

# LISTENING

BY STEVE BRONSTEIN



DAVE MCKAY

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**by Dave McKay**

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## Chapter One--The Monster is Dead

The news of his execution was flashed all over the world, and everywhere it was greeted with celebrations. Chaim Judah Rosenberg, the notorious endtime prophet, was dead -- shot through the head by a young Israeli sniper.

Killed with him was his partner in crime, Rayford Strait. Strait, too, had been shot in the head by the same soldier.

In the week before their execution they had, on two occasions, publicly burned to death people who had tried to arrest them. These were the final victims in a three-year worldwide reign of terror by the two desperadoes.

Chaim had been dubbed the "smiling assassin" because of his apparent indifference to the suffering that he inflicted on anyone who dared to challenge him. It is estimated that more people died as a result of these two men than had died during all of the genocides in history.

Authorities had been working for years to bring the pair to justice, but they had slipped through every dragnet that was thrown around them, often killing dozens of law enforcement personnel in the process.

Chaim and Rayford were leaders of a tiny cult of religious fanatics whose members were so totally under their control that it was said that they would gladly betray their own families and even lay down their own lives at the behest of either Rosenberg or Strait.

Some news reports, reflecting on the long-awaited deaths of the notorious cult leaders, sought to unravel the mystery of their twisted lives. Chaim, in particular, interested the public, because he had started out as a peace-loving liberal Quaker just a few years earlier, a man of tolerance and love. But in a few short years he had evolved into an evil, perverted monster. What had caused him to change so dramatically, and what had been going on inside his own head to have led him to such a tragic end?

This book is an attempt to tell Chaim's story.

## Chapter Two--The Holocaust

Chaim looked deep into the lifeless blue eyes of the child that lay on the ground in front of him. She would have been only about six years old. Long ringlets of golden hair stirred in a gentle breeze around her tiny horror-stricken face. Her frilly white dress was covered in blood. There was in her face all the innocence of childhood, and yet Chaim sensed in her death all the worst of human depravity as well.

Around her lay other bodies, stretching for as far as he could see. But this one child was the only one on whom he could focus. Her face and her death embodied the suffering of each individual in a disaster that could not be comprehended through the use of numbers alone. He understood that she was part of the greatest destruction of human life that had ever occurred on earth.

Millions had been killed overnight. Exactly how they had died was not clear, nor was it clear how Chaim had escaped. In fact, it was not even clear what country he was in. All that mattered was the awfulness of what lay in front of him, and his own feeling of helplessness.

Deep sobs wracked his body, though he cried silently. He was overcome with grief and compassion, but he was also overcome with a feeling of personal responsibility, like all of this was his fault, or perhaps like there was something he could do to ease the suffering, but he did not know what it was. Tears began to form in his eyes.

And then he awoke.

Three nights in a row the same dream had come to him. It was just a dream; and Chaim was intelligent enough to know that it would go away eventually.

Still, during the past two days, those innocent blue eyes had returned to his thoughts over and over, to haunt him even during his waking hours. The feeling was one of revulsion at whatever had caused this, but there was also a feeling of great despair over what to do about it. Being only a dream, of course, it was not possible to do anything; and so Chaim, in his own way, would shake it off by having a laugh at himself for being so obsessed, and then just wait for it to fade from his memory.

There was a protest rally that afternoon to attend, and then the flight to catch tomorrow morning, and so Chaim turned his attention to these and other events of the day.

Chaim Judah Rosenberg was in his late fifties, grey-haired, short, plump, good-natured, and single. He was a lecturer in comparative religions at the University of Newcastle, and a faithful member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) for the past 18 years.

Although respected for his knowledge of all the world's great religions, Chaim's speciality was new religious movements. He had been invited to participate as the Australian Quaker representative at an interfaith conference to be held in Chennai, India, starting that weekend. The university had gladly given him leave to attend.

Friends (as Quakers are known amongst themselves) recognised Chaim as a competent, honest, and humble representative on any body that he had been appointed to. His Jewish faith had not been a problem with Friends in Australia, where the movement tolerated people of all beliefs on the basis of their willingness to "walk in the Light". Not even amongst his most

liberal Jewish relatives and friends had he found such broad-mindedness as he had found amongst the Quakers. He knew, when he had known them for only a short while, that this was to be his spiritual home.

Defending the rights of Aborigines was another one of Chaim's (and the Society's) interests, and that was the purpose of the protest that he was planning to attend that afternoon.

The Australian Government had been becoming progressively more militant in its attitude toward refugees, minority religions, and now toward Aborigines. In a perversion of the concept of "equal rights", funding had been taken away from a long list of Aboriginal bodies. The argument was that special treatment for Aborigines was making them more equal than others. In keeping with this approach, legislation which had originally been brought in to protect Aboriginal rights was now being rescinded. The concept of "one nation", which had been condemned as racist when it was first raised so many years earlier, was now being touted as the answer to just about all of Australia's problems.

Flag-waving and patriotic fervour were gripping the nation, and any minorities who objected were seen as being un-Australian. Friends in general were a part of the minority who opposed the present political trend.

The demonstration that afternoon was low-key and peaceful. Members of the peace movement had planned it without the usual support of various socialist groups who seemed more interested in confrontations with authorities than with reconciliation. This candlelit vigil under the clock tower on Beaumont Street was well attended and almost awesome in its complete silence. It had been advertised as an hour of mourning for the loss of yet another right for Aborigines, that of being able to hunt and fish without licences.

With a lit candle in one hand, and with the other hand supporting a poster that stood on the ground in front of him, Chaim looked out at the people walking by. And then the innocent blue eyes reappeared in his mind. The image was so powerful that it threatened to destroy his purpose for being there; fishing rights seemed like such a minor issue compared to the holocaust that the little girl represented.

Chaim passed his sign to someone nearby who did not have one, and he retreated to the back of the group. The burning candle was still in his hand as he seated himself on a bench beside an elderly, wrinkled Aboriginal woman. He had seen her at a number of other rallies, although he had never spoken to her personally. She was simply known as Aunty Molly, and it always seemed to be her job to look after the children while others took part in the protests. Chaim smiled toward her and then bowed his head, to look into the flame of the candle.

The little girl, lying there on the ground, seemed almost as real to him at this moment as she had in the dream. Tears started to form in his eyes, and he fought to hold them back. In front of him was the real world with its real needs, he reminded himself. Why was he letting himself become so distracted by something that existed only in his imagination?

"You ben dreamin'," said Aunty Molly in a quiet voice which was both smooth and raspy at the same time. In the total silence of the demonstration her words almost echoed inside his head, although, in reality, they were little more than a whisper. "You ben dreamin'." Her voice went neither up nor down at the end. She said it as a question, but she also said it as a statement of fact, as though she already knew the answer.

Molly had not turned her head, and she too was looking down toward the ground, so Chaim was tempted to pretend he had never heard the question.

After all , she had no way of knowing what was going on in his mind. Maybe she was talking to one of the children playing nearby.

“Best you listen to it,” she said, after a moment’s silence.

“Are you talking to me?” Chaim asked.

“It’s not me talkin’,” said Aunty Molly. “It’s the spirit. No need to answer me.”

And that was it.

## Chapter Three--The Vaishnu Sect

Chaim didn't know how to answer Molly's question even if he had wanted to; so he just threw an embarrassed grin in her direction... a grin at his own predicament if nothing else. Dreaming, no doubt, meant something different to Aborigines than what it did to him. She could have been talking about any number of things. If he had said yes, would it have meant anything? After all, by a White man's interpretation, everyone dreams.

And what about her advice for him to listen to his dream... assuming, of course, that the frightened blue eyes of the little girl were what she was talking about? How does one listen to a dream?

As soon as the rally had finished, he hurried home to deal with a few last minute chores and then get a good night's sleep before leaving for India the next morning.

Thankfully, there were no more dreams that night... at least not the worrying kind. Maybe the episode was behind him.

The conference in Chennai was routine, although full of enough business to leave little time for delegates to do anything more than attend meetings. When it finished, however, Chaim had a day and a half to himself, which he planned to use to investigate a Hindu sect that had been arousing considerable interest in South India. The guru behind it had consented to a private visit with Chaim, and his ashram was only a two hour drive from Chennai.

At the ashram, Chaim was greeted by a beautiful young woman in a light brown sari.

"Vanakkam. My name is Lakshmi," she said as she placed her palms together and bowed her head in the traditional Indian greeting. "How can I help you?"

"My name is Chaim Rosenberg. I have an appointment with Guru Vaishnu for two o'clock," Chaim replied.

The woman's brow wrinkled in bewilderment. "I am so sorry," she said.

"But Guru Vaishnu has appointment with another man today."

After some checking, Chaim learned that there had been a mistake and his audience with the man had been scheduled for the following week. The sect leader was being interviewed that very moment by Geoffrey Baum, a reporter for the BBC, after which Vaishnu would be leaving for the airport and a flight to Bangalore. Still, with some explanation about his own interest in the movement, Chaim managed to get permission from the reporter to observe the interview and to take notes for his own research.

"Why do you think your movement has attracted so much interest here in India?" Baum asked.

Baum was a big man (both in height and build), in a white shirt with an open collar. Beads of sweat dotted his brow, and his long brown hair was damp as well. (It was May, and the heat in Tamil Nadu at that time of year was almost unbearable.) By contrast, Vaishnu was small, thin, bald, and cool as a cucumber. He was clad only in a blue plaid lungi. Chaim was immediately struck by the guru's quiet confidence.

"People in India have always been interested in spiritual things," Vaishnu said with a patient smile. "But our religion does not have one leader to teach all our people. Because of this,

people believe many different things. Only now we are seeing things that were secret for many years. They receive it because in their hearts they know it is true. This is what happened when Gandhi started teaching ahimsa.\* It is happening again now.” The time is right.

(\*ahimsa means non-violence)

Chaim had already noted that Vaishnu looked a lot like Gandhi, but with much darker skin, and a plaid lungi instead of a white one.

“Did you get your ideas from Gandhi?” Baum asked.

“We know his teachings; and we study the holy books. Truth is in there, but many do not see it.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“I will give you a big example: You see statues of Laxmi in many shops in India.”

Baum nodded to indicate that he had.

“The shop owners do poojah to Laxmi because they know from the books that she is the goddess of provision. She is most favorite goddess, because all people want to be rich. But real faith in Laxmi will make them stop trying to be rich. Think about it for one minute.”

Chaim thought about it while Vaishnu and Baum also paused. He was struck by the simplicity of this radically different approach to wealth, where people are taught to show their faith in God's provision by not trying to be rich.

“What we are doing now,” continued Vaishnu, “we are teaching devotees to do good and to help others, and then Laxmi will feed them. The people are simply seeing the truth in this.”

In several villages in Tamil Nadu people were discovering this new interpretation of Laxmi's role. She and her legendary husband Vishnu represented the power of God's provision. In her name, Vaishnu's followers were quitting their jobs by the hundreds and setting out to make the world a better place through freely offering their services wherever they were needed.

As word had spread that their needs were still being met (often by the people whom they helped), others had warmed to the idea and joined the movement.

“Many are saying that you are the tenth avatar. What do you have to say about that?” Baum asked.

Many Hindus believe that Vishnu appears in a total of ten incarnations or avatars, including Rama, Krishna, and the Buddha. Nine avatars have already appeared, and the tenth, or Kalki Avatar, they say, will come riding on a white horse with a meteor-like sword. He will pour out death and destruction on the earth as a prelude to re-establishing righteousness. It will mark the end of an age of darkness, and the start of an age of purity and innocence.

“I am not even a prophet,” Vaishnu said humbly. “All I do is prepare the people for Kalki Avatar.”

“Do you know who he is... or where he is?” Baum asked hopefully.

“I know nothing,” said Vaishnu. “All that I say is already in the vedas and in the Gita.”

After the interview, Chaim was barely able to introduce himself to Vaishnu before the guru was whisked away by his attendants. However, he had seen enough to be deeply impressed. He arranged to maintain contact via email with the little man.

Authorities in Tamil Nadu were starting to see the political advantages that could be gained from supporting the Vaishnavites. In those fields where Vaishnu's followers had chosen to apply their talents, they were said to be the most honest, the most enthusiastic, and the most reliable workers. The fact that they were happy to work for free, or for whatever they were offered, was an added bonus for those who employed them.

Fundamentalist Hindus controlled the Government in Tamil Nadu. They had quickly thrown together a series of projects aimed at occupying the talents of followers of Vaishnu. As a consequence, cities were being cleaned, trees planted, and roads repaired in a way that they never had been before.

In return for their labour, the Government had provided Vaishnavites with basic necessities, and had offered to build them a temple. Members would provide the labour, of course.

Now other states were showing a similar interest. In fact, Vaishnu's trip to Bangalore that same day had been financed by the Karnataka State Government, in order for them to interview him about future plans.

In Chaim's mind, one of the best things about Vaishnu's teaching was that he had taken Gandhi's opposition to untouchability a step further, and had urged those who trusted in Laxmi and Vishnu for their provision, to give first priority to work that no one else wanted. The most despised jobs were those related to sanitation and hygiene... the work of untouchables. As a consequence, the state had inherited an army of zealous street sweepers, toilet cleaners, and nursing aides. Even Vaishnu's attire and that of his attendants reflected that of the lowest castes, suggesting that his idea of 'provision' was not one of luxury, but just of necessities.

Between naps on his overnight flight back to Sydney, Chaim mused on how the movement would affect India and the rest of the world if it should continue to spread.

## Chapter Four--Those Eyes

Even before he had cleared Customs in Sydney, it was evident to Chaim that something was seriously wrong. Everyone at the airport, from cleaners to Customs officials, was busily passing on bits of information to one another. This information gradually filtered through the queues of incoming passengers as well.

Something terrible had happened in America. Hundreds of thousands of people had been killed... maybe more.

A surprise Russian Air Force attack over the North Pole, linked with the launch of hundreds of nuclear missiles, had wiped out, or nearly wiped out, scores of American cities. Reports were sketchy, but U.N. Secretary General Xu Dangchao had already appeared on TV, asking for governments to work in co-operation with the U.N. to mount a rescue operation. Many of America's international airports had been destroyed, but tents, medicine, and other supplies would be sent to those places in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada where planes could still land. Because of widespread fall out and the extent of damage, it would also be necessary to fly hundreds of thousands of people (if not many times more than that) out of the U.S., to seek refuge in other countries.

The airport was in chaos, but Chaim's flight to Newcastle was not affected.

Throughout the day nothing occupied his attention (nor much of anyone else's attention for that matter) nearly so much as getting news updates on what was happening in America. Although it would be weeks before the full extent of the damage was known, it did not take long to realise that this was a disaster which towered far above all other disasters in human history.

The world was amazed at the ease with which America had been destroyed, and especially at the apparent failure of her defence system. The Secretary General was so quick to respond that there were rumours he knew ahead of time that the attack was going to take place.

Back in his flat in Newcastle, Chaim was watching the news the next morning when the first video clips of the scene in America were being shown.

They included an amateur video probably taken from a camera that had been found in the rubble of an American airport.

A family of three was facing the camera, with their backs to the large windows that looked out on the airport runway. In the final second or two of the video, a ball of fire could be seen hurtling across the taxiing lanes. Planes were just beginning to upend, before the windows exploded and the filming ceased.

What transfixed Chaim, however, was not the action in the background. It was the family in the picture. In the center of the trio was a beautiful little girl, about six years old, with springy blonde ringlets surrounding an angelic face. He watched in shocked disbelief as the girl's innocent blue eyes filled with horror at the very moment that the video cut out.

Although tolerant of other beliefs, for himself Chaim could not remember a time when he had ever believed in miracles. The miraculous, he taught, was a special spin people put on things which do, in fact, have natural explanations.

Like Tolstoy, he believed that miracles filled a need for certain uneducated people, but that they also were used by unscrupulous religious leaders to manipulate people.

Despite this apparent cynicism, Chaim would never have referred to himself as an atheist. Definitely not. There was much that transcended human understanding, and for Chaim, God was an appropriate title for all that he had yet to learn. Quaker teaching referred to this Godness as residing in the hearts of everyone. And Australian Quakerism tended to see the same force residing in all of nature as well. Such pantheism enabled Quakers to relate better to both primitive religions and to much of the New Age movement.

But the girl on the amateur video clip had Chaim rattled. The dream never came back after that, and her eyes ceased to haunt him. Yet he knew, as the whole world became occupied with rescuing American survivors, that he had experienced some kind of foreknowledge about this.

But why? And how had it happened? The whole experience went beyond any explanation that he could come up with, for even if it could be explained as a fantastic coincidence, something in his spirit would not let him accept that. He had definitely been party to something of great significance, and he continued to feel the burden of responsibility that was a part of the original dream. It had all happened for a reason, and he needed to find it.

All through meeting the following Sunday, Chaim went over the facts, searching for an explanation.

Quaker meetings are held largely in silence, with short interruptions for "spoken ministry", which are brief moments when someone shares a few words that they feel they have been led to share as a result of their silent worship.

As an elder in the local meeting, Chaim had often spoken. His previous contributions had been little more than thoughts that sprang to mind during the silence, often reminders of something he had heard on ABC radio that morning or read during the week. Now, having experienced something undeniably powerful, (He still could not bring himself to call it 'supernatural'.) he was unable to speak, and the reason he was unable to speak was because he feared what the others would think of him.

Ostensibly, meetings for worship were a time when the congregation waited expectantly to hear something that possessed divine unction, either within their own hearts, or through the words of others in the meeting. But academic pride had caused many attenders to regard anyone who spoke with such authority as being misguided visitors who had not yet come to appreciate "Quaker ways".

Now Chaim had become party to something that was at least worthy of consideration by others in the meeting, yet he could not bring himself to share it.

He did not want others to think he had lost his academic impartiality and turned into a religious fanatic. Instead, the meeting, which was more than double its normal size due to insecurities everyone was feeling about the disaster in America, was punctuated only by feeble attempts to bring meaning out of all that pain and suffering.

Rather than share with the others, what Chaim had decided, was that he would visit Aunt Molly that afternoon. At least she would not think less of him for his experience.

## Chapter Five--Baxter Detention Centre

"Git on down from there! We got better things to do than scrape your remains up from offa the floor."

Sandra Buckley, one of the 'nicer' guards at the Baxter Detention Centre, was talking to a prisoner who had managed to scale the compound wall, using the roof of the canteen to get there. It was obviously not an escape attempt, as there were other walls beyond it, and a lot of razor wire in between. It was, instead, another suicide attempt.

Sandra, like all of the other guards, saw such actions only as attempts to get attention... empty threats from people who were not prepared to play by the rules of the Department of Immigration.

"I want meeting with my lawyer," the distraught man cried. "Why you stopping him from visits? I will break my head on the concrete if you do not bring him here."

It was Mahmoud Aziz. Like all of the detainees, he was not officially entitled to legal representation. Some lawyers and solicitors had offered to represent them pro bono, and Mahmoud had a particularly good lawyer who had agreed to act on his behalf. But last week, the lawyer had been 'caught' bringing a small photo in for Mahmoud... a photo of his family in Afghanistan. The photo itself was not the problem; but it had been sent in a small frame with a glass front. The glass could have been used to cause self harm. Mahmoud's lawyer had failed to mention this before entering the prison, and for that he had been barred from returning.

Ironically, the same system that insisted suicide threats were childish temper tantrums--best ignored--had outlawed everything from disposable razors to liquid detergent, for fear these items would be used to inflict self harm.

"Please, you let me talk to him," said a short, quiet inmate named Mashallah. He was respected by guards and prisoners alike, and several times previously he had prevented prisoners from committing suicide. Sandra backed off to let him work his magic. All she could think of was how ridiculously selfish Mahmoud's behaviour was, in light of the really serious news from America. In her eyes, Mahmoud was probably connected to those who had destroyed America anyway. He didn't deserve all the care he was getting there at Baxter.

Mashallah spoke quietly with Mahmoud for a few minutes, asking about his family, listening to his concerns, and then reminding him of his faith in Allah.

"All ah loves you, Mahmoud," Mashallah said with deep conviction. "I think he will not love you less if you do this awful thing to yourself. He knows what we go through here. But I think he has other plans too... good plans. Please wait with me and wait with the others. We need you."

A few minutes later, Mashallah and a few of the other detainees were helping Mahmoud down from the wall, watched cautiously by Sandra Buckley and two other guards.

For eight long years Mashallah had lived as a prisoner here at the Baxter Immigration Detention Centre, outside of Port Augusta, South Australia.

Mashallah was no closer to being released now, than he had been when he was first taken into custody.

Nine years earlier, back home in Iran, when he was barely twenty years old, he had seen his father and uncle killed by the authorities there because of their involvement in an outlawed political group. He himself had been forced to flee for his life. While in hiding, he had learned that his two sisters had been taken away to be interrogated by the authorities, and had never returned.

His mother had smuggled all of the family's savings to him, and begged him to use it to flee the country. Up to that point she had been spared by the Iranian authorities, and she said that if he was successful in finding refuge in another country, she would be happy to face whatever fate awaited her in Iran.

With the money, Mashallah had been able to get a ticket and a false passport, to bribe an airport official, and to fly out of the country to Singapore.

In Singapore, he had located a people smuggler who had promised him freedom and a new life in Australia. Mashallah had paid the exorbitant fare and was put on a small boat that would take him and 150 other refugees to a larger ship for the journey to Australia and political freedom.

When the tiny boat was far out to sea, the people crowded into it discovered that there was no larger ship. They had been ripped off. This leaky craft was their only means of escape to Australia. They spent weeks of deprivation on the open seas, with rations that were barely sufficient to keep them alive before they landed on a remote beach in Western Australia. Good fortune had prevented them from being stopped by authorities before they landed, but as soon as locals learned of their existence, the refugees were rounded up and put into detention.

Over the years, Mashallah had seen most of the other refugees released, though often only after lengthy appeals to the Department of Immigration. But his case was different. His real name was not on his papers, and he had resolved not to disclose his true identity. He and his mother might be executed if he returned to Iran, or she could suffer further problems if the authorities there learned about his existence in Australia. When the Department of Immigration treacherously tried to verify his identity with authorities in Iran, using the false papers, it became clear that Mashallah was not whom he had claimed to be, and this threatened his status as a legitimate refugee. Ironically, at the same time, the government's use of his false papers (rather than his real identity, if he had provided it) protected his mother. He vowed never to give in and tell them his real name after that.

Others around him had been able to enlist public sympathy by converting to Christianity and arguing that they would be killed if they were sent back to Iran.

The Australian Government, at first suspicious of their motives, sent a few back, but the deported refugees were taken into custody by Iranian authorities on arrival and were not heard from again. This brought angry protests from many churches in Australia, and after that, Iranian refugees who claimed to have converted to Christianity were given slow and begrudging assistance from the Department of Immigration.

But claiming conversion to Christianity was not an option as far as Mashallah was concerned. It was true that even as a student in Iran he had faced persecution for defending Christians, and it was true that his appreciation for at least some aspects of Christianity had increased as a result of his time in Australia; but his official position was that Islam and the kingdom of

heaven were his religion. In his mind, he had not converted to anything; he had only discovered in Christianity a greater appreciation for his Muslim roots. Despite advice from his lawyer and other refugee advocates, he had stuck to this position.

"I have lost everything but my faith," he explained to them. "Not even to save my life can I change what I believe. I try here in Australia to follow the truth in both religions, but I pray in Arabic, and I was born a Muslim. Allah will be with me, I know, but only if I am true to him."

As a consequence, Mashallah was a man without a country. He had applied for refuge in almost forty other countries, but they all argued that he was Australia's responsibility now. The Australian position was that he would remain in detention until he revealed his true identity (after which he would still face the possibility of being deported to Iran).

In the meantime, Mashallah had set about making the best of his situation.

He continued to pray five times a day, and to follow other Muslim religious rules.

He saw his role as that of a humble servant to others in the detention centre. His refusal to react to the callous treatment of the guards won him their approval as well. More than once he had been able, like today, to instill hope into the heart of a fellow detainee, and he had come to think of this as his primary purpose for being alive.

Shortly after Mahmoud touched the ground, the poor man was roughly seized by the guards and taken away, to be locked up in Red One compound, where all potential y suicidal inmates were placed for round the clock observation. The inmates themselves knew that Red One was really the detention centre's version of solitary confinement. Mahmoud would have no access to normal amenities or recreation; he would be allowed no visitors; and he would be forced to sleep on the floor as punishment for having upset the status quo of the prison cum detention centre.

It was time for Mashallah's afternoon prayers by the time Mahmoud was led away, and so he quickly retreated to the privacy of his room, where he bowed on the floor, facing Mecca. Unlike the other Muslims at Baxter, he said his prayers privately now. He had learned this from his readings of the Bible. Jesus said to pray secretly, and not to be seen of others. This made sense to Mashallah, and he had put it into practice in his own prayer rituals.

Perhaps it was the stress of Mahmoud's rescue, or the fact that he had lost another friend that afternoon who (fortunately for the friend) had won release and been taken to Adelaide. Maybe it was because the previous day had been the eighth anniversary of his arrival at Baxter. For whatever reasons, in the middle of his prayer, Mashallah broke down and began to cry quietly. He tried to stifle the sobs and to refocus his attention on the words of his prayer, but he was having little success.

It was then that he heard a voice, not quite audible... but very distinct, inside his head. It said, in Arabic, "This year, freedom! But only if you use it for me."

"Yes, yes, certainly! I will do anything you ask," he responded. "Allah be praised! You are so good to me!"

That started a fervent and deeply sincere search for what he must do for God if the Voice was right about freedom coming to him in the near future.

## Chapter Six--Listening

"We don't have words for these things," Molly said, when Chaim asked if she would tell him more about what Aborigines mean when they talk about dreaming. "When you be quiet you know. That's all I can say. You just know."

Chaim had expected something like this. And much as he hated to admit it, her words spoke to his condition. Although he had refrained from speaking during the morning meeting, he knew that something of spiritual significance was happening to him, and this conviction had been reinforced within his own spirit during the silence.

"But how can I be sure?" he asked.

"You White Fell as all us wanna be sure. What is sure? You get too smart and you miss the Spirit. Just you be quiet and listen."

Chaim laughed at the irony of Aunty Molly lecturing him on silence. After all, Quaker theology practically revolves around silence.

"You're absolutely right, Molly!" he chuckled.

Whatever else had happened as a result of the dream, Chaim's appreciation for quiet times had deepened. From that point on, the more he sat in silence, the more he knew that God had spoken to him, and that God had used the dream to get his attention. He found comfort in just being quiet before God.

Something akin to this was happening during his sleeping hours as well.

Even when he could not remember his dreams, he had the feeling that important things were happening deep down in his spirit.

Even with all of his education, Chaim felt no more literate than Aunty Molly when it came to verbalising what it was that was happening to him. He was spending more and more time in solitude, just listening (in the Aboriginal sense).

He wasn't hearing anything that he could put into words, and the chief result of his listening was that he was losing interest in all that had previously engaged his attention. An odd side effect was that Chaim became even more cheerful than he had been previously, almost to the point of being foolish.

It's a little like being drunk he had thought to himself, as he observed his own feelings when listening. Part of it was deliberate; he disliked anyone who took themselves too seriously, especial y in religious matters. But it also grew from the thrill of being so total y free from care when he was alone with God.

