges earned by rank, but no fame or accolades went with performance. People lived well, but felt used.

Ammad’s mouth flowed with honey and sugar every time it opened. The man was
the Devil, and few citizens realized it. Luckily, all the programming for the Mars missions was in Edison’s possession. Edison had analyzed the water in the Martian soil. Even at the equator, it was 5% water by weight. In the arctic regions, 60% water by weight. And the computer developed technology that baked water out of the soil to make it
available.

Sunlight at the Martian equator was about equal to that of Norway. And there was enough nitrogen and all the other elements needed to make fertilizers and so forth. So Edison determined that water, along with Mars' plentiful carbon dioxide, would make it feasible to grow food and other plants to make products such as
clothing, at least in some regions.

Mars produced enough geothermal power underground. Utilizing that power source, plus any exploratory combustion, nuclear, or hydroelectric power, mankind could sustain a population on Mars for several centuries. So crews drilled for access to geothermal heat, hoping they
might also find liquid water as well.

They hunted for structures underground, where that power could be harnessed and a mini-world could be colonized. Protected in a temperature controlled environment, humanity had a chance. Only Edison had all the details. Those biospheres had to hook up and leave before Edison was discovered.
and disabled, or mankind would be held prisoner on Earth until all human life ceased.

There has to be another computer.

Cline’s mind ran rampant with possibilities. To arm space modules, develop high power weaponry for his terrorists, and win an Edison-generated leadership exam took scientific prowess
Ammad did not possess. Once safe inside the Vatican, he’d communicate with Edison and determine the likelihood. God help us if he was right and Ammad did possess an Edison-type computer.
Chapter 23

Pendleton greeted Thaddeus Cline, as Cline was escorted into the Pope’s quarters by the papal guard. Soon after Pope Peter led them to a place of safety. At least for the time being.

“Inside the Vatican are places only a few in the Holy See know,” Pope Peter said,
as he, Pendleton, Duarte, and Cline headed into the Sacristy & Treasury Museum and passed the list of Popes buried in Saint Peter’s. “We need seclusion. I’ve had my people clear the Sacristy for us.”

Pendleton’s mouth dropped open as Peter led them down the corridor to the Sacristy and across to an altar with candles brightly burning.
Twisted columns rose on each side. High above, a clock chimed noon.

Peter edged down and pushed a small button at the base of a picture of Jesus being taken off the cross. A grinding noise accompanied the movement of the altar, as it slid a few feet forward revealing a narrow staircase leading downward. Peter descended a few steps and
turned on a light. Then Pendleton and the rest followed. Once all had reached the lower room, Peter pushed another button and the altar slide back into place.

“Good God,” Pendleton quipped. “Right out of the legends of the Knights Templar.”

Peter chuckled.

“Nothing so sinister. But this is a useful place to hide or
seek solitude.”

In a room some twenty feet square sat two sofas, three comfortable leather armchairs, a writing desk complete with computer capabilities, and a full-size bed in case one wished to nap. Pendleton asked. “Water and food?”

Peter smiled. “Some.”

He pulled aside the bed behind which was a small
refrigerator/freezer stocked with enough food for a day or two, not much more. “It’s not the wine cellar, but everybody knows about the wine cellar.”

“You seem pretty spry for your age,” Pendleton said.

“Going down stairs isn’t a problem. Going back up taxes me. But in such times, God provides strength to the weary.”
Duarte, who had been standing next to the staircase, said, “Sir, if George, Harry, and your daughter are to be given instructions, we need to prepare them soon.”

A slight smile curled the corner of his mouth. “To business then.” Pendleton motioned for his companions to sit down.

Duarte took a chair at the desk, while the others
relaxed into the leather armchairs.

“Professor Cline,” Pendleton said. “Tell us where things stand.”

For the next half-hour, Cline related the attack upon his London facilities and his escape from Ammad’s forces. Then he changed the subject to his suspicion of the second computer. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. Ammad
scored well on the tests from the beginning. But not the top 1%. How else could he have accomplished what he did?” Pendleton considered the possibility. “If so, he’ll make finding Edison his top priority.”

“Hence his attempt to capture me.” Cline pulled the file he’d left London with up into his lap. Opening it, he spread out the plans Edison
developed for launching the biospheres and docking them to their transport ships.

“These papers showing the location of Edison and the location of the biosphere launchings are what Ammad desires, even more than killing you and Laverna.”

Pendleton feared Ammad had accomplished half that task already. “How can we stop him?”
“What military forces do we have?” Pendleton shook his head. “The rules of the Global Realm are airtight. All protective and security personnel are under the rule of the First Citizen and his appointees.”

“So we’re screwed.” Cline closed his file and tapped the corner against his palm. “Edison’s protection-
personnel report to your daughter. They are loyal to you. But eventually, Edison will be found. Our job is to delay that from happening as long as possible to allow for the launches to take place.”

“How will that be accomplished?” Pope Peter asked.

“How to delay the enemy or how the launches will proceed?”
“Both.” Peter chuckled.
“There are some 40,000 Christians here in Rome alone who desire to depart.”

“Harry Pendleton and Obadiah Abu positioned the major biospheres on launch pads, twenty-five in all.”

Cline smiled broadly.
“Tomorrow morning the first launches will take place. By week’s end, all units will be in orbit, and our teams will
begin connecting and testing the life support systems. All launches will be accomplished with lighter-than-air technology.”

“Mr. Pendleton and I had the pleasure of taking a ride in one of the lighter than air shuttlemcrats at least twenty years ago.” Duarte’s eyes glistened. “A remarkable memory during my time with the First Citizen.”
“Yes,” Cline said. “And the technology has leaped since then. The new shuttlecrafts are ten times more advanced than the one you rode in. We have over a hundred being readied to carry Christians to their waiting space crafts for the journey to Mars.” He frowned. “Even so, the evacuation will take weeks.” Pendleton jerked his
head left. “Why would Ammad wish to detain us? You’d think he’d be delighted to be rid of us.”

“The run-of-the-mill Christian doesn’t interest him.” Cline sighed.

“Leadership does. What a prize—a feather in his cap to have Arthur Pendleton convert to Islam on Global television.”

Pendleton’s mind
darkened. Ammad had Lovey. If he managed to capture George, Harry, and Connor, Pendleton would be at his mercy. But he must leave an intervention to God. He had his orders, and he must obey them regardless.

# Hans Van Meer wrung his hands as he circled his office in Balmoral for the umpteenth time. George had
gone with Connor to join up with Harry and Obi. His communication with the world grew narrower by the hour. Edison still functioned, controlling the areas it was connected to, but those connections were rapidly being pulled down by Ammad’s people. Soon, only the core security protocols would be left until Ammad’s team finally found Edison
and shut the computer down. A tear moistened his cheek. He yearned for Felicia’s presence to no avail. He had no one, but Michael Ziebach. His value to the Global Realm had ended. Before Connor ordered her brother to go with her, she summoned all her assets with a call to Cher. When he asked what he could do, she responded by touching his
arm lovingly and saying, “Ammad is in London. Cline has run, but is still communicating with the launch teams. When Ammad comes here, you must delay him without revealing where any of us went.”

So here he was. A blooming decoy—a dead duck, actually. Fine kettle of fish. His pacing increased. His security team surrounded
the Balmoral Complex with orders to cooperate with the enemy. The tactic of passive resistance didn’t sit well with him. But like a good #2, he’d set up the line for Pendleton, wherever he was, to address the Christian community for the last time.

“I’ve lived a damn good life,” he said aloud to no one. “Helped create a new society out of a bunch of greedy
idiots. I did.”

The sound of his own voice grated on his nerves. The glory days ended with Felicia’s death. The past was past, and the future—bleak as a fish’s bones drying in the sun. He glanced out the window. Snow in early October? The longer he watched, the harder the snow fell. Maybe the European Ice Age had moved to the west.
Regardless, it was symbolic of the times. Maybe he should convert to Christianity. At least he could hang on to some delusion of happiness.

Ziebach opened the door and wheeled in. “Ammad is approaching from the south.”
Chapter 24

“Prepare to enter Balmoral,” Akbari said, as he rode next to his boss. The convoy of vehicles coming up from London seemed strange to onlookers. Rarely did vehicles travel on roads. Supersonics, elite aircraft, and pollution-free ocean craft were the main transportation
methods. Ammad stood in the back seat of a converted limousine and waved to the workers on the 50,000 acre estate and those leaning out over the parapets of Balmoral Complex.

Ammad knew the significance of the place. Pendleton drew the highest ranking officials here when he married Laverna Smythe, the redhead witch. Now
Ammad had come to gloat. By all accounts, Pendleton and his family were still here, and with forceful persuasion, they would come to their senses and urge their followers to fall in line.

Of course, Pendleton didn’t know about Peacock’s escape. How could he? That would be Ammad’s calling card. Bow the knee and spare your wife. Ammad never
studied the jinn or the black arts. Humans were made of clay, angels of light, and the jinn of smokeless fire. His education centered on the Twelve Imams and his role after them. He left the rest to Akbari.

A microphone was set just outside the entrance gate. Ammad disembarked his vehicle and approached the microphone, as Global
Broadcasting interrupted their programming to broadcast his speech. “I am here at Balmoral today to meet with Arthur Pendleton, our former First Citizen, and forge a peaceful transition of government. I’ll receive a debriefing on matters of vital importance to the survival of our planet.”

# As Ammad waxed
eloquently, Hans Van Meer descended the staircase to the castle’s main floor. He, Ziebach, and their delegation proceeded out of the castle and onto the grounds in the center of the complex to wait for Ammad’s entrance.

“Be cordial and professional,” Ziebach instructed the entourage. “Give the bastard’s people the Global information they
require. Say not one word about Arthur or his family. Answer any personal questions with a ‘You’ll have to speak to Mister Van Meer.’”

Van Meer stiffened as the doors to the outside of Balmoral Castle opened. What would Ammad do—try to convert him, imprison him, or torture him? None of those tactics would work. Van
Meer’s training remained rock solid. He could withstand until death if need be.

*Rotten piece of luck.*

Ammad’s caravan entered the inner courtyard as huge crowds gathered. Here to see the spectacle, Van Meer thought. Akbari led the entrance procession followed by Ammad, who was surrounded by security
Akbari’s outfit seemed ridiculous to Van Meer—something straight out of the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*. On his robes, every symbol of Islam, the star and crescent moon in emerald and in gold and the Farsi name for Allah. There was no question the half of the Global Realm under Ammad’s control would be a religious state.
Ammad had shed his Global attire for a Qutwani cloak, looking more like a Jew than a Persian. His white head-covering accentuated his tanned handsome face. Van Meer attempted to recall the significance of the clothing, but the sheer gaudiness of the procession distracted him.

As Akbari stood aside and Ammad strutted up to
him, Van Meer said, “Where’s the party? Had I known I was to where a costume, I’d have put on my Richard the Lionhearted outfit.”

The expression Van Meer saw on his enemy’s face changed from an insincere smile to a scowl. Ammad glanced down, presumably checking to see if his microphone had been
removed. “Watch your words, mouthpiece, if you value your life.”

In his many meetings with Ammad, Van Meer had never heard this voice before—deep, sinister, almost satanic. His body shivered from the sound. Not a person who believed in the angels or demons, Van Meer’s outlook received a blow to its core. Unbelievable evil had
revealed itself. He’d trained for the physical world, not the supernatural. His spirit shriveled in an instant.

“Now shake my hand, smile, and we’ll go into the castle with my prime minister. The rest will stay outside.”

Van Meer did as instructed. He motioned to Ziebach to stay where he was. His jest about Richard the
Lionhearted and the Crusades still stuck in his throat. Once inside Balmoral, Ammad headed into Van Meer’s office as though it were his own. “Where is Arthur Pendleton? Why does he insult me by sending his—how do you Brits put it—lackey to greet me?”

“I haven’t the foggiest where he is. He left a few days ago and hasn’t been
heard from since.”

