

Re-Earth

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Eileen du Mee

## Acknowledgements

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Bible passages quoted in *Re-Earth* are from *The Ryrie Study Bible: new King James Version*. (1985). Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago.

## Abstract

This work includes an exegesis and a draft thesis entitled *Re-Earth*. In the exegesis, the method section highlights the research and writing process undertaken by the author for the development and completion of the thesis. The discussion section enlarges on the method section. It explores the different genres upon which *Re-Earth* draws inspiration and considers *Re-Earth* in relation to published works which have informed the work. It also views the work from a world perspective with both a historical and contemporary insight.

The thesis is a fictional story about a persecuted religious minority on the distant planet Re-Earth. Here, a Christian engaged couple struggles to survive in an environment tipped towards genocide. After an eight-year hate campaign against the Christians, the antagonist instigates the use of an anti-Christian device with the intention of exterminating all ‘true Christians’ for his personal and political ambitions.

The object was to create a thesis that would interest a reader who wanted a fast-paced story with a topical theme.

EXEGESIS

## Introduction

*Re-Earth* is the story of a persecuted religious minority on a distant planet. This exegesis accompanies the draft thesis and gives insight to the work. The method section highlights the research and writing process undertaken by the author for the development and completion of the thesis. The discussion section enlarges on the method section. It explores the different genres upon which *Re-Earth* draws inspiration and considers *Re-Earth* in relation to published works which have informed the work. It also views the work from a world perspective with both a historical and contemporary insight. *Re-Earth* is a relevant work because it incorporates the issue of religious persecution which is a state-of-being many suffer worldwide today.

## Method

The idea for *Re-Earth* came from information presented on the Christian broadcasting station Radio Rhema concerning the persecution of Christians overseas and the supposedly spurious reasons behind Christian individuals being arrested and jailed. Over the months following, the idea of intolerance toward others, which may include the death of those who have been ostracized from the society in which they live, became of great interest. A decision was made to write a science fiction novel incorporating this topic.

According to Steinmuller (2003), “science fiction writers use science in many ways, as foreground, background, context, or subject for their stories” (p. 176). *Re-Earth* deliberately places the science in the background so creating a work of ‘soft’ science fiction. In this type of science fiction, “while technology may play a role, the emphasis is not so much on how that technology works, but how it affects individuals or social groups” (Gilks, Fleming & Allen, 2002, p. 40).

The initial goal was to write a Christian science fiction work that would also draw on the dystopian genre. Soft science fiction appealed to the author as this sub-genre seemed a suitable vehicle for the type of persecution that was to be presented in the work. In order to gain an understanding of this genre as a novice science fiction

writer, soft science fiction novels and short stories were read or re-visited, for example, Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (2001), P.K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1982), *A Scanner Darkly* (1991), Robert Silverberg's short story *To See the Invisible Man* (1977) and Christian soft science fiction works such as C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* (2005) and *That Hideous Strength* (2005). Mary Doria Russell's works *The Sparrow* (1997) and *Children of God* (1999), which appear in John Mort's *Christian fiction: a guide to the genre* (2002), were also appraised.

The main way in which these works influenced *Re-Earth* was by clarifying the degree to which 'science' is required in order to classify a work as being science fiction. As Milhorn (2006) states, soft science fiction is "character-driven, with emphasis on social change, personal psychology, and interactions" (p. 34). This is in contrast to 'hard' science fiction where "plausible science and technology are central to the plot" (Gilks et al., 2002, p. 38). The works appraised follow Milhorn's definition and an attempt was made to mirrored this within *Re-Earth*.

The dystopian genre was investigated through such works as Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (2004) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1988). These influenced *Re-Earth* by showing how a dystopian world could be created, one which enhanced the story being told without detracting from it. The aim was to achieve a 'realistic' negative world that would be an appropriate backdrop to enhance the characters' faith and struggles.

The persecution of Christians as a fiction subject was explored through Christian works such as S. Bambola's *Refiner's Fire* (2000), Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (2003) and Jerry Jenkins's works such as *Soon: the Beginning of the End* (2003); *Silenced: the Wrath of God Descends* (2004) and *Shadowed: the final judgement* (2005) (*Underground Zealot* series). These latter works as well as Tim LaHaye's and Greg Dinallo's *Babylon Rising* (2003) were incorporated into vital research on the type and level of violence that is accepted in Christian works.

Research was carried out as to what the three genres 'Christian', 'soft science fiction' and 'dystopian' comprised. For this author, database research of peer

reviewed journals revealed little on the contemporary Christian genre and so research was expanded to incorporate data from non-academic sources, for example, through Google Books. Books from local libraries were also investigated, for example, John Mort's *Christian Fiction: a guide to the genre* (2002) as well as books obtained from the New Zealand Christian Writers Guild such as *Dimensions of Christian Writing* (1970) by A. D. Bell and J. C. Merrill and *The Complete Guide to Christian Writing and Speaking* (2001), editor S. T. Osborn.

Research on hate speech, hate crime and hate media assisted with the development of believable scenarios and characters. (E.g. Vollhardt, Coutin, Staub, Weiss & Deflander, 2006/2007; Parekh, 2005/2006; Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002; Cowan, Resendez, Marshall & Quist, 2002; and Leets, 2002.) Such database research allowed the work to carry authenticity to real life experience.

Other works, for example, L. Dossey's *Be Careful What You Pray for . . . You Just Might Get It* (1997) inspired the creation of the anti-Christian device which became the key sci-fi technology within *Re-Earth*. However, as the project developed, additional database research was required on the 'thriller' genre when the author's writing style carried *Re-Earth* across further genre borders.

After the subject matter for the story was settled upon, the idea for the anti-Christian device was developed. Then the idea for the first chapter arose and the story evolved as it was being written with minor planning of future scenes occurring throughout the writing experience. As Mort (2002) states, "When imaginary people, or characters, meet with conflict, the result is fiction." Plot threads incorporating conflict were developed, for example, the long-standing conflict between the main male protagonist, Pete Ford, and his father, and the more subtle conflict between Pete and the newly baptised Christian Jarris Claymore. These conflicts assisted in showing human flaws in the characters, both Christian and non-Christian, so adding authenticity to the story.

To increase the tension and hopelessness of the persecuted in *Re-Earth*, a key decision was made to locate the story on another planet which in itself is hostile to human life and from which there is no escape for the persecuted. The crucible

(Stein, 1995) was thus developed, that being the Carmel City Basin in which the majority of Re-Earthers live and work. The traditional three act structure (Schmidt, 2005) was chosen and adapted for the work as this is the structure best known to the author. The three act structure, what Schmidt (2005) calls the Traditional Structure incorporates three acts. It has a “clear beginning, middle, and end” (p. 28), where “Act I is the Setup, Act II is the Development, and Act III is the Climax and Resolution” (p. 28).

Both third person objective and third person subjective were chosen as the points-of-view that would best amalgamate the stark nature of the dystopian world with the more intimate viewpoints of the characters. While writing *Re-Earth*, however, it became apparent that the story was being told predominately from a Christian point-of-view. Therefore, another character was created, one who became the atheist observer, but one who ultimately develops sympathy for the persecuted.

After the first draft was completed, the voice of the fascist regime was developed by inserting four separate pieces that are the voice of the fascist regime-controlled broadcaster, Re-Earth Media. Once the story was completed, Biblical scriptural quotes were also added to develop the Christian aspect of the work. However, scriptural quotes were only included to assist in portraying the mindset of Christian characters. Scriptural quotes were not used while in the position of third person objective narrator. This permitted the scriptural passages to assist in justifying the religious mindset of the characters. But care was taken not to overload the work with Biblical passages so that this religious aspect did not detract from the story as a whole.

On *Re-Earth*, there is no distinction made as to the finer point of denomination among Christians. Any believer is labelled as ‘Christian’ no matter what their Christian orientation may be. All Christians are targeted by the dystopian regime and anti-Christians do not see the finer distinctions of denominations, such is their prejudice. Consequently, there is no need to highlight a specific denomination.

During the writing phase, meetings were held with an appointed writing mentor on a regular basis. The mentor pinpointed weak areas within the work so that these could

be improved, for example, improvement of dialogue so that it was not in the same voice as the narrative, but in the characters' vernacular voice. One-to-one mentoring proved an effective method of learning new writing skills as the discussions were on a work under development rather than, for example, the discussion of a finished piece in a class situation. Student group meetings were also attended. These proved beneficial as they invited feedback on each member's project.

The object of this thesis was to create a work that would interest a reader who wanted a fast-paced story with a topical theme. This project is of significance to the author as it is a realization for the author of her writing style. A main issue has been identifying and accepting a writing style that is simple, but a simplicity which arguably has the capacity to carry a complex work. With this acceptance has come greater enjoyment and confidence in writing as well as a more informed view of the persecution which many minority groups suffer worldwide.

### Discussion

Some readers may consider *Re-Earth* a Christian science fiction work that also draws on dystopian elements. Christian fiction is concerned with Christian precepts in contention (Mort, 2002). This "conflict can be indirect, didactic, subtle, political, and multifaceted, but its Christian content is what turns Christian fiction into a genre" (Mort, p. 1).

In *Re-Earth*, the conflict that propels the narrative is generated by a fascist government and is multifaceted. The President, Brunar Martez, who has waged an eight-year hate campaign against the Christians, has both personal and professional reasons for doing so. This contention highlights the Christians' strength of faith or lack of it. The reader enters the story at the flashpoint when the President is past talking about eliminating the Christian threat and has primed *Re-Earth*'s non-Christian citizens to accept the death of Christians. 'The elimination of the Christian threat' became a reoccurring theme within the work so that the reader might experience the voice of the regime as opposed to the narrator's voice. This distinction was made by italicising the 'voice of the regime' so that these pieces stood out from the main body of work.

Works of fiction have not always been popular among Christians. Until the late 1800s, and the publishing and general acceptance of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) by Lew Wallace, American Protestants were wary of the novel (Gutjahr, 2002). Fiction was regarded as detrimental to their moral welfare (Gutjahr). While this opposition was carried by some Protestant factions into the late twentieth century, there was an increase in Christians reading Christian novels which were seen as a means of conveying Biblical content (Gutjahr). But, “with a growth rate at times nearly twice that of the twentieth-century American publishing industry in general, Christian book sales in 1996 reached three billion dollars, a 14 percent share of the country’s publishing industry” (Gutjahr, 2002, p. 210).

The Christian genre was chosen as a vehicle for *Re-Earth* as it is of interest to the author and because this market is a burgeoning one. The author was brought up with Christian values and with the maxim of personal, political and religious freedom, so found it natural to write from this perspective. The author found the Christian genre a challenging one in which to create a story as it adds another dimension to the work – that dimension being a higher power. This element can be problematic as it may become exaggerated to the point of reader disbelief. Care was taken so that it did not undermine the theme of persecution or the religious aspect of the work.

Even though *Re-Earth* is a work of Christian fiction, there are no obvious ‘miracles’ or dramatic acts of God that aid the Christians as can be found, for example, in Jenkins’s *Underground Zealot* series. This outcome was a conscious decision by the author from the start of writing *Re-Earth* so that the work reflects the unnoticed and unobtrusive way God works in many people’s lives. The fact that most of the Christians have exited the Carmel City Basin prior to the devastating gas flood can either be viewed as a miracle or a coincidence. God’s hand may or may not be seen in the fact that Bibles find their way into Nrocks prison, be it at the cost of thousands of lives, and that the Christians’ presence has a very real effect on the inhabitants of this brutal, savage place.

When writing religious fiction, the author was aware of the importance of conveying the religious meaning by showing the reader rather than to “preach, scold, admonish,

or lecture” (Page, 2001, p. 114). While writing *Re-Earth*, every attempt by the author was made not to preach, but to create a work in which the religious aspects fitted smoothly into the story by being a natural embodiment of the Christian characters and so reflecting their psychology. Page (2001) states that spirituality is not without effort for the character and that characters should develop through spiritual conflicts. In *Re-Earth*, the Christians are fallible human beings who battle with their spirituality and even question the presence of God. One such character is Pete Ford, the main male protagonist, who faces a personal crisis after accidentally killing a man.

Persecution of Christians is a subject the target audience may find of interest. It is an issue which seldom makes mainstream media, even though it is occurring in numerous places around the world including China, Vietnam, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Arab countries such as Syria, Egypt and Saudi-Arabia. Although *Re-Earth* is a work of fiction, it may give these persecuted people a voice by bringing this serious subject to the fore. However, the author was aware that the writer has no control on what the reader takes from the story or how individual readers will interpret the work. “It is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that create the pleasure of the great narratives” (Roland Barthes as cited in Sullivan, 1995, p. 84). It is expected that Christians and non-Christians would engage with *Re-Earth* differently. But, by keeping the persecution theme to the fore, it is hoped that this remains with the reader, even sensitizing them to the subject presented.