Although he continued to refrain from sharing this experience with others in his local meeting, Chaim looked forward to meetings much more now, and he found himself wondering whether other Quakers had ever experienced anything so powerful. Maybe there was a whole dimension to Quakerism which had previously eluded him. If there were others like himself, who had experienced this powerful relationship with God, how would he recognise them? What would he say to them? He had no answers to any of these questions.

Chaim spent many hours pondering all that was happening in America.

He lost interest in his duties at the university, preferring to voluntarily assist American refugees settling in the area. Apart from that, there was little he could do to make a difference, and that frustrated him deeply.

For a while the university was sympathetic about him missing lectures...after all, the tragedy was foremost in the minds of everyone. But as time went on, and as other Australians returned to more traditional pursuits, Chaim seemed to be moving in the other direction. At the end of the academic year he applied for an extended leave of absence, in order to work out where his life was heading.

There was an irony about world events that dominated many of his thoughts. For centuries Quakers had sought world peace, better conditions for the poor, and religious unity. Now it seemed like the most destructive (if not the shortest) war in history had brought (or at least was bringing) significant improvement in all three areas. Did such an end really justify the means?

Under the influence of the U.N., many countries had adjusted their foreign and economic policies to favour developing countries; and Australia was no exception. Without America to back her up, the government was yielding to other pressures now.

The United Nations had assumed responsibility for bringing order out of the chaos, and Secretary General Xu Dangchao was doing an admirable job of co-ordinating relief. American interests overseas were being returned to local governments and absorbed into the local economies, thus boosting incomes for much of the developing world.

As often happens during disasters, the world had been brought together as one in response to the catastrophic events in America, and this was particularly evident in the attitude of the religious community. Terrorism had dropped to almost nil now that America was out of the picture. People were reaching out to embrace and support one another across national, political, and religious boundaries that had sharply divided the world only months previously.

Although they were deeply saddened by the war, Quakers in general were heartened by the encouraging developments toward world peace.

But as Chaim considered it all in silence, he started to "hear" things that disturbed him. He had a feeling that something far worse than the destruction of America was yet to happen, and that the world was being drawn into a false sense of security. Was he being too cynical, or had he, in his 'dreamings', tapped into something that Aborigines had known for centuries? He found himself returning for more clearness from Molly.

"Big trouble comin' for sure," Molly said when Chaim shared his misgivings. She had no more information to add than what Chaim already knew, but it was a source of comfort to him to know that he was not alone in his misgivings.

Although distressed by what alcohol had done to Australia's Aboriginal community, Chaim began to genuinely enjoy being around them. He was discovering a spiritual dimension and dignity in these people that he had only theoretically acknowledged before. As opportunities arose, he would journey from town to town, spending days at a time in the various Aboriginal camps along the way. He just wanted to soak up the new-found mysteries of these first Australians.

## Chapter Seven--Clearness

It did not take long for word to spread through other Quaker academics that Chaim was no longer working. Although most of the talk was out of Chaim's earshot, there were a few informal approaches made by well-meaning Friends who were concerned about his mental state. Chaim just laughed it off.

"Think of me as insanely happy," he would say. "Life is an adventure, and I've never felt so much alive."

This led to comments about the need for Friends to submit their concerns to the wisdom of the meeting. "Right order" it was called. Chaim patiently listened, but then gently reminded them of early leaders who had acted contrary to the wishes of the religious hierarchy.

"The way I see it, the meeting wouldn't come right out and tell me what to do anyway," he said on one occasion. "The only reason for a clearness meeting would be if I wasn't sure about what to do; I don't have all the answers, but I've never felt so confident that what I'm doing is right."

Another problem with having a clearness meeting was that he didn't think he could explain what was happening in terms that anyone in the meeting would be able to understand.

Chaim's position as an elder, and his faithful service for the past 18 years in the Society, protected him from official opposition. It would be awkward for Friends to fault him on his intimate involvement with Aborigines. After all, they had been promoting the Aboriginal cause for many years, and now they had one of their own practically becoming an Aborigine himself. Surely this was not something they could officially oppose, and Chaim would teasingly remind them of this.

It could not yet be called a faith, but in the back of Chaim's mind, there was a hope that what he was going through would all lead to something dramatic, useful and powerful. Because of his Quaker tradition, he assumed it would at least start with some significant revelation in the meetings for worship that he attended each week. Nevertheless, although the meetings were extensions of the pleasure that he enjoyed during quiet times at home and with Aboriginal communities, and although there often was a "quaking" which he experienced in the meetings, like the rumblings of a volcano about to erupt, nothing came out. For months it seemed that what was happening to him was to be for him alone.

Then, at Yearly Meeting in Brisbane, six months after the fall of America, Chaim finally spoke. It was by far the biggest yearly meeting he had ever attended, due almost exclusively to the big changes in world affairs. It was not an ideal time to test his new understanding of spoken ministry, for a mistake in front of so many people could mark the end of his high regard in Quaker circles.

Neither was it the dramatic event that he had thought it might be. Inside his head what he wanted to say was bursting with authority and divine anointing, but spoken through his lips it seemed apologetic and weak. Only Chaim's ability to laugh at himself had carried him through it.

"Friends, I want to share something that's been happening to me over the past few months," he began quite earnestly. "I trust you won't be offended by what I'm about to say."

And then there was a painfully long pause as he sought for the next words. He had trusted that if he began, the words would come to him, but they were not. His speech was full of starts and stops.

"We're missing something... " he started, and then stopped, remembering the need to "keep low". He smiled sheepishly and started again.

"I mean, I feel we're missing something. Maybe it's just me.

"As a Society..." And he stopped again.

"Mmm, no, not as a Society. There's nothing wrong with societies. Sorry, Friends, I'm having some difficulty with this, as you can see." And he laughed at himself while others waited patiently.

"What if we stopped thinking of ourselves as a Society? What if it's just you and me and the Spirit? Are we really listening to the Spirit? Or are we the blind leading the blind? Each trying to guess what the others expect of us?

"Let me put it this way: Things are looking much better in the world at the moment. Peace, Unity, more equality. But I have a leading in the spirit that says something is very wrong out there. I feel it so strongly!"

Yes, Something is wrong summed up best what he wanted to say. Those three words came out strongly, confidently, but they were vague enough that no one could say he was being judgmental. So he repeated them.

"Something is wrong. I think I'd best leave it there." And he sat down.

The Spirit must have known how much his audience could bear.

Afterwards, most people seemed almost indifferent to what he had said.

There was some uneasiness, and Chaim could tell that a few people were mildly embarrassed, but that was all. On the other hand, three or four came to him privately and said with deep conviction that his comments had "spoken to their condition", which is Quaker parlance for spoken ministry that strikes a chord with a listener.

They did not say anything more than that, and so Chaim had good reason to wonder if he and they were talking about the same thing.

Something is wrong, he thought with the left side of his brain. That could mean almost anything. They could have been reading into it whatever was bothering them.

But the other side of his brain... the part that had learned to listen... felt encouragement ... reason to believe that his new lifestyle and the direction in which it was heading were part of a bigger plan.

Maybe there were others apart from the Aboriginal community who were hearing the warnings.

## Chapter Eight--Trouble in India

"You seeee, sometimes we must do things that are not...?" The Minister for Law had a habit of turning a simple sentence into a question like this, by raising his voice in anticipation and then pausing before the final word.

"... Easy," he concluded, like a teacher answering on behalf of a slow student.

Guru Vaishnu and his followers had benefited greatly from the generosity of the Tamil Nadu Government, but now the popular sect leader was seeing the other side of the Government's generous support. He had never liked this Minister, whose political career had always depended on Mafia-like control of the slums in his electorate; yet here Vaishnu was, seated in one overstuffed chair facing his opponent, who was seated in another overstuffed chair. K.A.

Krishnamurthy smiled wickedly through a mouthful of crooked teeth as he spoke.

His hands were clasped on top of his huge stomach, and his thumbs rolled around each other as he spoke.

"Your people can finish the job in a...? ... Day. And then you will have a second...? ...Temple. You see how easy it is?"

Krishnamurthy was talking about a slum village that he wanted levelled.

He was asking Guru Vaishnu's followers to perform the unpleasant task of burning down the thatch huts, in return for use of the land when they were finished. But what he was asking was much more than a request. If Vaishnu refused, he knew that he and his followers would bear the wrath of this Government.

The village he was being asked to raze was in the electorate of one of Krishnamurthy's cronies, who had just failed in a bid for re-election. Slum lords retained their power through political terrorism, and the poor know that if they do not vote them back into power, retribution will be swift and cruel.

Krishnamurthy could have assigned the task to anyone else, but he was deliberately using it to push Vaishnu over the brink.

For a time he had, in co-operation with the Chief Minister, been able to exploit the hard work and good will of Vaishnu's army of volunteers. Huge amounts of money had been approved for various clean-up projects, and while the Vaishnavites had faithfully carried out the tasks, for virtually nothing in return, Krishnamurthy and others in his party had pocketed the allocated funds. Corrupt use of funds was not unusual; what was different this time was that the projects were actually being done. At first, support for the Government had soared. But there was a growing awareness that it was really the Vaishnavites who had transformed the image of the corrupt BJP Party in Tamil Nadu and in neighbouring states. Slum dwellers were starting to believe that change could come through the ballot box, but they were aware enough to know that a vote for the BJP was not necessarily a vote for the Vaishnavites.

The BJP, like fundamentalist parties in other religions, existed primarily for the rich and powerful within Hindu society. Non-Hindu elements (chiefly Christians and Muslims, but also Communists) had, over the years, created unrest amongst outcastes and untouchables in India, by offering them more humane treatment in exchange for deserting their religion.

Vaishnu and his followers, with their willingness to do the work of the untouchables, had appeared to be the perfect answer to the void left by untouchables (or dalits) who had deserted Hinduism. But their actions had so inspired the poor that some of the dalits were returning to Hinduism with a new hope for change. They were politically aware enough now to represent a serious threat to the upper castes in Hinduism.

As yet, there was nothing overtly political about Vaishnu's movement; but the more discerning members of the BJP could see that the sect was having a political effect anyway. The election loss for one of their most promising incumbents was proof that the dalits were being dangerously influenced by the Vaishnu movement.

Krishnamurthy could think of no better way to solve both problems than to assign the task of punishing the poor to the very people who had, in his opinion, caused the slum dwellers to revolt in the first place.

"This is an important decision. Can I have a few days to discuss it with my people?" Vaishnu asked. He had known for some time that he was walking a dangerous path in his dealings with these people, but at the same time, Krishnamurthy's inhuman demand had shocked him.

"Two days. That is all the time we have. I will send for you on...? ...Friday."

Vaishnu stood to his feet. "I will move quickly. I think we can meet your deadline."

"You know what this will cost if they do not agree? You will tell them?"

"Yes, Minister, I understand. I will do my best."

Later that afternoon, Vaishnu met with his top followers. The meeting had been arranged secretly, and was held in a humble hut, where they were forced to sit cross-legged on reed mats on a dried cow-dung floor as they spoke.

"We must move quickly," he said, after explaining what the Minister had asked of him and of them. "In two days, the Minister will come looking for me.

When he fails to find me, he will come looking for you. And if he cannot find you, he will take out his anger on our people. They must be warned to flee immediately."

"But where will we go?" asked one of them.

"We can go anywhere, as long as we do not go together. No more than two or three members to any one location. They cannot find an organisation that does not exist."

"Not exist?" the same man asked in dismay. "But what of our work? What of your teachings?"

"Our movement and my teachings are in their hearts now... if they have learned well. From today on, we each must seek to serve the God alone... or with the help of one or two others. If we work in this way, they cannot stop us."

"And where will you go?" asked one of the other men.

"Only the God knows. I will pray for wisdom, and each of you must do the same."

## Chapter Nine--Dodge City

It was shortly after sunset in an Aboriginal settlement called Dodge City, just outside of Brewarrina, New South Wales. Chaim Rosenberg had accompanied Molly on an expedition to visit some of her relatives. Molly was off touring the neighbourhood, and Chaim sat casual y on the couch at Ben Black's place while half a dozen men of various ages passed a flagon of port around.

Ben himself was not there. The loungeroom was almost dark now, either because the electricity no longer worked, or because someone had failed to replace a bulb. In either event, the men were oblivious to the darkness as long as they could make out one another's silhouettes in the light that came through curtain-less windows from a nearby street light.

The house smelled of dirty nappies from the two babies that lived there, though it had little effect on any of the men in the room. Conversation was banal and tended toward arguments over the least detail. But none of this fazed Chaim, who remained silent, and simply passed the flagon on untouched whenever it came to him. No one seemed aware that he was not Aboriginal, that he was not joining in the conversation, nor that he was not drinking.

These were the kind of scenes Chaim had grown accustomed to over the past few months. He had come to love them, not because of the conditions just described, but because he had a growing conviction that, as a people, the Australian Aborigines were just waiting for something of immense importance to happen... something in which they would play a vital role. Ironically, the Aboriginal community itself was almost indifferent to all the fuss the rest of the world was making over the war in America.

"You mob clear out. We got business to 'tend to." It was big Ben Black standing in the doorway. (The door itself had been removed years ago.) He had a tall, thin white man in a cheap, dusty suit with him. The Aboriginal men in the the room rose to their feet, as Ben motioned Chaim to stay seated.

"Charlie, you can stay too," he said, and one of the older men in the room resumed his seat on the loungeroom floor.

When the others had left and there were just Chaim, Ben, Charlie, and the stranger, Ben began his introduction.

"This young fella is name of David... David Hartley. He got some fings to show us from the Bible... important fings for our people."

David was about 35 years old. Chaim later learned that he had been raised in the Seventh Day Adventist Church... a group that believed fanatically for decades that it was evil to worship on Sunday. The movement had, in recent years, become far more liberal, and far more tolerant of other Christian denominations.

David had left the church during one of many divisions that resulted from its shift toward mainstream Christianity. He had spent a couple of years on his own, travelling around the country. Like Chaim, he had a strange attraction toward Australia's Aboriginal people.

"I discovered this a few months ago," the young preacher began, opening a well-worn Bible to the 18th chapter of Isaiah, and squinting heavily as he struggled to read in the dim light. "It's a

message to people from Kenya, who it says came to Australia many years ago. Least that's the way I read it."

The chapter started with, "Woe to the land... which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, that sends ambassadors by the sea, even in vessels of bulrushes, saying, 'Go, swift messengers, to a nation scattered and peeled, to a people terrible from their beginning hitherto, a nation meted out and trodden down, whose land the rivers have despised."

David looked up to see if he still had their attention before he continued: "Some translations say this new land they were talking about was vast and flat, with few rivers, and no way to travel 'cept by foot. Most big flat dry places in the world either have horses or camels, but not Australia. The first people here got 'round by walking. Doesn't it sound like the Aboriginal people of Australia?"

He went on, without waiting for an answer.

"There's theories that the first Aborigines came from Africa, maybe in papyrus boats, just like the verse says. Then there's the baobab tree. It only grows in Australia, India, and Africa. In all three countries there's a legend about God punishing the tree for its pride by pulling it out of the ground and planting it upside down."

"He thinks us Black people, here and in India, come from Africa," Ben put in.

Chaim's thoughts strayed at the first mention of India. He had, since attending the conference in Chennai, formed a deep friendship with Guru Vaishnu. The two had corresponded almost daily via email, and earlier that week, Chaim had received a disturbing letter from Vaishnu, about problems with the government there.

David's voice brought Chaim back to the passage of scripture and the darkened room: "It starts out warning the people in this country; then it says there'll be some pruning; and it finishes up saying they'll bring a gift to God at the time of the harvest, when a trumpet blows."

Chaim pulled out a little penlight and, looking over David's shoulder, he shone it on the open passage. One line stood out: "The churlish man will no longer be called liberal." A smile crossed his face as he thought of the recent decision by the Liberal Party, to change its name. For as long as he could remember, the party had been conservative to a fault (even 'churlish' he thought mischievously) in its foreign and domestic policies. It had always been a misnomer to call them 'Liberals'.

"In Bible prophecy," David continued, "the harvest is the end of the world.

There are seven trumpets that signal a time of great trouble, just before the end."

Chaim flinched. The end of the world? Bible prophecy? he thought.

These were not his favorite subjects, not as a Quaker, as a Jew, or as an academic. Yet it was no more preposterous than him sitting here in a dirty, smelly, darkened room in an Aboriginal housing estate. He may as well hear David out.

The others squatted on the floor, in front of Chaim and David, who were sitting on the worn-out couch. "It's not really the end of the world, like the destruction of the world," David explained. "It's more like a change... the end of one age... an age of spiritual darkness. And the dawn of

a new age... an age of justice and righteousness."

Chaim noted that David's words were almost identical to the ones Hindus use to describe what they expect when their Kalki Avatar arrives.

David explained further: "Just before the end, there'll be another leader who will bring what seems like peace, prosperity, and religious unity. The problem is that he'll be a counterfeit. Only those who are tuned in to God will know the truth. This false peace will turn into the worst suffering in the history of the world."

"What happened in America?" Chaim asked. "Is that what you're talking about?" He knew what fundamentalist Christians believed about the coming world leader, but he was hoping that David might be pushing a toned down version.

"Way I see it, we're going to experience something even worse than that," David replied.

It was difficult to imagine anything worse than the destruction of America.

The official death toll was now nearing thirty million and counting, with some 300 million people evacuated over the past year, and millions more unaccounted for, presumably dead, or living in Canada and Mexico by now. The entire country had been left uninhabited, and there was hardly a person on earth who had not been directly affected by it. Not even the Black Plague had taken so many lives.

On the other hand, what David was saying coincided with Chaim's own misgivings about something even worse coming in the future.

David continued. "This world leader, who starts out good, ends up as evil as the devil himself, a man called, 'The Antichrist'. He'll try to kill true believers, but the Bible says they'll be taken to someplace called 'the wilderness', where they'll be protected. Maybe this is where God will use the Aboriginal people.

They've lived for centuries in some of the harshest country in the world... the wilderness of Australia. They could train people all over the world in how to survive. I think the 'gift' these people bring to God may be the people they help to escape from the Antichrist."

The concept of an antichrist wasn't new to Chaim, but he had not personally met anyone who related any of it to the Aborigines.

"How long have you believed these things? Have you shared them with others? And if so, what has been their reaction?" he asked as politely as he could when David had finished his presentation.

"I've been talking about this for a few months now, travelling 'round the Outback. Truth is, no one so far has been interested in it." David hung his head slightly. "Least not till tonight."

"Most of our people are as lost as anyone else," Ben said through two missing front teeth. "But I fink it's true. I been finkin' 'bout Jesus for a long time, and I reckon he's got more aboriginality than most us Black fell as."

Talk turned to things that Jesus was reported to have said about money and about living by faith. This part of what David was saying appealed more to Chaim. He recognised Jesus as a great teacher; and he had already noted a link between what was happening in India and

things Jesus had said. He himself had pretty much stopped working for money now. So it was intriguing to think of Australia's Aborigines becoming part of a similar movement, if that was what David was talking about.

The Aboriginal people, most of whom had no word for 'money' in their native languages, had for millennia escaped the curse of materialism. While the world saw them as misfits, who refused to become compliant workers in its economic quests, the Aboriginal people themselves had held out. But many thousands had drunk themselves to death, and many more had suffered a kind of collective insanity in the process.

Despite his reservations about the eschatological stuff that David was spouting, Chaim was starting to feel that they were getting closer to discovering the true destiny of the native people of Australia.

Missionaries had tried to scrub and clothe those to whom they ministered, but they had never seen the potential for the Aborigines themselves to become missionaries of a different sort... ambassadors of truth and goodwill to the rest of the world. With this concept of learning to survive without paid jobs in an alien world, the Aborigines might be the natural experts.

There were points here that could be quite exciting... if only Chaim could get over the stuff about Bible prophecy. He decided to ask more questions.

"I've read a bit about prophecy," he explained, without revealing his academic expertise in the area of religion. "It always seems like the prophetic bits could be read in several different ways. The interpretations aren't usually clear until after they've been fulfilled. Would that be a fair way to put it?"

"I don't see it quite like that," said David. "But is it really important that people understand it all in advance? Might even cause problems if they did know too much. As long as it really does fit with what happens, seeing it can still be inspiring even if you don't see it till after it happens." David paused for a moment and then went on.

"Of course some prophecies are easier to prove than others. I'll give you two examples...

"There's the Isaiah 53 prophecy about Jesus being wounded for our transgressions, and being led as a lamb to the slaughter, without answering back. That kinda stuff.

"It's a pretty good match for what he actually did; but the prophecy itself doesn't say enough for people to have been sure it was talking about the Messiah before Jesus came along. This is the kind of thing you're talking about, isn't it? It wasn't clear until after it all happened."

Chaim grunted agreement.

"There's lots of prophecies like this," David confessed.

"But there's another one that says right from the start that it's about the Jewish Messiah. In fact, it's the only prophecy in the Old Testament that uses the exact word 'messiah'. And it tells the exact year when Jesus would be crucified." He looked to see if Chaim was interested, and he was. This was something different.

David continued: "It was written by the Hebrew prophet, Daniel, more than 500 years before it happened."

David directed Chaim to Daniel 9:24 to 27. It said that "Messiah will be cut off, but not for himself" 483 years after the decree to rebuild Jerusalem. David was talking about a decree by Artaxerxes of Persia, in 446 B.C., to rebuild Jerusalem.

"Even if one is skeptical enough to believe that Daniel wrote the prophecy after the decree was issued by Artaxerxes," David explained, "no one believes it was written after Jesus was crucified, in 30 A.D. So Daniel definitely beat the odds by picking the exact year of Jesus' death so many centuries earlier."

Chaim wasn't so sure. Somehow, in his studies, he had never heard of this passage. Also, he had done some quick calculations while David was talking, and he came up with a discrepancy of seven years.

"From 446 B.C. to 30 A.D. is only 476 years... not 483," he argued. The prophecy is off by seven years."

"Only if you work on the modern calendar, which has 365 1/4 days to the year," David explained. The calendar used in Bible prophecies worked on a year of 360 days."\*

"Over a period of 476 years, at a rate of 5 1/4 days per year, you would have accumulated a total of 2499 days, or roughly seven years!"

Chaim was impressed. Why hadn't he ever encountered this passage in his studies? As a Jew himself, any reference to the Messiah should have included reference to this passage, if it really was, as David said, the only passage in the Old Testament that specifically named the 'Messiah'.

(\*See Revelation 11:2, 11:3, 12:6, 12:14, 13:5, and Daniel 7:25, and 12:7, where a period of three and a half years is also described as 42 months, or 1260 days [42 x 30 days, or 3.5 x 360 days] ).

The fact that it predicted the exact year of the crucifixion of Jesus (and, of course, the subsequent impact on history made by this one incredible man) was overwhelming evidence for Christian claims about Jesus being the Messiah.

But for Chaim himself, messiahs of any sort were not a major concern.

Nor were prophecies. He was not that kind of a Jew. What he was interested in were the implications of all this with regard to his dealings, both with the Aborigines of Australia, and with the Vaishnavites of India.

## Chapter Ten--Threshing

There was no way of knowing at the time that the changes Chaim was undergoing would one day give him a reputation as a monstrous killer. He was too busy trying to follow his conscience, and trying to answer to that of God within his own heart. Nevertheless, there were hints that what he was going through was pointing toward a destiny that was vastly different to anything he had expected before the fall of America.

Ben Black and David Hartley moved in with him, in his plush apartment not far from the University of Newcastle. They continued to come and go from Newcastle, as they visited Aboriginal communities around Australia. Their efforts centered around a commitment to Christianity, while Chaim himself was primarily searching for answers that could be relevant to people of all religions.

The idea of a culture where people worked for the good of others, without regard for money, was appealing even in the world as Chaim had always known it before the fall of America. But if spiritually dark times really were ahead, he could see how it might eventually become a necessity for survival as well.

During the Reformation, the Anabaptists were hated and hunted by both Catholics and Protestants because they had refused to become a part of either of the politically warring factions. Their peace-loving stance nearly resulted in them being wiped out. The Pilgrims fled England because of religious persecution, and the Quakers of that same era found themselves hated even by the other Pilgrims after they arrived in America, because of their ideals. Each movement, however, had eventually mellowed with regard to some of their more offensive beliefs, possibly in an effort to escape persecution and to be re-absorbed back into the mainstream. Jehovah's Witnesses, who still refused to recognise the sovereignty of any political system over their loyalty to God, probably represented the nearest thing to the fanaticism that had resulted in persecution for each of the earlier movements.

So what if, Chaim thought, there was a time coming when a revival of faith would be met by an equal revival of persecution? Wouldn't it be helpful to have an army of people who were able to survive underground? This was the kind of reasoning that had earlier piqued his interest in Vaishnu's philosophy. The idea of people working for love instead of for money would be eminently practical...with or without dark times.

It came as a surprise when Chaim was approached after meeting one Sunday and asked if a threshing meeting could be arranged at his place, during which Friends could express their concerns about what he was doing. As an elder himself, he knew that such a move should have gone through the Ministry and Oversight Committee, of which he was a member. But he was also surprised, because he had assumed that most Friends were unaware of what was happening in his private life. For a threshing meeting to be called, someone must be feeling pretty strongly about what was happening to him. He agreed to host such a meeting at his flat on a Saturday afternoon two weeks later.

More than a dozen Friends turned up, and most of them were not from Chaim's local meeting. The convenor reminded everyone that they were there just to hear people out, and not to make any decisions or to discipline anyone.

People had questions that they wanted to put to Chaim, and so he was being offered an

opportunity to hear the questions and to share his concern. That was all .

"These men who are staying with you -- Ben and David -- do you know much about what they're teaching in the Aboriginal community?" asked Barbara, a young Friend who was actively involved in social work with Aborigines in northern New South Wales.

"Yes, I do," said Chaim. "But you know, Ben and David aren't Friends themselves. They don't even attend."

"Do you support them in what they're saying?" asked Barbara.

Chaim could see that he would need to be careful about how he answered that one.

"I support their right to share their faith in whatever way they see fit," he said with a grin.

Barbara then went on to describe in her own words what she felt Ben and David were doing. They were frightening Aborigines with talk about the end of the world, and they were disrupting communities by steering young people (and a few oldies) away from their jobs, their families, and so many of the social support networks that had been set up in that state for indigenous people.

Chaim asked whether it was fair to discuss Ben and David, since they were not present to defend themselves.

"What about you? What is your position on these things?" asked Barbara more pointedly.

Before Chaim could answer, the presiding clerk gently elderd Barbara for not letting others share before she commented further. Quaker practice is to restrict individuals from hogging the floor; ideally, everyone speaks once before anyone speaks twice.

Dorine, an older Quaker who had come from Canberra for the meeting, spoke next.

"You know, we Friends have had a long history of interest in Aboriginal issues. But we've never had many indigenous attenders, much less members. I wonder if what these two men are doing may be at least as relevant to the needs of the Aboriginal people of Australia as anything else that we're doing?" There was no response to that, though Chaim was encouraged by Dorine's observation.

Then Dennis, another elder from Sydney, a retired accountant with whom Chaim had felt tensions over minor issues even before this sudden change in his life, spoke up.

"Bible prophecy? End of the world? Is this really what they need to hear?

What Chaim's friends are teaching has nothing to do with tribal religion; it's just Christian fundamentalism. Friends, you know I'm christocentric myself; but I don't go so far as to support this kind of talk."