“Don’t lie to me.” Ammad swung into Van Meer’s leather chair and cracked his knuckles. “Where is his family then?”

“Gone as well. God knows where.” He told the truth. They were gone, and God, if there was a God, knew where. Van Meer did not.

Akbari seemed to grow
in stature. He grabbed Van Meer by the nape of the neck and closed his eyes.

“He’s telling the truth,” he said to Ammad, releasing his grip on Van Meer.

“You, then, are the highest ranking official of the old guard left here.”

Ammad’s icy stare froze Van Meer’s spirit. “You will sign this order officially ending his administration. Now!”
“It’s just a formality anyway,” Van Meer said and studied the document. “You’re not original. These are the exact same words used when bestowing power on Arthur.”

“They suit my purpose. He had the power to set up the Realm his way. Now I have the power to change the way the Realm operates.”

“Only half of it,” Van
Meer quipped and signed the document.

“A temporary situation,” Ammad responded. He examined the signature closely. “So, will you make a public statement in support of my government?”

“No. But I won’t make a public statement against it.”

Ammad handed three books he had hidden inside
his cloak to Van Meer. “Here are the Quran, the \textit{Al Jafr}, and the \textit{Tawrat}. I will allow you to educate yourself. Then I will demand a pledge or you will pay the consequences.”

Van Meer gulped as his enemies left. He owned a Bible. He’d read that first. With no power, no personal life, and his friends save Ziebach either dead or gone, he had the time.
“Who am I now?” Peacock asked the angel as she strolled along a path inside the Vatican Gardens.

“God calls you Donna.”

“Not Laverna Pendleton.” She laughed. She laughed a lot lately. “Of course not, Laverna Smythe Pendleton is a lie. I am who I was born to be.”
“You are almost transformed into the eternal.”
She saw the angel’s eyes glimmer gold and white.
“Only one more thing to do here. What you learned as Peacock will become profoundly important.”
“I still can’t believe God loves me so much.” She wanted to weep recalling her former life. “I’ve been the worst sinner in the world.”
The angel laughed. The sound seemed like water skipping over rocks. “All who have repented feel that way. But God knew what you would do from before He created you. He knew you would turn to Him. You raised children who walk in His ways. You proclaim His name unashamed. You are not perfected, but you will be.”
She warmed. “Am I dead? Am I alive? I’m certainly not human anymore. Humans don’t go through solid matter.”

The angel patted her arm. “You think too much. Let’s just say you are alive in a state far better than you were in before now.”

Well, his answer didn’t really explain things. She guessed it didn’t matter. She
saw people and objects. Sometimes they saw her. But only when the angel allowed. A part of her wished she could go to God and sing at His throne. Another part desired to see her husband again. A vision entered her mind. She stood between her husband and the devil, and the devil could do no harm.

The angel pointed at one of several video screens
set up around Vatican City.

“Listen and watch. Your husband is about to perform the last act God asks of him.”

“I’m proud of him,” she said. Her angel smiled.
Chapter 25

“Your network feed is up.” Cline pointed to Pendleton’s microphone. “Say what you have to say. I don’t know how long before the enemy cuts the line.”

Pendleton took a deep breath and stepped up to the microphone. He didn’t understand technology all that
well. How this worked was a mystery to him. Here goes, he thought. “My fellow Christians in the faith, I believe all who are meant to hear me now hear my voice. Do not hesitate. Follow the orders of your pastors and our transportation crews. Leave this planet as soon as you are able. A new world awaits you. The biospheres will sustain you during your flight
and beyond. Our scientists have created livable conditions in several underground locations on Mars.”

“You have maybe ten seconds,” Cline said. “The line is being disconnected.”

“Assembly of the biospheres to the motherships is going on now. Transports will be ready to shuttle you within a few hours.”
“Line’s cut.” Cline smiled a thin smile. “Good job.”

Pendleton threw his hook-up on the floor and shook his head. “That’s all I can do.”

“No, that’s not all.” Pope Peter hurried up to him and gave him a loving embrace. “You can prepare for the onslaught here in Rome and see that the
shuttles clear every believer who wishes to go out of here.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“I have word from Balmoral.” Cline raised up his phone, showing a replay of Ammad’s speech. “Van Meer signed the official order turning power over to the devil.”

“Don’t blame him. He had no choice.” Pendleton
bowed his head. “Pray for his soul.”

Cline’s body trembled. “Our London operations have been raided and Balmoral put up no resistance. But Rome and the Dallas Complex will be a bloody mess. The word from my sources says that large contingents of Global Security Forces are on their way across the Mediterranean Sea. They’ll come here. I
imagine Ammad has another force heading to Dallas in North America.”

“How much time do you think we have?” Pope Peter asked.

“A week tops,” Cline said. “They’ll land, organize, and march north. We have some forces, the Swiss Guard and the Christian militias loyal to Pendleton. But they’ll only slow down the enemy.”
“Just so they slow them long enough for our people to board the transports,” Peter replied. “Workers are busy finishing a shuttle port at the Rome Central Supersonic Terminal. Non-Christians refuse to help, but they won’t hinder us for fear of reprisals.”

Pendleton’s cell buzzed, startling the three. “Yes?” “It’s me, Hans.”
“I heard things have been rough for you.”

“He’s the devil. I felt the evil. I have nothing here to stop him. He’s going after you, Arthur. Run. If you stay in one place, Ammad will find you.”

Pendleton gulped.

“How did you get to me? I thought you were blocked.”

“I called upon a friend in Beijing,” Van Meer said.
“They’re still connected to Edison and programming security blocks to stop the enemy’s attempts to damage communications.”

“I need to speak to my children.” Pendleton inhaled a deep breath. “If they’re running the show on the evacuation, I need a status report.”

“George is connected to Chui’s people. You should be
able to reach him.”

“I used my one chance. I don’t have another.”

“Have you ever called Harry? They should be together.”

Pendleton furrowed his brow. Why hadn’t he thought of that possibility? He had that call left. “Right you are. A call to Harry it is. And Hans take care of yourself.”

#
Connor jumped when Harry’s cell buzzed. Nerves frayed beyond her point of control, her training kicked in to steady her.

“Yes,” Harry said. He pulled his hand over the receiver and mouthed. *It’s Dad.*

Harry handed the phone to Connor.

“Can I speak to George?”
“It’s me. George is working with the away sites on timing the shuttle flights.” The silence confirmed her feelings that *Dad* didn’t view her brother or herself as worthy to talk to. “Well?”

“All right. I need a status report. How ready are we to completely evacuate? I doubt we have more than a few days. Hans says a week tops.”
Connor heard her mother’s words from long ago when she was twelve.

“Your dad loves you all equally, sweetie. But he can’t relate to women like he can to men. Only his mother will he listen to.”

“Not to you, Mom?” she’d asked.

“He’ll listen, and do what he wants to. But then, so do I.”
Connor sighed. “Most of the departure sites are set to go. But that’s because there’s no resistance coming. If you’re back in London, at Balmoral, Rome, or Dallas, it will be touch-and-go. He wants you, and he’ll kill anyone in his way to get to you. So, where are you?”

“Tell me where you are first.”

Ugh! Why was his need
to know more important? But despite his manner, she loved him, and now wasn’t the time to challenge him. She’d been disobedient enough of late.

“We’re with Edison outside Supai, Arizona with three hundred trained warriors, including Mom’s personal guards.”

“How did you know Edison’s location?”

“Cline gave George a
general idea. And you know George. He didn’t tell anyone until it became necessary.”

“You’re in the right place, Connor, if you want to die for humanity. I’d prefer you live to a good old age.”

“Nonetheless, this is where we are. Thanks to Chui and his intelligence people, we discovered the actual coordinates.” She paused. If Chui could find Edison,
eventually, Ammad could too. “So where are you?”
  “I’m in Rome. Pope Peter is a fine host, and Thad Cline is with us.”
  Connor added up where each family member was and concluded, “We’re in the worst possible places. Hans is in Balmoral, we’re here outside of Supai, and you’re in Rome with Cline and the Pope. Once Ammad finds out
where Edison is, we’ll all be under attack.”

“Promise me. When it’s time to board a shuttle, you’ll go.”

“I promise, Dad.” The truth couldn’t be told. If she did her job, the last person to leave from her location would be her. “I’ll see you on the mothership.”

“Thanks for the update, sweetie. I’ll see you there.”
He hung up.

Connor trembled.

Where was her mother? She couldn’t duplicate herself and be in four places at once. She had her brothers, her husband, and Edison to protect. Because of their location, the shuttles would come to them last. Harry looked at her with a left out again mope on his face. She gave him a breath taking hug.
“You’re my hero, little brother. We can’t make it on Mars without you.”

#

Three large men wearing camouflage uniforms and Global Realm head coverings surrounded Hans Van Meer, a virtual captive in his own residence. Before him they had placed a live video feed. The screen showed Atash Akbari holding
an axe over the head of Michael Ziebach.

“Where is Edison?’ he asked.

“I don’t know,” Ziebach spit. “I wouldn’t tell you if I did.”

“One last chance.”

“Go to hell.” Ziebach closed his eyes. “Lord Jesus, receive my soul.”

Akbari swung his axe, cleaving off his head at the
shoulders. The video faded to black.

“You have until tomorrow to give us the information we want,” one of the thugs in Van Meer’s room said, and the three men left.

Acid caused Van Meer to cough. Ziebach proved to be a loyal and faithful friend. These bastards were ruthless. If Christians were right, Van Meer’s soul was in trouble.
He’d read the Bible and the books Ammad left him. He had some serious thinking to do and not very long to arrive at an answer.
Chapter 26
George Pendleton
edged along the rocky slope between the cave entrance to the Edison facility and the landing pad for Shuttle 12—the transport coming for the lab personnel and his family when this exodus ended. Thank God for Chui. Coordinating the launches
from the Grand Canyon gave his team time to do the job right, before Ammad came down upon them with every man in the Western Hemisphere he could recruit. Connor had prepared the defenses remarkably well. Once Harry and Obi delivered the biospheres and set up the launch times, they departed for Supai and were there in 24 hours. George and
Connor abruptly left Van Meer and traveled 18 hours to join the others. Ammad’s people couldn’t be everywhere at once. Ammad was organized, but not that organized.

Travel by Supersonic across the Bering Straits took time. The trip slowed again across Alaska. But the Juneau to Vegas leg regained some lost time. Ammad’s men
couldn’t track them amongst millions of other travelers on Global Realm business. Outside of the infighting among the elite of the Realm, life in the world ran as it had for the past 25 years.

Once in Vegas, the Pendleton children took the Grand Canyon shuttle to the Havasupai Trail. They proceeded by mule down into the canyon. When they
reached the bottom, they entered the town of Supai. Connor’s security team and select guards from Edison’s protection force awaited them at the town gate. How she’d communicated with them all she never told George. It didn’t matter. He felt a thousand times safer with Cher, Ming and Bruegman there.

The residence of Supai
had regressed back to the Dark Ages. Might made right in this desolate place. Families had no loyalty to one another, and the fittest made slaves of the weak. Some agriculture existed. But life depended on the flooding of the Havasu Creek. George had counted close to a hundred-fifty people across the area. The women outnumbered the men, but
were herded by the strong like cattle. This was the world outside the Global Realm’s control. Millions of humans lived this way all across the globe, if living was the correct term.

George examined the shuttle landing area as crews packed and pounded the soil into a smooth surface. As ready as we’re going to be, he thought. Extending the
timetable into the future, they would leave in six days, a day longer than safety allowed. If only Cline was onsite, but he was in Rome and had problems of his own.

A glance over his shoulder caused George to stiffen. The indigenous population had spotted him and two brave souls were edging their way up the slope toward his location. He fired
his weapon at a part of the Wigleeva Rock formation sending it downward to block their ascent. He made his way back to the lab to run the data again, hoping upon hope he could find a way to secure a shuttle sooner.