Christian science fiction has its roots in such work as C.S. Lewis’s science fiction trilogy *Out of the Silent Planet*, *That Hideous Strength* and *Perelandra* (Mort, 2002). The Christian science fiction genre was chosen for *Re-Earth* as it was a way in which the persecution of a minority religious group could be highlighted within a created world, one that was away from earthly distractions. The writer, therefore, had more control of the environment. There could be no earthly suppositions of possible assistance for the Christians arising from an outside source to erode the validity of the plot for the reader.

On *Re-Earth* the persecuted have no sympathetic ally powerful enough to come to their aid or become their voice. Ultimately, any sympathizer is quickly dispatched by the President's security force. The Christians must face their foe alone with nothing but their faith to give them hope and strength. There is no opportunity to migrate away from the persecution. The crucible (Stein, 1995) becomes the Carmel City Basin in which the acts of persecution and the resulting suffering become distilled.

Early authors of soft science fiction include Mary Shelley and H.G. Wells (Sullivan III, 2001). However, science fiction became a genre in 1926 in America through the magazine *Amazing Stories* which "gave science fiction an identity and a characteristic flavor [sic]" (Gunn, 2010, p. 27). From the 1960s, soft science fiction evolved (Higgins, 2009) and included such authors as Ursula Le Guin and Robert Silverberg.

Silverberg's short story *To See the Invisible Man* (1977), Le Guin's novels, for example, *The Dispossessed* (2001), P.K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* (1991) and Mary Doria Russell's *Children of God* (1999) influenced the writing of *Re-Earth* because although the technology may play a part, these works make it seem possible that one can write science fiction without any real knowledge of science technology. As Gilks et al. (2002) state, "good science fiction, like all other forms of fiction, is about people" (p. 37).

In *Re-Earth*, religion and politics are the issues and the technology is central only in the form of the anti-Christian device which is used to detect 'true Christians'. Although a description of the device is given, a scientific explanation as to how this device works is not, as would generally be the case if this were a work of 'hard' science fiction. Instead, the device is discussed by the characters who would naturally talk about the device within the situations they find themselves. In so doing, they give the reader what information is necessary without explanation from the author.

But throughout the story the effect of this technology can be seen on the characters, as may be the case with soft science fiction. One vital aspect of the work is how the

device affects not only the targeted minority group, but the attitudes of the rest of society as a result of its use as part of the President's hate campaign against Christians. To further enhance the soft science nature of the work, the story does not abandon those rejected by the anti-Christian device outside Bright Light Church but, later in the story, shows the reader the psychological effects and behavioural changes that being rejected has on these characters.

To create another 'soft' dynamic to the work, an atheist voice was added in the character of Adrow Huffle, a character who stands outside the story's main action flow. He is the observer, the man in the background, who can reflect on the persecution of the religious minority group and the political situation. His input is vital as he provides the reader with a viewpoint which the other characters cannot. He is essential in giving story details without any detrimental slowing of the story pace or tension.

However, deciding on which genre *Re-Earth* fits into can become problematic. Some readers may consider *Re-Earth* too 'soft' to fall within the soft science fiction category. They may consider that although this is a story about persecuted Christians, it is not Christian fiction. They may consider that the work draws more on the thriller genre instead, as well as incorporating both science fiction and dystopian elements.

Thriller elements include, for example, being fast paced, incorporating a number of points-of-view and containing on-going suspense (Milhorn, 2006). In *Re-Earth*, the reader experiences thirteen different points-of-view which carry the story forward at a rapid pace. Multiple points-of-view also allow the reader to be with the right character(s) at the precise location and time where important story incidents occur. In *Re-Earth*, the action helps to build the suspense, as do the endings of the sections, which leave the reader unsure of what will happen next.

As Milhorn (2006) states, "in the thriller novel the fate of a city or the entire world often is the prize" (p. 36). In *Re-Earth*, the fate of a religious minority is at stake when the President targets the Christians for extermination. But the prize soon

becomes the planet itself when the lives of the majority of the populace who live inside the Carmel City Basin is placed in jeopardy.

Science fiction stories are those “set in the future, or in which the contemporary setting is disrupted by an imaginary device such as a new invention or the introduction of an alien being” (Ousby, 1993, p. 834). According to this definition, the science fiction element that *Re-Earth* displays is that it is set in the future when humans have advanced enough in technology to live on distant planets.

Dystopian elements are also evident in *Re-Earth*. One description of a dystopian work is that it is “a fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand” (Claeys, 2010, p.107). In *Re-Earth*, the President plans to become the planet’s first dictator and uses the Christian minority as a scapegoat to advance his personal and political ambitions. In his hate propaganda he uses, for example, hate speech and hate media as his means to build contention against the Christians to create an environment conducive to genocide. Brunar Martez and his dystopian regime is the evil the Christian protagonists must face and overcome.

The traditional three act structure (Schmidt, 2005) helps build the tension. In the first act, *Re-Earth* begins in the normal world for the Christians which is one of growing persecution. However, the change to this normality, the inciting incident, comes in chapter two when the President’s security force raids churches to arrest Christians after they defy his most recent bans.

Milhorn (2006) states that “exposition is used in some popular genre more than others” (p. 44). Science fiction is one example (Milhorn). Here, exposition is required, for example, to present “a whole new universe” (Milhorn, p. 44). In *Re-Earth*, Act One’s structure was problematic as expository narrative was required to not only set up the world, but the environment of persecution. To overcome this, a short chapter one became a later addition at the mentor’s suggestion. This chapter permits the reader to ‘see’ and then ‘settle’ into the world more easily before being faced with the necessary expository narrative.

Act two finds the main protagonists facing obstacles. The main male protagonist, Pete Ford, has a clear-cut goal that is created by the raids – he wants to save his beloved, Sophay Winters, from the regime. However, his goal is an ever-changing one. As he learns more about the anti-Christian device, he realizes he must develop a counter-device before he can get close to his loved one. The goal changes again when he thinks his beloved is dead. In a highly emotional state, his goal turns to one of revenge which again alters when he learns his fiancée is still alive.

*Re-Earth's* structure incorporates two plot climaxes in the third act. The first finds the protagonists and antagonist confronting each other in a church with the lives of the protagonists in jeopardy. The second plot climax was developed to deal with the nature of the planet itself. A gas flood that threatens the lives of those living in the Carmel Basin looms when a crucial bank of air purifiers fails to fire up. This may or may not be read by the reader as the workings of a higher power, but may satisfy the Christian reader that something more than humans' earthly ambitions are at work.

However, two plot climaxes became problematic as both required resolution without detracting from each other. Although Pete is reunited with his fiancée before the ending of the story, the work still required an emotional ending within the resolution to satisfy the reader. A later addition, at the mentor's suggestion, this emotional ending rounds off the relationship story thread. It draws on an element that recaptures an earlier chapter.

The resolution to the second plot climax does not incorporate the main protagonists, merely the antagonist. Here, there is no circular route in the Third Act that links back to the start of the story. Vogler (1998) refers to this as “the open-ended story form” (p. 224). Nor is a solution given to the wider problem of persecution. These were deliberate authorial choices that leave the reader with questions that may inspire consideration of the serious subject of persecution. As Vogler states, this type of story-telling “goes on after the story is over . . . in the minds and hearts of the audience” (p. 224).

The open-ended story, according to Vogler (1998) is suitable “for more sophisticated stories with a hard or realistic edge” (p. 225). Because of its subject matter, this

seemed the most appropriate ending type for *Re-Earth*. The second plot climax also leaves the story open for a possible sequel.

The use of violence in a Christian fiction work can become problematic as to how much is too much. Authors' work that guided *Re-Earth* on the tolerance level for violence within Christian works included Jerry Jenkins's *Underground Zealot* series and *Babylon Rising* (2003) by Tim LaHaye and Greg Dinallo. So did Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1997) and *Children of God* (1999) which take place on earth as well as on another planet. It appeared that violence is acceptable so long as it is in keeping with the storyline and where there is no use of unnecessary violence. Physical violence can be the unhappy lot for those who are persecuted and this was one element that could not be avoided in *Re-Earth* in order to retain the integrity of the story.

A third person objective narrator was chosen so that scenes could be written from an unemotional standpoint, so creating more dramatic scenes that do not, for example, glorify violence. This voice creates a stark narrative that also becomes the harsh voice of the fascist regime. As a contrast, third person subjective narrator was also chosen to bring the reader into the characters' emotions, motives and thoughts, where deemed relevant.

Research on hate speech and hate propaganda informed the creation of *Re-Earth* and has the story echoing what is occurring on Earth, so making this work pertinent for today. Hate speech is "one of eight stages leading to genocide" (Vollhardt, Coutin, Staub, Weiss and Deflander 2006/2007, p. 16-17). Even though *Re-Earth* is set in the future, basic human nature has remained the same. Both the President and non-Christian populace in *Re-Earth* use dehumanizing speech towards the Christians.

Research also uncovered that hate speech involves three elements: 1) it targets a group with specific features; 2) it gives that group unwanted attributes and; 3) the undesirable group is positioned at the fringe of society (Parekh, 2005/2006). These elements appear in *Re-Earth* where the President's hate campaign gives the Christians unwanted and anti-social attributes, such as being hoarders of space on a planet where personal space is at a premium. Christians are tagged as a people who

are profiteering through their ownership of infrastructure vital for survival on the planet. They are likened to cockroaches. Their habits are questioned and they are deemed unhygienic. Through hate speech, the Christians have become undesirables who are shunned by non-Christians. The President's hate campaign has isolated the Christians from the rest of society.

Hate speech "encourages a climate in which over time some groups come to be demonised, and their discriminatory treatment is accepted as normal" (Parekh, 2005/2006, p 217). This idea finds fruitful ground in *Re-Earth*. The President's anti-Christian propaganda builds on the latent anti-Christian feeling that already existed on Re-Earth prior to his coming to power. Discrimination against the Christians is now seen as acceptable for the survival of other Re-Earthers. Pete Ford, seemingly the one Christian who saw the President's hate campaign early on for what it was, questions the Christians' apathy that has stopped them from speaking up against the fascist regime. Complacency has kept the Christians quiet. Pete's fiancée only starts to question the state of affairs when she is a prisoner of the fascist regime. But, too late. They no longer have a voice within Re-Earth society.

The President has taken over the sole broadcasting station on Re-Earth which transmits anti-Christian messages repeatedly. Re-Earth is a distant space colony of American States United, one that is backward in technology and made even more so by the President, who has taken over New State Wide, the equivalent to the Internet. He also has the capacity of monitoring all computers on Re-Earth. He plays on the non-Christians' fears and on their dissatisfaction with their lot on the planet where there is a lack of resources and high unemployment.

As Parekh (2005/2006) states "if anything can be said about a group of persons with impunity, anything can also be done to it" (p. 218). This concept finds expression within *Re-Earth* with the reader entering the story at a time when the discrimination has turned to outright physical harm for Christians, and with the accepted destruction of anything Christian. As Vollhardt et al. (2006/2007) state, "individuals will align themselves . . . with leaders who promise immediate solutions to their problems" (p. 21). Brunar Martez promises non-Christians a better future on a Re-Earth where there are no Christians. Parekh (2005/2006) also states that people react

differently to hate speech where “some . . . either internalise their negative image and develop self-abasement and low self-esteem, or compensate for it by becoming aggressive and self-righteous” (p. 218).

In *Re-Earth* the characters were developed to reflect these tendencies. Jamieson is not willing to hide her cross, the symbol of her beliefs, until a friend’s insistence and the dangers of overtly wearing the cross dawn on the woman. The character Faith is self-abased and has low self-esteem. Sitting in church, she questions the Christians’ right to be there. After the fascist regime has killed her brother, she walks into a burning church. In effect, the regime has crushed and destroyed her. This imagery reflects the death of Christianity on the planet. Annette Carson is unable to accept the regime arresting her seven-year-old son and the anti-Christian device rejecting her. She commits suicide. By contrast, Baldwin, also rejected, turns self-righteous from a non-Christian perspective and becomes extremely aggressive. He joins roaming mobs to destroy churches and kill Christians and is happy to turn Christians with whom he had once forged friendships over to the mob.

However, Leets (2002) states that while hate speech may have a devastating effect on some people, “the same words may have no influence on another person and may even strengthen his or her tolerance and restraint” (p. 344). In *Re-Earth*, this tendency was also developed. For example, Roo Gylespie, after being rejected by the anti-Christian device, lives in fear. He is able to overcome the fear and adapt to the culture of the new regime, but still maintains his Christian beliefs. Another character, Emily Hollender, is also affected by what is occurring on Re-Earth, but becomes stronger in her faith as a result. Even though she is rejected by the anti-Christian device, she considers ways in which she might help the persecuted.