After a moment of silence, Chaim asked for an opportunity to respond.

Because he was the subject of the meeting, he had the option of speaking more often than the others.

"I can't really speak for Ben or David," he said. "But I've been experiencing something quite powerful in my time with the Aborigines over the past year. Listening is a big part of it, and

that's very much in keeping with the way we worship. But there's something else that we Friends may have missed.

It has more to do with their understanding of history. I know the reputation Bible prophecy has, but if we could see prophecy more from the Aboriginal perspective, I think there may be something in it that could actually unite people instead of dividing them.

Chaim was surprised to hear himself talking in this way. Being put on the spot, he was saying things in defence of prophecy that he had not even consciously thought out prior to the threshing meeting.

As the discussion progressed, there were a few questions which seemed to show genuine concern for how Chaim was going to survive when his savings ran out, and some people lovingly expressed concern for where all of this was leading.

But the overall spirit of the meeting was one of deep concern for what he was getting himself mixed up in. He was reminded that Bible prophecy usually did not result in people being more loving.

There was some probing into how much overlap exists between tribal prophecy and Bible prophecy. Chaim said that he felt the Aboriginal approach was far more subjective than that of Western religion. Because of that, and their absence of written records, he felt that Aborigines could adapt to the truths that existed in other religions at the same time that they seemed to have a clarity about what the Spirit was saying here and now. He noted that this was often lacking when religions became entrenched in historical interpretations of ancient writings. Most of those present seemed relieved to hear that he had a higher regard for the Aboriginal approach than he did for the traditional Christian approach.

Dennis (who most likely was the force behind the meeting), and one or two others, did not seem at all satisfied with Chaim's answers, but most of those present left more supportive (or less antagonistic, as the case might be) than they were when they arrived.

## Chapter Eleven--Policy Changes

The great influx of refugees from America (many without official papers, and all without prior application) had forced Australia to re-think its position on refugees. It was impossible to put all these former allies through the same ordeal that she had been inflicting on other refugees for so many years; so the Americans were welcomed freely, without visas or detention. This, of course, led to embarrassment about all the refugees who were still being held as prisoners.

The Government delayed making a decision for as long as possible, but by the end of the year it had declared amnesty, opened the doors of its cruel detention centres, and freed people like Mashallah, who had been locked away for years.

A short time later, Australia did away with visa requirements altogether.

Mashallah himself had, while imprisoned, reached the conclusion that even after his release All ah wanted him to continue his stateless existence, as a wanderer in this new world. He became convinced that he was to travel the country in search of the Imam Mahdi, the messenger of All ah who would lead him and other Muslims to the Messiah.

For twelve months Mashallah wandered aimlessly, from Port Augusta, to Adelaide, to Melbourne, and finally to Sydney, visiting mosques and talking to people on the streets, in an effort to glean hints from them about where he could find the one whom he sought. There were lots of theories, but none that led to anything concrete.

He did not seem any closer to finding the prophesied Imam by the time he reached Sydney, than he had been when he left Baxter; but he was still determined to stay faithful to the agreement that he had made with his God before leaving the detention centre. Furthermore, it was so good to be free, that he did not care if it took the rest of his life to fulfill this peculiar mission.

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During that same year, Chaim stayed gratefully free of further confrontations with Friends, and he continued to maintain contact with Vaishnu.

The free work movement had disappeared from the public eye in India, because of the threat from Krishnamurthy. But over that year, Vaishnu had shared excitedly with Chaim about what he was learning of those who had dispersed. Many of them were continuing to help others for free, but they were doing so quietly and sometimes even anonymously, and still they were surviving.

On top of that, there were changes in the government which had the potential for greater freedom for Vaishnu and his followers.

In fact, eight months after the sect's sudden dispersion, the BJP was voted out of office in Tamil Nadu, and in the neighbouring state of Karnataka. Vaishnu had learned his lesson, and although he was working on rebuilding communication with his followers, he was doing so quite independently of any government assistance this time. In Delhi, the ruling Congress Party brought back far more liberal religious policies. Changes were brought in which made international travel easier as well.

Throughout the world similar changes were taking place. Immigration restrictions, visas, and

even passports were being phased out in many countries.

There was a rush by people from poorer countries to move to the West, but it was not the mass migration that many had expected. There were so many good things happening within the poorer countries themselves, that most people wanted to stay on and to be a part of it.

This one world view was reflected in an interfaith conference to be held in Sydney, with representatives coming from all of Australasia. Similar conferences were being held in other areas of the world to coincide with talks involving the newly elected Pope Pius XIII, and the U.N. Secretary General Xu Dangchao in Jerusalem.

Chaim had maintained just enough contact with the university to qualify for an invitation to attend. He was suspicious about where this movement was heading, but he decided to participate anyway. Because it was being held in January, he would have to skip Yearly Meeting, which was being held in Melbourne this year.

Vaishnu had been invited to attend as one of many representatives from India, and that was one big reason why Chaim wanted to be there. The organisers had also given him permission to bring David Hartley and Aunty Molly along as observers.

## Chapter Twelve--Macquarie University

Ming Lee pushed the papers she had been working on away from her on the desk, and leaned back in her chair. There was too much turmoil in her spirit to concentrate on studies at the moment. It was semester break anyway, and only the most avid students would be working ahead.

The usual campus population had gone home, apart from a few international students. Under normal circumstances, Ming would have returned to China too. But she had chosen instead to defy her parents' wishes. This was the source of her inner turmoil. Surely, they would sense the reason behind her decision, and this could lead to serious consequences. Sooner or later she was going to have to face them.

More than a thousand visitors were using the empty student lodgings at Macquarie University, in conjunction with a big interfaith conference that was opening at the Entertainment Centre, in Sydney, the next day. Posters around campus had outlined some of the topics to be covered, and some of them interested Ming. She decided to go for a walk and to see if the delegates were doing anything tonight.

There appeared to be a number of small meetings going on in various classrooms surrounding the main hall, but at the last moment Ming felt too embarrassed to walk in on any of them, for fear that she would be asked to leave. She wandered slowly down the empty corridor, listening to the soft murmur of voices coming from the various rooms. But then she reached an empty room at a darkened end of the hallway. She knew it was empty, because the light was out. But she caught a glimpse of something inside... a candle, and some movement around it.

She peered through the glass on the door for a moment, and then pushed it slowly open.

"Hi! C'mon in!" A heavy-set woman in her late thirties peered eerily across at Ming. She had just seated herself on the opposite side of a low table on which the candle was burning, and it was now immediately below her face.

"I was expecting you," the woman added.

Ming's curiosity was aroused. How could this woman have been expecting her? She stepped inside, and moved hesitantly toward the table.

"My name is Ming. What is yours?" she asked politely.

"Sheree." the bigger woman responded. "Did you hear the voices too?"

"Voices? Well, no, I..."

"Not to worry," said the woman. "You're here, and that's the main thing."

Sheree pointed toward the door that Ming had just entered, and Ming turned around to see what she was pointing at. Another face had appeared in the window, and he too pushed the door slowly open.

It was Mashallah (although the two women did not know his name at this time).

"Excuse me. Am I interrupting anything?" he asked.

"No, not at all," said Sheree. "We were expecting you."

Now Ming was more than curious. She was a wee bit scared.

"I was looking for the Muslim delegation, and I noticed the light," he said.

"You're looking for more than the Muslim delegation, aren't you?" Sheree asked.

"Well yes, in a way. How did you know?"

"I just listen to the voices," Sheree replied.

All this talk about voices was making Ming nervous. She knew enough about psychology to know that this woman probably had mental problems. Ming excused herself and headed swiftly for the door.

She pushed the swinging door open so abruptly that she almost caused a group of people walking down the corridor to crash into it. Some papers went flying and an Indian man bent quickly to pick them up.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said as she looked at them in surprise. "I was not looking."

"No harm," said a short plump man, with a smile for Ming and an apologetic look for his Indian friend, who had just retrieved the papers. It was Chaim Rosenberg. And with him were Molly, David, and Vaishnu. "Are you lost?" Chaim asked. He could see that the room Ming had just left was in darkness, and he assumed that it was empty.

"No. Actual y, I live here. I mean, not here, but at this university. I'm a student here. Are you here for the conference?"

"Yes we are," said Chaim.

Just then, Sheree poked her head out through the door. "Hi!" she said.

"Are you going to come in, or should we meet out here in the hallway?"

The four friends looked at each other in surprise. Chaim almost laughed out loud. Molly nodded quite seriously, to let Chaim know that she believed the woman to be one of them... spiritual y.

"Shall we go in?" Chaim asked Vaishnu.

"Certainly. Let us do so," the Hindu replied.

Ming, who had been so eager to leave, was now drawn to re-enter the room with the support of the people she had just bumped into in the hall way.

Mashallah was seated in one of the chairs, with his hands folded in front of him.

"Mind if I turn the light on?" David asked.

"No, that's fine," said Sheree. "I was just using the candle for meditation."

"What a good idea!" said Chaim, who was, himself, trying to work out what was happening. Why don't we all sit quietly for a few moments, and meditate?"

David had already switched the light on, so they left it that way while they each took a seat. There were seven chairs conveniently placed in a circle.

Sheree blew out the candle and joined them.

They had hardly been sitting for a minute before Chaim felt the old familiar quaking. But this time, he was sure that he was going to say something. He stood nervously to his feet and opened his mouth.

"Our coming together here is not a coincidence. It's part of a plan... a plan to bring people of faith and goodwill together from all over the world. It's now going to be our job to ask God what role we each must play in that bigger plan."

This was followed by more silence. The full impact of what Chaim had said did not sink in to Ming, but mention of God had touched her. Her fears about Sheree's sanity gave way to other fears, unrelated to the people in the room. She began to weep softly. Sheree was next to her, and she lovingly wrapped her big frame around Ming.

"You wanna talk 'bout it?" she asked softly.

Ming nodded as she fought back the tears.

"I don't know who you people are, but I have a big problem," she said.

"My parents hate God. They will force me to leave here. My parents are very powerful in China. We were happy about the fall of America; and I was sent here to help the Communist Party. Now I have betrayed them by becoming a believer."

Ming related how she had been swayed mostly by the religious and political tolerance she had experienced in Australia.

As he listened, Chaim was struck by just how relative freedom can be.

Most of his friends had been only aware of how much tolerance had been disappearing from the Australian political and religious scene, whereas Ming could still see and appreciate what other Australians had come to take for granted.

"Even people who disagree with the government are supported here,"

Ming continued. "Some communists and anarchists are elected to the student council. We do not have such freedom in China.

"There are many religions. I do not want to join any one of them, but I want to be a believer... to be part of them all . Can I do that?"

Chaim nodded. "I think that's why you're here, friend. God has chosen you." Chaim paused to give Ming a fatherly smile before continuing: "If God cares enough for you to bring you here tonight, don't you think he can make a way to protect you from your parents? Just relax and take things one step at a time."

"Do you know where is the Imam Mahdi?" asked Mashallah, who had been silent up to this point. "I must find the Imam Mahdi. He will lead us to the Messiah."

Chaim flinched at mention of the Imam. He knew Muslim prophecies, about how such a man

would lead Islam to Jesus on his return, and about how the Jews would follow Dajjal, the evil one-eyed Antichrist. Muslim teaching is that Jesus will eventually hand control of the world to Muslim clerics, who will punish the Jews. Everything about the prophecies was anti-Jewish, so obviously Chaim, and all the Jews he knew, had some strong feelings about such prophecies.

Chaim waited politely to see if any of the others wanted to reply, and then he spoke: "I'm sorry, but we know nothing about the Imam Mahdi," he said. "We are each seeking. Some seek one thing, and some seek another. Have you asked God about it?"

"Yes, I have been asking All ah, and he led me here... to this room... tonight."

"You're in the right place," said David. "We too are looking for the Messiah. But we must be careful of deception. There will be false messiahs."

Vaishnu spoke quietly: "Excuse me, but I am not clear. I am not a Christian. I am a Hindu. What does this mean... messiah?"

"Mmm, yeah. We're going to have to be patient about some of our differences. I don't understand them myself," Chaim replied.

Though he did not have things worked out, he still seemed to be the natural leader. Unfortunately, the others looked to him for answers that he still did not have.

"We're all seeking; but if we say too much, all we'll see will be our differences. Can we each be patient, and wait for God to fix up our differences?"

David said nothing, but he was clearly disappointed. He had assumed that Chaim's silence over the past few months had meant consent to what he and Ben had been saying about Jesus and about Bible prophecy. This was the right time for Chaim to be steering people to Jesus: the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

But he wasn't doing that.

"So am I following the same God?" asked Sheree. "I pray to the Goddess, and I follow the voices." Sheree, like David, had come with her own expectations; but, at least on the surface, she seemed to be taking the disappointment well.

"It's not my job to tell you how to worship," said Chaim, "but by your presence, you must be part of the same spiritual movement that we are each experiencing." He took an immediate liking to Sheree. She seemed so unpretentious and confident. He went on: "There is that of God in each of us, so if we center on what we have in common, I believe we can move forward together."

## Chapter Thirteen--A Gathered Meeting

Although their coming together appeared to have been miraculous, the seven people in that classroom represented a strange mixture of backgrounds and personalities. Some of their differences would work in their favour, while others would represent huge obstacles to be overcome if they were to achieve anything worthwhile together.

Chaim had been drawn to Vaishnu and Molly because of their leadership skills. It was Vaishnu who introduced him to the whole concept of people working for love instead of working for money. The others seemed to share Chaim's respect for Vaishnu, as they learned more about his beliefs and about how he had practiced them.

Molly was not the organiser that Vaishnu was, but she had great wisdom, and amongst her people she was held in high regard. Listening, in one way or another, was what had drawn them all together, but Molly was the group's authority in that area. She had been both a comforter and a guide in Chaim's own quest for spiritual self-realisation.

Right from the start, Chaim had found Sheree easy to like in a different way. His attraction to her grew deeper as he got to know her better. Paganism, or whatever it was that her religion consisted of, was not a part of his own spiritual journey, but neither was it a problem to him, as he had known many wonderful pagans both at the university, and through his years with the Quakers.

But it was Sheree's cheerful personality that attracted him most.

Although she did a good job of covering it, Chaim sensed that Sheree felt the same unease that he felt around David, with his irritating sense of Christian superiority. Outwardly, Sheree was open and accepting of everyone. Like Ming, Chaim, too, suspected that the voices Sheree was hearing could be linked to schizophrenia; but that was just his academic approach to something that was obviously quite spiritual from Sheree's perspective. And even if the phenomenon really was a mental disorder, Sheree had obviously turned it into an asset. She showed no embarrassment about her voices, and she appeared to have none of the paranoia or delusions that so often accompany them. Her charming confidence and goodwill were highlighted by Chaim's belief that she must have overcome a lot of other difficulties to achieve them.

David had to be respected for a similar triumph in the area of religion.

Evangelical Christianity seemed to be as much a part of David's makeup as the voices were for Sheree; and yet, like Sheree, David had been able to retain the good without being overly affected by the bad. He had introduced Chaim already to many religious concepts that were traditionally Christian, and which Chaim would have never even considered without David's help. Nevertheless, there were still serious differences between the two, and he knew to avoid certain topics around David, and to take others only in small doses.

Mashallah was probably going to be the hardest one for Chaim to work with, if, in fact, that was to happen at all. Perhaps in time Mashallah would give up this search for the Imam Mahdi. Chaim knew of Muslims with whom he had no problems getting along; but they were not the sort who talked about Dajjal or looked for the Imam Mahdi. Mashallah's quietness indicated that he too was having some serious misgivings about whether he could or should

work with a Jew, given that just about everything evil had Jewish roots according to his religious upbringing. Nevertheless, fundamentalist Muslims had been known to convert to a more liberal understanding of their faith.

And then there was Ming. She was so new that Chaim was still piecing together his own feelings about her. She seemed to be both delicate and strong.

Her tears had revealed her fears; but they also revealed that she had made a brave decision to follow her conscience. Time would tell if she also had the wisdom to survive and work around the opposition that her family might represent.

But if anything augured well for the future, for all of them, it was their miraculous coming together. God had spoken to each of them, and they had listened. Focussing on that would help to keep their other differences in perspective. Quakers had been able to accommodate so many different belief systems over the years, primarily because of their silence. No two Quakers would agree on everything, yet it was their ability to let others find their own way that both made the movement possible, and made it great. Chaim was hoping to draw from that experience in this present situation.

To Quakers, a 'gathered' meeting is when unity transcends personal differences. For some the experience is rare, while for others it is a common occurrence. The concept itself is subjective, so that it becomes pointless even to discuss to what degree a particular meeting was gathered.

What was happening in that room represented the highest degree of gatheredness that Chaim had ever experienced. But Quaker history had shown that, in order to maintain their spiritual unity, they would need a lot of wisdom about what to say (and what not to say) when the talk began. For that reason, he pushed for more silence (listening, meditation, or prayer, depending on how each person saw it). They lost all interest in the conference, and stayed in the classroom over the next three days.

It was a minor miracle that no outsiders, not even a janitor, interrupted them throughout those seventy-two hours. They were able to flow freely back and forth between periods of silent worship and periods of tentative discussion.

There were trips out for food, for blankets from Ming's room, and for a few walks around the campus; but they kept returning to the privacy of the classroom.

On one trip out for pizza, David picked up news that an agreement had been made in Jerusalem, involving the United Nations and heads of the Muslim and Jewish faiths in that city. It was an agreement to build a Jewish Temple adjacent to the Muslim Dome of the Rock. Construction was to begin immediately.

David announced that, according to the Bible, the decision was historically and spiritually significant, that it had something to do with a false superchurch which would eventually turn sour. The others accepted his explanation with varying degrees of conviction. Chaim supported what David was saying, by offering some statistics about how much the average church spends on buildings by comparison to how much it spends aiding the poor. He said that George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, often called church buildings 'steeple-houses', and many Quakers still refuse to call the building they worship in a 'church' because they feel it detracts from the far greater importance of the people who worship in the building.

This skepticism about buildings was a new concept for Vaishnu, who had always associated worship with temples; but, as with so many other things, he quickly saw the truth in what was being said and agreed with the others that the drive for bigger and better temples tends to draw people away from what matters most with regard to true spirituality.

## Chapter Fourteen--Reaching Out

Seven people, each following quite different and largely separate spiritual paths, emerged from that classroom after three days of intense fellowship, with an exciting concept of a world where each person would take no thought for their own material needs, but would just do what they could to help others and to listen to God. Vaishnu had done an excellent job of inspiring them all, although David was quick to point out that what he was saying was really coming from the teachings of Jesus. They agreed that they were each prepared to give up all other plans or ambitions in order to create such a world.

Ming packed her belongings, and the seven new-found friends squeezed into Chaim's station wagon for the drive to Newcastle. Ben Black was there when they arrived, with five Aboriginal friends, bringing to thirteen the number of occupants in the sprawling two-bedroom home unit.

Vaishnu and Ben

"Vaishnu, your flight to India leaves in two days. What do you want to do about it?" Chaim asked soon after they had unpacked.

"Of course I must go; but I will need help. With my people I can lead, but I was not thinking before about teaching non-Hindus. So much will be different now."

"I fink I should go with him," said Ben.

Ben had never been outside of Australia, and, in common with many other Aborigines, he went through periods of great lonesomeness once away from his beloved homeland. But he showed no worry about the decision now. Chaim arranged to purchase a ticket for Ben, and the two men took a train to Sydney for the flight to Chennai.

Ben and Vaishnu were an ideal team. They were both humble and teachable. Over the next few months, with only the slightest hints, Ben was able to steer Vaishnu away from Hindu references which would hinder his dealings with non-Hindus. Ben's full-blooded Aboriginal skin was his ticket to acceptance by the Tamils of South India, although their journeys through India ultimately led them to settle in New Delhi.

One by one they had located many of the old followers and expanded the vision of these people to include all faiths and all countries. New recruits started to pour in from amongst Muslims, Sikhs, and even Christians. All of these people resumed the offer of free labour. As news of the offer spread, and as their workforce grew, so did public interest.

Media coverage resumed, but Vaishnu himself (with promptings from Ben) stayed out of sight this time. Of course, this secrecy only heightened the curiosity of both the public and the media, about who was behind the new movement.

Ming and Carl

Ming flew out of Sydney for Beijing just two weeks after Vaishnu and Ben.

She was accompanied by Carl Chang, a young Sydney political activist, who had briefly visited China three years earlier, as a representative for an Australian trade union. His father was half Chinese and half Aboriginal, hence the Chinese surname. Ming emailed her parents that she had quit her studies, but did not inform them of her plans or of her whereabouts.

On the flight to Beijing, they sat next to a retired Chinese businessman, in his sixties. He too had been searching for the truth, and what they shared with him touched his heart.

"Equality and justice can only come through faith and love," Ming explained in Cantonese. "Communism tries to do this with force, but there is a better way." They went on to talk about people trusting God for their material needs, and about a community of people who willingly give up all private ownership.

Something clicked, and the businessman, Ree Woo, invited them to share his home with him. A week later, he was liquidating his assets and planning ways to finance this new movement in China. He not only sent Ming and Carl on their way to their next destination, but he started recruiting others in the movement himself.

It was only a matter of weeks before word was spreading in China as it had in India. The movement, with its emphasis on spiritual communism, attracted several idealists in the government, who left their positions (amid protests from colleagues) to take up this new form of communism, where people serve one another freely, for love and not for profit. Once again, the media became involved, and once again, the leaders (Ming and Carl in this case) stayed out of the limelight.

Every new member of the movement also became a new recruiter, so that Ming and Carl only needed to find one or two receptive spirits in each area of the country for those members to spread the message further after the pioneering couple had moved on.

Mashallah and Gambuti

Mashallah left Australia about the same time that Ming and Carl flew to Beijing. He was accompanied on a flight to Indonesia, by Gambuti, a tribal elder from Arnhem Land. Gambuti was a handsome elder, with a big head of white hair, and a bushy white beard, both of which made him stand out wherever he went.

The pair spent a week doing volunteer work as cleaners at a beach resort in Bali before they met their first disciple. He was a tourist from Germany, who had been travelling the world in search of truth. He decided to stay on permanently in order to continue the search for other believers in that country.

It was more than a month before they made their first Muslim convert, and then it was Gambuti who figured most strongly in the conversation.

"You talk too much about perfect," he had said to someone who was defending Islam on some minor point. "You say your book is perfect. You talk like your prophet is perfect, and your organisation is perfect. But only All ah is perfect."

The man they were talking to did not change; but there was a young Muslim woman listening nearby, and she approached the pair when the conversation ended, hoping to learn more.

"All ah will bring together all who are open to his Spirit," Gambuti explained to her. "But we must listen, and we cannot hear when we are full of our own answers."

Sometimes Gambuti and Mashallah would spend a week or more just waiting on the leadings of the Spirit, then they would get a strong impression about where to go or who to help, and before long, they would have located one more person who was ready to drop everything and

become part of the chain reaction that was spreading all over Asia. They spent about three months planting seeds in the hearts of people in Indonesia, before moving on to Bangladesh and then Pakistan, where they ministered to many more Muslims.

In Australia itself, Molly, David, and Sheree had started by approaching three different sub-cultures; but in the end, only Molly stayed on in the southern continent.

### Molly and Bess

Molly was helped by Bess, a younger, stronger, heavy-set motherly woman from a mission station in Western Australia. Bess had left her youngest child in the care of her oldest daughter in order to join this movement, a decision that had been very difficult for her. Together, Molly and Bess were finding far more than the handful of Aboriginal assistants that David and Ben had been able to round up prior to the meeting at Macquarie University. And it wasn't long before their followers were reaching out to the White population of Australia as well. A race that had often been maligned for its indifference to work, responded with enthusiasm to the idea of labouring for God and for love, even if many of their workers lacked professional skills.

Converts would do tasks as simple as mowing lawns or weeding gardens, but with the help of the media, they were soon getting more requests for help than they could handle.

At one point the two women made a trip to Papua New Guinea to locate a disciple. They then took a trip to New Zealand, where they met two Maoris who were open to the leadings of the Spirit. After they returned to Australia, their recruits carried on looking for others on their own islands, and on other islands in the Pacific.

The strangest thing about this new movement was its adaptability.

Converts all quit their jobs and dedicated all that they owned to the cause; they all spent a lot of time just listening; and they all seemed to travel a lot. But when it came to creeds and doctrines, there were almost as many variations as there were people involved.

### Sheree and Bobbi

Sheree started by focussing on the New Age movement. She was aided by a young Aboriginal woman from Queensland, named Bobbi, who had a university degree, and who had done social work amongst various Aboriginal communities around that state. The two were like sisters, with abundant enthusiasm for the work that they were doing.

Some of Chaim's Quaker connections were the first to join in with what these women had started. Together, they attended everything from Rainbow Gatherings to country music festivals, where they would participate, help out (for free, of course), or set up an area where they would make themselves available for one-on-one conversation, therapeutic massage, or free workshops on learning to listen.

After only three weeks of this, Sheree and Bobbi felt that they could leave what they had started, for the others to carry on, and they themselves took off for Tokyo, from where they were able to reach out to Japan and Korea over the next six months.

### David and Charmane

David's partner was a twelve-year-old girl named Charmane, who came from the Northern

Territory. Like any other twelve-year-old, Charmane was full of energy and curiosity; but at the same time, she was unusually quiet. Ben and David had been encouraged by her mother, Rose, to take her with them, because Rose herself could not leave her other children. She had insisted that Charmane could see and feel the same things that she felt and saw. Over the ensuing months, David came to recognise the truth in this. Charmane had a spiritual maturity that amazed and impressed him.

"I've scouted out four different church services for us to attend tomorrow,"

David said on the first Saturday after he and Charmane had been teamed up.

The young girl said nothing. She just folded her arms across her chest and raised her eyebrows politely.

"We need to look for opportunities to talk to the people; can you watch for that tomorrow?"

Charmane said nothing; but David hardly noticed.

"The first two churches let people give testimonies during the meeting. I can do that. But the others, we'll have to wait till after the meetings finish, and then start up talk with people coming out of the service."

It went like this for three weeks, with David making plans and Charmane's reticence being ignored. On the third week, Charmane just got up and walked out of the service. David had been waiting for a chance to speak, and now he was going to miss it, to chase after Charmane and see what was bothering her.

He caught up with her in a park not far from the church. She was sitting on the ground, pulling out blades of grass and chewing on them.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "I was just gonna speak when you walked out."

"Ya ain't s'posed ta be talkin' jist yet," Charmane replied. "'Member? Listening?"

"Yeah, that's what we're trying to tell them about. Don't you want others to know about listening too?"

"Hey, but they ain't listenin' either, are they?"

David had to admit that they had not achieved anything in the past three weeks. Several arguments, maybe, but no converts.

Just then, Charmane jumped to her feet and raced over to the playground area of the park. She took a seat in a swing next to one occupied by a boy about her own age. David did not know what to do or say, so he just watched... and listened for a change.

"You come from round here?" the boy asked.

"Nah," Charmane replied.

"Where ya from?"

"Up near Rockhampton."

"So what're ya doin' down here?"

"Lookin' for people."

"What sort of people?"

"People who wants ta listen to God."

There was silence for a while, and then the boy spoke.

"You sound like my dad. He's over there at the picnic table."