#

“Let us assess where we are.” Ammad glared at his advisers until not one could raise his eyes to meet
Ammad’s stare. “The Jews are waiting for my arrival in Jerusalem to inspect their preparations for the building of the temple. I can’t afford to have any leaks about what is happening to Christian leaders, and specifically about my search for Pendleton and Edison. These events can’t reach the ears of the population.”

“It’s general knowledge
that the Christians are leaving as part of the Mars colonization project,” one Imam said.

“That’s a separate issue.” Ammad cracked a wicked grin. “We’re allowing their departure, except for their leaders. Those in Rome, London, and the Dallas Complex who are zealous against us must not be allowed to go. That includes
the Pope and Pendleton. I have a feeling when we find Edison we’ll find Pendleton’s children and the redheaded witch.”

“What of Van Meer?”

“He converts or dies.”

Ammad grew more powerful with each passing day.

“Balmoral has been neutralized without a global ripple. London has a few of Cline’s people to be
accounted for as yet, but generally, the Complex has been running normally. We will find the rest of Cline’s loyalists and offer them the same opportunity we’ve offered Van Meer. Someone will crack.”

At that moment, Akbari rushed into the room, adjusting his turban as he came. “I’m sorry I’m late. Pendleton and Cline are in
Rome. Sayyid detected a communication from Pendleton to his son, Harry. Pendleton is definitely in Rome.”

“And Harry?” Ammad asked.

“Somewhere on the North American continent. Somewhere either underground or below sea level. Sayyid’s guess, a four hundred mile radius within
the former states of California, Nevada, and Arizona.”

“Where they are, Edison is.” Blood rushed to Ammad’s head. His heartbeat increased. “Begin immediate transport of our most highly skilled combatants to that area. Land them at the Vegas Complex. Once we know the exact location, we’ll destroy them and Edison with them.”
“Ammad,” Atash Akbari whispered. “You must catch the Supersonic to Jerusalem in twenty minutes. Allow me to administer justice to Hans Van Meer with your approval.”

“Granted.” Ammad rose to leave. Supersonic or not, the ride from the Basra Complex to Jerusalem wasn’t as long as the trip from Jerusalem’s outskirts to...
selected temple grounds next to the Dome of the Rock. Each time he traveled to the former Nation of Israel, the crowds welcoming him grew. Today, he hoped to win the hearts of both Palestinians and Jews alike toward the idea of unifying the children of Shem.

#

A sliver of light crept into Van Meer’s room at
Balmoral Castle, a bittersweet moment for him. His last sunrise most likely, and yet the light brought a hope he couldn’t find in the darkness. Around four in the morning, he’d given himself over to Christ, reciting from the Psalms, “O Lord my God, in You I put my trust; Save me from all those who persecute me; And deliver me.”

A growing peace filled
him. He knew his spirit dwelt with God. His soul and a new body would follow, but not before the devil demanded his life. He’d regretted his past—wasted on worldly goals and pleasures. But with what short time he had left, he would serve his Lord the best he could.

At noon, the door to his room opened. The same three men who had threatened him
the day before led him out through his sitting room into the 1st floor grounds near the terrace. There in the open air three flags had been set up, the Official Flag of the Global Realm, the Global Realm Peace Flag, a light-blue flag with a white dove carrying an olive branch, and Ammad’s official flag, a green flag with a red-crescent moon and a white star etched
on black.

In front of the flags, a hooded giant dressed in black stood next to a chopping block with an axe in his hand. His face was covered so only his eyes and mouth could be seen. There were cameras and video feeds stationed around the yard.

Does he really intend to bring attention to this?

“Your execution will be
broadcast only to Muslim-controlled complexes,” one of the men holding him said.

“Good morning, Hans.” Akbari’s voice sounded from the speakers closest to Van Meer. “Will you join us and declare allegiance to Ammad, the Chosen, and his Global Realm government?”

Hearing that proclamation sickened Van Meer. He wet his lips and
responded, “I will continue my allegiance to the Global Realm. But I do not acknowledge the existence of a chosen religious leader.”

“He is the newly elected First Citizen, Ammad al-Sistani.”

“He can choose to call himself whatever he wants, but I do not believe in an Islamic prophet or in Islam.”

“Well, if you are loyal
to the Global Realm, please reveal the location of Edison. Our people need access to it for the good of our citizens.”

Van Meer tried to get a visual on Akbari, but only his voice came through. He wasn’t anywhere nearby. “As I said before, I don’t know where Edison is.”

“Do you know how to reach Thaddeus Cline?”

“No.”
“Arthur Pendleton?”
“I tried. My cell won’t recall his number.”
Akbari teased him, asking the same question about every member of Pendleton’s family. Van Meer answered no to all his questions.

“This is your last chance. You seem to be the least informed former candidate for First Citizen the
world has ever seen. Do you accept and declare allegiance to Ammad, the Chosen and his Global Realm government?”

“My answer is the same. I do not believe in an Islamic prophet.”

“Axe man, carry out your duty.”

Van Meer’s body shook as he tried to pray. Praying wasn’t his strong point. A
hand forced him to his knees. “Lord Jes. . .”

A clamp secured his neck to the block and cut off his wind. Receive my. . .

Akbari clapped his hands and danced before Ammad’s advisors. “Put his head on the highest spire next to Michael Ziebach. Leave it there until it rots.”

#
“You will need all the skill of Peacock now.” Custos sat on a hillside bench looking down at the Rome Complex and the entrance to Saint Peters Square.

“May I ask you a question?” Peacock said, wondering about the future of her husband. “Arthur will be in Heaven with me. He murdered millions. I will be there as well. I broke every
commandment. How can this be?"

"Not everyone who knows Jesus is Lord will enter the Kingdom of God." Custos shrugged. "But only those who place their trust in Him and follow Him. Both you and Arthur tried to please God. You failed. Yet like David, you repented."

"But I failed so often."

"Yet you tried. Think of
yourself before you accepted Christ. Did you follow Him?”

“No. I was too angry to follow Him.”

“And now?”

“Now my conscience bothers me when I stray, and I ask forgiveness.”

“And that’s the difference between the saved and the unsaved. They are too proud to accept Jesus as Lord, even though they know
in their hearts He is.’” Custos sighed. “The Lord weeps at the loss of every human soul. But they choose disobedience, because they refuse to be held accountable to any power higher than themselves. Even though they know they sin before God.”

Peacock reasoned out what the angel had said. “So because I try to follow Christ, and I place my faith in Him,
I’m saved.”

“Faith comes first. Your good deeds second. For without faith, your works are nothing.”

“I’m going to face Ammad. Even knowing I’m saved, I’m afraid.”

“In the Garden at Gethsemane, Jesus feared what was coming. But He obeyed God.”

“And you’ll be there?”
“No. I’ll be near.” Custos held her hand. “God, Himself, will be with you.”
Chapter 27

Ammad waved to the crowds gathered on the Haolan Road. His caravan of vehicles turned through the Dung Gate into the Jewish Quarter and headed toward the West Wall. Hundreds of Hebrew clerics and the seventy from the Sanhedrin greeted him as he stepped out.
of the limousine that brought him.

Rabbi Levinson, a wide smile gracing his face, locked Ammad in a brotherly embrace. The swine’s touch sickened him, but Ammad returned the hug. A few years from now, Levinson would either bow to him or die like Van Meer had done. Arrogant Hebrew believers weren’t brothers, only those who
dropped their faith in favor of money and power could serve his purpose.

“So show me the plans and the instruments for the sacrifices.”

Levinson rolled out a long scroll on a cedar table inside the construction pavilion, a portable structure covered with tarps. “So to rebuild the new temple in Jerusalem all the instruments
that will be used for the sacrifices have been precisely recreated. Red heifers, required for purification of the sanctuary and the people, are bred. We have pure reds. Now that peace exists, only a disagreement among us Jews whether Elijah needs to come first to oversee the building project is still in dispute.”

“"I’ll settle this. Call your people together."
Levinson scurried about hustling as many elders as he could inside to hear Ammad. When they had gathered, Ammad asked. “How many here await Elijah?”

Some twenty hands shot up.

“Do you trust God?”
“Yes,” they cried.
One man uttered. “It’s you I’m not sure of.”

Ammad tilted his head
and shrugged—a move familiar to the Jews as meaning, *I get your point.* “If you trust God, and you know He can do anything He wishes. Then rely on that. God promised Elijah would return. If now is the time, he will. Until then, build your temple.”

He turned to Levinson. “Send me a list of everything you lack, and Global
distribution will deliver the materials to you.” He stretched out his arms and asked, “Does anyone disagree?”

Only one hand went up, Rabbi Shamir, the same one who opposed him in Tel Aviv. Ammad had him on his list. A painful death would follow when this was over. “So begin, and may Allah be gracious to you.”
Levinson reddened and replied. “Yahweh willing, we will be finished in forty-two months.”

Ammad left the pavilion and headed to meet with administrators at The Dome of the Rock. He chuckled as he imagined the axe severing Van Meer’s neck.

“It’s what you get when you fail to bend the knee.” He said aloud. His words never
reached another human ear.

#

The buzzing of his cell startled Pendleton from a deep sleep. He rolled over to see George’s name on his screen. “How did you manage to make this call?”

“Edison’s figuring out the rogue computer’s operating pattern and undoing some of the damage. If you can get Cline on the line, he
might be able to help us gain more control.”

Clearly, he didn’t have top priority even in his own son’s life. No, how is it going, Dad? No, I love you. Just get Cline on the phone. But that was how he’d treated his children went he had pressing business.

“Hold on. I’ll try to wake him.”

He stumbled to the door
and headed down the cold tile floor of the Vatican’s sleeping quarters to Thad’s room. He knocked.

“I’m awake. Come in.”

Realizing he was barefoot, Pendleton opened the door a crack and said, “George found a way to call. Apparently, Edison is undoing some of the rogue computer’s damage, and he wants to talk to you.”
Cline ran to the door and grabbed the phone.

For the next ten minutes the man who once ruled the world stood barefoot in the hall outside Cline’s room with no power except that of a delivery boy. God told him his time was over. Why did he feel so depressed? The immense pride within him couldn’t deal with his loss of power. The thought came to
him to rest in this situation and enjoy God’s peace—a hard thing for a proud man to do.

“Here’s your phone back,” Cline called out as he clumped to the door, his Vatican pajamas looking miserably crumpled. “Come in and have some tea, while I update you.”

“My feet are half frozen.”
“I’ve got the standard pull-ons. One size fits, you know.” Cline tossed him a pair, and Pendleton slipped them on, slouching as he entered Cline’s room. “You look like Ammad’s already put you in prison, or worse yet, ordered your execution.”

Tomorrow, he more than likely would, Pendleton thought.

Cline flipped the switch
on the Eco-Stream Tea dispenser and pushed twice. Two cups dropped into place and hot Earl Grey tea poured out ready to drink. He stirred Pendleton’s and set the cup down on the durable serving table at the far end of the room by the windows. Dawn was still two hours off.

Outside Cline’s window, the vivid lights of the Vatican buildings tossed
rainbows of colors into the night sky. Every steeple on Saint Peter’s Basilica reflected varying hues of yellow and gold, blue and violet, off nearby buildings. The sight calmed Pendleton a bit, as did Cline’s soft smile. The humongous ego that used to be Thaddeus Cline had vanished as the years passed, leaving a stout fellow and good friend in its place.
“Here’s life’s cruel fact. Total control is not possible. Try as you might, Arthur. You can’t maintain power forever.” Cline took a sip, and Pendleton plopped down onto a chair. “You pulled the sword from the stone, and you wielded it well. But times and people change.”

“I don’t need a lecture.”

“No. You need a friend.” Cline sighed and his
lips quivered. “Hans is dead.”

Hearing the words didn’t mean understanding them. Pendleton’s head jerked back like a prizefighter had caught him with an uppercut. The air left his lungs. If he hadn’t been sitting down, he’d have fallen. “I’m alone. Lovey, Milton, and now Hans, all gone.”