Research such as Ting’s and Watson’s (2007) study of “nine Chinese pastors, who had experienced religious persecution to the extent of confinement” (p. 202) allowed better understanding of the coping mechanisms the persecuted may put into practice while incarcerated. In *Re-Earth* the ‘true Christians’ who are arrested demonstrate four of the eight ways listed by Ting and Watson. These include “preparing to suffer . . . worshipping and reciting Scriptures, fellowships and family support, and

believing in a greater purpose” (Ting & Watson, p. 202). However, in *Re-Earth*, Christians also question the latter.

While writing *Re-Earth*, another problem to arise was associated with world creation. Re-Earth society required the development of, for example, objects not found on Earth. These were introduced into the text without explanation and with the belief that the reader will formulate their own meaning to such words that will be a close approximation to what the author proposed. Stylistically, to assist with world creation, words outside the English language to enter the *Re-Earth* vocabulary include ‘selecteds’ and ‘contaminateds’, ‘berrin’, ‘heliar’, ‘mo-coms’, ‘wing-cams’, ‘mini-T’, ‘tor-bike’, ‘dehecs’, ‘Dober’, and ‘peyjil’. The Earth phrase ‘what on earth’ transforms into ‘what on Re-Earth’. This is not uncommon in science fiction. As Stockwell (2003) states, “creating new technological and social concepts involves creating new words and forms of expression” (p. 195).

In *Re-Earth*, there is also an intertextual connection with the Bible. The great departure in The Book of Exodus where the people of Israel leave Egypt and enter the desert is mirrored in *Re-Earth* when the President orders all Christians to leave the Carmel City Basin and go into the Dredden Desert. Just as Jesus Christ was crucified, so the Christians face being crucified in *Re-Earth* if they do not leave the Basin within a given time period. Intertextual echoes also occur with the Bible through the use of quoted scriptures at relevant points through the story to give gravity to the moment from the Christian characters’ perspectives. Such traits as humility, patience and loving one’s neighbour, explored and taught in the Bible, find their reflection in *Re-Earth* where the society is deliberately shown as dystopian so that the Christian concept has a sharp contrast.

Worldwide, religious groups are being persecuted. “200 million Christians are suffering severe persecution” (Cagney, 1998, p. 20) and in many countries there are “situations of violence” (Paul Marshall, as cited by Cagney, 1998, p. 20). As Davis (1998) states, “religious persecution continues to be a serious problem worldwide despite significant legal steps taken by the world community in recent years to deal with it” (p. 286). In 1998, the first Conference on Religious Persecution was held in America (Cagney, 1998). Legislation has been

implemented in many countries worldwide, such as Britain, Australia, Denmark, Canada and the Netherlands (Parekh, 2005/2006) and New Zealand to curb hate speech.

History harbours many dictators and despots who have prevented Christian or other religious groups from practising their beliefs. Hitler is a prime example. Hate speech was “used as an integral instrument of genocide . . . in Nazi Germany” (Cowan, Resendez, Marshall & Quist, 2002, p. 248). *Re-Earth* draws on recent history by echoing the persecution of the Jews during World War II. Just as the Jews were transported to death camps, so the Christians are transported to Nrocks Prison in cargo transports to be exterminated. Just as many Jews were gassed, so the President hopes the gas generated by the Gratner Ocean will exterminate the mass of Christians who have been forced into the Dredden Desert.

Although *Re-Earth* is not a story of a holocaust on another planet, it echoes what occurred on earth so that such extreme persecution resonates as true in the make-believe world of *Re-Earth*. If such acts could happen on Earth, there is every likelihood such horrors, or worse, might occur on another planet. It was a ploy deliberately used as many people are aware of the Holocaust and much could be stated without putting it into writing simply by activating readers’ knowledge of the event.

But genocide has occurred more recently, Chechnya being one example, and because *Re-Earth* is a story that holds contemporary issues as well as drawing on history, it may well have a role in influencing its audience to take an interest, if not action, against the persecution of religious groups. It may also, indirectly, educate people. As Laz (1996) states, “SF novels are especially useful because they implicitly or explicitly question existing social arrangements in the process of creating alternatives” (p. 55). Stockwell (2003) states that “SF has always had a pedagogical dimension” (p. 197). *Re-Earth* may have the capacity to sensitize readers to the plight of the persecuted and may even motivate people to start questioning the apparatus of propaganda that bombards them every day.

## Conclusion

*Re-Earth* may either be viewed by readers as a Christian soft science fiction work that has dystopian elements or as a thriller with both science fiction and dystopian elements. *Re-Earth* explores the effects of a fascist government's hate campaign on a persecuted religious minority on a distant planet where earthly considerations have no bearing. Research on hate speech, hate crime and hate media assisted in the development of characters so making *Re-Earth* a relevant work for today. Its subject matter, the persecution of a Christian minority, echoes what is occurring in many countries worldwide. No solution to the problem of persecution is given in *Re-Earth*, a deliberate authorial choice which may inspire in readers further thought on the serious subject of persecution.

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THESIS: RE-EARTH

## Chapter One

Lava bubbled at the bottom of the volcanic crater. Pete took Sophay by the hand and led her through the throng of people to a clear space on the viewing platform by the railing. The lava was a fiery red in a black hole that dropped far below them.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. By the faint light of the Xertor star he saw her face break into a soft smile.

Lava spurted upward as if attempting to reach them. Her light laughter rose above the excited chatter of the other spectators and floated on the breeze into the night.

She sighed and moved closer to him. One of her hands gripped the railing. The engagement ring sparkled in the starlight.

A man in a green windbreaker came to stand close by them. He lifted his hands high above his head.

“Praise God, Almighty God, for this glorious marvel! And I don’t care who hears me!”

“Amen to that, brother,” someone said.

“Amen,” Pete and Sophay chorused.

They stood together for a time, his arm round her, and her cheek resting against his shoulder. He pointed out the Valmarth Constellation. She picked out the Cameron Star, a distant twinkling entity, low in the night sky.

Behind them a familiar rumbling sound caught their attention. They turned to see an armoured transport coming to a stop. It had barely finished braking when at

least a dozen security officers exited the vehicle. In dark blue uniforms, they were shadows moving toward the viewing platform.

When their turn came, Pete and Sophay showed their identity disks. The officer ran his light over the surface of the disks and moved on.

They turned back to watch the lava. It spurted upward again, reaching higher than before, a red flash in the darkness of the hole.

He heard her sigh. Saw her eyes widen in wonderment and watched the play of light reflecting on her face.

He kissed her cheek and hugged her closer when a sudden blast of cold air from off the Gratner Ocean pushed past them.

The Christian in the windbreaker wished them a ‘Good night’ and started walking the path that led to a higher viewing platform.

Sophay giggled. “I can’t believe we’re finally getting married.”

“Now we’ve got the duo-space.”

“In a matter of days we’ll be husband and wife.”

Pete looked down into the lava. Red, glowing, roiling.

A scream pierced the night. Everyone looked toward the higher path.

Lava gushed upward. By its light, Pete saw the man in the windbreaker tumbling down the side of the crater. His body hit the molten lava inside the Turwal Crater. Flames erupted. The spectators gasped.

Sophay whimpered. The flying lava subsided.

Pete looked up at the rim of the crater, from where the man must have fallen. Three retreating shadows were silhouetted against a sky aglow from the lights of Carmel City.

Sophay looked scared.

“Someone might have overheard us.”

He grabbed her by the hand and headed straight for the public transport site.

## Chapter Two

Pete Ford looked round his new accommodation, located on the twenty-seventh floor of Personal Space Building No. 1025. After eleven months, Re-Earth bureaucrats had finally fulfilled his request for a duo-space, a surprise considering personal space was at a premium on the planet. Barely larger than his previous single-space, there was a living area and the additional benefit of a separate bedroom and hygiene area. Best of all there was a window.

As Pete neared, he could feel the heat from the sun penetrating the imitation glass. He was not over the novelty of having a window and leaned a shoulder against the surround to study the Carmel City Basin where most of the four million inhabitants of Re-Earth lived and worked. Austere in design, the tall yellow-green Boa-stone buildings, with their small windows, cut harsh angles and shapes into the vivid blue sky.

Pete let his gaze float down the broad slope of the Elman Heights to the flat centre of the Carmel City Basin, then over the industrial area that spread to the distant jagged Boa Mountain Range where the Carmel elite owned sprawling estates and multi-spaces.

Backtracking, he spotted the tall, narrow building on the Carmel flat where he worked under a ten-month contract. He knew he was luckier than most as there was always work to be found as an electronics consultant. Unlike those in the lower career classes where periods of unemployment meant lean resources and living in group accommodation units infested with gangs and crime.

Never had unemployment been so high on Re-Earth and never were so many people dissatisfied with their lot on the planet.

He looked at the large central building that housed the offices of Re-Earth's bureaucrats who nowadays sang their tune in time to the rigid rhythm of the current presidency. The Control Building Central structure dominated the other buildings on the flat, like a large rock in a pebble garden. On its roof was a landing area for the president's heli-air and a pole from which flew the flag of his political party. When not at his Boa estate, the president resided on the top floor of the building in an extravagantly appointed penthouse suite that boasted floor-to-ceiling real glass windows.

The sun was high in the sky. Pete acknowledged he had slept most of the morning away. He looked for Personal Space Building No. 4054, about halfway down the Elman Heights and a smile curved his lips when he thought of Sophay. He brought up the time on his mo-com. In less than three hours he would be going shopping with his fiancée for dressing for the window.

He sank into an easy chair. To pass the time, he tipped the contents of a battered leather satchel, a relic of Old Earth discovered in a memorabilia shop, onto the low table and sorted through the pile of paper. Some were images, some were articles. Others displayed his strong, flowing script.

He pulled out an article and read the large headline type out loud.

"Christian religion crucifies progress on Re-Earth".

He knew the contents almost by heart, but took the time to skim the spurious reasons given for expelling Christians from his home planet. Land hoarders, space hoarders, resource hoarders, the fixers of prices on essential services. Get rid of the Christians and life would be easier for everyone else.

The article fell from his hand when he spotted another. He picked it up to read.

*Re-Earth is dangerously overpopulated by 10.73%, the latest government statistics show. The Christian community, a closed religious sect, exists on the fringes of Re-Earth society. They make up nearly 11% of the population and follow ancient rituals that originated on Old Earth centuries ago. They condone an outdated mode of lifestyle that places an enormous burden on the limited resources of the planet.*

*Shocking new statistics show that Christian females irresponsibly produce more mouths to feed than non-Christian Re-Earthers. Contraception and abortion are alien concepts to Christians. The females stay at home to breed and 'care' for their children, often in unhygienic conditions, instead of contributing to the society at large as do their non-Christian counterparts.*

*The team leader of Personal Space Acquisitions, Veadith Mastrey, states that within the last 24 months, 67% of family-space was handed out to Christian families ahead of more society-conscious people. Mastrey states that Christians are draining government resources with many deserving non-Christians going without as a result.*

*One government inspector, appalled by the conditions in which the Christians prefer to live, stated that "cockroaches have better habits than do the Christians". Bitro Lever, responsible for the sanitary conditions within the Carmel Basin, is concerned that the Christians' chosen lifestyle will result in the spread of disease and the death of thousands of innocent non-Christians.*

*The government is investigating this clandestine group after allegations that Christian businesses are reluctant to employ non-Christians. This is an important issue for all Re-Earthers and especially for Government who considers that resources generated through business activities should be circulated within the wider society rather than remain within the hands of a few who represent a growing powerful minority. . . .*

The article's meaning was clear enough to Pete. Christians looked after their own and preyed on others. They aimed to become the special elite on Re-Earth. Christians were the cause of the hardships suffered by non-Christians. It was easy for the President to breed ill-will and contempt when ignorance on the Christian way of life abounded.

Sighing, he sat back in his chair to reflect on the cold future of Brunar Martez's shaping. It was only eight years ago, under a more lenient presidency, that Re-Earth Christians had full freedom to follow their faith. Since then, the

President's propaganda had stripped Christians of their rights, all under the guise of legitimate reason.

If there were others who saw the government's propaganda for what it was, a hate campaign, they remained silent, probably out of fear of the President's retribution. Too many people had disappeared or late or died from inexplicable accidents.

Pete looked round his personal space and wondered, if he had ticked the box on the Personal Space Acquisition's application form to identify himself as a Christian, whether he would have got a new space at all.

He searched the pile for a picture of Re-Earth's president and held it up to study. The REP's trousers and button-less, long-sleeve top, undoubtedly imported from the finest garment maker on Old Earth, echoed the colours of his political party – navy blue and white with silver and orange trim. The hard uncompromising eyes set in a tanned face stared back.