Needless to say, by the end of the afternoon, David and Charmane had found their first convert. They stayed away from churches for the next two weeks and just listened. Near the end of the two weeks, they met someone else who was looking for what they had to offer; and about the same time, they both had a conviction that their target audience was not to be in Australia. They, too, were needed in China.

They flew to Guangzhou, in southern China. For the next six months, they never came in direct contact with either Ming or Carl. Instead, they were led to Christian believers, most of whom were connected with underground churches, scattered across the country. David rented a room in Hong Kong, where he worked during the week producing literature for themselves and for the other five 'tribes', as the groups came to be called. Charmane stayed with believers in Guangzhou.

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It took a while before each of the six teams came to realise just how rapidly their movement was growing. Their own efforts were miniscule by comparison to the exponential growth that was coming from the people whom they kept bumping into and then leaving in their wake. In just six months, they had grown to more than fifty thousand people in Australasia and the islands of the Pacific, and they were still growing.

There were links between each of them, including access to an Internet site which Chaim had set up, but on the whole it was just their mutual commitment to 'listening' that seemed to keep them together.

## Chapter Fifteen-- Chaim Learns to Hear

Chaim struggled to climb the steep, slippery side of the canyon. For a few steps he would make progress, and then a branch would break off in his hand, or his foot would slip, and he would slide back down the muddy track toward the swirling waters below. So far he had been able, each time, to stop himself before being washed away; but the water level was rising and he was no closer to escape. To make matters worse, the torrential downpour seemed to be increasing now, rather than abating.

After the others had been sent on their way, and the home unit had been sold, Chaim had travelled to Sydney, and then hiked out into the Blue Mountains, in an effort to get closer to God.

It was exciting to see something happening that was so obviously supernatural. Encouraging reports were coming in from the six "tribal judges", as he had started to call them. But the problem for Chaim was that he could not see where it was heading. Here was this wonderful worldwide movement of people doing nice things for everybody--and attracting a lot of attention for doing it--but it seemed to end there. Add to that the fact that the movement was counting on him to give them answers--answers that he did not have.

Before he left Newcastle, he had discovered a website in England. where he learned about a similar movement happening in the Western Hemisphere. He had contacted the people to learn more, but was disappointed to discover that they were unashamedly Christian, from start to finish.

That was fine for them, but what he was leading was much bigger than that. It allowed for people from all religions to work together without trying to convert one another. It would be a betrayal of what he stood for if he allowed this movement to be turned into just another Christian sect.

In fact, he could already sense tensions between himself and David Hartley, the group's only committed Christian. David was more flexible than most Christians Chaim knew, but he suffered from the same tendency to assume Christian superiority.

And then there was Mashallah, who also looked for a messiah, but as with David, it came with the trappings of religious bigotry that represented the Muslim point of view.

Vaishnu was different. He was more open to other beliefs, and, although he also looked for a messiah, he was not so prone to raise the topic of the Kalki Avatar.

What Chaim went up into the mountains to find was a way to overcome all of these differences, and to get the more religious elements of his movement to let go of their fundamentalism.

And then the rains had started. Just a drizzle at first, growing into a gentle shower. But then it changed to a catastrophic cloudburst and, what had seemed like a comfortable sanctuary with a pond in the middle and mountains on three sides before the storm came, had suddenly filled with water that could not escape quickly enough through the deep gully that became a waterfall at the open end of the canyon.

As the waters continued to rise, Chaim had moved farther up into the canyon itself. Now he

was totally boxed in. It was only a matter of time before he would be drawn into the muddy water and swept over the falls. Suddenly, he found himself praying for help, something he had never really done before, even after he had started listening more seriously to God.

"Please God! A tree. A rock. Anything to get me out of here," he prayed, as he clamoured again up the muddy bank. Instead of what he had prayed for, he grabbed a clump of grass that gave way and sent him plummeting down the bank once more. This time he did not stop at the edge. He slid into the water and was drawn under. His heavy hiking boots and wet clothing added to his inability to surface. This appeared to be the end, for him and for his hopes of finding the answers he had sought. As his oxygen ran out, he felt a strange peacefulness. His mind filled with a blinding light.

And then, just as he felt certain that he was dying, there was a rumbling from under the ground, and a powerful change in the movement of the water.

Where it had been flowing over the falls at the open end of the canyon, rocks began to tumble, and the ground began to open. The entire cliff face that had caused the flood to build up behind it, collapsed, and tons of water rushed through the opening, pulling Chaim with it.

As he was about to be swept down the ravine to his death, his body crashed into a huge fallen tree that spanned the gap and was now the only obstacle to the water's escape. The crash forced water from his flooded lungs.

Chaim clung there, watching the water race down the ravine below him. He was not out of trouble yet, but at least he could breathe again.

"Thank you!" he shouted between coughs and splutters. "Oh thank you!" and then he looked around. He might be able to climb across the fallen tree to the rocks on either side, but both ends of the tree were lodged in rocks over which the water was still running strongly, from the sides of the canyon and down into the ravine. Unless the rain stopped, he would never be able to walk on those rocks without being swept over.

"Gotta stop the rain," he said to himself, and just as he did, the rain stopped, as quickly as if someone had turned off a tap. One moment it was gushing down so heavily that it was difficult to see through, and the next instant, nothing. He looked up and a hole appeared in the clouds, with the sun shining brightly through.

Chaim started to laugh almost hysterically, as he hoisted himself up onto the top of the tree. Then, hugging it as he progressed, he moved toward the nearest end, where the flow of water was already beginning to slow down. He took several minutes to cover the distance, and by the time he reached the rocks, they were almost dry. The sun was shining brightly now. He scrambled to a higher perch and then threw himself on the ground, bruised, shaken, and exhausted, but alive nevertheless.

"So what was that all about?" he exclaimed unashamedly and thankfully to God. He had no doubt that the rains had stopped in response to his mutterings, but he wanted to be sure.

"Start!" he said quietly, and the downpour immediately returned.

"No! Stop! I didn't mean that!" he shouted. And the rains stopped, as they had before.

"Okay, so what does all of this mean?" Chaim asked himself and God at the same time, when

his laughing had died down. He naturally assumed that it was his responsibility to find an explanation, although he was conscious that God had to be the one to give it to him.

There had been the dream about the little girl, just before the fall of America, then the synchronicity of everyone turning up at Macquarie University, and now this. In between, Chaim had not experienced anything else that he would regard as miraculous. He still had his underlying bias against miracles, which he always associated with religious fundamentalism and ignorant superstitions.

So was God trying to say something about his attitude toward fundamentalism, perhaps?

Grabbing hold of a nearby rock, Chaim decided to try it once again.

"Start," he said softly. Nothing happened. "Start. Start raining!" His voice was louder, more demanding this time. But again nothing happened.

"Okay, so I've lost it," he said with a shrug. "It's kind of a relief anyway."

But he knew that what had happened before was not his imagination.

"Miracles happen. I can accept that," he said to himself. "But they're not the norm. Just exceptions for exceptional circumstances."

Then he looked up and said, "And that was one hell of a circumstance that you just got me out of. Thank you. Thank you."

Chaim smiled as he contemplated what was happening to him spiritually.

"So I'm becoming a fundamentalist. I believe in miracles!" He thought for a moment. "Okay, I can live with that. But what do I do about it?"

He thought more specifically about his problems with David and Mashallah. Obviously, they couldn't both be right... not perfectly right. But they had some things in common too. They both were looking for a messiah, and they both called him Jesus. This bothered Chaim. Vaishnu was looking for a messiah too, but that had not bothered Chaim. Why?

Could it be because Vaishnu's messiah was not called Jesus? How was it that he could tolerate things in non-Christians that he could not tolerate in Christians? Maybe, for all of his talk about tolerance, he really did have a blind spot when it came to Jesus. And maybe when it came to listening, this same blind spot was more like a deaf spot.

"Okay, if that's it, then I apologise," he said to God. "Could it be as simple as that? If that's the problem, I'm willing to change. Is all of this just about Jesus?"

Chaim closed his eyes, and instantly an image appeared in his brain of a man on a big white horse, wielding a huge blazing sword. Some words popped into his brain at the same time: "His name is the Word of God."

He knew instinctively that the man was Jesus, and he was overcome by the power of the revelation. In all of his listening previously, he had not seen images or heard words. It was always just silence. God had used the silence; but he now understood that what God really had wanted to do was to talk to him.

And what had kept him from hearing had been his prejudice against Jesus. Oh, he had been prepared to accept Jesus as a great philosopher, and he truly did respect much of what Jesus had been recorded as saying. But now he was coming face to face with the Man on the White Horse, the Word of God. This was Jesus in all his splendour... a Jesus with absolute authority. And Chaim literally bowed at his feet, ashamed of how he had treated him in the past.

"Forgive me," he said with heartfelt sorrow. "Forgive me!"

## Chapter Sixteen--The Cornerstone

Learning to listen, as the Aborigines do, had produced a powerful change in Chaim. But now he was starting to actually hear things from God, and it had an equally dramatic effect on him. He had, in accepting the authority of Jesus, a starting place... a cornerstone, from which to build a broader understanding of all that he experienced.

And what a cornerstone it was! Chaim devoured everything that Jesus said, with an understanding that he was going to do his best to follow Jesus...obey his instructions... submit to his authority. He had become an unabashed Christian in the true sense of the word. And what he was being called to build (He learned with delight.) was not some Christian sect; it was to be Christianity as Jesus taught it and as Jesus lived it. Chaim observed that what went on in so many denominations and churches was no more based on the teachings of Jesus than were any number of service clubs or political parties.

But in the teachings of Jesus he discovered explanations for life that he had never even imagined before. He heard God speaking most forcefully through the Gospels, but he also started to receive information in his listening times... words, visions, even an occasional song. They took some practice to understand, but they were invaluable when it came to filling in the gaps between what the Gospels said and what he needed to do and say each day himself.

His fears about falling into the traps that he had seen other Christians fall into appeared to be groundless. He was still able to exercise discretion, to observe and criticise his own behaviour, and to recognise the roots of hypocrisy.

Belief in miracles, submission to the authority of Jesus, and even faith in the prophetic parts of the Bible did not make Chaim anything like the fundamentalists with whom he had always associated such things. The whole world had been conned into believing that right wing Christianity was built on the teachings of Jesus when it was almost exactly opposite. Chaim had found the real thing.

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During a visit to his old meeting in Newcastle, two weeks after the drowning incident, the "quaking" finally expressed itself in words... words that were backed up with a deeply changed life. But even before he spoke, Chaim knew that what he said was not so important as the fact that this was the right time and the right place. He could have stood up and burped and what followed would have happened just as surely. Such was the power of the Spirit that Sunday morning.

"I've been a thief," he began. "I've taken the social benefits of being a Quaker without knowing personally the One whom we call the Seed. I have enjoyed the peace and the holy silence which was purchased with the blood of early Friends; even as I have laughed at their commitment, despised their extremism, and boasted of my own uncertainty. Week after week I went through the motions of worshipping God. But now I can say that I have found Him. I have found the One for whom early Friends were willing to suffer and die, and I can testify that it is a whole new level of living."

Then he turned toward those in the meeting.

"Friends, do you know him? Are you really a child of the Light? We talk of this infinite ocean of

light and love, but have you ever swum in it? Conformity to a people is not enough. It takes a hunger for something better, a willingness to be changed in the deepest places of your being.

"I believe God wants a response from each of us... today. Do you feel it?

I'm not imagining it, am I? This could be the most important day of your life.

What are you going to do with it?"

Chaim spoke with earnestness; but there was something present in that room which went beyond what he was saying. Some were speechless with embarrassment and not a little shocked that he should be speaking with such authority. But others were touched deeply. A few produced tissues with which to wipe tears from their eyes.

After a long silence, a young man stood up.

"I came here three years ago," he said, "seeking this Light, this power that had made Quakerism so great; but what I found seemed to be only the remnants of bygone days. It was better than nothing, but I have longed for more. I want this that Chaim has spoken of. I want to change and I want to be changed. You don't know how much I've wanted it." His voice was cracking as he spoke the final lines, and when he finished, he turned and faced his chair before falling to his knees in front of it, with his head resting on the seat.

He sobbed quietly for a few moments before another member, a young woman this time, slipped off her seat and knelt similarly in front of it. She too had tears running down her cheeks.

Then others joined the movement of the Spirit, some just bowing their heads, but others kneeling in submission to the One whom they sought now with all of their hearts. Two or three stood and walked conspicuously out, but the others took no notice. Something was happening that was much more important than whatever was bothering them. And it was going to echo around the world.

## Chapter Seventeen--Free Work

A dozen members of Molly's 'tribe' had joined in with a handful of parents to do some urgent landscaping at a preschool in Western Sydney. The trucks delivering the topsoil were only available during school hours when most parents were at work, so the principal had turned to one of the new believers. Molly's growing army of volunteers was in great demand all over the country.

Chaim hadn't seen Molly and Bess for a few weeks, so he slipped over to the site to have a word with them.

"Great to see such enthusiasm," he said to Bess as they looked out on the playground area from the window of the staff room.

"We bin gettin' lotsa calls," Bess replied. "Tomorruh dis mob'll be letter-boxing most of Parramatta with some health pamphlets, bout AIDS or sumpin."

Bess and Molly were a good team. Molly was much older and wiser, but Bess had the push and energy to keep the team going. In their separate ways they both had a gentle and loving disposition that inspired others.

Just then Molly poked her head in the door from the hallway outside.

"Chaim, ABC feller wants ta talk to you out here," she said.

"Molly, you know I can't do that," Chaim whispered intently. "Did you tell him...?."

"Didn't tell him nuthin', Chaim. He told me. Says he knows you, and he knows you're here."

"What's his name?" Chaim asked.

"Bum, or sumpin like dat. Geoffrey Bum," she said with a smirk at such a rude name.

The name was familiar, but he couldn't place it. "Does he have anyone with him?"

"Fell a with a TV camera."

"You say he knows my name? Bring him in, but not the cameraman."

When the big man walked through the door, it all came back. He was the reporter who interviewed Vaishnu when Chaim first met the guru in Chennai.

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Rosenberg," Baum said as he reached out his big hand.

"Call me Chaim," Chaim replied. "Geoffrey... yes, Geoffrey. I don't know how you knew I was here, but it's very important that no one know who I am."

"I figured it from what's happening in India. The BBC sent me to ferret out a connection between the two movements. I had an appointment to film the volunteers today, and I spotted you going into the school."

"Geoffrey, you can cover what you like, but I can't come into it. No one must know that I have anything to do with this."

"Sure, I can do that," Baum promised. "But it would be better if I could interview you. What're

you afraid of?"

"I don't want you to even mention me," Chaim said. "It's not a problem now, but I think it will be later. You do know what happened with Vaishnu, don't you?"

"You mean when they had to hide? Yeah... heard about it. I just finished an update on what's happening there now, and I didn't bring Vaishnu into it at all .

I can do the same for you if that's the way you want to go."

"You can get all the information you need from Molly and Bess," Chaim assured him.

"But where are all these people coming from? And how are you finding them?"

"I don't know if you can appreciate this, but I think it's just happening,"

Chaim said. "It's not like any movement I've ever heard of before. People are sort of being brought together miraculously, often before they even know about the free work. But Molly and Bess are the ones you need to talk to," he added, gesturing toward the two women.

"They're puttin' the soil in the wrong place!" exclaimed Molly, who had been looking out the window. "Bess, you go tell 'em to put it over there by the back fence. See there? Where the rains washed the old soil away."

"Sorry about that," Molly said to the two men, as Bess left the room.

"Is it connected with a church?" Baum asked, still directing his question toward Chaim.

"There's a meeting house up in Newcastle where people gather on a Sunday and just sit in silence," Chaim explained. Something happened there, and so now people are coming from other places to see for themselves. But mostly it's just people meeting up in other ways.

"Bess attends in Newcastle, Geoffrey, not me. She can tell you about it when she gets back. Molly and Bess meet over at Molly's place too. But then, you must already know that," Chaim added, "if you've had enough contact to be here now."

"Yeah, I've got that," Baum said. "What I want is the bigger picture. Who or what is behind it? I want to hear your story."

"Look, I'll talk to you, but no cameras, and you must promise to keep my name out of it?" Chaim bartered.

"Agreed," said Baum, reaching out to shake Chaim's hands. "Can we sit down?"

They had been standing while Chaim wrestled with his chances of getting out of this without his name being broadcast.

"Sure. Over here on the couch will be fine. Molly, come and join us," Chaim added.

"First, I'm not the leader. You should know that. Vaishnu was doing this long before I ever came along. But it's bigger than him too."

Baum nodded his head. Chaim was talking now, and he was listening intently.

"The whole thing seems to be a spontaneous spiritual awakening."

"Are there Hindus involved here... locally?"

"Not that I know of. Yet. But even with Vaishnu it's not just Hindus anymore. It's bigger than that."

"I picked that up from Vaishnu," said Baum.

"Well , it's that way here too. The meeting house is Quaker, but our own people aren't running it. The truth is, only a few Quakers have joined. But I don't think any church would have been able to tolerate it the way Friends have."

"Are you getting opposition?" Baum asked.

"Surprisingly little. At the moment we're making friends faster than we're making enemies. Free work helps," he said, nodding toward the window.

"So why the secrecy?"

"Geoffrey, I'm saying this to you as a friend, and not as a journalist, okay?"

Chaim was looking deep into the big man's soul, and he felt that he could see a spark of faith there.

"I have what you might call premonitions about some hard times ahead.

At some point, people are going to start feeling that we expect them to do the same thing that we're doing, and then they're going to react."

"So do you expect others to do the same?"

"If you found the cure for cancer, wouldn't you expect others to use it too?"

Chaim asked. "But I don't think any of us is really preaching. We just seem to be led to people who like what we're saying. There's nothing to sell."

"So tell me about the free work. If they're all working for nothing, who pays the bills?"

"You've been to India, Geoffrey. You must know how rich we are here by comparison, even without paid jobs. Molly and Bess are teaching us to live more simply. Many of us own houses. We're selling them and moving in with others in rented accommodation. There's more than enough money, for ourselves as well as for brothers and sisters in some of the poorer countries."

"So you're saying it just happened. What's your take on free will?"

"It's not theological. There's no doctrine... yet. What we have in common is just that we're all trying to follow our inner voices."

"But what about you personally? Do you think you were predestined to be part of this?"

"I don't feel that way. But I do feel a wonderful peace about everything, like what's gonna happen is gonna happen and there's nothing I could do to stop it. Things keep coming up that are so different to the way I've always thought, but then I just step outside of myself and kind of observe what's going on. It's great entertainment!" he laughed.

"What I'm experiencing now is like being tossed around inside a washing machine. What might be torture to some is like a joy ride if you just relax and go with it.

"Your turning up here today is an example. I felt panic at first, because I really do want to keep my face out of this. But then I figured, you must be here for a reason. Why worry? Go with the flow."

"And what do you think is the reason?" Baum was not asking as a journalist now. He was genuinely curious.

"I think you're trying to trick me into selling!" Chaim explained, with a laugh and a slap on the back of the big man. "You're the only one who knows the answer to that one."

"Do you think I'm meant to be part of this movement?"

Chaim gave no answer. He just raised his eyebrows and smiled.

## Chapter Eighteen--Listening to Whom?

As quickly as Chaim learned anything, either from his times of meditation, from studies of the Bible, or through information he was picking up from the movement in England, he passed it on to the six teams he had sent out.

Previously, the message had been free of dogmas or creeds. Everyone had been swept along by an exhilarating move of the spirit. Each person was left to work out their own ideas about right and wrong and about where this was all leading. The message being passed from convert to convert was just to follow their heart. But now that was changing. Chaim and Rayford Strait, a retired airline pilot who was spear-heading the movement in England, were trying to explain what was happening; and they were drawing heavily from the Bible to do it.

Sheree had a problem with this, and she wrote to Chaim about it: Dear Brother Chaim, I am writing because I feel you are in danger of destroying something wonderful that is happening under the guidance of the Spirit. Bobbi and I have seen thousands of people drawn together, in Korea, and here in Japan, as a result of our ministry. We are not trying to control it, but we are the instruments through which this is happening. As you know, I have had to adjust my own ideas to conform with what you and others are sharing... about working for love and about listening to the voice of the Spirit. This I could do, because it did not contradict what I believe.

But now this man from England is trying to move in and make this a Christian movement. Here in Japan and in Korea we are working with people who consider themselves to be Buddhists, worshippers of their ancestors, or followers of other religions that are much older than Christianity. They're not going to convert if that's what you expect. If you continue with what you're doing, it could destroy everything we've started.

Chaim had been planning a tour through Asia, and so he responded by email:

Dear Sheree and Bobbi, I agree that we should not do anything that will damage what the two of you have started there. Please do not act rashly. I have heard your concerns, and I will be coming over to share with you both next week.

I'll be arriving at Tokyo International on China West flight 017 from Sydney at 6:30am on Friday the tenth.

Chaim was uncharacteristically worried about the implications of Sheree's letter ... not for himself or even for the thousands of people following her, but for Sheree herself. She had become his favorite amongst the six judges, mainly because of her own special brand of confidence. Outwardly Sheree evidenced a carefree faith in her voices. But privately she had confided in him about the struggle that she went through constantly, trying to discern between the "good" voices and the "bad" ones.

"Yes, I have schizophrenia," she had confessed to Chaim. "But I see it as a blessing as well as a curse. I can hear the goddess guiding me in a way that others do not. It's so clear and easy if I just trust her. But there are other voices too. I have to block them out."

Chaim arrived in Tokyo feeling surprisingly alert despite getting little sleep on the overnight flight. He was keen to share with the two women.

"How are you? You're looking great!" he said as he hugged Sheree with deep emotion in the

arrivals lounge. Sheree was just so naturally huggable, but there was a tension this time that ended the hug abruptly.

"And how about you?" Chaim said as he turned to give Bobbi a hug. "How is your Japanese coming along?"

"Sukoshi sukoshi," she said in Japanese, and they all laughed... slightly.

They drove to a park near the airport and moved to a picnic table to talk.

Chaim sat on one side, and the two women sat facing him.

Bobbi and Sheree did all of their business through the Internet, using the laptop modem in an old Hi-Ace campervan. A solar panel on the roof gave them power to run the computer during the day, and so they had no need of an office.

The Hi-Ace was both their home and their office.

"Before we say anything about our differences, can we have a little listening time?" Chaim said when they were seated. The women agreed and they each closed their eyes to listen.

Five minutes went by without anyone saying anything. Then Chaim spoke.

"Hate."

It was all he said. There was a pause while the others either reflected on what it could mean, or waited for him to say more. Then Sheree spoke.

"That doesn't sound very good," she said. "I think it's a warning... about where this Christian stuff is leading."

Chaim did not think it was a warning, but he had no better interpretation.

When it appeared that Sheree was through listening, and when he saw Bobbi waiting for an answer, he responded.

"I don't know what it means," he confessed. "What do you think we should do about it?"

"We should go back to what we were doing before Rayford came along,"

said Sheree. "Just let each person follow their own path. It's far more loving."

Bobbi was not saying anything, but she was listening intently.

"Fair enough," Chaim answered. But what about my path? That's what led me to what I'm doing now. Where do I go with that?"

"Rewind back to where you started listening to Rayford," Sheree said.

Chaim found himself wanting to use terms like 'Sheree honey' or 'darling' to convey his deep feelings, and the agony he was going through just to disagree with Sheree like this. "But if I did that, then I'd be listening to you," he said.

He leaned across the table and placed one hand on Sheree's and one on Bobbi's. "You see," he said softly, "I have an inner voice too, and my inner voice is telling me to go with Rayford. I love you, both of you." (It was Sheree that he was looking at.) "And I love what you women are

doing here; but if we really believe in listening, then we have to trust the Spirit to lead others too. And he's leading me in a different way."

"But you're trying to get us to follow you, and you're trying to get all these other people to do the same thing. Is that fair?"

"Can I say something?" asked Bobbi.

"Sure," Sheree answered.

"You know, I've never considered myself to be a Christian either. But something in my spirit says that what Chaim is saying is true. Shouldn't we let the people here in Japan each decide for themselves? What Chaim is saying, and maybe what Rayford is teaching too, is a different kind of Christianity."

Sheree was shocked, and hurt. Before this, Bobbi had not questioned her stand against Chaim's conversion to Christianity. She felt betrayed that Bobbi would be talking like this now.

"You heard what he said, Bobbi. He said "Hate". That's where it's leading. I've seen the way Christians act when I talk about the Goddess. Do you want to be part of that?"

"Well , I don't know..." Bobbi had no defence, but neither was she backing down.

"I don't know either, Sheree," said Chaim. "I don't know what the word meant or why I said it. Maybe we should have waited longer... for an interpretation. You know that I love you, don't you?"

"Chaim, it's not you that I'm against. It's Rayford, and the influence he's having on you. You used to be so open and accepting, but now you're changing. Can't you see it?"

"What I see," said Chaim, "is that listening is all about change. We each have prejudices, and God wants us to overcome them. If you think..." and he paused to look around for something to illustrate his point. Then he banged his fist on the picnic table. "If you think this table is real, but Bobbi thinks it isn't, then one of you is wrong and needs to change. Would you change your beliefs if you found something better?"

"Stop loving, and start hating? Is that what you're asking me?" Sheree said, raising her voice in anger. "No, I'm not going to do that. Not for anyone. Some things can't be compromised."

Chaim was stumped.

"Sheree, please. I don't want to lose you and I don't want to hurt you. You each have to do what the spirit is telling you to do. I'm not going to stand in the way of that."

When Sheree didn't answer immediately, he went on. "Maybe you're right. Maybe others will feel the same as you after they hear what Rayford and I are saying." Then he decided to go farther. "Maybe they shouldn't even hear it. It's up to the two of you... each of you... to decide for yourselves what you want to do with what I'm saying. They're your followers, not mine."

It wasn't a perfect solution, but it could buy time. Sheree could see the good sense in not fighting, for she too had deep feelings for Chaim; so she let the discussion die, and shifted her attention to the needs of the day. She showed Chaim, who was starting to feel his tiredness now, where he could sleep at the back of the van.

"The table makes down into a second bed, and there's a third bed over the cab which Bobbi uses," she explained. "So you can have this one." Sheree dearly wanted Chaim to know that she did not have anything against him personally.

"Later on we'll be driving into the city, but if you can sleep through it, please do."

Then she and Bobbi left the van to give Chaim some privacy. They returned to the park, where they sat side by side in two swings and talked.

"Why didn't you back me up?" Sheree asked, when they were settled.

"We were listening," Bobbi said, "and I got a picture of a line of people holding hands. I thought it was saying that we can do this; we can work together with Chaim, just passing on what he gives us and letting others down the line decide for themselves."

"We can work together with Chaim?" Sheree asked, looking deep into Bobbi's eyes. "Or we can work together with each other?"

"Well , both... if you're willing."

"If I'm willing? What does that mean? I love Chaim dearly, Bobbi. You know that. But he didn't do what you and I have done here; and Rayford had even less to do with it.

"It isn't really Chaim that I'm against. I want to work with him. But Rayford's messing with his head. It's been the history of religion. Men interfere and try to use it to achieve their own ends. What you and I are doing here is beautiful and free. We need to keep it that way."