Cline touched his hand.
“God is with you. Have you ever confessed your sins? I don’t mean with words. I mean with your heart. Have you ever truly given God control? Did you ask Him what to do before you came here?”

Pendleton shook his head. “The conversation was one way. God told me to come here, and I came.”

Cline tilted his head and
lowered an eyebrow.
    “Don’t you believe me?”
    “If it’s true, show it by being confident. What does the scripture say, ‘If God is for us, who can be against us?’”

    He looked like a schoolmaster. Pendleton glanced to see if Cline had a ruler in his hand with which to swat him. He tried to
respond, but nothing came out.

“Look. I was a rounder and an egotist.” Cline shook his head. “I pushed the button that blew up the United Nations building. Yes, you and I have blood on our hands. God is the only salvation for us. Stop worrying and start doing what you’re told.”

Pendleton nodded.
“With George’s help, Edison reversed much of Ammad’s damage,” Cline said. “But this is only a temporary fix. He opened two lines of communications covering ninety-three primarily Christian complexes. I wrote down the shuttle schedules, and I need you and Pope Peter to record a message for broadcast over each line. Sooner or later
someone will break down and reveal Edison’s location and we’re finished.”

“I should have maintained an army and kept surveillance on the Muslim complexes.”

“Quit your bitching and beating yourself up. Do what you can now. Forget about the past.”

Pendleton squirmed in his seat, pushing his shoulder
blades back against the spindles. “I will. What else did George tell you? You talked for quite a while.”

“If you mean, did he ask about you?” Cline’s comment irritated him. Because it hit home. “He did. He said they all miss you, and for you to do what needs to be done. He also said Connor has prepared to fight to the death. He sees no way out for
us but up—one way or another.”

Pendleton gulped down some tea and fixed himself another cup before saying anything. “I doubt we’ll ever leave this complex. Unless it’s on a shuttle. But I will be the last person out.”

“A noble thought.” Cline bumped his cup against Pendleton’s. “Let God decide that.”
Chapter 28

Howard White didn’t make it to the tunnel when Ammad’s people ransacked Cline’s London laboratory. He hid inside a cabinet until he thought the attackers had gone. A mistake. They found him, pulled him out, and threw him down onto the floor. Since then, he’d been
confined in the dark at the former Blundeston Prison—the only prisoner there in over twenty years. Howard White forgot his name and everything else in his life. He only knew pain.

“This can stop, Howie,” a voice called to him for the umpteenth time. “Where is Edison?”

“Howie, Howie, come home nowie,” he cackled and
drooled a bit. “Yes, Mommy.”

The men surrounding him laughed as the screw man turned the iron handle forward a notch. Howard, caught in a crouch between the iron jaws of a Scavenger’s Daughter, groaned as his ribs cracked a little more. Where is Edison? Where is Edison?

“Soapie, Dopie, I don’t know pee. Somewhere in the
mountains near Soapie.”

“Soapie?” His tormentor wondered.

Then Howard White forgot to breathe.

# Atash Akbari reviewed the tape of White’s last words. He knew his gut feeling shouldn’t be ignored, but he didn’t expect a good result. He called his connection to Sayyid. “Find
any location sounding like Soapie nearby a mountain range.”

Ammad had left the Dubai Complex a few hours earlier to join his forces approaching Rome. Akbari needed this time to find Edison and seal his masters’ fate as supreme ruler of the non-Asian world. Once secure, he could fulfill his plans to enslave the Jews and
defeat the Asian Empire led by Tzu Chui.

His cell buzzed. Rabbi Levinson calling with another request for assistance, he thought. “How can I help you?”

“I need more workers.” Levinson sighed. “Also, I have quarrels among some of the religious workmen that fire will burn them if the time isn’t right. You know how it
is. Two Jews equal three opinions.”

“The quarrels I can’t help you with. Workers I can. How many?”

“Five-hundred. We didn’t have enough precut stone in storage. Thanks to Arthur Pendleton, precut stone is available in quantity, but not near Jerusalem.”

Akbari listened with interest. Pendleton had set in
motion the perfect conditions for projects like this. “You’ll have 500 men from the Greenland prison, plus twenty 200-ton haulers for the additional stone. Satisfied?” “Jews are never satisfied. But appeased, of course.” Akbari disconnected. The ability to transnavigate the globe from anywhere in twenty-four hours made the
impossible twenty-years ago possible now. His cell buzzed again. “Yes.”

“Imam Akbari, Sayyid identified three possible spots for Edison’s location, but two are unthinkable.”

“How so?”

“One is submerged in the Pacific Ocean and the other is in Antarctica.”

Akbari groan. A meager try at best. “And the third?”
“There is a former settlement in the Americans near the Grand Canyon called Supai. A phone communication was exchanged between the Rome Complex and George Pendleton’s cell from a location near Supai only a few hours ago.”

Maybe not a meager try. Maybe genius at work. “Send me everything written about
that area, including military installations the Americans built years ago. Also, give me an analysis of the number of our loyalists in the area.”

“Right away. Allah Akbar.”

The former United States used the American Southwest to test weaponry and had numerous military facilities in close proximity to the Grand Canyon. A sneaky
location for the world’s brainchild. But a logical one. Wipe out Edison and Pendleton’s family at the same time. The beauty of the thought warmed him. But where was the redhead witch? She would be in one of two locations—Rome or with Edison, no question.

Let the Christians who can, leave. Those who remain will conform or else.
Tzu Chui tapped his fingers on his conference table. A quarter of the scheduled shuttle flights worldwide had been completed and their crews had returned to make a second run. One active satellite bank provided him information on ground movements made by Ammad’s forces. With
London and Balmoral falling without a fight, Chui wondered if Rome, Dallas, and Supai would do the same.

“Do we assist our friends, if they put up a fight, or remain neutral?” His gaze moved from advisor to advisor, stopping long enough to make an impression. “Your thoughts.”

A long silence followed before a reluctant hand edged
“Director Sun, you have my attention.”

Sun, a frail man in his eighties, rose unsteadily to his feet. He inhaled a deep breath and spoke in a confident tone. “Fifty missiles will not bring us ultimate victory over the evil one’s forces. They are for tactical—surgical strikes. Agreed?”

Heads nodded. Those in
attendance nervously adjusted themselves in their chairs. Sun waited until they settled.  

“My advice is twofold. First, decide how many missiles we can afford to use in aiding our friends. Second, how will they best strike fear in the heart of our enemy? As Sun Tzu said, ‘When you are far away act as though you are close.’”

Chui held back a smile.
“As to your first point, I doubt more than four or five missiles will be needed. Our task is to delay our enemy, not destroy him. All fifty could not do that. To the second point, the few missiles we fire must be so accurate our enemy will know we can see his every move. He will not strike us back, fearing defeat. He will wait until he can build up stronger forces.”
Sun nodded.

“Precisely.”

He slowly dropped back into his chair.

“Are we together on this?” Chui asked.

There was no opposition.

#

Connor Uba rushed about the mountain enclosure shouting orders to her two-hundred eighty warriors.
She’d divided the forces into four groups, Bruegman, Cher, Ming, and herself heading up one each. “Reports are enemy forces are approaching. One force is planning to scale down the Havasu Canyon walls west of the old Havasupai Nation reservation. The other is approaching the trail we arrived on.”

“How many?” Cher
asked.

    “Harry, how many?”
Ming called out.

    “Oh,” Harry answered in a quiet voice. “Over a thousand troops from each side, we’ve nowhere to go. But we have God. So if I follow Gideon’s lead, we should all go to the river and get a drink of water. We’ll send those who lap the water like a dog away.”
George dashed in through the entrance, face grimy and pants shredded. “The shuttle left the mothership a few minutes ago. With any luck, they’ll land here tomorrow morning. If we can hold off the vultures for twelve hours, we can get the rest of the personnel out of here.”

Connor trembled. The rest of the personnel didn’t
include her teams. That would mean a third trip, and by then, she doubted anyone would be left alive. She nodded and smiled. “Good news. Thank you, big brother. Now keep Edison running and leave the fighting to us.”

“The Havasu River appears blue-green now against the maroon, travertine rocks,” George said. “I had our construction crew plant
two detonators and six sticks of dynamite into the mountainside east of their most likely descent point. They’ll be impossible to see given the coloring. Travertine rock is porous and fragile. The mountain should crack and collapse. I don’t know what the result will be to us in here, but the enemy will receive heavy casualties.”

Bruegman grumped.
“The assholes will be annihilated. But others will regroup at the campground two miles past the village. Give me twenty-five volunteers, and I’ll trap them there.”

“Each of you has a charged laser weapon.” Connor raised hers in the air. “Set it on kill. How many dynamite sticks do we have left?”
“Three,” Cher answered. “Enough to disrupt and disorient.”

Connor considered their situation. Each planned attack depended on their guesses being correct. What Ammad’s commanders decided couldn’t be predicted. But they had to pull together quickly, so how well trained these fighters were was questionable.
“Okay, no more than twenty-five and grab some dynamite. Take your positions before the enemy arrives.”

Harry raised his hand again. “Chui just called. His people have Ammad’s forces on satellite feed. He has agreed to help us. His people can fire a few missiles into their midst.”

“Whoa,” Connor
gasped and shook her head. “Those missiles clear a five square mile area.”

“The natives are long gone, sis. It’s them or us.”

# Christian leader, Sean O’Dell, waved to the third team of shuttles leaving the Dallas Complex. All roads surrounding the Complex had been blocked by Ammad loyalists. Four artillery pieces
brought from Fort Hood were positioned in range of the Dallas Complex Evangelical Seminary and Education facility.

O’Dell and his staff formed a line next to the runway, determined to remain there until either the shuttle returned for them or Ammad’s forces attacked. They had no weapons. They had no protection. They
vowed not to bow the knee, and over a hundred citizens gathered at the gate to the shuttle area to block the entrance.

“No violence,” O’Dell directed. “Peaceful disobedience only.”

Those at the gate sang “It is well with my soul” and held hands. Ammad loyalists fired all four artillery pieces at the gate. O’Dell and those
around the shuttle area were knocked to the ground as explosions blew the gate and those singing into miniscule fragments. When the debris settled, the loyalists breeched the gate and approached the landing area.

“Pledge your allegiance to Ammad al-Sistani and the Global Realm.” The voice over the loudspeaker added. “Any who do will be
welcomed without harm. You have thirty seconds.”

“I will not forbid you to go, if you so desire.” O’Dell remained on the ground kneeling and prayed.

“We will not forsake God,” a voice replied.

All of those awaiting transport stayed their ground. After one minute, the crowd rushed O’Dell and his staff, cutting them to pieces
with knives. Outnumbered thirty to one, the Christians died where they prayed, and the battle for the Dallas Complex ended.
Chapter 29

“They’re unaware of the numbers.” Chui’s assistant paced hands behind his back and head down. “Tens of thousands are coming. They’ll attack in waves.”

“Pendleton destroyed armies with his missiles,” Chui said, staring at the satellite feed. “We can only
delay this army. Fire two missiles—one at the forward group and one at the farthest behind. This temporarily traps the three middle groups from advancing. They’ll scatter, regroup, and give the evacuees some needed time.”

“Beijing command. Fire rockets 14 and 15—one at the forward group—one at the rear.”

Chui called George at
Edison base. “Pull anyone deployed above away from the mountainside.”

“This may be the last transmission you’ll be able to send us.” The concern in George’s voice caught Chui’s ear. “The enemy computer is cutting off transmission lines faster than I can bring them back up.”

“Once they found your position, their job became
easier.” Chui hesitated, then said, “Satellite indicates well over thirty-thousand are approaching from the north, above you and at your back. Maybe five thousand from the front.”

“I see…” George’s voice trailed off. “I’ll pull everyone inside, except for those deployed to the campground.”