Pete swept his record of what he believed was Brunar Martez's intrigue to become Re-Earth's first dictator back into the satchel. Such information, he knew, was far too dangerous to store on a computer. Especially nowadays when the government had access to all computers on Re-Earth to crush the so-called 'Christian plot to take over the government'. He zipped the satchel closed and stood it up against the side of his chair.

Growing restless, he returned to the window. Below, the side-walk was a moving mass of humanity. He spotted the former police, now the government's special security force, sitting astride their tor-bikes at strategic points along the roadside. Watching, directing, listening, they kept the mass moving, the traffic flowing, half their unsmiling faces hidden behind dark helmet visors. Today they were more alert, their movements energized. They always seemed that way to him after Brunar Martez had made a significant public announcement.

Following his hunch, Pete picked up the remote and turned on the wall screen to hear the latest news on Re-Earth Media, the sole broadcasting station on the planet, now owned by the government.

As she walked beside Grace Jamieson, Sophay was beginning to regret her decision to accompany the older woman to the special prayer group meeting at Bright Light Church. She gave Jamieson a sideways glance, her eyes settling on the large gold cross that dangled from a fine gold chain. She admired the conviction that kept Jamieson from hiding the symbol of her faith, but was growing fearful of the attention it was attracting. People were knocking into them, elbowing them or spitting on the sidewalk as they passed or throwing epithets their way. By associating with Jamieson, she was receiving the same treatment, even though she had taken care to zip her handbag closed to hide her Bible from prying eyes before leaving her personal space.

“Perhaps you should hide your cross, Jamieson.”

Jamieson stopped walking and turned to her.

“I’ll not hide my cross! I’ve worn it for years and no one is going to tell me differently, or separate me from it.”

A scantily-clad woman gave them a malicious look as she passed.

“Space wasters!”

Sophay caught Jamieson’s eye and raised her eyebrows.

“Why not put it out of view until we reach Bright Light at least?”

“I’ll not be ashamed of being a Christian and neither should you be!”

“Of course I’m not, but –”

“I’m a Christian and proud of it!”

“Space wasters! Get out of Carmel!”

“Filthy, dirty, disease-ridden Christians!”

The disturbance the cross was creating attracted the attention of a security officer. Sophay heard the low hum as he moved his tor-bike closer. She grabbed Jamieson by the arm and got her walking again. She didn’t want to spend the rest of the day in a detention cell for violating the peace.

They were soon lost in the crowd, but the air around them filled with disparaging comments.

“Resource hoarders.”

“No space for you on Re-Earth.”

“Toxic trash! We want more space!”

“If you don’t get out we’ll kill you.”

The soft-spoken man who voiced the threat stopped in front of Jamieson. He eyed her in a menacing manner, his hands on his hips. He was a big man. Sophay felt dwarfed by him.

When they attempted to walk round him, he sidestepped to block their path.

“Get out of our way!” Jamieson flared.

Sophay looked round for a security officer to assist them. One laughed and sent her a rude gesture. She saw two others watching a group gathered on the roadway. The traffic had come to a standstill. She could smell something burning. A spiral of smoke was weaving its way up through the still, hot air, above people’s heads. She stood staring at the scene, the flames jumping skyward. A gap broke in the crowd and she saw a group of youths dancing around a burning cross.

Sophay linked her arm with Jamieson’s and looked up at the man.

“Please, we don’t want any trouble.”

“Rats, cockroaches and Christians are best dead.”

Jamieson was breathing hard. “How ridiculous! Do you know anything about the Christian faith?”

The man took a step closer.

Jamieson lifted her chin higher. “Greater is He who is within me than he who lives in the world!”

Sophay saw the anger, the hatred in the man’s hard eyes, in the twitching of a jaw muscle. Never had she been accosted in the street before or confronted such antagonism. There had always been an underlying antipathy towards Christians on Re-Earth prior to Martez coming to power. But she had always believed in the individual person’s ability to reason and to accept the slurs against Christians for what they were.

“Please, let us pass.”

Her heart pumping faster, she sidestepped round the stranger, drawing Jamieson along with her before her friend could anger the man further. The man waved a fist close to Jamieson’s face and cursed her.

“Hide the cross, Jamieson.”

The widow was about to protest again, but the sight of the youths braying over the fire was enough to have her hiding the offending object under her blouse.

Pastor Bill Riley stood on the steps of Bright Light Church and read the large poster fixed to the wooden doors.

ALL CHURCHES ARE CLOSED.  
ANY CHRISTIAN CAUGHT CONGREGATING,  
IN POSSESSION OF A BIBLE OR PRAYING  
WILL BE ARRESTED.  
THE CHRISTIAN THREAT WILL BE ELIMINATED.

Re-Earth Media had played a similar message repeatedly since the small hours of the morning. The pastor frowned and looked over his shoulder. Outside the church grounds, people were gathering to watch him, to see if he would break Martez's new laws. One yelled insults at him. Another threw a stone in his direction. It landed on the soft grass some distance away.

An armoured transport came crawling along the road. A solid hulk of a machine, it paused outside the church for several minutes, its engine idling. No security force personnel came tumbling out to quieten the growing crowd or to arrest him. Its engine throbbing, it continued on its way, moving slowly along the road.

Pastor Bill turned back to the poster and stared at it in a moment of indecision.

In one brusque movement, he tore the poster off the door and entered the church.

\* \* \*

Pete picked up his mo-com to connect with his fiancée. He got her message service instead.

“Sophay, it's me, Pete. Look, I know I said I'd meet you for a cup of berrin at Grey's before we go shopping for curtains, but I've reconsidered. I'll meet you at your personal space instead. From what I've seen on Re-Earth Media it's getting ugly out there. No more subtle talk from Martez. If you have to go out, make sure you've got company. Whatever you do, stay away from church. Phone me. Let me know you're safe.”

\* \* \*

Sophay settled herself on a stackable chair next to her elderly friend about halfway along the aisle. Sitting within the stillness of the church, she could hear the muffled rage coming from the mob outside. She rubbed her sore leg where a stone had hit her and let out a sigh of relief that she and Jamieson had arrived safely. She was finding it difficult to believe that setting foot inside the church, where she had attended service since she was a child, now made her a criminal.

They were late, but it didn't seem to matter. Everyone was talking about the new bans.

Forty-two-year-old Baldwin, his plump face red, stepped into the aisle.

"At least we're here. We've not been scared off. Hundreds of Christians across Carmel are doing exactly what we're doing. Standing their ground by attending church. Who does Martez think he is with his latest bans? We'll show him! He's gone too far this time!"

His Bible in one hand, the pastor stepped into a more prominent position, up by the altar.

"We're not here to show anyone anything. We're taking this opportunity to pray for a Re-Earth where there's tolerance toward all peoples of all creeds."

"But the mob outside –"

The pastor looked over their heads at the swing doors.

"Don't you worry about them, Jamieson. We're safe enough in here."

"We shouldn't be here."

Faith, with her sweet voice, had stated the obvious.

No one spoke. Everyone was looking at Pastor Bill. In silence, he stood looking back at them. Sophay could not determine whether he was genuinely at a loss for words, or whether he was refusing to make a reply to such a Re-Earthly point of view. In God's eyes, after all, they had every right to be in church. She was aware of the growing uneasiness, the seconds stretching into minutes.

Then movement as one couple rose from their seats. Without a word, and looking at the floor, they scurried out of the church. Over a dozen more followed. Still Pastor Bill said nothing. When it seemed no one else would bolt from the meeting, he turned to the altar and bowed his head in prayer. The sun shone through

the large stain glass window, showering his white hair and person with colourful rays of light. Red, green and yellow.

Blocking out the sounds of the mob outside, Sophay bowed her head and attempted to pray, but the uneasy atmosphere within the church became loud enough to distract her. Her thoughts drifted to her wedding day and she was filled with happiness at the prospect of becoming Pete's wife. She had known him for most of her life and he was her best friend. In four days time they were supposed to get married in Bright Light. Now they would be forced to organise another venue for the ceremony.

She looked up at the wooden rafters and breathed in the unique polished wood smell of the church. So different from the tarnished air that filtered into her single-space.

Her thoughts jumped to the duo-space and the window. Pete preferred wooden slat blinds to curtains. But she thought slats would be too heavy for such a small window and would clash with the rest of the decor –

“What are you going to do about it?”

The pastor turned to Baldwin and smiled. “The REP can't stop us practicing our faith.”

“He's forbidden us to own Bibles –”

“They can be hidden.”

“He's banning us from praying –”

The pastor chortled. “He can't enforce a ‘no praying’ ban. How can he? The idea's absurd.”

Roo Gylespie leaned his muscular form back in his chair. “Exactly, Pastor. Unless we pray aloud, how's anyone going to know?”

“He's stopping us from congregating.”

The pastor took his time in answering. He opened his Bible and thumbed over a few pages.

“We can always meet in secret, Baldwin. Even if it's at night in the Dredden Desert.”

“But what he's done goes against the Accord!”

Grant Drubermore withdrew his arm from round his wife's shoulders. “Baldwin's right, Pastor. Under the Accord we're supposed to have the freedom to practice our faith without interference.”

Baldwin punched the air with his fist. “It has the support of America States United! So what are we going to do about it?”

The pastor sighed and placed his Bible on the altar. “There’s not much we can do. Old Earth is miles away. You know her protection doesn’t stretch this far into space.”

“I can’t hear the mob.” Ruth Drubermore twisted in her seat to look down the aisle. So did Sophay.

They all became silent as they listened. No sound came from outside, not even the sound of passing traffic.

The pastor seemed more relaxed.

“There, you see?” He smiled. “Everything will settle down. Always does after Martez uses us as his political pawns.”

Sophay pulled her mo-com out of her bag and played the message from Pete. She’d wanted to talk with him earlier about the REP’s latest bans, but had stopped herself from contacting him. He needed the extra sleep after working long hours for almost an entire month.

She rose from her chair and hurried down the aisle to make her call in private in the foyer. She was reaching for the swing doors when they swung open toward her.

The barrel of a laser gun protruded through the open doorway.

It advanced on her. Forced her back into the church.

A wall of navy-blue uniforms stormed past her into God’s house. The officers tramped across the wooden floor. People shouted, screamed and ran in all directions.

Too surprised to move, Sophay looked from the barrel of the laser gun to the security officer’s sarcastic smile. She couldn’t see his eyes, hidden behind the dark visor. Suddenly, he swung the barrel of the gun upward. His large, black-gloved hand grabbed the mo-com from her. It dropped to the floor and he ground it under his boot.

He grabbed her by the shoulder, turned her and shoved her back into the church. She nearly fell, regained her balance and hurried to Jamieson’s side.

Faith was screaming. Sophay turned to see the young woman’s brother being beaten by an over-zealous security officer.

The *zaamp* of a laser gun. The large stain glass window shattered. Coloured glass fragments dropped to the floor. The security officers' boots ground the glass fragments underfoot as Sophay was shepherded with the others into a tight group.

She looked round, but could not see Pastor Bill. The side fire exit door stood open. The sun was dazzling outside. A warm, dry breeze blew into the church. One of their number made a run for freedom. A laser gun sounded and the man staggered and fell to lay half in and half out of the church.

\* \* \*

Pete sat up straighter. His mo-com screen showed the panic steadily building on his friend's face. Blue eyes sparkled with alarm. A breeze blew the thick white hair off the pastor's forehead.

"Bill?"

"I'm at Bright Light Church. A prayer group –"

"A prayer group meeting? Are you mad?"

"I didn't think they'd be on to us so soon."

"Why are you whispering?"

"They're here, Pete. Oh, my . . . oh, no, no, no! Got to get back inside. Must stop them. They're killing people."

Pete was instantly on his feet. He turned up the volume on his mo-com. Muffled voices and the distinct *zaamp* of a laser gun, the sort Martez's army of thugs had used all too freely in past months, filled his personal space.

"Bill! Talk to me!"

He guessed from the heavy breathing, the footfall pounding the ground and the blurred images on the screen, that the pastor was running fast with his mo-com in hand.

"I've got to talk to them. I never thought it would be like this. You were right about Martez. Oh, God, forgive me. What do they think they're doing?"

"Don't go in, Bill! I'll be there as fast as I can!"

Pete ran to the door. The sound of loud laser fire bounced off the walls and stopped him in his tracks. The pastor let out a guttural sound. The screen captured a downward movement and a heavy thud when he hit the ground.

Shock kept a momentary lock on Pete's vocal cords. He stared at the screen in disbelief.

A moment later, sudden, violent movement erupted on the screen before it settled on the pastor's face.

"Couldn't save her, Pete. . . tried . . . couldn't save her. . . couldn't save them."

"Bill! What do you mean? Sophay's there? She's not supposed to be there!"

He ran to the window. His gaze settled on Personal Space Building 4054.

Turning, he looked at the portrait of his fiancée hanging on the wall. Gentle hazel eyes looked back at him. Her lips were curved in a soft smile. The shoulder-length, brunette hair was mussed by a gentle breeze.