"So how do we do that?" Bobbi asked. She was probably the least Aboriginal of all the assistants working with the six judges. She had been raised by European foster parents, and only when she reached university did she begin to show an interest in her Aboriginal roots.

"We don't pass on their poison, for one thing," Sheree answered. "Let the members here in Japan and in Korea decide for themselves."

"But how can they decide for themselves if we don't even let them hear what Chaim and Rayford are saying?" Bobbi asked.

Sheree was barely able to mumble the word "intuition" before her eyes went blank and then rolled up into her head.

Bobbi knew the look, and it triggered a similar disinterest in the previous conversation for herself. She didn't get audible voices like Sheree, but she did receive visions. They sat there silently for a couple of minutes, just dangling peacefully in the two swings, with their hands on the ropes.

"Did you get it?" Sheree asked eventually.

"Yeah. I saw a big building with no door or window, something like a warehouse."

"Right," said Sheree. "And I know how to get there. Do you think it would disturb Chaim if we drove there now?"

"He was expecting us to go into town anyway. What do you suppose it's all about?"

"Let's see how he's doing. I'm not sure, but maybe this is to show us... and to show Chaim... that we don't need Rayford."

When they opened the door of the big van, they found Chaim snoring peacefully.

"I really do like him. He's so free from the usual male pretensions... when he's not listening to Rayford," Sheree whispered as she turned the key.

They drove in silence for several minutes, following the freeway past several exits, and then taking a turn to the left, followed by a number of other turns. Then Sheree pointed ahead, on the left. "Is that it?" she asked, knowing already what Bobbi's answer would be.

Sheree pulled up to the kerb, just past the front of the building. "Good ole intuition!" she said. "Never fails. Let's check it out."

She left the keys in the ignition and they climbed out of the van. There did not appear to be either a door or a window at the front of the building, but there was a narrow walkway down one side, between the building and an overgrown hedge. The two women headed down it. When they were halfway along, they came to a small side door. It was ajar.

"Hello! Is anyone there?" Sheree sang out in Japanese. No one answered.

She pushed the door inward and leaned through the opening.

"Come in! Come in!" A slight Japanese woman in her forties motioned for them to come in.

"You like?" she said. "This is for you. Take it." She handed them a heavy shoulder bag. Sheree looked at Bobbi, and Bobbi looked back.

"What's this?" Sheree asked.

"Is gift. For you. You take it. Go." She motioned toward the door through which they had just come in.

Sheree looked inside and her eyes just about popped out. It was full of money. American hundred dollar bills.

"You take it. You go. Hurry," the Japanese woman repeated.

"Yeah, sure. Thank you," Sheree said, and she hurried Bobbi out into the laneway.

"It's money," she whispered loudly to Bobbi as they moved quickly down the narrow walkway. "Lots of it. A gift from the Goddess. It looks like we haven't lost our touch, eh?"

Then, just as they emerged at the front of the building, two Japanese police cars pulled into the drive, and police jumped out of each of them, with their guns drawn. One walked over to Sheree and took the bag from her hand. He peeked inside and then handed it to his assistant.

"Come with us," he said to them both in Japanese.

\*

"We're in deep shit now," Bobbi said to Sheree when they were finally alone together in the cell. "How're we gonna get out of this? And what's Chaim going to think?"

They had been charged with receiving stolen money, and would be facing court the following Monday. Chaim was due to fly out the next day, and he would wake up in a strange neighbourhood in a strange country.

"We both knew the Spirit was telling us to go there," Sheree said, half as a question. "You did get it too, didn't you?"

"Yeah, sure, I did. But was it really God?"

Police had entered the warehouse from the rear just as the women had entered from the front. The raid was in connection with a drug deal that had taken place there a few minutes earlier. When the woman in the office saw the police coming, she had sent Sheree and Bobbi out with the money in their hands.

They tried meditating, to see if they could get an answer, but, despite hours of listening, they both drew blanks.

"What's wrong? Why can't we get anything?" Bobbi asked. "It's like we've lost contact."

"We have to try harder," Sheree urged. But Bobbi was working on a different theory.

"What if God is trying to humble us?"

"Don't be silly. We just got something wrong. We have to solve this ourselves."

Bobbi wasn't so sure. She started to ask God if their predicament was related to them not submitting to Chaim. There was no response; but there was a peaceful feeling... kind of a confidence about acknowledging Chaim's superior wisdom.

"Look, it's working. I feel right in my heart about doing it Chaim's way," Bobbi said to her stubborn cellmate. But Sheree would not budge.

"You're giving up everything we had for a bunch of churchy propaganda," she said. "What we've started here is a lot bigger than Sunday school stories and Bible colleges, Bobbi. It's about everyone just walking their own path. It's about listening!"

"But listening to what?" asked Bobbi. "You know, sometimes we hear things that aren't right. Maybe we need to listen to people like Chaim too. Even Chaim's listening to Rayford. Maybe God is talking through them."

"Men! Can't you see it, Bobbi? They try to take over and run the show. It always happens like that."

Just then the rattle of keys turned their attention to the heavy metal door between the holding area and the station proper. It clanked open and a guard entered, followed by Chaim with his trademark grin.

"You do know how to get me acquainted with the streets of Tokyo, don't you!" he said.

"So how did you find us?" Bobbi asked, when they had cleared the formalities and left the station.

"I prayed," Chaim answered. "It is what we do, you know."

"And then I called the police. Thank God, the first station I called happened to be this one, and they knew English," he said as he unlocked the Hi-Ace.

Chaim handed the keys to Sheree. "You drive," he said.

When they were inside, he continued. "It seems your story checked out, so they dropped the charges. But how on earth did you end up in such a wrong place at such a wrong time anyway? I thought you were going into the city to collect mail."

"It's a long story," Sheree said glumly, and Bobbi decided not to add anything further.

That night Bobbi spoke privately with Chaim, but Sheree made no further attempt to communicate deeply before he left.

Chaim's final defence came just before he checked in for his flight to Beijing the next morning.

"Something big is happening," he said. And it's not just happening inside people's heads. Your members are going to want some direction. You can help them if you stay open to all that the Spirit is telling you. Please think about it."

## Chapter Nineteen--Hate

On the short flight from Tokyo to Beijing, Chaim thought more about the one-word message that he had received while listening with Sheree and Bobbi.

He was not one to worry easily, but it brought back to him something that a Friend had said to him in Sydney. He was worried about where Chaim's involvement with Bible prophecy was leading and he had shared his concern.

"You know me, Rod," Chaim had said. "If I felt something was wrong, I'd be the first to admit it. It's not like I'm going to be convinced by the same things I oppose."

"But it doesn't happen all at once," Rod had warned. "I had a friend years ago... wonderful chap. Had a deep love for the underprivileged. But he got mixed up with some Pentecostals. Now he's hard as nails. Says the poor are poor because they have poverty demons."

Am I becoming like that? Chaim asked himself. He certainly didn't feel like he was becoming hard. But what was the word "hate" all about? Sheree thought it was a warning. What he hadn't said was that he thought it was more of a command, like something he should be doing! Either way, it didn't sound good.

Meanwhile, at Beijing Capital International Airport, a drama was unfolding.

When Carl and Ming arrived to pick up Chaim, Ming caught a glimpse of someone pulling up in a car whom she was convinced was her father, Sam Chon Lee. Ming was dressed as a peasant, with a coolie hat, sandals, and simple grey robe, a disguise she often used when out in the open, since her family also lived in Beijing. Carl was wearing a tracksuit and the same backpack he had worn when he left Sydney.

Because of a security scare, no one was being allowed inside except passengers with tickets. A huge crowd had gathered outside the airport, waiting for arrivals.

"Quick, in the line!" Carl said to Ming, as he pushed her toward the queue entering the airport. He fished around in a side pocket of the backpack and pulled out the ticket wallets that they had used when coming from Sydney, waved them at the guard on the door, and stepped inside just before Ming's father lunged toward them from the crowd. He shouted something in an effort to get assistance, but it was too late. Ming and Carl were on the escalator to the upper level, and as they peered back over their shoulders, they could see that the guards had not been convinced that they should act.

It was half an hour before Chaim arrived. During that time they discussed plans and contacted other believers by mobile. When Chaim had cleared Customs, Carl and Ming were able to catch his attention from the departures side of a glass wall, and to signal for him to come over to their side to link up with them. Because Chaim had a valid ticket, he had no trouble getting past the guards and into the departures lounge, where they pulled him aside and Ming shared about her predicament.

"Sam won't get violent in front of the crowds," she assured them. "Not after he failed with those guards. If we can get to a taxi, maybe we can get away."

A few minutes later, Sam Chon spotted the distinctive grey peasant robe fleeing the airport in company with a short, fat foreigner. They jumped into a taxi and pulled away. But Sam had a

car of his own waiting, with two other men inside. They headed off in pursuit.

At the tollgate to the Airport Expressway, Chaim could see Ming's father just three or four cars behind his cab. On the expressway, they urged the driver to hurry, but Sam stayed with them for the 20km run into the city. Chaim texted a local contact. "Is the parcel safe?" the text asked.

"The parcel has been picked up and is on its way," came the reply.

Chaim turned to Carl, who peered out from under Ming's robe and peasant hat. "Step one accomplished," he said, "But the next step could be harder."

They now needed to shake their pursuers.

Carl paid the driver in advance and explained where they wanted to get out. The cab turned south on Third Ring Road, and then right onto the road to the Dirt Markets, so named for the unpaved surface where more than a thousand stalls sold everything from crafts and Chairman Mao souvenirs to cheap clothes and fake antiques. At this time on a Saturday it would be totally packed.

The cab hesitated in the traffic; both doors burst open; and the two men dashed into the crowd. Carl led the way, but he kept an eye over his shoulder to be sure Chaim was keeping up. The older man huffed and puffed through the opening that Carl was clearing through the throngs. "I'll never be able to outrun them", thought Chaim. But as they turned one corner, Carl pulled him behind a rack of clothes and out of sight. He signalled the stall keeper to say nothing, and the two men just crouched there, struggling to control their breathing as their pursuers ran past.

"Thanks, Lung Chee," Carl said to the stall owner, an obvious friend, and they rejoined the crowd to retrace their steps back to where they had left the cab.

There, in a sea of bicycles, were two men on motorcycles waiting for them to each jump on the back of one before the cycles raced north, toward the Forbidden City.

As the motorcycles pulled away from the curb, the two passengers did not see three men emerge from the shopping crowd. The trio chasing them had also returned to where they had started, after losing sight of Chaim and Carl.

\*

The bikes made good time through the crowded streets, passing Beijing Station, Tiananmen Square, and then out onto the northern highway to Datong.

Once clear of the city, they opened the throttle and sped along for hours, going under the Great Wall and then on to Datong.

It was well into the evening when the two motorcycles with their four passengers drove through the village of Datong, west of Beijing and then out toward Yuyang, where one of the country's most popular tourist attractions could be found. The giant sandstone carvings, made some fifteen centuries earlier by Buddhist monks, attracted thousands each day. But by night they were deserted.

Behind the carvings were caves, but the government had closed off those that were deemed

too dangerous for tourists. Local children still played in them, however... with one exception.

The two motorcyclists, believers named Watchman and Fong, led Chaim and Carl to a statue some distance away from the others, that had a wide crack in the base. They squeezed into the crack, did something with a hidden lock, and pushed open what had previously been an ineffective barricade. Believers had modified this barrier to make it strong enough to keep curious children out.

On the far side of the opening the four men entered a huge chamber. One of them lighted a torch mounted on the cave's wall while the other assisted Chaim and Carl through the opening.

When they were safely inside, Watchman sent Fong back outside to hide the motorcycles, while Chaim and Carl marvelled at the set-up inside. There were pallets stacked with literature, and others piled high with boxes of food: tins mostly, but some grains as well.

"Night time, believers bring food and books on pack horses," explained Watchman. "We make ready for hard times."

Their host gave them blankets and ground sheets on which to camp; and he opened a few tins for a welcome meal.

They had started to worry about what was keeping Fong when he poked his head through the cave opening. They saw the frightened look on his face first, and then the arm around his neck. It was holding a sharp Chinese dagger.

Sam Chon Lee and his two assistants followed the man into the cave.

"You give me Ming, I not hurt you," said the older man.

"Ming isn't here," said Carl, who had removed the coolie hat, but was still wearing the grey robe.

"You tell me."

"I'm afraid we can't do that," said Chaim.

Sam continued to hold Fong while his thugs tied the others, hand and foot, with wire that they had brought with them. Fong was the last to be tied.

During this Chaim started to shake, and it got worse as the tying proceeded. The men with Sam Chon discussed Chaim's behaviour in Chinese, obviously revelling in the fear they had evidential y inspired in Chaim.

"P-p-please don't do this, Sam," Chaim begged, stuttering uncontrollably.

"P-p-please! Y-y-you will h-h-hurt yourself."

"I no hurt myself," said Sam. I hurt YOU!" and with an evil smile, he plunged the dagger into Carl's thigh. Carl screamed in agony.

"S-S-Sam, don't do it!" Chaim begged, with tears starting down his cheeks.

"You tell me, or you die!" Sam said, pul ing the dagger out and stabbing Carl's other thigh.

"No Sam. Y-y-you will die!" Chaim warned.

The others, who spoke no English must have understood, because they started to laugh at Chaim, while Sam brought the knife up to Carl's throat.

"N-n-no!" Chaim shouted, and as he did, all three men were thrown back away from their victims, as if from an explosion. They each burst spontaneously into flames. There were momentary shrieks of pain, but the cries ended abruptly as the searing heat quickly took their lives away. The bodies continued to burn, as though they had been soaked in fuel. The flames eventually consumed their clothes, their flesh, and even their bones.

In the meantime, the others were able to crawl close enough to each other to unfasten the wires and then move to the cave entrance to escape the smell of burning flesh and to get fresh air. There they treated Carl's wounds.

"Ming has been writing to her family by email," Carl explained, as they looked out at the night sky through the opening in the cave. "I don't know how they found us, but we knew they would be dangerous."

"How they die? What make them burn?" asked Watchman.

"I don't know. I honestly don't know," said Chaim, who was still in shock.

"But I knew it was coming... just before it happened."

"So you were crying for them! Is that it?" asked Carl.

Chaim could only nod his head. "How are we going to explain this to Ming?" he asked.

"I don't think she'll have as much trouble as you think. She saw it coming.

I don't mean them burning up like that. I mean she saw that they were not going to stop at anything to get her. So she's been turning loose of them in her heart.

"Learning to hate", she calls it."

"Hate?" asked Chaim.

"Not real hate, but just letting go. Giving up hope of ever changing them.

They were the ones who said she hated them, but Ming saw no point in disagreeing, since she wasn't going to give in and go their way."

"Here in China, many believers do like this," said Watchman.

"We suffer for our faith many years now. God is testing us."

"You think suffering comes from a loving God?" Chaim asked.

"Who you think kill those men?" Watchman asked, throwing his head back toward the interior of the cave. "God gives and God takes. He can do that."

It all seemed so cruel to Chaim, and he said as much.

"You have better God?" asked Watchman. "You have God who not let people die?"

Fong joined in. "We are happy people," he said, "because we have hope for new life... better life. Life here is pain," he said, looking down at Carl's bandages. "New life is better."

## Chapter Twenty--Love

Chaim had scheduled time to meet with believers in Beijing, but with all that had happened, he and his companions decided to lie low and recover there in the cave. Rail tickets back to Beijing had to be booked days in advance anyway, and Carl was not up to another ride on the motorcycles.

They were able to treat Carl's wounds and start him on antibiotics just with what was in a medical kit in the cave. He was given new clothes, and Chaim washed his. Ming had Chaim's luggage in Beijing, and he would pick that up on his way out.

Presumably no one else knew of the attack, and so they agreed to say nothing to the authorities or even to other believers. The hideout had, hopefully, not been compromised, and so it could still be used as a place of refuge when things turned worse, as the believers knew they would.

By Thursday morning, Chaim was back in Beijing, and boarding a five-hour flight down the coast to Guangzhou, where he would meet up with David and Charmane.

As Carl had predicted, Ming showed little emotion on hearing of her father's death.

"I want to help people who look for truth," she said. "Now I can do it with less trouble."

\*

Charmane was waiting for Chaim at Baiyun Airport. She had a truck lined up to meet them at the kerb, but on the way out of arrivals, she received a call on her mobile.

"We gotta stop at a place on the way," she said, both to Chaim and to the driver of the truck as they climbed into the cab.

Guangzhou, perched on the Pearl River, 150 miles from Hong Kong, had been a prosperous city from as far back as the Middle Ages, when Muslim and European traders had all come there to buy and sell. Even at the height of the Cold War, Guangzhou had tended to look more capitalist than communist. Prior to the Asian Games in 2010, the government had poured 25 billion U.S. dollars into upgrades on everything from the New Baiyun International Airport to the eleven underground railway lines that kept its ten million residents in touch with each other.

Food preparation and automobile manufacturing were two of the city's many industries, and both were located near the airport, to the north of the city.

The truck had been called to a catering firm there, after which it would drive to Huadu, a working class area near the motor vehicle plants.

"We been cleaning here, and one of the managers axed us to bring the truck by," Charmane explained as they pulled into an industrial compound near the airport.

They parked, went to the office, and were told to back into an adjacent warehouse.

"That's a lot of food preparation!" Chaim remarked as he stepped out of the truck inside the warehouse. Rows of pallets were lined up waiting for delivery.

"They make food for lotsa airlines," Charmane said. "But if a plane doesn't go, Ling Pao calls and gives us the meals. Neat, isn't it?" She gave Chaim a wide toothy grin.

Chaim watched as a forklift loaded a pallet of meal trays onto the back of the truck.

"We don't got enough people to eat all of it," said Charmane, "but we know some orphans out where we live. When we have extra they get it, and they really like it. I like it too, cuz the kids are cute."

They pressed their palms together and bowed their heads in thanks to Ling Pao for his generosity, and then headed the truck west on the Jing-Zhu highway to Huadu. Huadu was where Christians and Falun Gong members had been detained, and often tortured in years gone by. All of that had ceased now.

"You carry this," Charmane said to Chaim, handing him a piece of plywood that had been behind their seat. They were at the flat now, and about to leave the truck. "Pretend you are just taking it inside, but hold it so it hides your face."

The apartment door was open by the time Chaim reached it, and Lee Chong, the local leader, urged him quickly inside. When Chaim was out of sight, Lee Chong left him to greet David while he went out to assist with Chaim's luggage and with bringing in some of the meals. The driver then drove off to drop the remaining meals at other safe houses and at the orphanage.

"Neighbours can see," Lee explained when they were all in the house.

"Many foreigners are in the city, but this is working district. People ask questions."

The Government had declared amnesty for all believers, including Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim Vighurs as well as Christians and Falun Gong practitioners. But this group of believers was still keeping a low profile.

"It's not what I had been expecting," David lamented, when they were seated on the floor and sipping cups of tea. "I thought the underground church would lead the way."

Chaim's whole relationship with David had changed after he stopped reacting to the younger man's Christian faith. He could see now that David's faith was unlike the churchy stubbornness that he had come to despise. "They're still leading," Chaim replied. "It's just a smaller underground now."

"They call it 'new era'," Lee Chong said, referring to the amnesty. "Young members leave because they like what the Government is doing. No more prisons, and they get free church buildings too."

"And the older members?" Chaim asked. "What about them?"

David replied, "They remember what happened before, when they were enticed out of hiding with offers of free Bibles. The older people are more suspicious. But they, too, are refusing to work with us because we accept the Falun Gong, Muslims, Buddhists, even some communist atheists."

"No group has a monopoly on love," Chaim replied. "A lot of those joining us were deeply involved in social work, with no religious affiliation. But even in that sub-group, the percentages joining this movement are very small ."

"We're being forced to set up new security systems in the old underground network," David continued. "The ones who are leaving know the old locations and the old members. This house belonged to an underground pastor who works with us in Hunan Province now. People here think he sold it to Lee Chong, but Lee came here from an underground church in a different province."

And then David became very serious. "Chaim, how do you see what's happening?"

"Briefly," Chaim answered, "I think God is doing something that is bigger than any religion in the world. It's totally spontaneous... people who are genuinely seeking truth, from all religions, are being brought together... like what happened to us at Macquarie Uni. Remember? Maybe it's not so dramatic now, but it's the same process and it's happening all over the world."

"What I mean is how does that fit in with the Bible? Is it a Christian movement or what?"

"Oh it's all there in the Bible, like you said, David. Just not like most Christians expected."

"Not what I expected either," David confessed.

Chaim went on. "In Australia there seem to be only a handful coming from the churches. There are probably more atheists than church people who are joining us."

"See, that's hard for me to accept," David said.

Lee, too, looked shocked.

"The key seems to be sincerity," Chaim went on. "Religion has turned into an excuse not to be sincere, for most people. They lean on the organisation and let it destroy their conscience."

"What about Quakers?" David asked.

"We have more Quakers by percentage than the churches, but even amongst Friends, it's becoming clear that most are not really hungry for more truth. Their commitment to love is pretty lukewarm too. It happens like that in any organisation."

"Why?" David asked. "Why is it happening in the underground church here?"

"Genuine seekers are rare," Chaim said. "I reckon only about one in 50,000 is joining this movement. But in the underground church and in the Falun Gong the rate would be at least a hundred times greater than that. So you shouldn't really be discouraged about what's happening here."

"Even with all of our differences, it seems like everyone who joins likes the idea of working for free," David pondered.

"I like free work," said Charmane, who had been wanting to be part of the conversation. "We meet lotsa nice people."

"And what did you do today?" Chaim asked.

"Today we folded letters and put 'em in envelopes," Charmane said. "It was easy; but I like it better when we do garden work mostly."

"People like it when we help them too," Chaim said, smiling at Charmane while addressing it to

the others as well. "Just remember that it's not going to last. Our lifestyle is a threat to the values of the world. It comes down to why we're here. Were we made to make money? Or were we made to help others... without worrying about our own material needs?

"I see it even in Quakers," he said. "We're more accepting than any religion I know of. We try to see the good in everyone. But frankly, most of my friends are scared of me now. It comes down to our differing attitudes to money."

The discussion moved to talk about what was happening in the West, where Rayford Strait was leading a similar movement. Together, there were twelve main leaders, or judges, six working with Chaim and six working with Rayford. They were now referring to themselves as the "Twelve Tribes".

"It's a Jewish concept," Chaim said. "We had tribes, led by judges, before we had kings. God never liked the idea of kings, because power always corrupts people."

"How will it finish?" Lee Chong asked.

"We win, in the end," Chaim promised, with a smile and a wink. "But first, we lose."

"The message of The Revelation is one of love. Love is stronger than all the empires of history. The Lamb that was slain..." he quoted from The Revelation, in the Bible. "The Lamb that was slain is the one who is prepared to die for love. When we have that kind of faith, nothing can stop us. They can kill us, but there will always be others to take our place. So we win; but first we lose."

"Are you ready for it?"

"I think that's why we're here," Charmane answered thoughtfully. "I think God knows we'll die for him. It's why he picked us." She finished with a firm set to her jaw and a nod of her head for emphasis.

Chaim thought briefly of Sheree, and her problems with his leadership. "I hope so," he said. But he was also thinking of something even more serious than that. "I certainly hope so," he mumbled to himself.

Lee Chong rose to fetch the meals, which had been heating in the kitchen.

"So the Twelve Tribes are the new underground church?" he asked, knowing the answer.

"That's right," Chaim replied, loudly enough to be heard in the kitchen.

"The new underground church is a lot bigger than China now."

"And what about people who not come with us? Are they all lost?" Lee called back as he stacked four trays to bring to the table.

"No, I don't think so," Chaim replied. "I think there'll be others... many others, who will join us later, when it becomes clearer."

"I'm terribly sorry," Chaim said abruptly, when Lee started to set a tray in front of him. "Do you mind very much if I skip this and lie down for a while?"

"Things are catching up with me, and I need some rest."

He was given a pallet in an adjacent room, and the others turned to whispering so that he could get some sleep. In fact, he was only slightly jet lagged. What was really eating at him was what he had just said to the others about loving enemies, and dying for love.

How did that fit in with what happened in the cave in Yutang? he thought.

There, he had seen three men consumed by fire because they had tried to fight against... and at that point, Chaim could not be sure in his own mind about exactly what it was that the men had been fighting against. Was it him? Was it God? Was it the movement? One could be seen simply as a father who was concerned about his daughter's welfare.

Chaim himself had always been a loner. He was an only child. He never married. In fact, in his younger days, he had thought that maybe he was gay.

Apart from a few teenage fantasies, his interest in sex had been minimal, and so he had withdrawn from intimate relationships. He was close to his parents, and had lived on his own ever since they were killed in a car crash more than twenty years ago.

Keeping his thoughts to himself had always been easy for him; so when it was decided in the cave that nothing would be said about the three men, except to Ming Lee, that made perfect sense. It did not, however, exempt Chaim from the need to discuss it with himself.

While he was still in the cave, it had all seemed clear. God had simply protected them. But now, after less than two days away from the scene, it was harder to accept that explanation so casual y. Chaim definitely knew the men were going to die, before it happened. He had felt some compassion for them during those few brief moments. But what if the force that killed them was not loving, and what if it was not from God? That was how his Quaker friends would see it, and it was how he himself would have seen it as recently as a year ago. A loving God simply does not hit back. Didn't he just say that this was the main lesson from The Revelation?

Chaim's ability to separate what he could change from what he could not pulled him through this period of doubt. In his own heart, he had not wanted to hit back. He was sure of that. He did not even feel anger toward Sam Chon.

The rest was someone else's responsibility. That was the best he could come up with for the time being.

It was just one more experience, starting with the dream about the fall of America, where things happened which were beyond his explanation and beyond his control. If they were all coming from an evil source, what was he supposed to do about it?

Do you have a better God? Watchman had asked, and Chaim could not answer it. Even the Quaker God let people die. Life had been given to us with the knowledge that it would be taken back at some stage. Was that loving? It seemed to Chaim, after an hour or so of thinking about it, like it was a question he did not even have the right to ask.

And with that, he fell asleep.

## Chapter Twenty-One--Business

The next morning, Chaim was up well before the sun. While he waited for the others to wake, he went over some of David's papers, which had been left out for him, along with a few explanatory notes.

It was getting harder and harder to pay for the printing without a microchip implant like everyone else was using. Those businesses that still accepted cash charged higher prices, and the only shipping companies that would let them get by without the implant tended to be dishonest ones. Chaim and the six judges had agreed that it was time to phase out the entire printing project.

Along with their unanimous attraction to doing free work, the movement was discovering that all of their members had a natural aversion to the microchip.

People everywhere were getting the tiny implant injected under the skin of their right hand, so they could just wave their hand under a scanner, like a credit card, when paying for things. Most Twelve Tribe members felt, even before they met each other, that the implant gave too much control to Dangchao's new world order. Some rebelled against it as yet another invasion of privacy. Underground believers in China had long seen it as the dreaded "mark of the beast". For these and other reasons, not one member of the Twelve Tribes had accepted the implant, and Chaim was teaching them that it should stay that way.

The sun still had not come up when Charmane slipped quietly into the room.

"Hi," she said as she sat down beside him. She yawned, then said, "I couldn't sleep."

"Do you want to talk?" Chaim asked, lifting his head from the papers.

"Not now," said Charmane, and she continued to sit there, saying nothing.

Chaim continued to read through the papers.