The line disconnected.
“How much time before the shuttle touches down?” Chui asked.

“Six hours,” his assistant replied.

“The second group will make it out. Not the rest.”

The screaming of her brother caught her attention. Connor raced to the entrance in time to see George racing up from the direction of
Bruegman’s encampment. “Harry was only partly right—the thousand part. Try over thirty thousand coming up from behind and five thousand in front.”

Connor gasped. “How many?”

“Let’s not waste time.” George raced past her. “Chui’s attempting to buy us some time. He’s providing a missile strike. Get inside.”
The walls of the Edison enclosure shook and pieces of rock fell from the reinforced ceiling.

“Under the tables,” Connor yelled, as a huge piece of insulation fell within a foot of her head.

“Edison has been shut down.” George Pendleton followed by Connor’s husband Obi slid under a standard Global conference
table with her. “I called the crew to set the memory wipeout program. Ammad won’t be able to recover anything of value.”

Obi tossed her an orange. “Eat fruit. You’ll feel better.”

She edged over to him and clung on to his arm as the interior shook again. Having him at her side helped her feel safe, but worried her at
the same time. She might lose him at any minute. “When the trembling stops, come with me to our room. I don’t want to die without showing you how much I love you.”

“We’re not going to die. God is with us.”

“God was with Peter, too. The Romans crucified him upside down.”

#

Klaus Bruegman
hunkered down in the trench he’d dug on the west side of the campground. A huge cloud of debris wafted overhead. In his hand, the detonators for both the cliff side and the campground charges. The enemy timed their arrival precisely, what was left of the forces above had begun their trek down the cliff as the first units of Ammad’s loyalists reached
the grounds and set-up base camp.

His people, fifteen men and ten women armed with weapons set to kill lay in wait only twenty yards from the edge of the enemy camp in three foot deep trenches. A camouflage blanket draped over each. Bruegman grinned. Eager for battle, he loved hunting down a predictable enemy.
As the troops on the cliff descended the mountainside, Bruegman’s finger moved atop the detonator button. When the cliff had filled with soldiers top to bottom, he pushed the button. A huge billow of smoke and debris flew into the air before the percussive sound rendered him temporarily deaf. One minute there was a cliff. The next
minute a V-like fissure appeared splitting the rocky side wall and spreading north several yards a minute.

Bruegman didn’t hesitate. He pushed the second detonator, and the campground exploded into flames. A wave of his hand once the debris stopped falling and his twenty-five warriors raged west killing everyone they met. Through
the campground and toward the mule trail where they had first entered the valley, Bruegman raced alongside his team firing his laser weapon and picking up the weapons of the dead that were usable for future combat.

At first the enemy ran, but then regrouped. Their numbers vastly diminished, they fired their weapons from behind trees and boulders,
and their accuracy proved adequate. Bruegman couldn’t hear their cries, but he saw at least five of his people blown to bits by a weapon more powerful than the ones they carried. Death is death, he thought. He dove for cover behind a stone statue of a Havasu Indian.

The enemy kept coming, reinforcing their troops and wielding massive
firepower. As what seemed like an hour’s battle drew on, Bruegman glanced at his timepiece. Fifteen minutes had past. One by one, he saw his people die. From what he could remember, only six remained. If he tried to make it back to the compound he’d lead the enemy to it as well. Let the bastards find the entrance themselves.

He rolled out to his
right back toward the campground, grabbing the weapon of a fallen comrade. The others with him hesitated one moment too long. As Bruegman turned and fired with both hands at those pursuing. Ammad’s people cut him off from the others. Maybe they’ll kill a few more before they die, Bruegman thought, then his thoughts ceased.
“The shuttle’s landed.” George Pendleton waved thirty-one workers and their family members out the cave entrance. He helped them up the slope to the east. Two crew members, hoses stretched tight, refueled the craft.

“No time left to return for you,” the captain said. “Bring your family and let’s
“We have maybe eighty people holding off Ammad forces.”

The captain shrugged, blue eyes reddened from stress. “I can only take forty more.”

“I’ll tell the others.” George scrabbled downhill and into the compound.

“Connor, he can’t come back. He says we’re out of time. He
can take forty more now.”

“Bruegman’s team has been destroyed.” Connor’s face told him she wasn’t going.

“But we can save forty people. How do we decide?”

Cher waved a hand. “I planned for this. While you and Obi were resting, we drew numbers.”

“Drew numbers?”

George cocked his head.
“You think on your feet. Who goes then?”

“You.” Cher pointed a finger at him. “You know more about the Martian complexes than anyone, but the few engineers there. Numbers 1 through 39 will go as well.”

“What about Connor and Harry?”

“I’m not going,” Connor said.
“We’re not going either,” Harry echoed and pointed to Obi. “So you forty grab what you can, and get the hell out of here.”

George screamed. “No. I’m not losing my family.”

All eyes looked away, except for Harry and Connor. “God has a role for each of us. Yours is with the mission. Ours is here.”

Harry hugged his
brother. “Lead them well.”
Chapter 30

“Do not be alarmed.” Ammad waved a hand at the curator of Hadrian’s Villa near the old city of Tivoli. “Tomorrow, we head into Rome. But today we choose to camp here and admire the beauty of pagan history.”

The curator twitched at the word *pagan*, but set about
to accommodate the new First Citizen and his entourage of several hundred. Meanwhile, Ammad made himself and Akbari comfortable in the curator’s office, quarters the size of a hotel lobby complete with media, computers, and elegant lounge chairs and sofas.

“Many things to inform you of.” Akbari scanned through data being sent in
from satellite feeds. “Do you wish to hear these now, or do you wish to wait until after our victory in Rome?”

“Information is power. Give me everything you know.” He mused at his friend’s apparent fear. “Hold nothing back. If I strike you, forgive me.”

Akbari squirmed where he sat. “Edison has been shut down. My guess is the enemy
plans to wipe out the memory before we can get our hands on it.”

“We have Sayyid. What effect does the loss of Edison have on Chui?”

“None that we can determine. He’s operating on older systems, never dismantled during the rebuilding.” Akbari printed out a summary and handed it to Ammad. “Apparently, he
never dismantled his military capabilities either, at least not the non-nuclear ones.”

Gazing upon several photos of military might, aircraft, ships, tanks, mechanized missile launchers, Ammad trembled and clenched his fists. “He out-guns us, out-man’s us, and out-produces us. We can’t attack him yet. We must organize our resources first.”
“Pendleton’s people gave Chui the codes to the remaining missile systems.” Akbari handed him the photos of the Supai area before and after the first attack.

“So the shuttle took off.”

“We lost over a thousand warriors.”

“We still have thousands more. These
photos show no enemies outside their cave.” Ammad sneered. “Position the weapon we took from the Yuma facility. It has a breech-loaded mortar launcher that fires 120-millimeter munitions. Correct?”

“Yes, master.”

“Position it, and use it.”

He sighed. “Problem solved.”

The number of his
forces killed was of little significance to him. The masses were simple pawns in a greater scheme. Pendleton’s children were trapped. Ah, that was the greatest reward. Then he could face his adversary with their blood already spilled. What concerned him most was the whereabouts of the redheaded witch. She’d escaped his dungeon. Regardless of what
Akbari told him, the Marid jinn guarding her possessed powerful magic to have broken her out of that pit.

He sensed he’d meet her in Rome. He shivered.

#

“More concrete blocks outside the entrance,” Connor shouted. “I want a six-foot wall protecting us from those bastards.”

Cher disagreed. “We
need three forces, two outside hidden along the mountain walls and one in the very back of our compound.”

“The purpose?”

“My force to the left. Ming’s force to the right.”

Cher waved her arm in the direction where she spoke. “We’ll fortify behind those boulders that litter the area. From there we have a clear view of their manpower and
equipment. If they have no artillery, we move to the security of the center. If they fire heavy weaponry, we defend from the sides. They blow the blocks apart, but no one dies.”

Reasonable, Connor thought, “I didn’t think of cannons. They’d have to bring them in from Yuma.”

“Yes,” Cher said. “Count on it.”
This Gurkha warrior, tough, lean, and cold as a Siberian breeze, commanded Connor’s attention.

“All right. Ming, position your people as Cher instructs you.” Connor called to her forces, twenty-two strong, “Move the heavy equipment, forklifts, tool carts, anything you can find, into the space in front of the dirt incline exiting to the
landing field. We’ll hold out up along the edge of the landing field in hopes we can still be shuttled out.”

No third shuttle run was coming. She knew that full well. But the longer they had a glimmer of hope and kept Ammad’s forces at bay, the more time Edison’s destruct program had to erase all identifiable memory. Ammad wouldn’t get any useable
information. She crawled up to the opening thirty-feet above ground level and looked out at the landing strip.

High above her was the mountaintop. At eye level, a two-football field size landing strip stretched across a mesa. Nothing moved. The enemy hadn’t found a way to the top. They had to come through her fortifications to get to Edison
or the imaginary shuttle that would never come. A hand touched her shoulder. Harry had climbed to join her.

“Lovely day to meet our Maker.”

His gentle smile and rosy outlook made him ever so attractive—the kindhearted Pendleton. “A lovely day indeed, little brother. At least George is off to carry on the family name.”
A jarring blast ripped into the complex. Both Harry and Connor scrambled down to the ground and shinnied to the ridge’s edge. The concrete blocks had disappeared. Only fragments of rubble remained.

“We’re okay out here.” Cher’s voice resounded on Connor’s receiver.

“Another blast and nothing will remain inside,”
Connor said. “I doubt they’ll risk destroying Edison completely. Do they know you’re out there?”

“They’re commanders are scanning the entrance from atop the mortar launcher.”

“I’ll see if I can take them out.” Connor whispered. She waved her people up the dirt incline. Her husband was with Ming on
the right flank. She checked the range from the edge of the mesa’s ridge to the launcher. She could see three officials pointing at the rocks where Ming’s people hid. Without hesitation, she fired at the man in the middle. Her laser weapon lost some accuracy at that distance and hit the leg of the man to the right of her target, blowing it apart.

Cher and Ming’s forces
fired at the flanks of the enemy’s troops who seemed like a swarm of ants from Connor’s position, rushing toward the rocks firing their weapons at will. This was not an orderly army. This was a crazed mob.

“Take out as many as you can,” she called to those with her. Her companions positioned themselves at the rim of the landing area and
The commander of Ammad’s forces ordered his slain second-in-command be dragged behind the launcher. Jumping off, he and his field commander directed the attack, issuing orders that Connor, George, and Harry Pendleton be captured if possible, but not killed.

Every few minutes, the
launcher fired mortar rounds at the rim above, until the return fire stopped. The commander drew his sword, checked his watch, and stepped out into the open. Nothing moved. “Step aside.”

His troops gave way, as he marched to Ming’s side of the defenses. A glance at his timepiece said the battle took sixteen minutes. He’d lost another eighty people, but his
enemy lay helpless in front of him. When he found a body, wounded or dead, he slit its throat and cut off an ear, dropping the ear in a bag he carried on his waist-belt.

“A woman,” someone called out.

“Alive?” he answered.

“No.”

He approached the body. “Oh. A Gurkha warrior.”
With respect, one highly trained combatant to another, he doffed his hat. “Bury her with honor.”

Inside the compound he went, sending a dozen troops up the dirt path to the shuttle landing area. When he heard the all-clear, he headed up the slope to level ground. A sickness of mankind, war, he thought. Each direction he looked, bodies or parts of
bodies lay strewn about like manikins.

He appreciated valor.
As before, he approached each body, slitting the throat and removing an ear for his bag. Four of his enemies were crawling when he found them, dragging themselves along and writhing from pain. Before he slit their throats, he looked to see if he had one of
the Pendleton children in his hands. He stared carefully at each face. If Harry, George, or Connor Pendleton were alive, they’d likely be here.