Pete looked at the screen of his mo-com. A grimace contorted the pastor's face as he swung the screen away to give Pete an angled, upward view of the foyer of Bright Light Church.

Pete stared relentlessly at the small screen, absorbing every detail. The rough hewn wooden cross on the back wall bearing a replica of the crucified Jesus Christ. The smooth white, freshly painted ceiling. The vase of flowers on a dark wooden table filled with colourful zee-tops, fifty petals a flower. The flower that flourished during Re-Earth's springtime.

Sophay's favourite bloom. The bloom she planned for her wedding day posy. He had met her in a tramping group, walking the Boa Mountains in springtime, the mountains coloured with differing shades of pink, red, orange and yellow zee-tops. Vivid memories of that carefree day filled his thoughts as he listened to the horror playing itself out at Bright Light Church.

"Please, God, let me see she's all right," he pleaded, already in the elevator that was swiftly descending to street level.

There was no movement on the screen. Sounds percolated out of the mo-com. Screams of horror and terror. Loud voices in dispute. A woman sobbing. The occasional unfathomable murmur from the pastor. Objects impacted against walls and the floor in God's house, beyond the foyer. The dreaded sound of laser fire.

"Bill! Talk to me! Where's Sophay?"

No reply.

Pete wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his loose-fitting top. His eyes riveted on the screen, he ignored the suspicious glances from other elevator occupants and was oblivious to the wide elevator door sweeping upwards. The

crowd billowed out, pushing him through the cool, refreshing air of the ground floor, out of the building and into the hot, dry atmosphere.

Pete drew in an impatient breath. The heat caught at the back of his throat. Standing in the middle of the sidewalk, he looked round, bewildered by his surroundings until familiar landmarks orientated him. A low hum came from nearby as a tor-bike moved closer.

His eyes dropped to the screen. No movement. No sound.

A young woman linked her arm with his and pulled him along.

“You must keep moving.”

He barely heard the whisper. He could not take his eyes off the screen. A short distance later, the stranger released his arm.

He looked up from the mo-com. The woman’s lithe form was already disappearing into the crowd ahead, but not before he caught sight of the small gold cross among an assortment of charms hanging from her bracelet.

Pete walked towards the public transport terminal as fast as the crowd would let him. His eyes frequently returned to the screen.

Finally, movement, but too close to the screen for Pete to identify who passed by. More legs. Legs of adults and a child.

His beloved Sophay appeared. Her oval face contorted with grief as a security officer manhandled her past the dying pastor.

“Let me help him, please! He’s still alive!” Her hand reached for the pastor.

“Sophay!”

“Pete? Is that you? Where are you?” Out of view, she sounded confused and dazed.

A security officer bent low to grin at the screen. The grin was followed by a dusty boot heel.

### Chapter Three

Sophay Winters stood outside the front of Bright Light Church with the other survivors of the raid. Standing at one end of a shoulder-to-shoulder line, her back was planted against the stone wall of the church.

She counted five security officers with laser guns ready to shoot. Their dark uniforms seemed out of place in the bright atmosphere and among the vivid colours that was springtime on Re-Earth. To her right, bordered by an extensive lawn, was a wooded area, planted by the first Bright Light congregation. To her left, the transport parking area.

There was no sign of the man she loved. She had thought she'd heard Pete calling to her. Tears spilled from her eyes. In a desperate moment of need fear must have conjured him close.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and looked across the road to where the mob lingered in the shadow of a looming personal space building. Some in the crowd were pointing. Several were using their mo-coms to record the event. Many were finding humour in the unexpected entertainment. Loud taunts rose from the brooding crowd.

Baldwin addressed the officer standing directly in front of him.

"You've kept us here long enough. Release us immediately! I know my rights."

The leaner officer moved closer to Baldwin who instinctively stepped backward only to have his retreat blocked by the stone wall behind him.

"Is the Christian speaking to me?"

The officer poked a tanned chin nearer Baldwin's and inspected him through the dark visor.

"A Christian breaks the law and tells me what to do. I don't think so."

A blur of black headed straight for Baldwin's mouth. On impact, his head slammed backward against the church wall.

The mob, swelling in numbers, cheered and yelled for more of the same. The officer flexed and shook his gloved hand. Waving to the crowd, he stepped back to his former position. He laughed at Baldwin who was now on his knees, one hand covering a bloodied mouth, the other his sore head.

Next to her, Sophay heard Jamieson recite a verse from Psalms under her breath.

"Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men; preserve me from violent men, who plan evil things in their hearts . . ."

She added to the woman's invocation. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

In response the widow grabbed hold of her hand and squeezed it hard.

Three of their number lay dead or dying inside the church. Sophay bent forward to see who remained. Emily Hollender, a young language teacher at Carmel Central City School. Grant and Ruth Drubermore, an architect and shop owner. Baldwin was still on his knees, but not praying. Shy Faith Morgan stood unblinking, her most recent accessory the blood of her dead brother, courtesy of the officer who had beaten him to death.

Annette Carson turned to cry into her husband's chest. Richard placed an arm round her shoulders. His other arm already hugged their scared seven-year-old son to his side. At the far end was Roo Gylespie, ex-large construction equipment driver.

A low droning filled the air and steadily increased in volume. The security officers mumbled among themselves and looked toward the road. A large cargo transport appeared, escorted by a flock of wing-cams, airborne units that relayed events live back to Re-Earth Media headquarters and probably to the REP himself. The flock hovered above the cab of the transport like of a swarm of pesky flies.

The cargo transport slowed and with indicator flashing, entered the church grounds, followed by a two-person mini-T. The transport's brakes squealed as it

came to a halt in the parking area. Its length stretched across a number of parking spaces. The compact mini-T parked close by.

A quiet expectancy hung over the crowd while the engine of the transport continued its smooth idling. Nothing happened for a time and then the cab door swung open. A tall man dressed in a navy blue uniform with gold epaulets jumped to the ground. He strode toward the line of detainees in front of the church.

He acknowledged the security officers with several curt nods of the head and strode straight to Roo Gylespie at the other end of the line. One of the security officers involved in the church raid fell into step behind him. The tall man, the fine gold tassels on his epaulets swinging, walked down the line, studying each prisoner in turn. A wing-cam hovered close by and paused when he paused as if to capture each victim's portrait electronically.

Sophay looked toward the parking area and noticed a long-faced man of below average height clamber out of the mini-T. Dressed in civilian clothing, his thin, straggly brown hair fell past his shoulders and gave him an unkempt appearance as did the mismatched jeans and baggy, chequered top. He stood by the mini-T and spoke into a mouthpiece of a headset as if to record his observations. He did not join the tall man who returned to stand in front of Gylespie. Instead, he stood alone a short distance off, looking uneasy and out of place, all the while speaking into the mouth piece.

The tall man aimed a small, black, rectangular device at Gylespie and watched it as if waiting for a reading of some kind.

“Not him.”

The tall man seemed disappointed. The security officer following him shoved Gylespie out of the line.

“Go home, hypocrite!”

The tall man worked his way down the line, pointing the device at each captive in turn.

“Not her.”

“You, too, gal, get lost!”

When Faith Morgan failed to move, her face a blank, Sophay saw Gylespie backtrack, grab the young woman by the hand and drag her away with him.

The device, likewise, rejected Baldwin who went to join Gylespie and Faith in the shade of a large, spreading tree near the corner of the church. They stood in a

tight group, looking bewildered by their good fortune, yet concerned for the others, while the tall man continued down the line.

Sophay heard Jamieson break into quiet prayer. Immediately, the strange device in the tall man's hand emitted a high pitched electronic shriek. Excited, he looked up and down the line, his eyes wild.

“One of 'em's praying! One of 'em's praying!”

In a moment of confusion, the officers looked up and down the line, their guns swaying from side to side in their attempt to locate their target.

“Where?”

“Which one?”

“Who is it?”

The tall man shook his head.

“Couldn't get a fix. They've stopped now. But we'll get 'em. They can't escape.” He held the small device high in the air in a triumphant gesture. “Not while I've got this!”

“What is it?” someone yelled from across the road.

The tall man laughed and turned to the crowd. “Something that will eliminate the Christian threat once and for all! Re-Earth for Re-Earthers!”

“Kill the Christians – give us more space – more resources!” the crowd chanted.

Suddenly feeling faint, Sophay leaned back against the church. The malice of the non-Christians was almost overpowering. In their enmity they didn't see Christians as being human anymore and now there was a device to single out those who prayed.

Sophay saw the civilian with the recording headset shove his hands into his pockets. With hunched shoulders, he looked nervously at the crowd that was inching its way back across the road and toward the church.

She looked up at the sky. A cloud drifted overhead to mar the vivid blue. The shadow it cast passed over the church and grounds. She wanted to pray. Needed to pray. But was too scared to do so. Scared of the inhuman treatment that might come her way.

The tall man stepped in front of Grant Drubermore and pointed the device at him. Suddenly, it let out a shriek. The man waggled his finger at Grant and let

loose a string of expletives. In his growing excitement he seemed barely able to remain on one spot.

“He’s one! Get him! Don’t let him get away!”

Grant Drubermore looked angry and perplexed.

“One what? This is absurd! What is that thing? Tell me!”

Offering him no answer, the security officer grabbed him by the arm. His wife would not let go of his hand. A second officer moved forward to separate the pair.

“No! Wait!”

The tall man held up a staying hand and the second officer stopped in his tracks. Not looking up from the device, the tall man pointed it at Ruth Drubermore.

“She’s one too! Let her go with him. I can’t believe it! Two at once. This thing works like the REP said it would.”

The crowd chanted, “Eliminate the Christian threat!”

The tall man walked past the Drubermores, ignoring Grant’s demands for answers. The security officer used his weapon to motion the Drubermores in the direction of an armed comrade who stood a short distance away. When they started walking in that direction, the device emitted another ear-piercing shriek.

The tall man, studying the device intently, swung hard round and pointed it at the Drubermores’ backs.

“He’s praying . . . No! Both are praying! Stop ’em! They’re at their most dangerous when they’re praying! Who knows what they’re sending against us. Stop ’em. Quick!”

Sophay felt her heart racing. Jamieson’s grip on her hand tightened. The tension in the air was palpable.

The officer placed his gun to Ruth’s head, his hands were trembling.

“End it now or I’ll shoot you both dead!”

The shrieking suddenly stopped. The device lay quiet in the tall man’s hand. Sophay looked from him to each officer in turn, surprised at how visibly shaken they were by ordinary people praying to a loving God. Nothing seemed real. She felt as if she were in an imaginary game of someone else’s contrivance and found it difficult to believe a part of her religious practice was the cause of such consternation.

The tall man, having regained his composure, stepped in front of Emily Hollender. The device rejected the school teacher and she joined the subdued group at the corner of the church. Annette and Richard Carson were also rejected.

Their son was not so fortunate. The device, having singled him out, he was torn from his parents' grasps.

"Tyrel!"

The boy squirmed to free himself of the officer's hold, but could not escape.

Annette Carson hit the officer with her fists to free her son. Sophay protested along with Jamieson and the Carsons.

"He's just a boy! Let him be!"

Sophay joined the others in mobbing the officer in an effort to secure the child's freedom. Two other officers ran to join the frenzy. Out of the corner of her eye, Sophay saw the burly Gylespie move out of the shadows to come to their aid, but Baldwin grabbed him by the shoulder and held him back.

"You've got five kids of your own to think about!"

"Eliminate the Christine threat!" the crowd chanted.

"Kill the little cockroach!" someone yelled.

Sophay kicked whichever officer came within range. Richard took several swings at the officers. Most missed their targets. Finally, the butt of a gun made contact with the side of his head and subdued him. Annette's elbow hit Sophay in the eye by accident and she staggered backward to lean against the stone wall to nurse the injury.

The crowd, now halfway across the road and doubled in size, cheered the officers on. Three youths ran forward of the crowd and threw stones at the bedraggled group huddled together in the shade of the tree.

Sophay peered at them with her good eye. The other, half-closed, was bruised and swelling fast.

"Go! Save yourselves! Go!"

But the four remained where they were as if not wanting to leave their friends.

A laser gun fired into the air and the vocal threat of being shot at close range brought an uneasy ending to the fracas.

Sophay helped Jamieson to her feet. Annette, distraught at being separated from her son, could barely stand on her own. Richard supported her as best he

could. Blood flowed from the wound on the side of his head. Still, they would not move away.

“Tyrel!”

Annette stretched her hands out in a vain attempt to embrace her only child who now stood crying, next to the Drubermores. Richard attempted to reassure his wife, but she would not be comforted.

The device having rejected the parents, Sophay noted the tall man no longer considered them a threat. His attitude toward them was one of disdain. Order having been established, he turned his back on them and moved to stand in front of her and Jamieson. He pointed the device at them in quick succession. It shrieked once, twice.