Half an hour later, Charmane spoke. By this time, Chaim had just about finished with his work.

"Why you ben worrying?" She asked.

Chaim smiled to himself. She could see right through him.

"Well , little sister," he started. "I'll tell you about it. I want to be a good leader. I want to follow God, and help other people to follow him. But sometimes God seems cruel. Do you ever think that?"

"God? Cruel?" She thought for a moment, scratching her head. "Yeah, sometimes," she concluded finally. And then added, "So what you wanna do 'bout it?"

"Do about it?" he asked himself, and then had to cover his mouth to keep his laugh from waking the others. "Huh! There doesn't seem to be anything we can do about it, does there? Except maybe worry."

"You're not a worry man," Charmane stated.

"You're right. I'm not... most of the time," Chaim said. "If we can't change it, why worry about it, eh? I'll get over this one somehow."

"Yeah, I know," she said with a big smile.

"So what do we have planned for today?" Chaim asked, after a short pause.

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Later that morning, Chaim sat with David on a park bench and looked out at a group of twenty people scattered haphazardly on the grass near them.

Charmane was there, squatting with her bottom almost touching her ankles, a most uncomfortable position in Chaim's opinion. A few people were going through slow motion exercises. Some reclined in various poses, but most just sat cross-legged. And all were quiet.

"Each day is different," David explained. "They might wait here all day, with people just coming up to them and asking questions or inviting some of them to their homes after talking for a while.

But mostly they form teams and move out in different directions. It's how they get most of their free work jobs, but it isn't always work that they do."

"Do they always start here?" Chaim asked.

"No, definitely not," David answered. "Charmane seems to know where they should start, and she makes arrangements ahead of time. If they were to go to the same place, people would take notice. We don't want that."

Just then, they noticed the people moving together into a tight bunch.

"They're probably going to share what they've received now," David explained. "She has different people each day, and yet they always seem to know just when to stop meditating and to start sharing."

"See that guy? Over there on the left?" Chaim was pointing to one man who was seated a short distance away from the others. "Any idea why he isn't joining in?"

"Oh him. He's from the Three-Self Church. That's the one the government set up years ago. Most of the old underground people see them as traitors, worse than the communists. Some of the Three-Self pastors tried to help secret believers in the old days, but they also had to betray them occasionally, in order to keep their position with the government. We don't get many people from Three-Self, but when we do, they have a hard time fitting in."

"Can he be trusted?" Chaim asked.

"Personally, I found him as keen as anyone here. He's especially eager to study Bible prophecy. They totally outlawed it in the Three-Self Church, you know."

"Yes, I've heard that," Chaim said. "It's ironic that the Chinese government seems to know more about Bible prophecy than the churches in the West. I'm supposed to be an expert on religion, and yet I never really understood it."

"The Three-Self people are super patriotic" David said. "They talk about the 'true Jesus'. He's not so different to the Jesus you hear about in a lot of churches in Australia. Never rocks the boat, and always supports the Government. More like the 'false Jesus' in my opinion."

Chaim nodded, thinking about his own earlier understanding of Jesus.

Then he changed the subject. "I went over the papers this morning, and it seems like you've done well with stocking up literature for the tribes."

"I hope so, because it's all they get. The last shipment goes out next week, and then I can be here in Guangzhou full-time."

"How's Charmane doing on her own?"

"She's not really on her own. Lee Chong is just one of many who look out for her here."

"How is her Chinese coming along?"

"Atrocious!" laughed David. "She's not a language person; but she spends so much time listening that it hardly matters. People just watch her and they learn. On the streets she keeps telling them to think poor, and then they start finding stuff everywhere."

"We have caves and abandoned buildings stocked with non-perishable food and literature, all over the country. The wealth here in China is amazing. They've come so far in recent years."

Chaim marvelled at how close he felt to David now, compared to his attitude when he first met him. David had changed, as a result of his contact with so many non-Christians, but Chaim believed that the most significant change had been in his own attitudes.

"It's good to hear that things are moving along so well," he said. "I'm off to Karachi tomorrow. But it has been a good visit. You're doing a great job, David."

And he really meant it.

## Chapter Twenty-Two--The Mahdi

Boxes of tracts, most of them written in Arabic, had been shifted around in the crowded godown, in order to create tiers on which participants could sit while they discussed the issue at hand. Mashallah was seated cross-legged on a reed mat at the bottom of the tiers, fielding questions from about a dozen of his junior leaders.

"So where is the Mahdi?" asked a very big Muslim, in a flowing robe, seated in the top left corner of the godown.

"I do not know," answered Mashallah. "I too have been looking. Maybe he will come later."

"Later we won't need him," the same man answered. "Jesus (blessings be upon him) will already be here, if this Rosenberg man is right."

"What about Rayford?" a younger man in the front row asked, turning his head around to address the man in the back. "Could he be the Mahdi?"

"He's not Muslim, and he's not in the East," came the reply. "The Mahdi will lead people from the East."

"Even among our own people we do not agree on everything," said a woman in the middle. Her very presence showed how far they had come in dealing with their religious prejudices. "Could Chaim be the Mahdi?"

"You do know, Sfiyah, that he is Jewish?" Mashallah reminded her.

"But we are not all Muslim here," Sfiyah answered humbly. "Kumar is Hindu, and Sonali had no religion when he joined us."

"But they are changed people now," Mashallah answered. "They are believers."

"Excuse me," said Kumar, standing from his seat down at the front, and turning to face the others with his palms pressed together in front of him. "I am changed; that is true. But I was a believer before I changed. We Hindus are looking for the tenth Avatar. I now think it will be Jesus; but I am not a Muslim. If Hindus must change, then why can you not change too." And then he resumed his seat.

"I hear there are Jews who are joining the Eastern tribes," said a thin man in his sixties on the far right. "And most Muslims are not joining. I do not know one Imam..."

"Jews can join," interrupted the big man at the back. "But not the Mahdi."

The Mahdi must be Muslim. It is in the Q'uran."

"Can we go over what we know about him?" asked Mashallah.

"He will be tall and have white skin," said a voice from the crowd.

"Chaim has white skin, but he is not tall," said Mashallah.

"He will stutter, and he will have a black mole on his left cheek," said another.

"Hmmm, he does have a mole," said Mashallah, but I don't think he stutters.

"He will have a big nose."

"Ha! All Jews have big noses!" laughed Sfiyah, and the others joined her.

"Are all these things in the Q'uran?" asked Sonali, who also stood and turned to speak.

Muffled responses from several people indicated that they were not.

"So they are only traditions. What does the Q'uran say about him?"

"That he will lead an army from the East, and that he will have the name of Mohammad (blessings be upon him)," answered Mashallah.

"We are an army from the East!" exulted Sonali.

"But his name is not Mohammad," the big man at the back said emphatically.

"How do you know?" asked Sfiyah. "Mohammad is Arabic. How do they say Mohammad in Hebrew?"

"Mohammad in Hebrew?" exclaimed the big man. "How can a Jew have such a name?"

"But every name has a meaning," said Sonali, who was still standing.

"What does Mohammad mean?"

"It means the one who is praised," said Mashallah, and then he added "Blessings be upon him," just to be safe.

Just at that moment, they heard the secret knock at the door. It must be Gambuti, who had gone with another sister to the airport to pick up Chaim. It was only 9pm in Karachi, but for Chaim, who had just flown in from Guangzhou, it was early the next morning, and he had been up much of the night on the plane. Mashallah pulled a box over for Chaim to sit on, and he moved up onto a box beside him. The rest of the audience went quiet, embarrassed by what they had been discussing before Chaim's arrival.

"The flight was okay?" asked Mashallah.

"Yes, no problems. These are your top leaders?" he asked.

"Yes. We are happy to have you here."

Chaim looked around the room. They did not look particularly happy.

"I have taken the unusual step of asking you to meet here," said Chaim, addressing the small crowd. "I feel that there are some issues that we need to deal with." No one said a word.

"All the world is at peace at the moment. Fighting has stopped, even in the Middle East. But you and I know that one reason it has stopped is because the U.N. troops are enforcing it. Muslims did not have any choice about the new Temple in Jerusalem."

Expressions changed slowly on the faces of the people listening. This was not what they had expected.

"As you know, I am Jewish. But I do not agree with what the Government has been doing in Israel for many years. They have been cruel and unfair in their treatment of Palestinians. One

does not need to be a Muslim to see that.

"But many Muslims have been cruel and unfair in return. Terrorism is not the answer. But then, I do not need to tell you, do I? You are here because you have taken what is best about Islam. And I pray that you have been able to take that which is best in other religions too.

"Right now, the religions of the world are trying to work together for Dangchao. Can we work together for Allah?"

Then he stopped, obviously waiting for some response.

Sfiya lifted her hand, and Chaim nodded for her to speak.

"Chaim, what does your name mean?"

"Chaim? I think it means life. Why do you ask?"

"Oh nothing," Sfiya said sadly, and folded her hands in her lap as she looked down at them.

"We were talking about the Imam Mahdi before you came," confessed Mashallah. "Our religion teaches that he will come to prepare us for the return of Jesus."

Chaim looked around, read their thoughts, and then, pointing with both hands at himself, he broke into a grin. "Don't look at me," he said, laughing. "I'm not the Mahdi. You'll have to work that one out for yourselves!"

Becoming more serious, he said, "Is it really so important that you have a Mahdi?" Chaim was thinking of the Muslim teaching that Jews will be punished after Jesus returns. In his opinion, it was a dangerous ethnocentric vision.

Mashallah raised his hand to speak. "When I was in prison," he explained, "I prayed about what God wanted me to do. He showed me that he wanted me to look for the Mahdi. Stil I am looking, but I have not found him. I cannot stop looking now."

Chaim had been leaning back against the wall. "I better stand up before I fall asleep," he said, rising to his feet. "Can I share something that I have learned about God?" he asked with his body turned toward Mashallah. Then, turning to face the crowd, he said, "Often God tells us one thing (or maybe he just lets us think one thing) in order to get us to a different place. Like sending a child to fetch the mail, so she'll find a new toy that you have left for her on the way." He paused for them to think about what that meant.

Gambutu had said nothing up to this point, but he spoke up now. "Religion all us fights over the mail," he said in his deep, mellow voice. He paused for it to sink in, then said with a smile, "God wants us to play with the toy!"

No one seemed prepared to push the point further at that time, so discussion degenerated into a few words of greeting to Chaim. Because the meeting did not seem to be going anywhere in particular, and because Chaim had said as much as he wanted to say for now, he asked if he could be excused to get some sleep in an adjacent room. Everyone agreed that it would be a good time to end the meeting, and they could resume the next day.

However, just as they were rising to leave, and as Chaim was walking out of the room, Gambuti called out. "Chaim!"

He stopped and turned; and the crowd went silent.

"What's yuh uthuh name?"

"You mean Judah he asked?"

"Yeah, that one. Has it got a meaning?"

"Comes from Yehudah," he said. "Means praised."

And he left the room.

## Chapter Twenty-Three--Unity

There had been much talk between the others after Chaim retired for the night, but when they awoke the next morning, Chaim was gone. So were Mashallah and Gambuti.

At a humble roadside tea shop not far from the godown, the trio were sipping sweet milk coffee and eating chappatis. Although it was still quite early, the street was alive with pedestrian and motor traffic.

"The Q'uran is a tool," Chaim was saying. "It's not God. In every religion there are people who try to trap God inside a box, and holy books can become one of the biggest traps of all."

"But the prophet (blessings be upon him), he received the words from God," pleaded Mashallah.

"Mashallah, if you have a dream and God talks to you in the dream, what language does he use?"

"Arabic, of course," said Mashallah.

"But what if he wants to talk to Gambuti? Or to me? Would he use Arabic? And if we could see him as a person, would he have white skin or black skin?"

"Well, I..." and Mashallah faltered.

"God just tells us as much as we need to know; and he says it in the language that is easiest for us to understand. He doesn't expect us to make a god out of the words he uses, or his language, or the colour of his skin. He just wants us to get the message.

"Your religious leaders, and my religious leaders became so busy trying to understand the words, that they missed the message. There's a new world coming, Mashallah, and it doesn't matter if the Mahdi has a mole on his cheek or not. It doesn't even matter if there is a Mahdi, as long as you are seeking more truth and more love every day. And if there is a Mahdi, then his job will be to help you do exactly that."

"From how they talked last night, when you were sleeping, I think they will say that you are Mahdi now," said Mashallah. "It is not what they were thinking, but... but they can change. What you say about the Q'uran is true. Gambuti, too, teaches that."

"You two must teach the others," said Chaim. "Get them to see that Muslims too must look for God in other religions and be open to change."

And then he turned to his plans for the day.

"I've taken a risk by letting them see me, but I can't go back. Today I'll watch only from a distance, without them seeing me. They're here for you to teach, not me. About this Mahdi thing... They can tell others that my name is Judah if they like, but do not give out my full name. We are not here to promote me or to promote the Mahdi. Understand?"

Mashallah agreed.

"So how's it going... apart from this Mahdi business?" he asked.

"Fine, fine. Here, and in Bangladesh, and in Indonesia, we are mostly Muslim. So our

problems are about small, small Muslim differences. These are special people. They all know how to listen."

"They listen well to what I say," testified Gambuti.

While the world appeared to be growing together in religious unity under the leadership of Secretary General Xu Dangchao, most Muslims (and, indeed, people from many other religions as well) knew that their opinion mattered little in terms of how things were progressing. Dangchao, it turned out, had Jewish ancestors, and he had managed to use his immense power to quell any Muslim dissent to the building of a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. On the surface, there was much cause for celebration as the Jews anticipated the opening of the Temple in just a few days. But Chaim saw more ominous warnings behind it.

"We have only three years left to prepare," said Chaim. "And then, it'll be the worst trouble the world has ever known. These next three years are going to be teach, teach, teach. I hope you and your people understand that. While everyone else enjoys the freedom, we must prepare for the reality."

"How long can you stay?" asked Mashallah.

"Tomorrow I fly to Delhi, and by Monday, I'll be back in Sydney," Chaim responded. "It's going to get harder to travel without the mark, so we'll need to depend more on email if we are to keep in touch.

"But don't forget that it isn't me you need to stay in touch with. Just keep listening to God. Stay open to change and to one another."

## Chapter Twenty-Four--Abounding

"How do you survive in this heat?" Chaim asked as he, Vaishnu, and Ben trudged across Connaught Place in the heart of New Delhi.

"We think of a hotter place; then we thank the God that it is so cool here," Vaishnu joked.

"Soon we will be out of the heat," said Ben.

And soon they were, as they walked up the long drive to the Hotel Oberoi, a newly renovated five-star deluxe hotel in the center of New Delhi. They could have gone there by taxi, or even by auto rickshaw, but they were learning to get by without cash, and Vaishnu insisted that walking would be physically rewarding as well.

The lobby air-conditioning sent a welcome chill through Chaim's body.

Even in his early days he would not have stayed at such a luxurious hotel, nor would he have approved of the energy spent on air-conditioning. But today, he was the guest of Vaishnu and Ben, and he was loving it.

"Says in the Bible we can be abased and we can abound," said Ben.

"When we have a foreigner with us here, we can abound."

Chaim noted with satisfaction that Ben did not think of himself as a foreigner.

The three men basked in the ostentatious luxury of the Oberoi's lobby for the next two hours, as they sat deep in overstuffed armchairs and discussed the work in India. Because Chaim was with them, the hotel staff did not question the two dark-skinned men in humble dress across from him, nor did they doubt that Chaim had a room in the hotel, which he didn't. When staff came to take orders for drinks, they graciously declined, and when the staff had left, Vaishnu pulled, from the folds of his loincloth, a bottle of water and some home-made halva, wrapped in oil-soaked paper.

"There are still a few people joining, but things have slowed down," said Vaishnu. "We came here to meet one of our newest members."

Chaim frowned. "Now? Today? With me here? I really shouldn't..." he began.

"This one is different," Vaishnu said, holding his hand up. "You know him."

Ben grinned widely, exposing his missing teeth. At the last moment, Chaim realised that Ben was not grinning at him, but at someone approaching from behind. He turned in his seat to see Geoffrey Baum creeping up on him.

"Geoffrey! What're you doing here?" Chaim asked.

"I'm part of the team now," Baum replied.

"So you're staying here at the hotel?"

"Oh no, not here," Geoffrey said. "I'm an interloper, same as you. No, I'm staying with a group of believers out in Chankyapuri. The BBC pays me enough to stay at the Oberoi, but it keeps Vaishnu in lungis if I give the money to him instead."

"You'll be pleased to know that he doesn't waste it on autos," Chaim remarked.

Vaishnu chipped in. "We are thinking he will be most help if he stays with the BBC... for now. They give him much freedom."

"They liked the report I sent from Australia," said Baum. So I asked for, and received, permission to spend a whole year living with the Twelve Tribes as a member. Research, you know." And he winked.

"They don't know he really is a member," Ben added.

"Well , what can I say!" exclaimed Chaim. "Welcome, Geoffrey. Welcome to the family."

Vaishnu tendered the water bottle, and Geoffrey tilted his head back, Indian-style, so he could squirt water into his mouth without his lips touching the bottle.

"Thanks for that," he said. And then he turned to Chaim.

"I've been travelling all over the world, Chaim, documenting this movement. It's early days yet, but here in India, things seem to be progressing well ahead of everywhere else. That's why my focus is here. I think it's going to be huge when the media wakes up to it.

"I don't think anyone else grasps the importance or the extent of the movement outside of India."

"That reminds me," Chaim said, addressing his thoughts to Vaishnu, "Could you put together something that summarises what you've learned so far, so we can send it out to the other tribes? Practical stuff, including any mistakes you've made, so they won't be so likely to repeat them?"

"I am not a writer," said Vaishnu; and then he paused. Slowly, he and the others turned their heads toward Baum.

"Me?" he said. "Yeah. Sure, I could do it ... if Vaishnu can instruct me."

Just then Chaim's mobile rang. The call was from Tokyo. It must have been quite late over there.

"Hello?"

"Bobbi! What's the problem?"

"She has? When?"

"Do you have someone with you there?"

"Nancy? You mean, the one you met at the Embassy? Yeah, I remember you telling me about her. Good. Just stay together. You may need to change pincodes, locks, that sort of thing... just to be safe, you know.

"Move? Well, not immediately, but do think about it.

"What are the chances she'll change her mind and come back?"

"Yeah, she seemed pretty set when I was there.

"Okay, I'll send you an email tomorrow, and you do the same for me, okay? God bless you, Bobbi! Give Nancy my love."

"Problems in Tokyo," Chaim said to the others when he was finished.

"Seems Sheree has left."

Talk shifted to reports on how things were going in India, but Chaim was distracted with worries about Sheree. His first instinct had been the security of others in the movement. How could he be so hard, when Sheree herself was in danger, and when she meant so much to him? But then he had the welfare of everyone to consider.

"The people do not understand why we leaders are so secret," said Vaishnu. "But the first members here, those who returned after our problems with Krishnamurthy, they can see. They teach the others.

"Even now, they could be watching us," added Vaishnu. "The media has been helping us get the message out; but politicians... they read papers too."

"Don't become paranoid on me," Chaim joked. "They're not as smart as the movies make them out to be. But we do need to plan ahead, develop good habits now, for when the trouble starts."

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"Shall we duck down to the gym for a workout and a swim before we go?" asked Geoffrey, when they had just about finished their business.

"Let's not push our luck," Chaim said with a smile.

"Only joking," said Baum as they all rose to face the heat out on the street... and a night without air conditioning in a crowded flat.

## Chapter Twenty-Five--Sheree Returns

Apart from two more calls from Bobbi, the visit in Delhi finished up without incident. Vaishnu was the most experienced of all the judges, and that included experience in resisting the temptations that come with power. He listened well to Ben's advice, and co-operated with Chaim in any way that he could.

The problem with Sheree, however, weighed heavily on Chaim's mind, both then, and after he returned to Sydney. Bobbi called to say that Sheree had been contacting members in Japan and Korea, in an effort to get them to leave the movement and follow her.

"Bobbi, if this movement is really of God," promised Chaim, "then he'll make it clear to each person what they should do."

"But if Sheree could lose the plot, others can too," Bobbi reminded him.

"That's true," agreed Chaim. "But it doesn't mean that anything is out of control. When we get off the phone I want you to read this verse: Daniel 11:35.

Have you got that?"

The verse appeared in the midst of a prophecy about the last days, which said:

The people who do know their God will be strong, and will do exploits... but some of them of understanding will fall, to try them and to purge, and to make them white.

Bobbi reported that in the few days between Chaim's departure from Tokyo and Sheree's departure from her, there had been little problem getting believers in Tokyo to accept the possibility that what they were doing was a fulfillment of something predicted in the Christian Bible. In fact, that was what seemed to anger Sheree most. People were not siding with her against Chaim and Rayford. Some had been looking for a Buddhist messiah, called Maitreya, but they had little difficulty relating that to the Christian message. What a shame that Sheree had not been able to do the same.

"She kept talking about listening," Bobbi said, "but she wasn't doing it.

She thought we had fallen away from our ideals, but she was the one who had lost it."

The movement had grown in such a way that even the judges did not have direct access to many believers, apart from those to whom they had been personally led from the start. Because of this, Sheree had only been able to contact a limited number of leaders in Asia, and over the next few weeks it did not seem that any of them had been convinced by her. In the meantime, leaders in Tokyo and Korea were quickly setting up new locations, where Sheree would not be able to find them.

Meanwhile, back in Australia, Chaim was making some changes of his own. Things were going smoothly with the Quakers, as long as no one tried to swing the organisation over to Chaim's point of view. Half a dozen Friends had become part of the Twelve Tribes movement, while others supported them in principle. The Society as a whole seemed to be thriving, more as a result of worldwide interest in religious unity than as a result of the spiritual renewal that grew out of Chaim's former local meeting in Newcastle.

Chaim gradually laid down whatever commitments he had in the Society, and he changed his

address again, without informing others of where he was living. He still attended meetings, but maintained a distance from individual members, most of whom seemed happy to have it that way.

It went like this for more than a year, with no major upsets anywhere in the movement. Even in Tokyo, Bobbi and her new assistant, Nancy Irakawa, were moving ahead with teaching programs for the thousands who depended on them for guidance. Sheree appeared to have given up.

Then, one night in early December, Chaim returned to his room near Strathfield Railway Station, in Western Sydney, after an evening at the library.

Like others in the movement, he had been learning to "live poor" as Charmane put it. His new home was an unlocked side room in a deserted house. Chaim was squatting there. There was no electricity, so each day he would take his laptop computer with him to public buildings around the city, where he could communicate with the various tribes in Australasia, and with Rayford, in London.

Sometimes he would simply use library computers, but at other times he would get on the Internet through unsecured WI-FI hot-spots.

The library had been open until nine that night, and Chaim had stopped off at a bakery on the way home, where he had been able to pick up free bread and cakes that were discarded at the end of the day.

He sensed something strange the moment he pushed the door open and set down his bags on the floor. He stood there in the dark for a few seconds, trying to figure out what it was.

"Hi Chaim," he heard, coming from the far right corner of the room. It was Sheree.

"Sheree!" he said excitedly. "How did you find me?"

"The voices," she answered. "Remember? It's what we do."

Could she have returned to her senses? he thought. She must have had some kind of spiritual guidance to have located him here.

"Hang on while I get a match and light a candle," he said, fumbling in his pocket and turning to a shelf on his left.

"Sure," said Sheree. "I want you to know that I've been missing you terribly, Chaim. I'm sorry that I hurt you."

"Oh, don't think anything of it," Chaim answered. "It's just good to have you back. Tell me what you've been doing."

He had been lighting the candle with his back to her, and he turned around to put it on the table, which was between them in the crowded room. In the dim light he could see that she had lost a lot of weight. She was dressed in a light blue summer pantsuit that included a halter top that gave maximum display to her ample bosom. She was tastefully made up as well, something that had never been typical of Sheree.

She stood up from the chair in the corner and walked around the foot of Chaim's bed to

approach him, reaching out to give him a hug.

When Chaim stood to return the hug, Sheree broke into tears, holding him close as she wept. Chaim did not know what to do or say, so he just let her cry for a few moments.

"I need you," she said, when she was able to talk. "I need you so badly."

Was she saying what he thought she was saying?

"You do love me, don't you Chaim?" she asked, still holding him close.

"Sheree, yes, I do love you, of course," Chaim said, at the same time that he set about untangling himself from her arms.

"I've lost weight," she said. "Do you think it makes a difference?" She stepped back to display her body.

"Yeah, sure, of course. You look great. But you've got to understand..."

"I've seen it in your eyes," she said. "We had something special, didn't we?"

"Yes... and no," Chaim answered. "If I could have ever been interested in a woman, you may have been the one. But things are different now, and honestly, Sheree, I'm not even sure if I'm straight." He smiled as he said it, and Sheree broke out in a loud laugh in response.

"There's only one way to find out," she said, and she reached up to undo the strings tied behind her neck.

"No, it's more than that, Sheree," he said. "It would be wrong. I don't want this. There are other things that we need to discuss."

"You mean about what happened in Tokyo?" she asked. "Maybe I just wasn't cut out for the job. Believe me, Chaim, I'm much happier now. I just wasn't growing where I was."

Chaim was relieved to see that Sheree had started to re-tie the halter strings. "Bobbi said you stopped hearing from God after I left," he said.

"Yeah, but I'm back to listening now," Sheree reported. "That's how I got here, remember? I've been seeing some wonderful things for us in the future."

"Us?" asked Chaim.

"Us. You and me. Nothing is going to stop us."

Chaim did not like the sound of this.

"Where are you staying?" he asked.

"I'm not," she said. "I just arrived in Sydney this morning. My suitcase is under the bed."

Chaim looked around the room. "As you can see, I only have one single bed, and hardly enough room to move around it. You won't be able to stay here."

"Ah, but there's another room out in the back. I've been checking the place out. I could stay there."

She was right. It was only an empty toolshed, but if she was prepared to stay in it, what could he do to stop her?

"Well , let's get you set up there before it gets any later," he said. "I was hoping for an early night. I have a big day tomorrow." He dragged the suitcase out from under the bed, picked up the candle and trudged around to the back of the building. The rest of the house was inaccessible, apart from this one room and the shed at the back.

Chaim carried out his mattress to get Sheree through the night, and then retired to his room once again. He was thinking, for the first time, about putting a lock on the door.

## Chapter Twenty-Six--Co-operation

Chaim's first instinct was to run. He could just pack up and leave, right then, or at any time in the future. But if she could find him once, what would stop her from doing it again? He was pretty sure that her voices were no longer coming from God, but he also believed God had all owed her to find him for a reason.

Not least amongst his thoughts as he lay awake on the floor that night was the possibility that Sheree could succeed in distracting him from what he had been called to do. She had lost something spiritually, but her appearance was much improved; and she was right about Chaim's attraction to her.

It was very late when Chaim fell asleep; and he was no closer to a solution than when he had first laid down.

The next morning, he was awakened by a quiet tapping on his door. He answered it with a sheet wrapped around himself. It was Sheree, and, like her tapping, she seemed much more timid than she had been the previous evening.

"I'm sorry, Chaim. I can come back later," she said when she saw he was not dressed.

"That's okay. Just wait a tick," he said, and he turned to slip into some slacks before opening the door to her.