A gurgle caught his ear. What fortune. Just when he feared his information was wrong, there, lying on top of a woman, shielding her, was Harry Pendleton. The commander called over his photographer, the man
assigned to record the death of any Pendleton encountered. “Begin recording.”

He bent down and rolled Harry onto his back, revealing the face of Connor Pendleton looking up at him. He smiled. Taking his knife, he placed it at Harry’s throat. “Proclaim your allegiance to Ammad, the Chosen, and Allah, and I will spare his
Connor spit.

He could see the blood running freely out of a wound in Harry’s neck, hence the gurgling. He grasped he was too late for sport. The man was dead.
As Connor opened her eyes, she realized her brother had shielded her from the last barrage of mortar rounds thrown by the enemy. She remembered firing at the horde of attackers overrunning Ming’s position. Harry, not adept at fighting, grabbed weapons for her.
from fallen comrades, as hers lost their charge. Then a blast no more than twenty-feet away knocked her unconscious. Harry must have fallen on her to protect her.

She wished she’d died. Harry’s weight lifted off her, and she heard a voice. “Proclaim your allegiance to the Chosen and Allah, and I will spare his life.”
She spit. Her eyelids lifted open to see gray skies above and blood dripping off her. A piece of shrapnel pinned her to the ground at the waist. She strained to see where it had penetrated her.

“The metal entered between your hip and your spine three inches from the edge of your left side.” A bearded-man stood over her.

“Forget it.” Connor forced out the words. “My allegiance is to my Lord, Jesus the Christ, to my father, and to my family.”

“A family that is dwindling.”

Her anger increased her pain. She bit her lip to keep from screaming. Harry died protecting her. She wouldn’t give this monster the pleasure
of seeing her in agony. Connor set her mind, as her mother instructed her. She pictured heaven, bright and welcoming.

“Cut off his head,” the commander said.

A heavyset man took a step, swung, and blood spatter misted over Connor’s face.

“Do you have this on camera?”
“Yes.”

“Put it on a pole and plant it here next to this infidel.” He bent down and glared at her. “Before long, you will beg for me to kill you.” He stood and shouted, “Salomon, strip her.”

Hours passed. Connor lay naked looking at Harry’s head set on a pole dripping blood until none was left to drip. Sweet brother, she
thought. At least you’ve found peace. Every ounce of her training kicked in to picture beauty in the midst of torture. The sun broke through the clouds and the temperature rose. The wind died down. Her body sweated as her lower stomach swelled with blood.

The bearded man walked up, took a hammer and spike, and drove the
spike into her right elbow, smashing it and pinning it to the ground as well. “You can end this by proclaiming allegiance to Ammad, the Chosen.”

She bit through her lip when the hammer struck. Closing her eyes, she refused to give him the pleasure of begging for her life. Lord, make this end.

Time passed. She saw
Saint Stephen being stoned to death, and Saul holding his cloak. She saw Jesus stand up to receive Stephen’s spirit. Flashes of red popped into her vision—spots that didn’t belong and didn’t go away. She felt herself being lifted up and dragged across the landing area.

“We do not have your mother.” She thought she saw the bearded man. “But we
have you. So you will receive her punishment.”

Surrounding him were masses of Islamists, each with a blade in-hand. A pole was embedded in the ground, and she was hoisted up by a rope looped under her arms. The spikes in her body remained in place. Light headed and dying, Connor let her body slump. Each warrior stabbed her as he passed by. Her legs,
arms, side, every part of her, all being ripped apart, while avoiding killing blows.

When the stabbing stopped, her mind drifted away to insanity. She babbled incoherently for a while. The bearded man raised his hand. “She is a vegetable. Drop her down and put her head on the block.”

They cut the rope, and she collapsed to the ground.
They dragged her to the chopping block and set her head on it. Her breathing came in gasps. In an instant, she saw herself floating above her body. She watched the masses rejoicing over her defeat as the cameraman recorded the event. The axe fell severing her head. They placed it on a pole next to her brother’s and left it there for the vultures to peck out her
eyes.

A gradual change occurred in the world around her, from horror to calm, from calm to peace, from peace to joy. Heaven opened to welcome her and the cares of the former world disappeared.

#

“It is done.” The bearded man spoke to his command headquarters.
“Have the cameraman upload the recording to Imam Akbari.”

Akbari clapped his hands as the recording of Connor’s execution ended. Ammad had left to give final instructions to his followers before heading into Rome. Reports were that five shuttles had come and gone from the complex itself, but
that the Pope and Pendleton were still in the Vatican and had not boarded a shuttle. The time had come to move. He sent Ammad a message. *Come in as soon as you can!*

He waited for almost an hour, knowing Ammad would come as he pleased. Finally, the door swung open. "The curator is impatient for us to leave."
Ammad grumped and slammed the door. “I’ve put on the front of peace.”

“You must see this before we go.”

Ammad’s gaze fixed on the scene in front of him as Akbari replayed the murders of Pendleton’s precious imps. His face contorted into fiendish sneers and gleeful smirks as each Pendleton died.
“They should have skinned her alive.” He slapped his sides and roared with laughter. His rejoicing ceased a few seconds later, and he frowned. “How can we be sure Pendleton will see this with communications now cut?”

“His lines are cut here on earth, but not from space. Sayyid may be able to send a message to him through an
open space line.”

“I command it be done.”

“At once, master.”

Arthur Pendleton’s limousine returned to the Vatican after he observed the fifth shuttle leave for the motherships. “Thank God. They’ve taken off.”

“Let’s hope they return in time for the rest of us, or
God help us,” Cline mused. “The journey takes twenty-four hours. Our scouts say Ammad’s forces are approaching Rome. They departed Tivoli a few minutes ago.”

“He’s a fiend,” Pendleton spit out. He flushed. “The rest of the world has no knowledge of the beheadings in Balmoral or the attack he’s attempting at
“the Edison site.”

“Or what he’s doing here for that matter.” Cline touched his friend’s knee.

“But Chui knows. His people know. And that’s almost half the world.”

As they entered the Sacristy and Treasury Museum, the Pope’s butler and personal valet ran up.

“Sir, we received a file from the main space complex,
Titled, *The Battle to save Edison*. We’ve waited for your return to view it.”

“Maybe it’s good news,” Pendleton said. “We could use some.”

Cline opened the door to their quarter and said, “Wouldn’t good news come straight from George?”

Of course, it would, Pendleton thought. “Let me see the file.”
The Pope’s butler led him to a computer connected to the Vatican server. He pulled up the attachment. The sender’s code on the message was a combination of letters and numbers. Pendleton copied those down and typed them into the search box. Restricted.

“Let’s call George at the Space Complex,” Pendleton said, and dialed.
George Pendleton stared out at the vast universe surrounding him. More at home in space than on earth, he wasn’t distracted by fear or space sickness. He’d watched the destruction of the Edison Complex and the ruthless murders of his sister and little brother. Having the best seat in the house and no way to change the outcome,
George forced himself to accept their deaths as part of God’s plan.

He’d prayed. He’d begged. On his knees, weeping, “God save my family.”

He had forty-eight missiles he could fire at his enemy. But every time he decided to do it, his hand wouldn’t move to give the command. It was as though
another hand pressed atop his. The more he tried the more difficult moving became, until the urge passed. He’d only felt pressure, but not pain. He understood. God’s hand held his down.

*Why?*

The scream inside his mind shouted to the Ruler of the Universe. As the ringing in his head quieted, the buzzing on his table
increased. He lifted his cell. “Yes.”

“George, it’s me.” His chest tightened as he recognized his father’s voice. “I received a file on the battle to save Edison. The code is Restricted. Do you know about the file?”

His jaw quivered and tears burst down his cheeks. “Do not open that file. For your own sanity destroy it.”
His father gasped. Choking and sobbing followed. When the sounds faded, there was a clank and then a voice. “Thad Cline here. What’s going on George? Arthur’s collapsed on the floor.”

“They murdered every person there. They tortured Connor. When they were done, they put Harry and Connor’s heads on poles and
left them for the vultures.” He breathed in a full breath.
“Don’t let my father watch that file, and don’t tell him the details. It will kill him.”
“Yes. I understand.” An abrupt click ended the conversation.
George slumped into a chair. “Don’t You have something to say to me?”
He shook his fist at the view of the stars. He opened
his mouth to curse God. Nothing came out but air. He pictured the painting *The Scream*. The refection in the window of his face seemed to morph into a replication. He had nothing available to take his frustration out on, so he made a blind dash into a support post and everything went black.
Chapter 32

Twenty guards stood at each side of the entrance to Saint Peter’s Square. If you didn’t have the proper papers, you could not enter. Ammad’s approach had unnerved the populace. Peacock strolled past them without making eye contact with Custos by her side.
“I haven’t any pain. I look as though I’ve never been tortured. People only see me when I want them to see me. So...”

“So your old body underwent a restoration of sorts. Your new body is yet to be, for you aren’t transformed yet.” He tilted his head. His expression said she asked too many questions. “You’ll need all
the strength I can give you when you face the devil’s pawn.”

“I’ve faced him before.”

“Not like this. He’s grown.” Custos smiled. “The world loves him, because he tells them what they want to hear. He will subjugate women and cloud the minds of men. Humanity will do unspeakable perversions and believe they are doing the
right thing.”

“Then I know who he is now,” she said. Her whole body trembled. “So he has come.”

“He has. But prophesy must be fulfilled to the nth degree. And you will fulfill it. You have been prepared for this time by the life you’ve led without you knowing. God turns what the devil uses for evil to good.”
“I know Connor and Harry died violent deaths. I don’t know why I know.”

Custos grew twice his size and glowed like a heavenly flame. “They have received great reward and await you in peace.”

Am I willing to face the lawless one?

Even in a restored state, Peacock chilled to the marrow of her bones. The
realization of her task momentarily stunned her and she stopped walking. “I can’t kill him. Can I?”

Custos vanished. She stood in darkness in the middle of the day. Could she face the son of perdition? *If God be for me, who can be against me?*

“No,” she said. “I am not willing. But I will do it, and I will not be alone.”
The bright sunlight reappeared. The dome of Saint Peter’s Basilica radiated beautiful shades of gold and red in the distance. Custos reappeared and took her hand. “Well said. No human being could be willing to face him now. But like Gideon, you do not see the hosts of heaven on the surrounding hills. However, Ammad will not die—yet.”
Peacock, Laverna, Donna O’Connor—whoever she was, inhaled the air with new resolve. Like she had defeated her husband’s enemies in the past, she would accomplish God’s purpose now. “If my interpretation of the Bible is correct. My role doesn’t lead to victory.”

“Yes. It does. Just not yet.”
“Then, lead on.”
As they strolled together toward the Basilica, the wind blowing against Peacock’s body cooled her. The arctic winter that plagued Northern and Central Europe as far south as Greece missed a swath from Western Europe, including the British Isles, to Italy. Still the temperature in Rome was seven degrees cooler on
average all year round. Yet she hadn’t noticed temperature, nor had she experienced hunger. Now she felt both. A quick glance at Custos gave her the answer. He’d lifted the protective hedge around her.

“Guarda il tuo passo, Signora.” Called out an official passing her.

“Grazie.” She ascended the steps of the Basilica with
ease. Strength entered her body. Her lungs filled. She realized she stood whole and healthy even with her scars and old wounds. Ammad would see his handiwork had done nothing to weaken her mind, body, or spirit. Through the Basilica she traveled with full stride and purpose acknowledging the few individuals—mostly nuns—as she passed.
She left the Basilica out a side door and headed through a huge parking garage next to the Palace of the Holy Office and toward The House of Hospitality Saint Mary. Built by Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa to serve the poor of Rome. The House of Hospitality had fed, clothed, and housed the poor before her husband’s reign. During
his time as First Citizen, it had been converted into living quarters for those left within the Vatican walls with no residence elsewhere during the reorganization. Only three people were housed there now, her husband, Thad Cline, and Eduardo Duarte. God revealed things to her with every step she took. Peacock pushed opened
the main door and slid inside. All the men were seated with their backs to her watching a Global broadcast. She let the door slam shut. “I’m happy to see you’re all alive. The hour is upon us.”