“These two as well. They go.”

He sounded bored with the proceedings as if the novelty of his new toy had worn off. He slipped the device into a pocket and walked back to the cargo transport.

Sophay and Jamieson were herded toward the other selecteds. At the rear of the group, Sophay watched, dismayed, as the security officers formed a tight circle around them. They were forced toward the rear of the cargo transport.

Richard staggered forward with his wife.

“Someone! Please! Look after Tyrel!”

Upon hearing his father, Tyrel broke free of Ruth’s care. Sophay saw an officer train his sight on the boy. She stepped forward to waylay the child. Jamieson was closer and caught hold of him before Sophay could reach him. The boy called to his mother and father. His cries further agitated his parents.

“I’ll look after him,” the widow called to the Carsons. “I’ll do whatever needs to be done. I give you my word.”

No longer able to support his wife, Richard let her sink to the ground.

“Tyrel, do what Jamieson tells you, there’s a good boy.”

His voice broke. He could no longer hold back the tears.

“Tyrel! We love you, son. We love you!” his mother called, on her knees, her hands clasped tightly together. “God bless you, Jamieson! We’ll pray for you all!”

The officer at the rear of the group laughed at her.

“Pray all you want, you hypocrite. Your prayers are worthless. Coming from you they mean nothing. Nothing! If they did, we wouldn’t be leaving you behind.”

“Load ’em up, quick! We’ve plenty more to expose before sundown.”

The order given, the tall man climbed into the cab and slammed the door shut.

Instead of returning to his mini-T, the civilian with the headset jogged to a safe distance behind the cargo transport to continue his recording.

The back doors of the cargo transport stood wide open. Sophay, as dazed by what was happening as were the others, gave no resistance and stood quietly by while an officer shouted orders.

As instructed, those with mo-coms discarded them into a container located on the ground nearby. Sophay watched the selecteds ahead of her climb the metal rungs and enter the hold. Grant Drubermore was first. Once in the empty hold, he encouraged his wife up the rungs, taking hold of her arm to assist her inside. When Tyrel was within reach, Grant used both hands to lift the boy into the compartment. Jamieson would not be rushed by the officers and took her time getting into the hold.

Sophay stepped forward and started climbing the rungs. Richard Carson’s voice drifted to her.

“Tell us where you’re taking them. What’s going to happen to my son.”

She listened for an answer. None came on the breeze.

Once inside the hold, Sophay stood looking at Bright Light Church.

Exuberant youths were throwing home-made incendiary bombs, nicknamed ‘Molotov cocktails’ after those used centuries prior on Old Earth, through the church windows. Explosions and flames lit up the interior of the church. She noticed the rejecteds no longer stood in the shade of the tree.

Gylespie was running from a pursuing mob. Baldwin and the school teacher were nowhere to be seen. A figure was walking in a trance-like state towards the burning church.

“Faith!”

The name slipped from Sophay’s lips as the young woman entered the blazing building, the flames enveloping her.

The hold doors slammed shut, denying Sophay further viewing of the chaotic scene. As the metallic echo reverberated in her ears, she remembered the pastor on the floor in the foyer.

“My name is Adrow Hurfle. I have been appointed by Brunar Martez, current REP of New-State, an outlying space colony of America States United, to keep a record of the elimination of the Christian threat Martez’s political party has instigated. I am an atheist and do not hold sympathy of any kind with Christian theology.

“My duty is to record for posterity the happenings as I observe them. Observation does not include communication with the targeted minority. There is a fear I may become contaminated and, in my best interests, the REP stresses that I remain always vigilant to their sly ways and never discuss my involvement with them. The REP has stated my report must not contradict his methodology in this matter or question his belief that his campaign against the religious minority is for the future benefit of all Re-Earthers –”

Hurfle pushed the rewind button on the slim-line recording stick and deleted the last sentence of an assigned task that made him feel extremely uncomfortable. He felt like a voyeuristic leech satiated on the horrors experienced by others for what was to become a historical account in the annuals of time.

Sitting in the mini-T, he threw the recording stick on the seat next to him. He was disgusted by his fear of the REP which had him accepting the assignment without question.

He flipped open his mo-com and pushed a key. Sweat was building on his upper lip. Today, he did not like himself. Today, he had become what he thought he never would: a Martez boy.

“Beet! How are you, buddy?”

“Hurf! So you’re going through with it then?”

Hurfle sagged behind the wheel. An accusatory tone tinged his friend’s voice and was not what he needed to hear.

“I’ve no choice. You know that, Beet. If not me, Martez would get someone else – perhaps *you*. Had you thought of that?” Frustration and self-loathing goaded his anger free from all restraint. “How would you like that? Eh, Beet? Shall I die for a bunch of crazies who hangs on to past myths so you can take my place? Eh? How would you like to do what I’m doing now?”

A long silence followed. A silence so long Hurfle thought he might have driven his best buddy off the line.

“Beet?”

“Yeah, Hurf, I hear, and I wouldn’t want to be in your position, I admit that.”

“To see them lined up like criminals. Men, women and a child. Outside Bright Light Church. Beet, they took a little boy.” He shivered. “I don’t know how I’m going to get through this. I’m to record what happens to them. *I don’t want to know!* I want to remain ignorant of the outcome. I just want to benefit from them not being here, like everyone else. Of course I want more space. Who doesn’t? But how can I possibly enjoy whatever resources come my way as a result, knowing what I know? You think Big M has a cushy ending for them? He certainly didn’t stuff them into a cargo transport to take them on a holiday. How can I possibly warp the truth when my heart and mind conflict violently against what Martez expects me to report?”

“You will, ’cause you have to. And the truth can vary. Depends on what perspective you choose to take. There’s Big M’s perspective. There’s the Christian’s. And then there’s Adrow Hurfle’s. You’ll tell your truth ’cause you have to. That’s why I envy you, Hurf. You’re that kind of guy –”

Hurfle slammed a fist against the steering wheel.

“My truth is the last thing Big M wants anyone to know.”

“All the more reason why you must ensure the truth survives. Someone has to tell what really happens. You’re that person. Call it destiny. Call it coincidence. Call it whatever you want. You’re the one chosen to be the eyes and ears, the voice for those people. Their story needs to be told.”

Hurfle shook his head. “I can’t, Beet! The last thing I want is to be labelled a Christian sympathizer. The REP will have me killed. I’ll have an accident or I’ll disappear as so many others have disappeared – down a Dredden sand hole, no doubt.”

“He doesn’t have to know what you’re doing.” The voice was coaxing. “Keep a record of your observations to appease him – his perspective. And keep one – your truth – to salve your conscience.”

Another long silence extended between them. After much consideration, Hurfle felt calmer.

“I see your point, Beet. That’s the way to do it. Keep two records.”

“You’re an excellent historian, Hurf. Re-Earth University is lucky to have you. Did you know Martez attended REU?”

“I didn’t.”

“I bet his past is dark and torrid. Just up your street, Hurf. No one can do this better than you. Get the facts. Record everything you can. The future is going to need to know, want to know. It has to know. If there is a God, He couldn't have chosen a better person for the job.”

## Chapter Four

*Greetings friends.*

*We at Re-Earth Media work hard to bring you informed news, especially on the Christian threat.*

*Some of you have already seen our protection force using a new device. Don't be alarmed. Don't be afraid. The device is as anti-Christian as you and I. It sniffs them out – that herd of self-indulgent, lazy, resource wasting Christians who live off the efforts of others. If you are anti-Christian, you have nothing to fear.*

*The Christian threat will be eliminated.*

\* \* \*

The cargo transport lurched forward out of the Bright Light transport parking area. Sophay was flung hard against the doors. She stood with her cheek against the panel, warm from exposure to the sun when open. Suddenly, there were bangs on the side of the hold, loud cheering and taunts as they passed through the frenzied crowd.

Sophay edged herself sideways until she came to the corner of the hold. Turning, she wedged herself into the corner, one palm flat against the door, the other against the wall. She blinked hard to encourage her eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness. Looking the length of the compartment, she saw a weak, artificial light emanating from the high ceiling at the far end. Sunlight filtered through long, narrow air vents located about three-quarters of the way up the sides of the hold.

She stepped farther into the hold, her palms sliding along the smooth wall, more for the feeling of security than for balance. With every sidestep her sneakers raked at the generous layer of wood chips that covered the floor.

There was nowhere to sit except on the floor and she sat as the others did, with her back against the wall. The Drubermores chose to isolate themselves in a far corner. Huddled close, they talked quietly, under the artificial light. Sophay sat near Jamieson, with Tyrel sitting between them.

Sophay felt round her bruised eye and overcome by a sudden weariness, leaned her head back against the side of the hold. Her thoughts drifted to Pete and she conjured his image in her mind's eye. The intense dark eyes. The long scar on his high forehead, the result of an abseiling accident in the Boa Mountains. The wavy brown hair.

She pushed on the light to her watch and noted the time. Pete would be knocking on the door of her personal space a short time from now. When he got no reply, he would pound out her key code, enter her space and head straight for the utilities bench. But there would be no note waiting for him, because of her haste to meet Jamieson. He would have no idea where she was or what had happened to her.

Her throat muscles constricted and tears pooled in her eyes. She may never set eyes on Carmel City or Pete again.

A hand patted her arm and in the dim light she saw Jamieson's smile of reassurance.

"Pete will find us. Keep your spirits up. Think of your wedding day."

Tyrel started crying for his parents. Jamieson turned her attention to the boy and soon had him smiling. She looked at Sophay.

"It's my fault you're here. It was my idea to go to the prayer meeting."

Sophay slid closer to the pair.

"I thought we'd be safe."

"So did I."

"I didn't think Martez would act as quickly as he has to enforce the bans."

"He never has in the past."

"He's growing more sure of himself."

Sophay trembled at remembering the expressions of malice among the crowd and the cold, brutal actions of the security personnel. Bans on Christians had become a common occurrence. No one questioned them anymore. Before, public

outrage at the blatant abuse of their rights would have stopped the REP. But now, even the general populace was siding with the REP in his desire to oust Christians from the planet. Non-Christians were fearful that their basic needs would not be met. Fear was spurring them on as was the REP's promises of a better life on a Re-Earth where there were no Christians.

"No one calls for justice, nor does any plead for truth. They trust in empty words and speak lies; they conceive evil and bring forth iniquity," Sophay murmured.

"Did you hear the crowd?"

"They wanted us dead."

Jamieson looked scared. She held the distracted boy closer. "We've been too complacent. I never thought this could happen."

Ah! But Pete had known. Sophay hugged her legs to her chest. Hate campaign. That was what Pete had called the REP's strategy against them over the years. Sophay couldn't think why the REP would target them. The Bright Light congregation had always done what it could to help the Carmel Basin community, to alleviate the poverty and suffering. She was finding it difficult to believe the REP wished them harm. The storming of the church, their arrest, seemed like a terrible mistake.

"What's going to happen to us?"

Sophay shook her head. She had no idea.

"I hope the others got away safely."

Images of the rejecteds and the burning church flittered through Sophay's mind. Never before had she realised just how fragile her rights as a Re-Earther were. Bright Light Church, a solid, tangible, immovable object of their beliefs, was being razed to the ground by a raging fire. The Bible had become an outlawed text with fewer eyes daring to scan the sacred work. Worship and prayer had become life-threatening activities. Overnight, their right to practice their faith had been taken from them.

But it wasn't usual for those who broke the law to be herded into a cargo transport. Surely they would be taken to a holding place, go before the Law Judgement Panel and be set free with a fine or a warning.

"We're a prayer group, are we not?" Grant Drubermore called from the other end of the hold.

“What’s left of us, yes,” Jamieson replied.

“Then may I suggest we get to it and pray? Pray like we’ve never prayed before. Let’s show them the true power of the Lord. For we will overcome! And this, too, shall pass!”

Jamieson laughed. “I like your spirit, Drubermore. Yes, indeed.” She rubbed her hands together. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I always feel better after a good prayer.”

The Drubermores bowed their heads. Sophay followed suit, conscious of Tyrel sitting up straighter and doing likewise.

Sophay closed her eyes, took a deep breath and felt herself relaxing. Grant began to lead them in prayer. She was just beginning to feel the presence of God among them when a loud, continuous electronic shriek filled the compartment.

Sophay moaned at the pain and shoved a finger into each ear. She looked round and saw the others were faring no better. Tyrel, crying, had slumped into a foetal position on the floor. Like Jamieson and Ruth, he had stuck a finger in each ear. Jamieson was shouting for the noise to stop. Ruth was silent, her face a portrait of agony.

Grimacing, Grant Drubermore got to his feet, his fingers plugging his ears. He looked upward at the hold’s ceiling, as if searching for the source of the din.