He offered her the one seat at the table, and fetched the chair in the corner for himself.

"It must have been quite a shock to you, finding me here like that last night," she said. Chaim just lifted his eyebrows in response.

"I don't want to cause problems for you; I just want to be near you," she said.

"About that," Chaim returned, "I want to be very clear that I'm not interested in a sexual relationship. I've stayed single this long, and I don't want to change now."

"I understand," said Sheree. "But if we could just be friends... I could maybe help you."

Chaim thought that if she really wanted to help, she would have stayed in Japan and patched things up with Bobbi instead. Still, it wouldn't be so bad, if she could keep from throwing herself at him, like she had done the previous evening.

"Well, you're here now," he said. "Let's just take it a day at a time."

And that's what they did, with Sheree spending that day and the next fixing up the shed, to make it more liveable. She stayed out of Chaim's way, and he was able to go off to "work" as he called it, without further interruption.

On Sunday, she asked if she could go to meeting with him, and it seemed pointless to refuse. Friends would take note of them arriving together, but they would think little more of it. They might even see it as a hopeful sign of him settling down.

Sheree picked up a casual job doing telephone sales, and when she tired of that she letter-boxed pamphlets. She shared with Chaim much that she was able to get by compromising with the system.

It wasn't long before Sheree was inviting Chaim out into the backyard occasionally (and then more than occasionally) for evening meals around a table that she had set up there. There were no further attempts to seduce him, and the overall effect was more seductive than anything else she could have done.

He really liked Sheree as a friend, at the same time that he weighed up constantly what effect this would have on the rest of the movement.

Every few months she would make some attempt to influence him in spiritual matters, but whenever he resisted, she would settle back into a less threatening relationship. Often she would disappear for days or weeks, and when she returned she would be in bad shape physically, like she had been living out on the streets. Chaim's presence seemed to be enough to restore her sanity, and to get her taking care of herself once again.

Several times Chaim thought about letting others in the movement know that she was there. At first he held back because he was certain that it would be temporary; but later he held back because it was not, and because he did not know how to explain it. Not even Molly and Bess, up in Newcastle, knew where he lived now, and Sheree was happy to stay in Sydney on the rare occasions when Chaim would take a trip to Newcastle to see them. Sheree became Chaim's little secret, and even though they remained only friends, he still had a feeling that it was more a "dark" secret than an innocent one.

Over the next two years, life for the entire movement progressed smoothly. There were the inconveniences of trying to do business without using money; but apart from that, they encountered few difficulties. Growth in numbers had come to a halt, giving individual cells an opportunity to organise themselves better, and to develop a clearer picture of what was happening and what was going to happen.

The rest of the world was still adjusting to the mass movement of so many Americans, but the general mood was one of continuing prosperity. Americans, many of them with skills and experience that could be used to build up local economies, became the Twenty-First Century version of slaves, harvested from an overnight war. With all the profits staying in the rest of the world now, people were starting to realise just how much they had been missing during those years when all of the world's luxuries had been sucked down the brain drain that led to the West.

Xu Dangchao's charisma had bedazzled the entire world. His role as Secretary General was now one of ex officio world ruler. Governments were not conquered (apart from America, and to a certain extent, Britain) but rather they were enlisted in Dangchao's many efforts to unite the world. Never in modern history had there ever been such a period of total peace, prosperity, and co-operation.

By the time that Chaim and Sheree were celebrating the second anniversary of their meeting at the little squat in Strathfield, Chaim estimated that there were just seven months left before things would change.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven--Betrayal

It was January, and time for Yearly Meeting once again. This year it was to be held in Perth. Chaim decided not to go, but Sheree wanted to attend, and so she asked for and received clearance from the local meeting in Sydney to do so. Anyone all owed to attend Yearly Meeting could participate in business meetings as well as most other sessions.

Chaim met Sheree as she stepped off the Indian-Pacific at Strathfield Station on her return from Perth.

"Welcome back," he said, as he greeted her with a hug, and reached out to take her bag. "How'd it go?"

"Oh it was great," she said, with a little less enthusiasm than he had expected. "Everyone was nice. They treated me just like I was one of them."

"I told you they would," he reminded her. "But you're acting like something's wrong. What is it?"

Their relationship had progressed to the point where he could almost read her mind.

"I'm worried that you might be upset with me," she said.

"Why? What happened?" Chaim had the feeling she was looking forward to telling him.

"At one of the sessions we discussed the Peace Testimony. I mentioned something you did, just to get their view. It wasn't very good." She looked up to gauge his reaction.

"You what? What did you tell them?" Chaim was shocked.

"I asked them if it's okay to kill someone, if you think God has told you to."

"What does that have to do with me?" Chaim asked, feeling cautious as well as shocked.

"I said that you would kill someone if God told you to. You would, wouldn't you?"

What was most surprising about this was that Chaim had never had any such discussion with Sheree. Where was she getting this? Did she know something about the three men in the cave in Yutang? No, that wasn't possible.

"Well ... would you?"

"Would I what?" Chaim had become lost in thought.

"Would you kill someone if God told you to?"

"C'mon, Sheree! That's not fair. Besides, how could you tell them something like that if we've never talked about it ourselves?"

"I'm trying to talk about it now, and you're avoiding the subject," Sheree argued. Of course she was right.

Chaim went silent as they walked from the station to the squat. On arrival, he left her to unpack and headed off to the library, where he could be alone.

What he needed was time to think. Not about whether he would kill someone if God told him to, because one might as well say that he already had... and not about whether Sheree was aware of it because he was sure she was not. But more about what his attitude should be toward her, under the circumstances.

She obviously knew what her disclosure would do to his acceptance amongst Friends. It was like she had gone there for the express purpose of betraying him. But the truth in what she had said was the biggest part of the hurt he was feeling.

Who could he turn to for counsel on how to deal with something like this?

That was when he decided to email Rayford. A full disclosure of his relationship with Sheree went into the email. He didn't go so far as to say what had happened in the cave, but he did say that there was some truth in what Sheree had said.

It was still a few hours before Rayford would be awake in London, but he hung around the library waiting. During that time he pondered and prayed, but his mind was racing so that he could not get anything through listening. Three hours later, he received a reply from Rayford.

"Thanks for writing," Rayford began. "The important thing is that you've opened up and shared what is going on. These kind of relationships always lead to problems if you keep them secret."

Chaim had explained that he did not see a way to escape Sheree if she put her mind to tracking him down.

"You must set borders," Rayford said. "Don't be afraid to say No. And then trust God to help you deal with any fallout that comes from it."

What Rayford said made perfect sense. Chaim should have taken him into his confidence from the start.

Although Rayford too was a pacifist, the issue of whether he would lay aside that belief for God was not the problem to him that it had been for Chaim.

Technically, Chaim had not killed anyone. But he had been a party to God killing someone, and that was where his dissonance came from. He had accepted that God has a right to take away a person's life, but he did not have the words to explain that to Friends, many of whom did not even believe in the existence of God.

The email from Rayford marked the start of a special relationship between the two of them. But it also marked the end of Chaim's relationship with Sheree and with most Quakers. Quite apart from any truth in what Sheree had said, he knew the motive behind it was evil, and that it was time for him to start "hating" her... for God.

Sheree had the good sense not to approach Chaim that evening, but the next morning she came knocking. He stood at the door as he talked, not inviting her inside.

"What's the matter? Can't we talk?" she asked.

"I don't think we have anything to talk about," Chaim replied. "You've betrayed me, and that's your right. But you've destroyed our friendship by doing so."

"Quakers had a right to know what you really believe," she said. "Why're you angry with me, just for telling the truth?"

"Because you haven't told the whole truth. You've told only that piece of the truth that you thought you could use to hurt me."

"Chaim, if I wanted to hurt you, there are much worse things I could do," Sheree said with a threatening glint in her eyes.

Chaim could see the truth in that. But he was not going to back down.

"If I've done anything wrong, I'll take my punishment," he said , "but I'm not going to help you in your campaign. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

And he shut the door.

Sheree attempted, over the next few days, to convince Chaim that she was sorry, that she had not meant him any harm, that there was still hope for their friendship. But Chaim knew better. He had known it from the moment she first greeted him in the darkened bedroom, two years ago. She was there to stop him.

They continued to live as neighbours, exchanging civil greetings whenever their paths crossed, but Sheree never re-entered his room, and he never joined her in the back yard after that.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight--The Cross

Rayford and Chaim had been quietly calculating for three years now, the exact day when Xu Dangchao would turn from being a great leader, to becoming the most evil man in all history.

During that time, Chaim had been working to merge what he referred to as two sides of the brain. He had taken a movement which started as spontaneous religious anarchy, with no human leader, and turned it into a tightly knit team of people who were fully submitted to the authority of God.

There were now more than 70,000 people involved in the six tribes that he led, and they were all geared for a huge spiritual battle.

This concept of God's authority encapsulated what Chaim now had the confidence to say was wrong with Friends, the churches, and the world in general. People were quick, he said, to push the authority of their various organisations, but slow to humble themselves before God. Friends called themselves mystics... open to the leadings of the Spirit, but only if the "spirit" was stripped of all authority first. They had become trapped in a whirlpool of self-made gods who became ever more comfortable and ever less real.

Chaim had grown to appreciate the significance of the death of Jesus... something that he had, in his more liberal past, rejected as inconsistent with a loving God.

"He's only human, after all !" Chaim would now say jokingly, to get people to let go of their ridiculously binding rules about what a perfect God can or cannot do. "If he wants to get angry, who are we to stop him?"

He taught that the cross was a symbol of God's anger against sin and rebellion... the kind of sin and rebellion that was being practiced and defended both in and out of the churches. By letting his own Son suffer for the world's rebellion, God had illustrated, in a single act, both his great anger at sin and his great love for the sinner.

Some churches still talked about the cross, but only in terms of what Jesus had done for them. The smarter theologians believed that if they yielded on that point, they would soon have to accept that Jesus also had the right to call on others to do the same thing. No one wanted to do that, and so, in one way or the other, the message of the cross was snipped out of the New Testament, as theologians conducted their own castration of God.

Meanwhile, thousands of people from outside the churches saw perfect sense in serving a God who makes rules and sets standards; and these were the ones who joined the Twelve Tribes. While the churches moved toward more and more open rebellion against God, Chaim was steeling his followers to face their greatest fears, and to pray for the strength to confront them. There would be suffering, he promised. There would be deaths. There would be rejection by loved ones, as Ming had experienced already. And there would be scandal, which, for Chaim, had been his biggest fear.

"God gives, and God takes away," he had said. "God forgives; but he also punishes. And we are about to enter the furnace of his judgment."

He was talking about the next three and a half years, a period during which true believers would be subjected to the greatest persecution that they had ever experienced before.

Sheree also knew of Chaim's predictions, and she hated the logic behind them. She had marked the day on her calendar, and was going to use it to make one final bid to steer him away from his goal... a goal which she had come to see as anathema to her voices.

It was a Tuesday night in August -- winter in Sydney. It had been raining off and on all evening, and Chaim had not taken an umbrella with him when he left that morning. During a cloudburst on the way home, he ducked under cover of a picnic shelter in a park, to wait it out. While standing there, trying to stamp some of the water off his feet and clothes, he spotted someone coming toward him in the darkness. Although the rain was pouring down now, the image in front of him did not hurry, but moved steadily closer. She was only ten metres away when Chaim recognised her. It was Sheree, and she had a strange smile on her face. Under her coat, she was clasping a notebook to her breast, but otherwise she seemed indifferent to her drenched condition.

The rain was so heavy on the corrugated iron roof of the shelter at that exact moment that it was difficult to hear anything. But Sheree was not saying anything anyway. She simply handed Chaim the notebook and indicated that she wanted him to open it.

Inside were lists of names, email addresses, phone numbers, even some house addresses. Chaim recognised them as all being members of the Twelve Tribes, most of them senior leaders.

Then, quite suddenly, the rain eased, and the two were able to talk.

"Where'd you get this?" Chaim asked.

"Here and there," Sheree answered proudly. "You didn't always take your computer with you, you know."

"So what're you planning to do with it?" Chaim had a good idea but he wanted to hear it in her own words.

"It all depends on you," she said. "There's still time to dump Rayford and start our own movement."

"You know that isn't going to happen," Chaim responded.

"So, I take this to the authorities! If your predictions are correct, from tomorrow onwards, they'll be looking for you and the others. Isn't that right?"

"Sheree, what's happened to you?" Chaim asked sadly. "First, you stopped listening to God, and now you're actually wanting to work for the devil?"

"There is no devil," she hissed angrily. "Only the voices."

"God is not going to let you get away with this," Chaim said calmly. "He'll stop you."

"I've memorised the entire list," Sheree boasted. "Even if you destroyed that book, it wouldn't stop me."

"Sheree! Look at yourself! Can't you see that we're talking about a lot more than destroying a book?" Chaim pleaded. "You're the one who'll end up being destroyed if you carry on like this."

"What? You're going to destroy me?" she asked, and then laughed. A long, evil laugh.

"I won't need to do it," Chaim answered. "God can take care of that himself. He let you come here... maybe to test me, maybe to give you another chance. But when he decides you've had enough opportunity to change, he'll deal with you in other ways."

"Is that how your God of hate works?" she asked sarcastically.

"If you want to think of it that way, Sheree, that's fine. But it won't change the truth. He'll do what he's going to do, and you won't be able to stop him. And he's asked me not to resist him either; so I won't. One way or another, he'll deal with you, and he'll do it without my help."

Sheree reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a small gun. "I don't want to hear any more of that," she shouted, as the intensity of the rain picked up again. "If you won't help me, you won't help anyone!"

Chaim left the notebook on the picnic table and strode quickly over to Sheree, hoping to take the gun out of her hand. "Put that down, Sheree," he said fearlessly, and perhaps foolishly. "You'll hurt somebody."

Just as he was reaching out for the gun, she pulled her arm back and then swung it with all her strength at his head, hitting him in the temple with the side of the gun. As she did so, the gun went off. Chaim fell to the ground. After a moment or two of shock, he realised that the bullet had missed his head.

Nevertheless, he was in pain, and more than a little dizzy.

Neither one said a word as Chaim stared up at her. There was a soft moan from him as he said something that Sheree did not catch. She was standing over him, with the gun pointed straight at his head. More out of curiosity than anything else, she shouted for him to repeat what he had said.

"I was talking to God!" he said, using all of his strength to be heard above the rain. From somewhere nearby was a flash of lightning, followed almost immediately by the loud explosive crack of thunder.

"And what did you say?" she asked, as she cocked the trigger. She was watching closely to be sure that he could not lunge at her and disturb her aim.

"I asked him to DO IT!" he shouted, just as a blinding flash of light filled the shelter, accompanied by the loudest explosion Chaim had ever heard.

Sheree did not hear it, however, because she was dead. The lightning had cut right through the metal roof and struck her in the head, lighting up her whole body just before she tumbled down on top of Chaim.

He rolled out from under the lifeless form, rubbed the side of his head where she had hit him with the gun barrel, moved over to the table to retrieve the notebook, and then stumbled back to his room.

There was no longer any need for an umbrella, because the rain had stopped.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine--Two Witnesses

Chaim broke down when he was safely inside his room, but his grief was matched by a feeling of triumph. He had passed a test by not letting his emotions come in the way of what had just transpired. He knew that it was what had been required of him.

Someone would discover the body by morning, and even with the gun in her hand, an autopsy would show that Sheree had died from the lightning bolt and not from foul play. There would be no link to himself.

The next morning, Wednesday, Chaim went off to work again as usual, though he detoured around the local park on the way. At the library, he started by reading the newspaper.

Huge headlines announced the death of Xu Dangchao, shot in the head and in the heart by a crazed assassin in Jerusalem. It had happened late on Monday, Israeli time (Tuesday morning, Sydney time), which was why Chaim had not seen anything in the papers the previous day. Dangchao had been inspecting a huge statue in front of the Cathedral of the Divine Creation -- an architectural twin for the Jewish Temple, located at the opposite end of the Temple Mount -- when the attack took place.

Chaim was not surprised by the news. It was what he and Rayford had been expecting. The media was filled with expressions of shock and praise from national leaders around the globe, who were freely lauding Dangchao as the greatest statesman the world had ever known.

Later that morning, an article by Rayford dropped into Chaim's inbox. It declared to the whole world that Dangchao was not really dead, that he would be revived, and that when it happened, people should understand that the body of Dangchao was inhabited by the devil himself. Rayford planned to post it on his website after approval from Chaim. In it, he predicted that Dangchao would desecrate the new Temple in Jerusalem, turning it into a palace for himself, where people could come and worship him. These were amazing predictions, but the two agreed on their accuracy, and after a few suggestions for minor changes, Chaim sent the article back to Rayford (and copies to the six judges).

He then posted it on his own website.

Queries flowed in from the tribal judges about the news, and Chaim was busy responding to mail for the rest of the day. He said nothing to anyone about what had happened to Sheree.

Even before he reached the library on Thursday morning, Chaim overheard people outside shops talking loudly about the miraculous overnight resurrection of Secretary General Xu Dangchao. Some reports said that it had been a mistake that he was reported dead in the first place, while others said a miracle had, in fact, taken place. Either way, the world was rejoicing that they had their saviour back. At the library Chaim read further and learned that Dangchao had decided that the only place safe enough for the world's greatest leader would be the new Temple in Jerusalem. "Temporary" offices would be set up there for him and other U.N. leaders. The entire city would be placed under United Nations control.

Then, later in the day, an urgent email arrived from Rayford. It said: I suggest you urgently sever links with your ISP. Our site seems to be secure. You can have mail forwarded through it. Neville (my assistant) will provide you with details.

Also, I must know whether you have had any experiences with fireworks happening when you speak. I mean literal y. If you are who I think you are, you'll know what I'm talking about.

Chaim replied immediately:

Yes, I have. So where do we go from here?

What Rayford was referring to was something that Chaim had been thinking about ever since the incident in the cave.

Bible prophecy spoke of two "witnesses" during the final three and a half years before Jesus returns. They would be given supernatural powers, including power to call down fire from heaven on anyone who opposed them. It was common for some mental patients to imagine themselves to be one of the Two Witnesses; but it appeared that Chaim (and he assumed Rayford) had the fire-making credentials that the others lacked. If so, it would be a huge responsibility for them to use their power wisely and graciously... if there really is such a thing as a gracious thunderbolt.

The irony of a lifelong pacifist being given a job as God's executioner did not escape Chaim. Later, he wrote to Rayford:

It seems that this whole movement centers on getting people to change sides. We all get a chance to see how it feels to have the shoe on the other foot.

Chaim had been an outspoken critic, not only of war, but of the death penalty and of abortion. He did not go so far as to oppose the killing of animals for food, but he did believe that their treatment even when being slaughtered should be handled humanely. Now here he was being given the job of killing people for God!

Rayford wrote back:

Can you imagine how it would be if he had given this power to someone who was not a pacifist? Even his own disciples couldn't handle it. All we can do now is pray that we will use it wisely.

It was a huge relief to be able to open up to someone else about what he was going through. Chaim shared openly now with Rayford -- about what had happened in the cave, and about Sheree. Rayford shared similar confessions, and it bonded the two men as nothing else ever could have. They were, indeed, part of a very exclusive club!

The news about Dangchao having been "mistakenly" reported as dead, and about his release from the hospital with only the loss of sight in one eye to show for his ordeal, let Chaim know that there was no turning back. Dangchao definitely was the Antichrist. He and Rayford definitely were the Two Witnesses.

And the last three and a half years before the return of Jesus, known as the Great Tribulation, definitely had begun. They were crossing over that line where prophecies stop being fanciful theories and start becoming part of history.

## Chapter Thirty--Using the Media

Rayford's prediction had not been on the Internet for 12 hours before it became a reality. But in that time, the right people had seen it, including Geoffrey Baum.

Geoffrey had been forced to sever his links with the BBC two years earlier, after his "experiment" with Vaishnu's tribe had finished. His refusal to accept the implant had made it impossible for him to stay on the payroll. But he had compiled a list of media contacts, and he dusted it off to send them tips on Rayford's prediction the moment he heard about it. Most of the media was too busy chasing down eulogies from world leaders to be bothered with some religious fanatic saying Dangchao would rise again. But the BBC had it from Baum that this was the figure behind the free work movement happening all over Asia, and so they pulled out file tapes and squeezed in a mention of the strange prediction along with all their other reports of Dangchao's death.

Of course when it turned out that Dangchao was not dead, everyone wanted to review what had actually been said on the Twelve Tribes website.

Rayford was there, anonymously, feeding them with more information, and telling the people what else was going to happen. As far as the media was concerned, it was too good to pass up. But for Dangchao it was a disturbing distraction from what he had wanted to be his grand moment. He thought that his agents had tracked down the worrisome dissidents, using their London website to do it, but something had gone wrong. Efforts to locate the group and its leaders became a personal obsession for him over the next few years.

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"We got a big mob askin' to join now," Molly said with a smile of satisfaction. "Same like you said it would be, Chaim."

Chaim had gone to Newcastle to see Molly and Bess, even though it was getting harder to travel now that he could not buy petrol. Sometimes he would hitch a ride, but this time he managed to sneak on a train without paying the fare.

The two women were camping in the bush, outside of Newcastle, and would periodically trek to town, where they would pick up discarded food, and plug in their laptop computer. Their meeting with Chaim was happening in a quiet corner of a fast food restaurant on the outskirts of Newcastle.

"There's a lot more just visiting our home page," Chaim reported, based on information that he had obtained from Rayford, in England. "It's starting to happen: People are starting to see through Dangchao," Chaim added.

"They gotta be blind not to," Bess added. "The man's sick... that's what he is. Makin' kids... little kids... kill each other! It's sick. Just plain sick."

She was talking about the entertainment that Dangchao had brought in after transforming the Temple into a palace for himself and his most loyal supporters. At first it was just rude and blasphemous music, comedy, and dancing. At intervals in the festivities, it became traditional for revellers to prostrate themselves before Dangchao. This even included political dignitaries and members of the Press, who hardly raised a word of protest. Then the program changed,

to include the most perverse sexual orgies, and finally gladiatorial contests in which opponents fought to the death, both with each other and with wild animals. Of late, even children were being given weapons and forced to kill one another.

"Dark times," Molly said, half to herself. "It's happenin' Chaim, just like you said. Dark times."

Molly had also seen it coming, but Chaim had added clarity, with predictions made privately to members of the Twelve Tribes that, as things got worse, more people would be drawn to consider the movement as an alternative.

It was becoming more and more difficult for anyone with any integrity to believe that Dangchao was not, in fact, a 'beast', as members of the Twelve Tribes had claimed. Only a tiny fraction of the world's population had the courage to opt out of the new world order, especially in the early stages, but their numbers were soon to be measured in the millions.

"It's going to cost these new believers," Chaim said sadly. "It'll cost them everything." The original members of the Twelve Tribes appeared to have miraculous protection, but circumstances were such now, that contact between the inner circle and the rest of the world had to be highly secretive. People joining during this period might have access to the Twelve Tribes website or to printed material, but they were left to fend for themselves outside of the refuges that has been established for the 144,000 leaders in this worldwide movement.

Chaim had come to Newcastle to discuss with Molly and Bess his plans for going public with specific warnings to the world, so that people would have no doubt about where his message was coming from.

"You tell 'em," Molly said, when she heard the plan. "And you know you don't need me to tell you that. You just keep listening to the Spirit, son."

## Chapter Thirty-One--Forecasting

Chaim took a final look in the mirror, almost laughing at his rough handiwork. The wig was one he had found discarded in the rubbish almost a year before, and he had saved it for just such a time as this. He had forced tissue up into his nostrils to change the shape of his nose. He wore dark glasses, dark make-up on his very light skin, and his beard had been shaved off and replaced with two clumps of black hair that he had cut from the back of the wig. They were glued, one under his nose to look like a comic imitation of Hitler's moustache, and one on the end of his chin.

He made a final check of the tripod where the video camera was mounted, started it running and then moved to a seat in front of it, with a blank wall behind himself.

"My name is Judah," he said. "I have been sent by God to give a message of warning to the whole world. I know that it's hard to believe someone just because they make such a claim, and so I will give you a sign. It will not rain throughout the whole of Asia for the next week. Not one drop. When this happens, I want you to seriously consider whether what I am saying can be regarded as coming from God."

Just then, the clump of hair that was to be his moustache broke free on one side and dropped down, hanging over his upper lip. Chaim grinned slightly, and quickly pressed it back into place. It was a strange moment of comic relief in such a deeply serious video, but he decided to leave it, rather than take time for a re-run. He continued:

And now for my message.

"God loves you. Many of you have heard that before, but you have never really believed it. It was a convenient doctrine for you to use, to allow yourself freedom to disobey him; but you didn't really believe that he loved you. When he would make demands on you or when he would allow you to go through painful experiences, you would turn on him. Nevertheless, he does love you, in spite of all that you dislike about his discipline. Until you can believe that, you will never have true peace."

Chaim was speaking with earnest compassion now, and it came across to those who watched the video later.

"The world is now being led by one who is the son of the devil; but we cannot put all the blame on him. You are each free to make a choice. Will you follow Xu Dangchao and all that he now stands for? or will you follow God? If you choose to follow God, it is going to cost you everything... even your life.

Please think about that over the next week, as you listen to the weather reports."

Chaim did not offer any "plan for salvation". He gave no pitch for people to contact the Twelve Tribes. In fact, he did nothing to direct them in any way.

There did not seem to be a need for it. If the sick perversions of Dangchao were not enough to make people cry out to God personally, then they were not going to find their answers in what the Twelve Tribes had to offer.

The amateur video went up on the website, and responses started coming in almost immediately. Over the next seven days, as the rains dried up in Asia, the hit counter spiked

even more dramatical y.

Throughout that week, weather forecasters gave various explanations for the sudden mini-drought over all of Asia. Most of the explanations sounded reasonable, but what was not so reasonable was that Chaim knew ahead of time that it would happen.

Although Dangchao himself was frantically using his considerable influence to get the media to boycott any information coming from Chaim or Rayford, there were still enough independent newspapers and radio/TV stations drawing attention to what had been said by Chaim, that the word had spread to just about everyone.

In many parts of the world, the message had been shown with subtitles in the local language. Anyone who missed the reports could go to the Twelve Tribes website and see the video there for themselves. With the help of tribal members from around the world, Chaim's speech could be heard in every major language. Teachings also had been translated into dozens of languages by now, and so they were there waiting for enquirers. The Twelve Tribes were being talked about everywhere, and people were starting to see the issues more clearly as Dangchao turned gradually more insane.

The world leader himself responded with a campaign of terror against all believers. Each time he was able to track down individual believers, he would add their torture and cruel execution to his Temple entertainment. Yet their numbers increased. He went further, and called for the construction of guillotines in major cities all over the planet, so that believers could be publicly beheaded.

This new wave of martyrs came to be known amongst the believers as Tribulation Saints.

Ironically, the more Dangchao persecuted them, the more the number of Tribulation Saints grew. They were almost queueing for the privilege of being executed for their faith. People who had never been more than lukewarm in their convictions were galvanised into action by Dangchao's evil machinations. And this, of course, angered him even more, forcing him to think of new ways to make life (and death) miserable for the believers.

Chaim and Rayford went on record as declaring a drought on all of Israel as punishment for Dangchao's actions, and that drought continued over the next three years, forcing the country to import water just for drinking. Crops failed and many local industries folded for lack of water.