# George Pendleton, head still smarting from the shock of the annihilation outside Supai, lifted the lid on a cold storage container and grabbed
a pre-packaged Global Realm approved dinner, including every vitamin, mineral, and antioxidant the human body needed to sustain itself. He tossed it in his heat kit and four seconds later had a fully cooked meal. Even the exquisite taste didn’t brighten his spirits. Harry and Connor’s deaths grated on his nerves. His hands shook and the knots in his stomach
stayed with him regardless of his efforts to relax.

His father had less than a fifty-fifty chance of escaping on the last outbound shuttle from Rome. That shuttle was still four hours from touching down, and Ammad and his band of cutthroats were within an hour of entering the Rome Complex. After that, it would be only a matter of minutes
before he’d enter Vatican City and search for his enemy.

The whereabouts of his mother still unknown, his gut told him she was alive. His head said that was impossible. He wiped his lips and headed for a meeting of the Christian Central Command, the government of believers who represented eighty percent of those going
on the Mars mission.

“We’re on our schedule, but not on my father’s.”

George frowned and plopped down in the only available chair. “The last earthbound shuttle is touch and go to get him out before Ammad’s forces overwhelm him.”

One of the men in the back muttered, “I question the man’s even a Christian.”

George shot a nasty
glance at him. “No matter what he’s done, a Christian he is. It’s not for you to judge him. Tell me one crime my father committed that David or Moses, or the Sons of Israel didn’t. You’re here because of my father.”

“He’s right,” A tall man sitting next to the accuser answered. “Arthur Pendleton and Pope Peter got our group together and with George’s
help we made it out of that place. Let’s not bicker or point fingers.” He put his strong right arm on the man’s shoulder and said, “If you say you are without sin, the truth is not in you.”

The rest of the group nodded agreement. The man reddened but remained silent. The look on his face said but not repentant.

“The landing area is
near the Fountain of the Aquilone.” George sighed. “On the other side of the Vatican grounds from where my father’s hiding. He has to make a run for it now.”

“We are only one day from Mars launch,” the tall man said. “That shuttle captain will have a short window to drop off passengers and board.”

George nodded. “Close
calls seem to be the norm. You’re right. We’re committed to leave when we’re fully powered up and the trajectory for a perfect Mars orbit is upon us. We go then, whether others miss the connection or not. So let’s discuss government options once we’ve completed our journey.”

The mission clock read 25:18 and counting down.
Only 800,000 plus Christians had agreed to leave. Four space-crafts housed 200,000 people each. These massive structures were scheduled to colonize Mars anyway, but Ammad had no interest in the souls leaving Earth. The smaller the number of Christians remaining the better, as far as he was concerned.

Arthur Pendleton
wished all the Christian population could leave. But sheer numbers made that impossible. Only God wielded that kind of power. After his meeting, George headed to his post in the lead ship’s command center for final preparation. He connected to the shuttle captain and asked, “What are your options once you land back at the Vatican?”
“One, they’re ready. They board, and we leave. I estimate the best case scenario at 10%. Two, some individuals will board immediately. In that case, I’ll wait until 8:45 before launch. I have to be gone by then.”

“Give them some more time. Leave at nine.” George gulped at the thought that his father might not make that schedule, but other lives were
at stake.

“I understand.” The shuttle captain answered.
“But no can do. Three. I approach, but Ammad has control of the launch area. In that scenario, I abort and return to you, Georgie.”

Georgie! How he disliked being called that. He was George, a Pendleton, not Georgie Porgie.

“Ten-four.” George
wondered why everything had to be so damn hard.
Chapter 33

Ammad entered the Rome Complex to the cheers of his supporters, few in number though they were. Global Realm media carefully orchestrated their camera shots to give the appearance of multitudes of adoring citizens greeting the new First Citizen. Ammad reasoned
that with his enemies all but gone, the crowd would increase. He’d play on their emotions and provide them entertainment. Worthy entertainment to celebrate of the rise of humankind to its peak—a heaven on earth.

“Citizens, I’m here to issue in a new day. I thank Arthur Pendleton for uniting the world. But, I criticize him for all the rules and
deprivation he forced upon us.” His smile radiated a kindly appearance—one that he’d practiced for months to achieve. “I’m here to thank him for his work on our behalf.”

How he’d explain his enemy’s demise? Well? He wouldn’t. He would never mention the man’s name again. People forget you quickly and put another
champion in your place when you lose. Still, he was now on record, praising his enemy. The Jews, Islamists, the non-Christian world, and some deceived Christians believed him to be a sincere man of peace. Chui now became his top concern.

Some Italians who attended Mass daily because of tradition shouted Ammad’s praises. Most stayed away
with a *wait and see* attitude. All in all, Ammad expected them to be watchful. He loved the idea of gradually playing on their lusts for things unholy. How simple-minded humans were. Why God made them puzzled him. And yet, without them, his fight with God would be boring. In the cave years earlier, he received the vision of power and authority given
to him. The promise of global rule and revenge against the Jew and against Pendleton. This vision guided his every decision. Now he had accomplished his task.

Once Ammad finished speaking, he headed into the Square and straightway to visit the Pope. The Pope’s butler and personal valet met him outside the Domus Sanctae Marthae, named
after Saint Martha and used as the Pope’s residence, the same used by Pope Francis. “His Holiness has no interest in seeing you, First Citizen. He bids you a good day.”

Out of sight of the main entrance, no cameras existed. No opposition faced him to withstand his men. He waved a hand. Three of the thugs with him grabbed the butler
and gutted him, leaving him dead in the empty street.

“Search the residence.” Akbari raised his arms, dropped to his knees, and chanted incantations. A greenish light misted around him, as if a floating ocean blocked the sunlight. When he finished, he said. “The redhead-witch is near.”

# Peacock held up her
hand. “Don’t try to touch me, darling.”

Arthur Pendleton stopped his advance a few feet from her. “Thank God you’re alive.”

“Alive? Yes. More alive than I’ve ever been. But you have to stop thinking in earthly terms. I have a mission from God, as do you. Only yours is done and mine is still ongoing.” She smiled
at him and ached at seeing him in agony. “I promise you. We’ll see each other again soon, but not in this life.”

    Pope Peter motioned to her from across the entry room. “I’ve tried to tell him that since he arrived. God asked him to rally willing Christians to prepare for the end, and he has done his job.”

    “Lovey,” Pendleton said. “You can’t defeat
Ammad. Come to the shuttle with me.”

She huffed. “I’m going to do what God asked me to, not what you wish I would. The time is short. Your fate isn’t here. Mine is.”

“Ammad has entered Vatican City,” Pope Peter said. “I sent my personal assistant to delay him. I’m not going on the shuttle, but Arthur, Thad, and Eduardo
should board with the last group.”

“I’m not . . .”

She stopped Pendleton mid-sentence.

“You are going, Arthur.” Face burning and at full strength, Peacock stomped her foot. “My purpose here is to confront the monster now. Go, I’ll see you in Heaven.”
Pendleton followed shaking his head as Pope Peter led the three men out and around the back of the complex away from the entrance to Domus Sanctae Marthae. Two guards from the papal service escorted them west through the palace of Saint Charles and out through the Residence of the Arch-Priest. His feet moved, but his mind toyed with
foreboding visions of his Lovey and that maniac who pursued her. Could she destroy Ammad? Impossible for a mortal, but not for God.

They continued west between the railroad station and the Mosaic School’s underground parking unit. This route blocked the view from the east where Ammad would surely come. They circled back north past the
Palace of the Governatorate. The Pope and the guards stopped. “You go on ahead. As I told you before, I’m not going.” He gave the sign of the cross. “If I live, I’ll shepherd those left behind as best I can. If I die, God will receive my soul.”

Why does he have such great faith, and I have so little? Pendleton thought. No power to change anything, he
decided to do as told. “I’ll see you in Heaven.”

That seemed to be the place each person hoped to go, including him, the greatest tyrant of them all according to some.

He grabbed Duarte’s hand and the three dashed around The Fountain of the “Aquilone” into the field cleared for the shuttle runs. The Tower of Gallinaro stood
as a guidepost to the northwest. Pendleton checked his watch. The shuttle should . . .

A roar and blast of wind hit Pendleton and he dropped to the ground. Heat from the shuttle’s engines burned his face.

Thad yelled. “Come on. The landing is good and bad news. We’ve got a chance, but Ammad’s people now
know where we are.”

Pendleton, leg bleeding from a nail embedded in his calf when he fell, limped along toward the shuttle. About a football field ahead of him, it glided to a stop and made a swift turn around for departure. Not the heavy craft of the past, these shuttles were made of ultralight metals and could lift off the ground straight up before
blasting into space. But without Edison, the pilot relied on his onboard computer and the computer on the space station for accuracy.

Duarte stopped and wrapped his arm around Pendleton’s for leverage. Pendleton increased speed with assistance and reached the shuttle out of breath and out of time.
“I’ve got aircraft approaching,” the shuttle pilot hollered, “and less than a minute to lift off. Climb in.”

No sooner did Pendleton, with Thad and Duarte’s help, clear the door when the pilot yelled. “Strap in.”

He found himself shooting straight up and climbing and lost consciousness on the ascent.
Chapter 34

Atash Akbari signaled to Ammad to cease pursuing Pendleton.

“Let the idiot go,” Ammad said to the command center. “Gone is gone. We’ll launch a team and dismantle the Space Station and the Space Complexes. Once they leave, they can’t come back."
See how long they survive without support.”

Akbari raised a hand. He chanted more incantations as the arms of his robes fluttered in the wind.

“This way,” he cried, and headed off in the direction of The House of Hospitality – St Mary, Ammad and his guards followed after him. As he went, his robes transformed
from normal greens into shades of incomprehensible, never before seen, shades that cause even Ammad to gasp.

Akbari scaled the stairs two at a time to the entrance door, but Ammad collided with an unseen force and fell to the ground.

Akbari yelled, “Wait until the door stands open before coming up the stairs.”

He gripped the door and
pulled it open, only to come face-to-face with a tall glowing creature whose eyes pierced his soul with the heat of an unquenchable fire. He dove inside the room as the door slammed shut.

“Hear me,” he cried. “I summon the power of my tariqa, the path I follow. I have completed my perfect tawhid. My Bektashi journey is complete. The four gates
have been traversed—the Sharia, Tariqah, Marifa, and, Haqiqah. Naimi is my teacher.”

“Well, I am Custos,” the angel said, as the two circled the room. “Almighty God forbids you stay.”

“But my master’s time has come.” Akbari grew. “Let me pass, Marid.”

“Deceived, you are. A Marid, I’m not.” Custos filled
the room and a golden light encompassed Akbari. “Be gone evil one. Your master and God’s servant must meet and settle their issue themselves.”

Custos pointed to the back door, and Akbari pulled himself up and exited.

# Ammad saw flashes of light, fell to his knees, and momentarily froze. He pulled
himself to his feet and heard thunderous voices—one of them Akbari’s. Then silence and the pressure holding him back from ascending the stairs subsided. The door to the entrance opened on its own.

Trembling, he paused and prayed to the entity he’d encountered in the cave in the Valley of the Magi. Then he straightened up, strode up to
the entrance door, and edged through. He drew out the dagger hidden within his robes. At first the room appeared empty. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he perceived the shadow of a female outlined against the far wall. Shivers crawled over him. The she-devil!

# Peacock sensed her husband had escaped
Ammad’s clutches. Not that his outcome wasn’t already sealed. His fate would not take him to Mars. Unaware of what his future was, other than secure with God, she concentrated on her approaching enemy. Custos had left her alone to complete her task. The outcome remained solely in her hands and mind. For indeed a mind game was to be played.
Ammad flipped the dagger from hand to hand as he stopped in the center of the room. The only light came from a skylight in the ceiling several feet above him.