Finally, he came to stand under what looked like a metal cage that protected a black object. He exposed an ear to the deafening sound to slip off a shoe. The noise seemed to affect his balance. He nearly toppled over. Steadying himself, he jumped toward the roof of the hold with his footwear extended high above his head. After several attempts he was unable to dislodge the cage and fell backwards onto the floor, his face contorting with pain.

As suddenly as the noise started it stopped.

Beyond the ringing in her ears, Sophay heard the distinctive voice of the tall man.

“There will be no praying. Not now. Never again. There will be no communicating with the enemy. Stop or the volume will be increased. You will learn the new regime.”

“They knew we were praying.” Ruth looked desperate. “How did they know? How?”

Grant massaged his ears. “It’s that dreadful device.”

“Which means he must have it trained on us.”

Sophay helped Tyrel sit up. He was crying and upset. He turned to Jamieson and she took him in her arms. Sophay ran a hand over the boy’s hair to help comfort him.

“He views our God as his enemy. Did you hear him?” Jamieson looked visibly shaken by the thought.

Grant rested his forearms on his drawn up knees. “I’ve never heard or read of such a device. It’s a powerful one if it can pick us up praying in here.”

“Powerful? In what way do you mean?”

Troubled, he looked at Sophay. “The cab is a separate unit to the cargo hold. I’d say this was once a refrigeration unit they’ve converted into a prisoner transport.” His knuckles rapped at the wall behind him. “Thick and insulated.” He looked upward. “The air vents are new, though, and crudely done.”

“Didn’t they use these transports to haul supplies across the Dredden Desert to the scientific outposts by the Gratner Ocean?”

“That’s right. They stopped when the transports proved too expensive to run and the Dredden too dangerous to negotiate. What might be solid roads one day all of a sudden became pocked with those dreaded sand holes the next. Too many transports and drivers were lost. Now supplies are flown to the outposts and parachuted in.”

“The only selection device I saw is in that tall man’s possession.”

“It must have a mighty powerful sensor to react to us praying in here. The problem is we have no idea what its range might be.”

“In other words, how far do we have to get away from the device before we can pray without being caught.”

Ruth brushed the unruly hair from her husband’s temple. “There could be one in here with us.”

Grant caught his wife’s hand and kissed it. “Somehow I don’t think so. I’m sure there’s a small speaker behind the metal cage up there, not one of those devices.”

The cargo transport came to a stop.

Sophay stared at the doors. The sound of the idling engine filled her ears for what seemed an age. Terrifying sounds, similar to those she had heard earlier at Bright Light Church, seeped into the hold. Sounds of laser fire. People screaming

and sobbing, and every so often an electronic shriek. Finally, the hold filled with the smell of smoke. Not long after, voices approached the cargo transport. Metal rubbed against metal and the doors opened wide.

Sophay held up a hand against the sudden in-pouring of dazzling sunlight as half-a-dozen bewildered adults clambered into the hold.

More and more adults filled the compartment as the afternoon wore on, so many, Sophay lost count. The long narrow air vents proved ineffective and the atmosphere within the hold soon became fetid.

She was grateful Grant Drubermore took it upon himself to warn each new group of the ramifications of praying. On two occasions, his warning not heeded, they suffered exposure to the painful din.

Sophay, with Jamieson's help, questioned each new group of arrivals, hoping to gain vital information or to at least gauge where they were within the Carmel Basin.

"They wouldn't tell us where we're going or what's to become of us," a woman said.

"When my uncle prayed the device set off an alarm," a young man said, in between chewing on his fingernails. "He dropped to his knees and when he wouldn't end his praying they shot him in the head. That's when the alarm stopped."

A heavy silence filled the compartment. Some of the selecteds crossed themselves. Others huddled closer to their friends or relatives. A few wept. Sophay covered her face with her hands when she remembered the gun being held to Ruth Drubermore's head outside Bright Light Church. She had wanted to believe it a bluff to stop the pair from praying.

But this time Martez was not bluffing. There had been no mistake. Christians had been blamed for so much over the years. The negative opinions against Christians, once scoffed at, were now accepted without reserve. Anti-Christians believed the lies because they wanted to believe them. Because it benefited them to believe them.

Sophay uncovered her face and looked round the hold at the scared, deflated people who were supposed to be the Christian threat.

"But I wasn't praying and the device singled me out," an elderly man said, sounding anxious.

Others raised their voices in agreement.

“So, what is it then?” Sophay spoke loud enough so the people at the far end of the hold would hear her. “What is it about us, apart from our prayers?”

She was met with silence and blank faces.

## Chapter Five

Brunar Martez ran the comb through the Dober's short black fur. Dogs were a luxury only the superrich on Re-Earth could afford; a luxury he often dreamed of obtaining when growing up in the slum on the outskirts of the mostly forgotten southern town of Keel.

He patted the symbol of his success on the head. "Go, Tarrin."

The dog, panting lazily, looked up at him, dark eyes shining. He tilted his head to one side and whined.

"Ah! you do like your pampering, boy. No more, I say. No more. Now go!"

Martez shooed the reluctant dog away with his hands. It gaited with fluid grace to the thick green mat in front of an open doorway. Beyond stretched row upon row of grapevines and farther still, looking south, a magnificent view of the steeper, uncultivated, uninhabitable slopes of the Boa Mountain Range, colourful now the zee-tops were in bloom. In the hazy distance were the jagged pinnacles Truby Day and Truby Night, standing side by side, marking the entrance to the vast basin that contained Carmel City.

Martez looked to his left, out the large windows. Beyond the Boa Mountains, the black sands of the Dredden Desert shimmered under the scorching sun to the shores of the distant green-black Gratner Ocean. The sun's heat had already generated a layer of gas that hung over the toxic ocean and which was now starting to creep ashore.

Martez breathed deeply, happiness surging through him. Vergluga Estate, a recent acquisition, was where he most enjoyed recuperating from the stresses of

living and working in the overcrowded Carmel City. If it were not for the strict sanitary and civil regulations, he knew Carmel would deteriorate into another Keel slum overnight. He huffed to himself at remembering the stench of the place. Not even the slum of Keel, the town that serviced Nrocks Prison and the mines, packed them in as did Carmel.

He looked out the windows to his right where the man-made structures of Carmel spilled down the Elman Heights into the Basin. His eyes narrowed with cynicism as he thought of the millions of people who were interacting with each other. Basic human nature did not change. Dress it up, civilize it, channel it through a religious filter, it remained the same. Greed, pride, power lust and the demand for physical pleasure were rampant in Carmel. Re-Earthers were easily controlled through their vices, their emotions, their fears, their affections, and guided simply by playing with their ignorance.

He swore under his breath. Except the Christians. Their belief system, their lifestyle had them looking at the world in a different light. His dislike for them rose in him like bile. He had never understood them –

“So, it’s started.”

Brunar Martez turned to the man sitting casually in a luxurious easy chair.

“It has. Carmel City is at last coming partway to solving the problem of over population. My predecessor McVyre was far too late in instigating his soft strategy to put a stop on migrants from Old Earth. His vision failed dismally. Mine will not. The problem requires drastic action.” He laughed. “And there was nothing drastic about McVyre, may he rest comfortably in the sand hole I personally chose for him.”

Martez walked to an easy chair, his body as lean as the Dober’s, his movements as agile. He sank into the plump red cushions and placed the dog comb on the low table close at hand.

“More wine?”

When his visitor refused, Martez gave the man a second glance before reaching for the bottle. One of the best whites available from the vineyard estates dotted throughout the Boa Mountains splashed into his glass. Contented, he returned the bottle to the table and leaned back in his plush seat, glass in hand. He took a sip and let the wine linger in his mouth before swallowing.

“The device works as it should, a credit to your company – to your ingenuity.” Martez raised his glass to salute the man. He sipped the wine and nodded at the wall screen.

“Here, take a look for yourself. One of this afternoon’s first batches to be exposed.”

He pressed a key on the keypad embedded in the low table. Images of uniformed men storming a church appeared on a wall screen in the shadows at the far end of the room.

A frown deepened on the man’s brow.

“Where is this?”

“Bright Light Church.”

“Bright Light Church?”

Martez looked at the older man. “You know of it?”

Daniel Ford pulled a face. “No reason why I should.”

Martez watched the businessman closely for a moment before turning his attention back to the screen.

“Just look at the size of that grass area alone. The Christians own large areas of land. Their bizarre ideas about the importance of nature and our relationship with it have them hoarding it. But Old Earth Christian myths have no bearing on survival on Re-Earth. Take this Bright Light Church, for example. A puny, single-storey building on eight dehecs of land. Enough land to build a modest complex for three thousand at least. Construction crews start flattening the wooded area tomorrow.”

Ford nodded. “Makes sense. They can’t be selfish, not in these hard times.”

Martez laughed. “Exactly! All their good intentions of growing trees are fanciful. The results are nothing like those on Old Earth. Here, they are ugly, stunted, distorted representations. The first Re-Earthers brought with them as much of their Old Earth as they could to a barren planet. But Re-Earth is not Old Earth. Nothing but the genetically modified strains will grow successfully. Vegetables, grape vines, the flowers in my current partner’s favourite vase. All genetically modified for this planet.”

“The scientists did get it wrong in the early days.”

“They did, and, as a consequence, we must deal with certain GE plants that have run amok. Yar! How I hate the zee-tops! They spread seeds like the storms in the Dredden spread grains of sand.”

Martez sat up, his attention captured by the images on the wall screen.

“Ah! Here come the cargo transport and Goya with the device. Now you’ll see the selection process itself.”

Each time the device registered to select a Christian, Martez laughed, thoroughly enjoying himself.

“Look at them! They have no idea what’s happening.”

“Who’s the man with the recording headset in the background?”

Martez pushed a key to pause their viewing.

“Adrow Hurfle, a historian from Re-Earth University, who has no idea how to play the games we play, Daniel. Hurfle’s job is to record history as an independent, but as I deem it should be recorded.” Martez laughed. “Didn’t have to buy him either. The security officers merely threatened to kill his pet rat and he bends over backwards to do my bidding.”

An infrequent smile pulled at Ford’s lips. “Pet rat, you say?”

“Well, why not? Why not pamper a stowaway from Old Earth? Rats, cockroaches and man, partners into eternity! A fitting pet for a fool.” He pushed a key. “And now we’ll see the selecteds.”

The faces of the selecteds appeared on the screen one by one.

“There you have them, Daniel, the ‘true Christians’.”

Martez did not care that the silk was gone from his voice or that it sounded his hatred, raw and ugly.

He glanced at Ford and saw the dull, grey eyes narrow almost imperceptibly when confronted with the face of a young woman. Martez shot out a hand and pressed a key to freeze the face on the screen. He loved to taunt the man.

The woman’s confused, haunting eyes stared back at them.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” He watched his guest closely. “What’s her name, do you think?”

No emotion showed on the man’s face. He shrugged.

“Unfortunate she’ll end up with a black eye from the tussle. Such a pity the device registered her as a contaminated.” Martez spoke quietly, still watching his guest. “You know her?”

Ford looked at him. “As you know, REP, I don’t associate with Christians.”

“And that’s why I chose you and your company for my special project.”

Martez locked eyes with the woman.

“Before the device it was hard to tell them apart, wouldn’t you agree? They look so . . . well . . . like the rest of us.” He paused. “Someone in your family announced their contamination, didn’t they?” He eyed Ford. “Your son, wasn’t it? You never told me you had a contaminated as a close relative.”

The man could not take his eyes off the woman.

“I thought it unimportant. We had a falling out over it. I’ve not seen or heard from my son in years.”

Martez put his glass on the table where the intruding late afternoon sunshine found the Casacaria gem on his right middle finger. He noticed the purple, blue and red shards of light emanating from the purple-black jewel entranced the businessman.

He smiled at Ford, a sweet, white smile.

“As you saw on the screen, the device registered when the Christians prayed. Your device successfully registers the power generated by prayer, the power generated by the Christians’ communion with an invisible host.” Martez huffed his disdain. “The power of prayer. A power scientists proved long ago. It’s taken far too long for our joint efforts to come up with a solution to this mental meddling of theirs, Daniel. And we are doing it here on Re-Earth. Something they can’t quite accomplish on Old Earth, even with technology decades more advanced than our own.”

Martez called the Dober to him and stroked its sleek neck. “The thought of these filthy Christians praying about me, harnessing this power to influence *my* destiny, *my* politics, *my* actions, infuriates me. To think, even now, groups of contaminateds are huddling together in secret places, praying for *my* downfall – or worse! – hoping I’ll be lulled into following their barbaric religion, their . . .”

In his agitation he roughed up the dog’s coat. The Dober bounded away and shook himself. Martez reached for his wine glass, gulped down its contents and replenished it.