Dangchao made certain that he did not suffer personally from the water restrictions, but people living in Israel were less inclined to sing his praises after the drought started to take effect on them and their businesses.

## Chapter Thirty-Two--An Open Confrontation

It was time for yearly meeting once again, and this was to be the last yearly meeting of The Religious Society of Friends in Australia... ever.

In future, they, like all other religions on earth, would become a part of Xu Dangchao's new all-embracing world religion. Already many Friends had left the Society in protest, and joined the 'Tribulation Saints'. Some had already lost their lives, and their deaths had been a powerful reminder of the suffering that early Quakers had endured for their faith.

But, sadly, the majority found the message of the Twelve Tribes more distasteful than that of Dangchao. He continued to tolerate worship of Gaia and other gods and goddesses of the various world religions apart from Christianity, so there were many Friends who convinced themselves that there was still room for improvement if they just went with him for now. Of course they were required to recognise Dangchao himself as the God of gods (because of his supposed power over death), but that was just a cultural thing that these people believed could be worked around. Love and patience would achieve more than the intransigence of the Twelve Tribes people.

The debate on how the Society was to finish up was a bitter one, which was ironic considering that the end result was a foregone conclusion. As an organisation, they had no choice but to become corporately linked to Dangchao's superchurch; but they did have the individual right (if it could be called a right), to go it alone. Of course anyone joining the superchurch was morally obliged to report those who chose to worship outside of Dangchao's prescribed boundaries.

As good law-abiding citizens, a surprising number of Friends felt it their civic duty to report those who spoke out against the merger with Dangchao. They saw such co-operation with Dangchao as being consistent with the Quaker testimony of 'honesty'.

Reports of Quakers being executed by Dangchao's forces saddened many Friends, because these were people they had known and loved for years.

Nevertheless, there was also talk of how these martyrs could have avoided execution if they had not been so open in defying Dangchao's orders. Friends believed in speaking truth to power, but some felt there were better ways to do it than announcing that one had joined the Twelve Tribes, as some Friends had foolishly done. Some members of the Society were further offended that people becoming Tribulation Saints were taking the high moral ground over those who did not feel 'led' to choose a similar path.

The whole world, and all of its religions had been forced to take a side --

Dangchao or the Tribulation Saints -- and neither side fit neatly into anyone's previous ideas about religion, ethics, or spirituality. Gone were the days when one could pick and choose their own bits of theology to create a god and a religion that was comfortable and yet smugly superior to lesser gods and lesser religions. Friends could believe whatever they liked inwardly, but outwardly, they had to choose between two strongly authoritarian religions. The Authority demanding their allegiance in one of these religions was invisible, while the other authority represented 'the laws of the land' and had a powerful army with which to enforce his decrees.

The session on dissolution of the Society ended with many Friends shocked at the serious

differences that had been revealed as a result of the choice they were each being forced to make. It reminded many of the time, more than a century earlier, when Friends had parted ways with each other in the United States, after throwing chairs and throwing insults which were entirely inconsistent with their reputation for peace. Those choosing to join the Tribulation Saints left the conference quickly and quietly, realising that their decision ended forever any further contact with those who had joined Dangchao.

It was also a decision which was going to ultimately cost most, if not all, of them their lives.

By this time, Chaim himself had severed all contact with Friends, and so he was not there to witness the debate.

Chaim's skill at creating disguises had improved since the time he did the "Hitler speech" with the faulty moustache. He was planning his movements more carefully these days, too, to avoid discovery. The general public had been warned to be on the lookout for vagrants. Because of this, Chaim took to wearing a business suit and timing his comings and goings to minimise detection by neighbours.

He and Rayford together had made several appeals to the rest of the world, with each one attracting a huge website audience. Through the Internet they had been able to carry on their ministry fairly anonymously. But Chaim felt that he needed to put his life on the line in order to make a special plea to Australians.

Molly had a contact who was a truck driver, and she arranged for Chaim to get a lift to Melbourne for a day, before catching a ride back to Sydney with the same driver the following day. Chaim announced to the media that he would be addressing the nation live on the banks of the Yarra in Melbourne's Alexandra Gardens, not far from Flinders Street Railway Station. He knew this would attract more than the media, but he also knew that he had to face his fears. By scheduling it in Melbourne, he would be directing authorities away from Sydney in their search for him.

A crowd of media personnel was on hand well before the appointed hour.

A few bystanders were hanging around, and almost a hundred soldiers, sent there by the U.N., were positioned around the area. Without a stage or microphone, people had no idea where to look for Chaim to appear.

Near the river-bank, not far from a heavy-set Muslim woman in a burqa, someone jumped back in shock as they spotted a snake slithering across the closely cropped grass. Then someone else, twenty metres away, let out a yelp as they too saw a snake moving near them. Other serpents began to converge on the area near the Muslim woman. Out of the river dozens of them moved in from behind her. At first people were so busy reacting to the snakes, that they did not take note of the woman. But it wasn't long before it became clear that this woman, though totally surrounded by snakes, was neither fearful of them, nor under threat by them.

A soldier who had been positioned closest to where the woman was standing advanced toward her, with the intention of establishing her identity. But he was struck in the calf by a huge brown snake approaching him from behind.

He screamed in pain, and that drew attention away from the woman for a while longer.

Everyone had formed into a tight congregation, all facing toward a writhing stage, where a fat Muslim was now removing her burqa. What came out of the garment was a man, dressed only in a T-shirt and shorts.

One soldier, convinced that this was, indeed, the man he had been sent to arrest, decided to shoot Chaim instead. He lifted his rifle and took aim. Just then, Chaim pointed in his direction and said, quite loudly, "NO!"

A flame appeared to shoot directly from his mouth to the soldier's chest, igniting into a fireball. In response to the soldier's scream, several other soldiers lifted their rifles, but just as quickly, Chaim pointed at each and gave the same one word command: "NO!" for each of them. Like rapid fire from a machine gun, six deadly accurate flames shot out in quick succession and hit each of them.

There were now seven soldiers screaming in pain as spectators sought to put out the flames. By this time the others thought better of lifting their rifles... with one exception. A loan marksman had managed to sneak to a position around behind Chaim, with the intention of taking him out from the rear. Without even turning, Chaim lifted his finger, wagged it in front of him, as though addressing a small child, and said "No" once more, much more quietly this time. The flame shot out from his mouth, turning to circle around behind him, and enveloped the would-be sniper.

Ambulances were being called, and the victims, who were all still alive, were being consoled. Several soldiers had radioed their predicament to their superiors as well. Chaim waited quietly until people had settled down sufficiently, and then started to speak. The media cautiously moved closer to the snakes, which all seemed to be in position now, forming a neat semi-circle in front of him.

Microphones were extended in the hope of picking up some of what Chaim had to say. A hush settled over the area, including those who had been injured earlier.

"I am sorry for the suffering that has happened here today," Chaim began.

His voice was remarkably clear and remarkably calm. "I am afraid that there will be more, if the people of Australia, and, indeed, the whole world, do not begin to show more respect for God.

"These snakes," he said, pointing to a sea of perfectly still serpents in front of him, "have a message for each of you. Look at them. They are at peace now.

Snakes do not naturally seek harm. They are quick to avoid a confrontation. But if you antagonise them, you will create your own torment.

"There is a lesson here," he said, lifting his eyes to the cameras and to the faces of some deeply worried soldiers who were still standing.

"For the next week, there will be a plague of snakes all over Australia.

They will come into the cities and into your homes. They will not hurt you if you do not try to hurt them. They are there under instructions from God. Not me, mind you. I'm just a mouthpiece. They are being controlled by God.

"Now if any of you," and he emphasised the word any as his eyes narrowed and his forehead

wrinkled, "If any of you reports even one person to the authorities as a believer, or lifts your hand to hurt even one believer, you will be bitten by the snake or snakes nearest you. Do you understand?"

And with that, Chaim turned around and walked into the Yarra, where he swam to the opposite bank. Two soldiers raised their guns, but without missing a stroke, and without looking over his shoulder, Chaim merely raised one hand out of the water and shook one finger, as though saying "No" yet again. The result was the same as it had been earlier, except that these two were also set upon by the snakes, receiving numerous bites before they died.

Chaim, wearing only shorts and a T-shirt, pulled himself up on the city side of the river, and walked into the CBD shopping crowd. Reinforcements had not yet arrived, and those present did not have the courage to chase him, especially when they saw the number of snakes in the river, with many more of them coming up onto the banks on both sides of the river now.

Chaim had planted yet another disguise behind a dumpster in an alleyway in the city, and so he collected it, unnoticed, and completed his costume change in a department store toilet. He came out dressed as a priest, for his journey back to Sydney and the walk to his room.

## Chapter Thirty-Three--A Warning Unheeded

Matt Hocking had had enough. Snakes in the kitchen, snakes in the lounge room. Even snakes in the bedroom. He had heard the warnings, and it did seem uncanny that the snakes were not attacking. A big black snake had curled up in the bed, beside him, on the first night after the plague began. It didn't move, even when he threw the covers back in angry shock on discovering it the next morning. But there was nothing supernatural about these desert creatures. He had shot several through the head, including the big black, and they died the same as any other animal. He even beat a couple to death with a rake. So no fool warning about these reptiles being from God was going to scare him off. It was time to act.

He strapped two six-shooters to his thighs, and carried a stock whip in his left hand as he headed off to the Department of Peace and Unity in downtown Kalgoorlie, a rural mining town in Western Australia. His neighbour, Cal Linley, was one of them; he was sure of it. Cal had been warning Matt not to kill the snakes, saying God would kill him if he did. And he saw with his own eyes Cal giving food to a vagrant earlier in the week. If he wasn't one of them himself, Cal sure as hell was supporting them; and the only way to deal with a snake like that was head on.

The office was quiet, with just two people on duty when Matt arrived.

"You got a report form?" he asked a huge middle-aged woman sitting on a stool behind the counter. It looked like she was doing a crossword puzzle as she leaned her heavy frame on the counter.

"I got someone for you," Matt announced.

"Down there on the end of the counter," the woman replied lazily, pointing to her right. "There are pencils in the box beside the forms."

Matt started filling one in, giving the authorities Calvin's name and address, and details of his suspicions.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of movement on the floor.

The whip flew from his left hand to his right, and with a flick of the wrist, the tiger snake's back was broken, rendering it immobile. Matt swung the whip two more times, breaking the deadly snakes back closer to the head this time, and then crushed its head with the heel of his heavy riding boots.

"Jist gotta let 'em know who's boss," he said, looking up at the fat woman with a grin, and then at her young geeky-looking assistant, who was peeking around a computer on the other side of the counter.

Matt finished the form and then walked with it up to the woman.

"Thank you," she said, as she reached out to accept the piece of paper from Matt.

"Liz, look out!" shouted her assistant. A death adder had been hiding behind the waste paper basket and it lunged at her ankle. In her rush to get off the stool, both the stool and the woman fell to the floor. The death adder struck again. And then once more, before returning to its hiding spot behind the waste basket.

Matt Hocking could not see what was happening behind the counter, but he had a good idea. Stupid bureaucrats, he thought. They've probably never seen a snake in the wild before. Live their whole lives behind a desk, they do.

"Here, you take it," Matt said to the nervous young man as he placed the form on the counter and turned away with callous indifference to the woman's plight.

"No, I don't want it!" screamed the assistant as he debated whether to help his superior or whether to track down the death adder. "I don't want anything to do with it!"

He raced to the woman, but already her breathing had stopped.

"Oh God! What do I do now?" he asked himself, for he didn't really believe in the One whom he had so spontaneously addressed.

He dialled triple 0, reported the incident, and then scooped up a few things from the drawers of his desk. Finally, he grabbed the form that Matt Hocking had just left on the counter, studied the address before stuffing it into his pocket.

"Oh God, let him be one of them," he said, suddenly realising that this time he really was talking to God.

Outside, a small crowd had gathered across the wide main street of downtown Kalgoorlie. Between this newest recruit to the ranks of the Tribulation Saints and the crowd, scattered across the road, lay the dead bodies of three or four snakes, each with their backs cruelly broken. In the middle of the crowd lay the lifeless body of Matt Hocking.

## Chapter Thirty-Four--The Big One

Chaim gave other warnings for other countries after that. The plagues varied, but the message was similar, and the responses, too, were much the same. People were more or less free to report believers after the week-long plagues ended, but the point being made each time was that, even when they later got away with turning believers in, it was only because God had let them.

Personal responsibility for the killings did not, in Chaim's opinion, rest with him, though he could hardly dissociate himself from what he was certain that God was doing. Nevertheless, the general public came to see him as cruel and bloodthirsty. This bothered him a little, but he knew it was only because they felt the same way about God. At least fewer people were trying to stop him now, as it became clear that he was being protected by a God of fierce countenance.

The deaths on both sides had risen into the millions by the time an announcement went out from the Two Witnesses predicting the greatest holocaust the world had ever known -- the "big one" as Chaim called it.

The Twelve Tribes website gave people a detailed account of what to expect, as well as practical advice on how to minimise the danger. It said that a huge meteorite shower would cover much of the world, followed by an asteroid slamming into the Atlantic Ocean, and sending mountains of water over the coasts of four continents.

This was the catastrophe that Chaim and Molly had sensed five years earlier.

It had only been six and a half years since America was decimated. Much of the planet was still in shock from that. They fully believed that the world would never suffer such a horrible experience ever again. Nothing would ever compare to it. Yet the Two Witnesses were saying that something even worse lay ahead.

By this time, Dangchao controlled the media sufficiently to be able to suppress most of the warning. People had been forbidden to visit the Twelve Tribes website too, but millions regularly disregarded the rule. The numbers visiting the site shot up even farther when word started to circulate about the "big one", and many who had seen the accuracy of the pair's previous predictions decided to take this one seriously.

When millions of cars started to flow out of the cities along the coasts of the many countries that bordered the Atlantic, U.N. authorities set up roadblocks to take information on everyone who left. This scared many into returning to their homes, but millions more gave the required information and fled, hoping that the authorities would find it in their hearts to go easy on them if they were later taken into custody. Fortunately for them, when the floods hit, all the records were destroyed, along with the personnel who were there manning the roadblocks.

There was no way to trace those who had escaped as a result of what they had read on the Twelve Tribes website, and so literally millions more were "swept" into the movement.

Chaim later took comfort in knowing that millions had been saved because of the warnings; but Dangchao and his billions did not see it in the same way. As far as they were concerned, Chaim and Rayford were the ones responsible for all those who had died. They were the worst mass murderers in all history.

At first, thousands of meteorites rained down on Europe, Africa, and the Americas. This was followed by raging fires over much of the earth. The heat rising from the fires led to the formation of unbelievably huge hailstones, big enough to kill a person. The meteorite showers, two of them, were followed by the asteroid. Even Earth's axis was affected by the collision, and the tsunami was so great that whole cities were literally washed off the map along the coast of Europe, Africa, and South America. It was like one big worldwide earthquake, with thousands of normal earthquakes causing further damage in the days following the 'Big One'.

The world would be decades rebuilding, and even just disposing of bodies was going to be a huge task, requiring international supervision. Dangchao was out of his mind with rage as he started to reap what he had helped to sow on America. His brave new world was in complete disarray.

"Forget the corpses!" yelled the tall, handsome man in the office marked "Secretary General", as he stood to his feet and banged his fist on the desk at the same time. "We need every available member of the military to stop the aliens." (Dangchao had started calling the believers 'aliens', in an effort to convince the world that they were non-humans with dangerous super powers.) "But your worship," answered a timid man in an ecclesiastical robe which suggested that he too had been used to being addressed with such titles, "it has devastated four continents. The whole world is in shock."

"You're not listening!" screamed Dangchao, who climbed onto the top of the huge desk, shoving aside papers and other paraphernalia in an effort to physically attack his assistant.

Pius withdrew, clutching a sheaf of papers and a clipboard in front of his body as his only defence.

"Kill them! Kill every one of them! Kill anyone who resists!" His face had changed, into that of a hideous animal, as he knelt on all fours facing Pius from the top of his desk.

"And I'll kill you too, if you stand in my way!" he growled in conclusion, as he reached his hand out threateningly toward the other man's throat.

"Yes, your excellency. You're quite right, your worship." Pius whimpered as he stepped back even further, almost tripping over the chair behind him.

"Don't just kill them," Dangchao said, a little more quietly now, but no less threateningly, as he returned to the floor on his own side of the desk. "I want them to suffer as I am suffering. Make them give up all the information they have before they die. We must find out who is behind this and stamp them out."

"But how..." and Pius paused for fear of enraging the man further.

"Say it, you stupid creature!" Dangchao said, resuming his seat behind the desk as evidence that Pius' life was no longer in danger.

"But how will we know that they are telling the truth? What if some do not know anything?"

"You see, Pius, this is the difference between you and me. A real leader knows that there will be collateral losses, and we do not let it stop us." He was speaking almost cordially by this stage, although his volume and passion increased with his next line: "Capture anyone who is named, and put them through the same process. If we kill them all, we will eliminate them all!"

Right?

"And then, when the aliens are gone, those of us who remain can celebrate."

Because of this brash decree, millions of Dangchao's own followers were tortured and killed. Word spread that loyalty to Dangchao was not enough to protect one from his wrath, and still more turned to the Twelve Tribes... not for salvation from death, for they knew what their decision would cost them, but for salvation from the evil that Dangchao's regime had become. If they were going to die anyway, it may as well be for what was right.

## Chapter Thirty-Five--The Monster

Chaim's transformation was complete. He had grown from a harmless, respectable pacifist to become the leader of a movement that was now implicated in the deaths of hundreds of millions of people. And he had the audacity to say that all of it had happened and was happening in obedience to his God.

Dangchao too had changed dramatically over the space of a few short years. And he too, had been responsible for the deaths of millions. The difference was that Dangchao had used his political influence to wreak death and destruction and he had done it to satisfy his own evil whims; while Chaim had acted only as a mouthpiece for a superhuman Director.

Chaim had grown into this relationship merely by "listening"... first to a dream, then to his conscience, circumstances, the wisdom of others, the Bible, and finally to revelations that he had received while worshipping. The change had been gradual, and each step had led naturally to the next, as fellow Quakers had warned him would happen from the start. But he could not find a single point at which it would have been right for him to resist the leadings of the Spirit that he had been experiencing.

More than anything else, what consoled and consolidated Chaim in his position was reality... his experience in the real world. Just as Watchman had pointed out to him in the cave: When things happen... when people die... it ceases to be a theological argument about whether or not God has a right to do such and such, and it becomes a matter of whether we are going to let those experiences draw us closer to God or drive us farther away.

In his case, he had been drawn closer to God. His understanding of who God is and what God expects of us was deeply challenged. He discovered a God who was bigger than the tiny seed that resided in his own intellect and emotions. He learned that this God had a plan for the human race... a real plan... an objectively measurable plan. And it had been recorded in prophecy.

The plan did not deny the differences that exist in belief systems around the world; but it did identify a time when all of those belief systems would need to be thrown into one cosmic blender, where they would each be broken by the grinding wheels of God's final authority. That was exactly what he had seen happening all over the world in the past seven years, both in his own life, and in the lives of everyone else on the planet.

As the Great Tribulation neared its end, the numbers of people leaving Dangchao to join the Saints gradually died out. The great division had been completed, and both sides had become locked into their final decisions.

However, even some of the last people to join the Saints did so with only a vague understanding of what it was and why it was that they were joining. They were sickened by the stench of unbridled evil that came from Dangchao's rule, and they were inspired by the faith of the Tribulation Saints; but they had little understanding of God, and even less appreciation for what it was that the Tribulation Saints expected as the final outcome of all this suffering. Earlier attempts to educate those who first joined the movement were overwhelmed by the flood that came in during the middle stages, so that organisation near the end was largely ineffectual under the parallel waves of new members and new killings. Still, they came, and because it was a decision that they knew would cost them their lives, it was seen by the

Twelve Tribes as reason enough to believe that a genuine transformation had taken place in their hearts.

In the final few weeks, even the inner sanctum of the Twelve Tribes was compromised, leading to the deaths of some of the movement's top leaders.

Those who remained prayed for strength and counted the days to the end.

Chaim had a final tearful meeting with Molly and Bess just before he successfully stowed away on a flight to Tel Aviv. They met at the St. George's River Rowing Club, within walking distance of the international terminal. He shared with Molly and Bess the sad news that Vaishnu and Ben had been taken in Delhi and were probably being tortured as they spoke. Geoffrey Baum had managed to escape and pass the news on to Chaim, although Baum himself was on the run now and would probably not be able to give any further reports.

They all knew that it would only be a matter of days before the end of all their suffering, but it was still sad to see the movement disintegrating. Chaim -- not one who was given to tears -- broke down and wept openly with the two Aboriginal women, hugging them repeatedly, and assuring them of his love before he headed off walking toward the airport. He was about to board a flight that he knew would take him to his death.

## Chapter Thirty-Six--The Witnesses are Killed

"Friends, we mean you no harm!" Rayford's claim was met with hoots of derision from the unsympathetic crowd that had gathered near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. But the crowd, though antagonistic, was still reasonably well behaved. They knew better than to disrupt the address.

"What we have done has not been of our own choosing. It has come from the God of heaven and earth, the Lord of Creation."

More derision.

"You can disagree with his right to judge, but you cannot stop him from doing it," Rayford concluded. Beside him, Chaim lay sleeping.

They had met for the first time just seven days previously. There had been a brief encounter with Dangchao himself at the start of the week, but when several of his guards were killed, Dangchao consented to letting them roam the streets of the city... at least until he could devise some other way to stop them.

Marksmen had been placed around the city, to follow their every movement, but not one of them dared to attempt a shot at the pair.

Rayford was younger than Chaim had expected him to be, and Chaim was fatter than Rayford had expected him to be. But together they had merged into a single voice with a single purpose. They each knew that this week was the culmination of their mutual life ministry, and they were resigned to their fate.

Throughout the week they hardly ate or slept; but they preached almost constantly, often answering questions for hours without a break. When they did sleep, they used only discarded cardboard as a bed, and a few old rags for warmth. One would stay awake while the other slept, because the crowds never left, not even in the middle of the night. There were hecklers, but even the hecklers were subdued as a result of the pair's reputation for judging harshly any who opposed them.

Their presence in the so-called Holy City had been broadcast around the world, bringing thousands of touristy spectators who wanted to see the aliens for themselves. Everyone knew to cautiously keep their distance. There had been a couple of incidents where spectators foolishly tried to attack them earlier in the week, and that was when either Rayford or Chaim had used their destructive powers to reinforce their divine right to be there.

It was Wednesday night now (or more precisely, very early Thursday morning). It had been a long and busy week. With that final comment, Rayford had answered what appeared to be the last question before the crowd moved away. As usual, those asking the questions did not really listen to the answers.

Nevertheless, Rayford poured out his heart to the people in one last attempt to turn them from the path they had chosen.

On the second day of their stay in Jerusalem, there had been one young woman who had responded to what they said. She had broken down and wept, begging for forgiveness for her hardness over those final years. She was taken away by two of the soldiers, probably for

execution. An elderly man had repented on the fourth or fifth day. He met a similar fate. Apart from that, their efforts seemed wasted on the crowds.

Rayford was weary, and about to wake Chaim for a change of shifts when a shot rang out.

At the back of the clearing where they were standing, a young U.N. sniper had jokingly drawn a bead on Rayford's head when his companion bumped his elbow. The pair were almost as shocked as Rayford, who only had time to register surprise before he fell to the pavement, dead.

The shot awakened Chaim, who jumped to his feet, only to be struck in the head by a second bullet from the same sniper. This one was deliberate, and was the soldier's attempt to protect himself from retribution by the elder of the Two Witnesses. The two men in military uniforms crouched behind a tree, unsure whether they had really succeeded.

"Look!" someone cried from the crowd, as people leaving the scene turned back to catch what had happened. "They're dead! They really are!"

"Be careful. It could be a trick," someone shouted, but a few brave spectators raced over to the bodies anyway. It wasn't long before the spectators confirmed that the two men really were dead. This brought the soldiers out of hiding. They then strutted out into the open and down toward the two bodies.

The young man who had fired the bullets was already talking on his mobile to his superiors, while the other one pointed at him and made hand signals to let the crowd know that this was, indeed, the hero of the moment, and maybe the hero of the century.

"They're dead!" "The aliens are dead!" Shouts spread quickly through the quiet streets of Jerusalem, waking up residents and flooding the phone lines. In a matter of minutes it was being talked about throughout the city, across the country and even around the world.

An ambulance arrived to take the bodies away, but by morning they were back in the same place, with a cyclone fence around them. The public was being invited to come and view them, where they lay. Indeed, a global holiday had been declared in order to celebrate their deaths. The forces of law and order had prevailed; the monsters had been destroyed; and now the world could safely put itself back together again.

If it had ended here, as so often happens, the victors would have written history in the way that this book began. Dangchao, or one of his successors would have told us about how they had saved us from two monstrous aliens. So often throughout human history this has been the case. One political power after another has told us that they would provide a solution to the evils of the previous one, only to succumb to worse evils themselves. But this time was to be different.

There had been tremendous suffering on both sides over those final years of the old age, but the death of the Two Witnesses had mercifully brought their suffering and the suffering of those whom they represented to an end. For the others... those who had fought Chaim and Rayford and the truth that they stood for, the real suffering was about to begin. Rayford and Chaim's deaths, so quick and so painless, were a hollow victory for those who had sought only revenge.

Then, three days after their deaths, while a crowd looked on and celebrated, an earthquake shook the city of Jerusalem. The earliest tremors seemed to awaken the two corpses; but a much greater power healed their wounds and brought youthful strength back to their bodies.

And then they had started to rise, slowly at first, but quickly accelerating, as they moved up through the atmosphere. On their way, they were joined by others like themselves, with new bodies that possessed new powers... the ability to fly, the ability to withstand cold and the ability to function without oxygen in the upper atmosphere.

Down below, the world was in chaos. The earthquake in Jerusalem was just one more of so many catastrophes that had occurred over the past few years. But there was worse to come.

Yet up here, as literally millions of believers from throughout history converged, there was unimaginable peace and joy and unity. Everywhere Chaim looked there was beauty. He had entered a dimension of pure light. Numberless species of plants and animals filled this new dimension. Even the stuff that it was made of was more beautiful than the most precious stones on earth.

And at the center of everyone's attention was the One who had made it all possible. His face radiated light so powerfully that it was difficult to make out the features. He wore a white robe as did everyone else, but his robe had a wide gold band around it. And when he spoke, everyone went silent. His voice could be heard perfectly by everyone, even though some were miles away at the back of the huge crowd.

Chaim knew immediately that it was Jesus, and he was overwhelmed with love for this one who had been leading him so graciously over the past seven years. But there were others in the crowd who had not yet come to know that Jesus was the One who had been orchestrating all of this. Even their presence in that amazing new dimension came for some as a surprise.

Everywhere there was rejoicing and celebration, dancing and singing, laughing and hugging. They had, indeed, come through the Great Tribulation, and they had learned that at the end of the tunnel called obedience, the God of Judgment that the world had so hated, was also a God of infinite mercy and love.

All he was looking for were people with enough faith to let him be who he was, enough humility to wait quietly and hear him speak, and enough courage to act on what they heard him say.

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