“The first report I received about you,” Ammad said, “told of a woman who used sex to entrap men—a spy, an adulteress, a murderer. You are the breaker of most of the
commandments.”

She gulped. God confirmed his words in her spirit. Then she said, “I’m a repentant sinner.”

Again, her words were confirmed by God. She quoted the Bible without thinking. “’Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.’” Then she
smiled. “I have experienced His forgiveness, but I’m paying for my past in this life.”

“In Jahannam are seven gates. Destructive jinns, their followers, and hypocrites dwell in the lowest of the depths.” Ammad’s sword glowed red. He held it up. “I have Solomon’s ring, forged again to exact specifications by Akbari. I will put an end
to your miserable life and send you to a place even worse than Scriptures state.”

“My life is not yours to take, nor is it mine. God has me in His hands. Where I spend eternity is God’s decision alone.”

Ammad raced at her and thrust his knife. She rolled left and tripped him. He fell backward and the knife, still glowing, slid
across the floor.

Peacock leaped to her feet and revealed a knife of her own. A white light streamed from its blade. She ran at him, but he rolled to his right and scrambled for his weapon. His hand reached it as she closed in on him. The two thrust their blades. Ammad let out an excruciating wail, as the two blades clanged. Ammad’s
blade burst downward embedding into the ground. Peacock’s hit its mark.

*Well done. My good and faithful servant.*

She heard the words as the vision of her former life dissolved and the brightness of a new world took its place.

#

Akbari raced back inside the moment his master howled. The power that had
held him outside fell away in the same instant. At first the room looked empty. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw Ammad, a dagger embedded in his skull an inch above his right ear. Ammad’s hair smoldered around the area. His skull appeared matted with blood and ash. Akbari checked his master’s pulse. There was a slight beat—steady but weak.
He used his cell and called for the best neurosurgeon the Complex of Rome could find to attend to his master. Looking around, he realized the red-headed devil woman had vanished. The clothes she wore lay crumpled on the floor. Ammad’s weapon steamed, as if hit by lightning, embedded in the floor.

“You’ve destroyed her.
An environmental supervisor aboard Mars Colonization Vessel 8 realized he was alone in the power control room where he and four other technicians were monitoring fuel.
consumption. He spoke to the computer, “Connect me to Director Lee.”

“Of course,” a sweet but mechanical voice replied.

“Lee. Here. What’s the problem?”

“One minute I’m talking to Gus about a mechanical malfunction, the next minute his clothes are on the floor, and he’s gone.”

“What have you been
drinking?”

“Seriously?”

“Hold on. My control board’s lighting up,” Director Lee said. A moment later he returned. “I need to go. Two-thirds of the crew’s missing.”

The supervisor spoke to the computer. “Where is Gus?”

The sweet mechanical voice replied, “Gus is no longer aboard.”
“What the hell?” He called for George Pendleton. After a few seconds, a female voice answered George’s phone. “Ah, hello?” “Who is this?” the environmental supervisor asked.

“I’m Laura with the maintenance staff,” the voice said. “I came around a corner in Living Quarters Corridor B and found a communications
device on the floor along with a full set of clothes. Somebody is going to be a bit chilly.”
Chapter 35

“Director Chui,” Regional Manager Xi said, panic rustling in his voice. “We’ve lost contact with George Pendleton on Mars Colonization Vessel 1.”

Chui raised an eyebrow. “Our relationship with the former Pendleton regime is over. Sad to say. A great loss."
But we have the codes for the rockets and the capabilities to send crews to the Space Station. So although I wish George well, our priorities have changed.”

“Director,” the man stood at attention, “there are reports of vast numbers of missing individuals.”

“Explained by the shuttles, Xi.” Chui pushed back in his chair. “Downplay
any speculation to the contrary.”

Xi doesn’t understand the use of misinformation, Chui thought. Too young to remember the old days of altering the facts on purpose to have them line up with the ruling party’s version of them. The people didn’t need to concern themselves about anything except the ultimate defeat of Ammad al-Sistani.
Already Chui’s manufacturing complexes were full speed ahead on military production. Whatever evacuation plan George pulled off, Chui gave no credence to rumors of the supernatural.

“Get me an update on the whereabouts of Ammad,” he said, and Xi left.

There could only be one ruler of the world. He
checked his Eastern Regional Master Computer. Running perfectly. Everything his region needed was being supplied from the Eastern Regional World Control Center even with the Christian population gone. Armed, fed, and with a purpose, his armies would one day cross the Urals to the west and the Euphrates to the south and sweep to the gates
of Rome and Jerusalem to defeat Ammad and rule the world.

The Americas would bow to the winner, and they had no love of Ammad the Vicious in any case. Time. He needed a few years, six at the most, and his military would be unstoppable. Chui tapped his fingers together. Good luck, George Pendleton.
Atash Akbari held his master’s hand. Three days had passed since the redhead-witch struck down Ammad with her knife. He had not left Ammad’s bedside.

“Awaken master,” he repeated again and again to no avail.

Crowds gathered outside Holy Spirit Hospital in Sassia, the oldest hospital
in Europe located a few kilometers outside Vatican City. A general unrest grew, sparked by worries over the disappearance of the millions of Christians who had not yet boarded the shuttles. Muslim and Jewish authorities now in power outside Chui’s region declared otherwise to no avail. The official line was most Christian believers left with the shuttles and many of
the others converted to Islam and stayed.

Who would be First Citizen if Ammad died? Was he already dead? Rumors of Pendleton’s wife being the attacker stirred tales of a Christian conspiracy to bring Arthur Pendleton back into power.

“You must reassure the people,” Rabbi Levinson pleaded with Akbari.
Levinson had traveled to Rome from Jerusalem to be of assistance. “Many fear Ammad is dead, and Chui is about to attack us.”

“I can’t leave him. I won’t leave him.” Akbari turned to the rabbi without letting go of Ammad’s hand. “You speak to the Global media. Tell them Ammad is resting peacefully and forgives his attacker.”
A reluctant Levinson exited the hospital and addressed the world. He tried to appear upbeat, but from what he’d seen, only life support kept Ammad alive.

“The First Citizen asks me to reassure the world he is recovering.” Lying caused him discomfort. He folded his hands behind his back. If Ammad was conscious, he’d
want to reassure everyone he was fine. So the lie was justified.

“He wants you to know he forgives his attacker and wants nothing more than to bring peace to all mankind, Christian and Jew, Muslim and Hindu, Buddhist and those considered pagans by some.” Now he adlibbed, and that seemed to sooth his conscience.
The clouds gave a dreary appearance to the sky—low hanging with no hint of thinning. And the humidity stifled breathing. Levinson’s sweat trickled down his neck, even with the temperature at 15 degrees Celsius.

“In his absence, his appointed Second-in-Command, Atash Akbari, will act in the First Citizen’s place. There will be no gap in
decision making.”

Levinson was about to conclude his statement when the front doors of the Holy Spirit Hospital in Sassia burst open. A crowd of Ammad’s supporters raced out the doors shouting about a miracle. A bright green glow lit up the hospital entry. Behind them Akbari led Ammad out and down the ramp to where Levinson stood. Levinson’s
jaw dropped and he handed Ammad the microphone. As he did, the cloud vanished and the sun shone brightly above.

“A cowardly attack struck me down.” Ammad held up the knife and showed the clotted wound in his head. “I know I died. But the Divine raised me up from the dead. He has dealt with those who opposed me. He will
deal with anyone who thinks to cause division in the future. I am a man of peace. Obey the rules and you will have nothing to fear.”

As Ammad spoke, chills filled Levinson even as the weather warmed him. Rabbi Shamir, whose full name meant “a rock of the faith”, had told him. “Ammad is a descendant in spirit of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who
roasted a pig in the temple. He thinks he is God. Do not trust him. Evil surrounds him. He will show you signs and wonders from the old arts of the Persians.”

Had he made a mistake aligning with Ammad for the cause of the Temple?

#

*Three days later*

Ammad polled his inner circle. The question was
where to set up his permanent government. Twelve other Imams plus Imam Akbari wrote their selections on their ballots and folded them. Akbari collected the papers and put them in a bowl, setting the bowl in front of Ammad.

“One of my guards found the Pope’s robes and shoes in the parking garage by the Palace of the Holy
Office.” He tapped the bowl he’d been given against the table. “I never had the opportunity to convince him to support me.”

“What do you think happened to him and others who are missing?” asked the oldest Imam with the long white beard.

“A demonic, supernatural event.” Ammad rose to his feet and leaned
forward. “As to what we say to the masses?” He shrugged. “Those who vanished either left for the Mars mission or they’re in hiding, meaning to do future mischief.”

“They’re hiding naked then.” The old man pointed a finger at Ammad. “To the world, you appear to have risen from the dead. But you said something that disturbs me. You used the term, the
Divine, not Allah. Nor have I heard you speak Allah’s name in our last few meetings.”

Ammad’s chest tightened, as did his fists.

“So who is this entity you serve?”

“I serve the Divine who gives me power.”

His pointed his finger back at the old man, who turned a ghastly gray, fell off
his chair, and died. Ammad kicked the old man’s body. “So now you understand.”
Epilogue

Donna O’Connor gazed into the eyes of Jesus, her savior. He spoke to her in joyful thoughts that sounded like the voice of a heavenly orchestra. Even the difficult things he said had comfort within them. How long he spoke? Impossible to tell. Then he stood, lifted her up,
and smiled the most joyous smile she had ever seen. The next instant he was speaking to another, and Custos was by her side.

“‘We are preparing to end the plague that destroys the earth.’” He took her hand and guided her through the Gates of Heaven. “‘Behold your temporary home.’”

Her eyes widened. Then she looked up at him.
“Temporary?”

“If you remember, there will be a new Heaven and a new Earth. These things are yet to come.”

“How could anywhere be better than here?”

Space and distance had no meaning. The Throne of the Father, the Sea of Glass, the choirs of angels and saints singing were at the same time near and far away, depending
on her will. Voices greeted her. Family surrounded her, Arthur, Connor, George, and Harry. Her parents also stood by with arms outstretched. She thought to ask forgiveness, yet knew forgiveness was granted. This would take getting used to.

In what seemed an instant, she had spoken to and heard from everyone in her life who dwelled in heaven,
whom she had known on Earth. She’d asked her questions, answered those asked her, and resolved all issues. Joy and peace filled her heart.

Custos reappeared next to her. “Once the All-In-All arrives, and God and Man dwell together on the New Earth, you will be given the desires of your heart. There are other universes to explore
and creations to see. Beings to help and things to learn that the beloveds of God need to know. Eternity is a busy place.”

“Until then, what do I do?”

“Praise the living God. Rejoice with your family and friends. Spend time in your home, a mansion you earned while on Earth.”

“What mansion?”
“Behold.”

A multicolored structure rose up to greet her. Custos escorted her inside. Hues she’d never seen on earth dazzled her mind. The rooms and furnishings were solid yet transformable at the same time. Chairs adjusted to her body as she moved. Walls gave way for her to pass through. Each room had a view of God’s throne and
other heavenly places where she could step through and arrive at a different spot.

She needed no sleep. Food presented to her was delicious and provided for enjoyment, not nutrition. All she had to do was think about where she wished to be, step out of the room she was in, and she was there. On her first visit to see Arthur, she realized physical sex was
inferior to spiritual connection. A simple hug, more satisfying than anything the moral body could experience. Heaven in fact was heavenly.

Every moment a part of her spirit sang with the heavenly host. “Worthy are You, Our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor, and power.”

Custos appeared to her
saying, “Come. Follow the King of Kings and Lord of Lords as He pours out His wrath upon the rebellious on the Earth.”

“Already? Is it time?” She reached out her hand and shouted for joy. Her family joined her as all heaven burst forth to follow the Word of God, eyes flames of fire, hair white as purity itself, and riding on a white
horse to destroy His enemies.

The End.