“But, as you know, Daniel, prayer isn’t the only Christian subterfuge the device detects. It detects something far more sinister. After what I have to say during my public announcement tomorrow, nobody on Re-Earth will allow themselves to become contaminated as are these Christians.”

“What about the Christians the device doesn’t detect? You’re not concerned about them?”

Martez grew impatient. “We discussed this during the design phase. Yar! Why bring it up now?”

“You’re not concerned about a reprisal, a regrouping by those Christians the device does not select?”

Martez gulped down his wine and refilled his glass with a careless hand. The expensive vintage spilled on the low table and pooled on the floor. The curious dog trotted closer to smell the liquid, lapped at it and bounded away.

“As I said those many months ago, Daniel, their power is not strong enough to concern us. Their faith is weak and their weak faith cannot harness the power as can the faith of the ‘true Christians’. And it is their weak faith that will ultimately destroy them. You see if I’m not right. And if this period of adjustment should happen to strengthen their faith, the device will detect them. Either way, their mental meddling has come to an end. Re-Earth will be freed from their God’s interference.”

“So they are to be incarcerated in Nrocks Prison and released once they deny their Faith and accept Re-Earth’s secular mores and morals – their complete integration into Re-Earth society.”

Martez looked from the dog, trotting out the open door, to his visitor, now sitting forward in his chair.

“Would it upset you if I changed my plans?”

He let his tone be sweet, but knew his hard eyes belied more heinous motives. He enjoyed taunting the man.

“We agreed –”

Martez waved a hand to silence his guest. “In truth, the final decision has not been made.”

He saw the man’s eyes were drawn back to the woman.

“Perhaps I’ll have the more stubborn female contaminateds sent to Keel.”

He smiled when the man flinched.

“The Casacaria miners and the Nrocks Prison staff don’t get much female company with Keel being predominantly a male populated town –”

“You wouldn’t.”

Martez raised his eyebrows. “Wouldn’t I? Call it a method of forced conversion.”

Beads of sweat were forming on the man's forehead. Martez let his smile widen.

“Perhaps I'll put the male contaminateds to work in the mines.”

“This is not what we agreed.”

“What we agreed way back then has no relevance to here and now.” Martez sipped his wine. “I thought you despised Christians as much as I.”

“You know what I think of them. But I designed the device on the understanding —”

With no public to charm, Martez dispensed with his politician's veneer altogether and allowed his true nature to shape his features. It was enough to silence his visitor and have him sitting back in his chair.

## Chapter Six

Adrow Hurfle shoved spare clothes and personal items into a bag and walked the eight paces to his small desk in his single-space apartment. He dumped his bag beside the desk, picked up a mug of berrin, slurped on the contents and set the mug down to sort through the articles he had accumulated. Hate speech, hate propaganda, scapegoating, hate media, all labels he now aligned with Brunar Martez and his campaign to oust the Christians from Re-Earth.

He had never considered Martez's position towards Christians before, because he was not a Christian himself and so had not been subjected to a devaluing of his position within Re-Earth society. The REP's campaign against the religious minority had started subtly, but even this was no excuse, Hurfle believed, for his oversight of the way in which the REP had placed damaging comments on the Christians. Sometimes this had been done as a passing joke. Many times it was insinuated that the Christians were less than human. Often the REP separated them as being a people outside of Re-Earth society. Always the arguments presented against the Christians were wholly unbalanced and difficult to discount since full knowledge was not available.

But full knowledge was not what the REP wanted Re-Earthers to possess. Martez had stripped the Christians of a public voice, and there were no longer any Christian politicians, let alone any politician, who would speak openly against him. Re-Earth Media, once a balanced broadcaster, had disintegrated to become hate media, with anti-Christian programmes and news broadcasts being played repeatedly.

Hurfle swore under his breath, disgusted by the world in which he now found himself living, and reached for his mo-com. He needed to talk, to bounce around a few ideas.

“Hurf! I didn’t expect to hear back from you so soon. How’s it going?”

“Not good, Beet. None of it makes any sense. No sense at all.”

“How so?”

“Why separate out ‘true Christians’ from the others and stick them in a cargo transport. For what purpose, Beet? What’s that supposed to say?”

“That Christians aren’t welcome on Re-Earth?”

“Yeah, but Big M could’ve shown the same sentiment in so many other ways. He could’ve put all of ’em on a space transport heading for Old Earth or some other planet –”

Beet laughed. “They’d send them straight back. Who wants thousands of people dumped on their doorstep? Anyway, the REP wouldn’t waste resources to send them some place else.”

“So they’re stuck in the Carmel Basin.”

“Appears so, Hurf. New State is the only liveable land mass on the planet and it’s surrounded by a toxic ocean that’s deadly to humans –”

“As you say, no place for them to go. They can’t migrate away from the troubles.”

“If development was extended outside the Basin –”

“That would impinge on land required to support existing human life.”

“They could go farther south, Hurf.”

“No, they couldn’t. Resource shortages are far worse in the mining lands than in the Basin. Resources in the south couldn’t support the extra thousands.”

Hurf sighed. “You know, Beet, I’ve given hundreds of lectures on persecuted minorities over the years and told my students it’s a thing of the past. I really believed it.”

“Not anymore. Not from what I’m seeing on Re-Earth Media. It’s happening right here and now.”

“I gave students Old Earth as the model. The problem is, Old-Earthers don’t live under the same strained conditions as we do. The fight for survival on Re-Earth tends to smother compassion in many –”

“A state of being encouraged by Brunar Martez.”

Hurfle heard the anger that edged Beet's words.

"Old-Earthers have full bellies, too, Hurf. They've got roofs over their heads and resources guaranteed. Helps foster an equitable and amiable atmosphere that allows higher human qualities to flourish."

"Perhaps a little simplistic, but it all helps."

Hurfle sat in the narrow chair at his desk and slurped on his berrin.

"From what I've seen this afternoon, it's as if Big M wants them to suffer and suffer bad. That device of his must have cost a fortune to manufacture. All that money. From where? To build a better Re-Earth?"

There was silence on the other end. Hurfle gave his friend time to ponder the situation. While he waited, he finished his berrin. He was disappointed in himself for watching the persecution of a minority on his wall screen for so many years and not seeing it for what it was. He was angry at allowing the REP's insidious propaganda to desensitize him to the suffering of others.

"So, persecution not merely for political ends, but for personal gain," his friend said at last. "A better Re-Earth is what he promises, but will it be a better place? And for whom?"

"Ah! Now you're starting to ask the right questions, Beet. By focusing on a minority that has no clout, Big M draws attention away from those groups within Re-Earth society who're prospering from the suffering of others —"

"I understand what you're getting at, Hurf, I really do. But what's he going to do with them?"

Hurfle got to his feet and picked up his bag.

"Another reason why I connected. I'll be gone a few days. Going south. I've been told he's taking them to Nrocks Prison."

Beet let out a long whistle. "If there is a God, all I can say is 'God help 'em!'"

"You've not caught on, Beet.

"No?"

"There won't be space enough for all of them at Nrocks."

"What's your point?"

"Big M's been building up to the big one."

"What do you mean?"

Mo-com in one hand, suitcase in the other, Hurfle walked to the door. Myriad thoughts were running through his mind. One answer would make the day's

happenings understandable, but an answer he'd been unable to accept even though all the elements were there. He hadn't wanted to believe it, but there was no ignoring the facts. Not now.

Big M's campaign against the Christians over the years now came together in his mind. All the anti-Christian messages. Subtle and detrimental. All the innuendoes, the exaggerations. The careful separating out of the religious group from the rest of society. The dehumanizing spiel. The image of a better future without Christians. The sporadic incidents of violence against the minority. Now, outright violence. Big M was pulling the noose tight.

“Genocide, Beet. Genocide.”

Hurfler felt a wave of apprehension. The Christians didn't stand a chance. No one would listen to them now. No matter how loud they screamed.

## Chapter Seven

*Greetings friends.*

*There is no place on Re-Earth for those who do not contribute to our society. You work hard to contribute to our society. Christians contribute to nothing but high unemployment and soaring crime rates. Why? Because they live different lives from us. They think differently. They dress differently. They talk differently. They're not like us. We cannot have a closed gang existing among us, undermining your efforts.*

*We must support our Government as it takes back Re-Earth for Re-Earthers. Christians are not Re-Earthers. Christians are not welcome on Re-Earth. If Christians don't want to be Re-Earthers then they shouldn't be here spreading their contagion.*

*Our most esteemed President promises us that the Christian threat will be eliminated.*

\* \* \*

The cargo transport had not stopped to pick up other selecteds for some time and now seemed to be travelling at speed on a mostly straight road.

“Hey, lady! For the boy!”

Sophay looked into the depths of the hold and saw a small object being passed from hand to hand. When it reached her, she waved her thanks to the man and passed the snack bar to Tyrel.

The boy thanked her shyly and tore open the packet to get at the snack bar inside. As hungry as he was, it didn't last long.

Sophay looked the length of the hold and then at Jamieson.

"Now all we need is for someone to have a mo-com."

"Highly unlikely, since everyone had to part with their mo-coms before getting into the hold."

Sitting cross-legged, Tyrel, giggling, leaned forward to fish under his baggy, oversized shirt and into a back pocket of his jeans. He held out a mo-com to Sophay.

She took it from him, hardly believing her eyes.

Jamieson chuckled. "They must have assumed he didn't have one on him."

"Mummy put it in my pocket when nobody was looking."

"Tyrel, listen carefully." Sophay hid her anxiety as best she could. "Did mummy tell you the eight numbers for the entry code?"

Tyrel giggled. "That's easy." He counted to eight. "Daddy's always telling her she should use a different number."

Smiling, Sophay entered the code. Her body ached to hear Pete's reassuring voice again. The display light seemed too dim. She checked the energy level. The energy cell was all but depleted. There was not enough power to make a call.

She got to her feet and held the mo-com high above her head.

"Has anyone got a piece of wire or something similar? For obvious reasons, I need it to get this working."

The hold became a place of bustling activity and before long an assortment of hairclips and other odds and ends sat on the hold floor in front of her. She pulled out a piece of wire and bent it as Pete had shown her. Soon after, she had the back cover off the mo-com.

Tyrel leaned closer. "What are you doing?"

Too engrossed in her tinkering, she did not look up. "A trick Pete taught me in case of emergencies." She straightened and re-bent the wire and went back to her tinkering. "There's always energy in a mo-com apart from what's in the energy cell. It's a matter of re-routing what's there to where it's needed."

Satisfied with her handiwork, Sophay replaced the cover and re-entered Pete's number. The connecting tone barely sounded before she heard his voice.

"Sophay? Is that you?"

“Pete!”

“Are you all right?”

“For now”

“Where are you?”

“In a cargo transport.” She looked at Grant Drubermore. “A converted refrigerator unit, similar to the ones they used to get cargo across the Dredden Desert to the scientific outposts by the Gratner.”

“Yes! I know what you mean. I’m so glad to hear your voice. I thought . . . I thought you . . . The church was ablaze when I got there. I found the Carsons hiding in the woods. They were too distraught to tell me much. Gylespie, Emily Hollender, Baldwin haven’t answered my calls.”

Sophay remembered the figure walking into the flames. “Faith is dead, Pete, and so is Pastor Bill.”

She named the other victims murdered in the church so Pete might inform their families.

“Tell the Carsons Tyrel is doing fine.”

“Where are you?”

“If only I could tell you.”

Sophay looked up at the air vents. Beyond was the grey-blue sky. The light was fading. The sun dropped fast in the evenings. A few more minutes and there would be no more sunlight.

An idea coming to her, she beckoned to a man of above average height, leaning against the side of the hold. Having spoken to him earlier, she knew his name was Nick.

“Hang on, Pete, just a moment.”

She quickly told Nick her plan and slipped off her shoes. He squatted low and she climbed onto his shoulders and eased herself up into a standing position. While Nick straightened, she walked her hands up the side of the hold to keep her balance. When he was standing at his full height, she stood up on her toes and strained to look out a vent.

“It’s no good, Pete. I don’t recognize anything.”

“Describe what you see.”

She checked the mo-com’s energy level and couldn’t stop the sob from escaping.

“Pete, I used the trick on the mo-com you showed me.”

“Good, Sophay. Good.”

“I don’t have much longer.”

“Look again. What do you see? Tell me what you see.”

“Lots of buildings. Not like the centre of Carmel. Plainer in design. More industrial looking. Hang on a moment, Pete. I’ll get Nick to hoist me up on the other side of the hold. I might see something there.”

Nick and other selecteds helped her down. She crossed the hold. People moved out of her way as best they could in the crowded compartment.

She looked at the mo-com. “We have to hurry, Nick. Hurry!”

She clambered onto his shoulders. He stood up faster than before. She nearly lost her balance, regained it and stood on tip-toes to peer out the vent.

“Pete! I see the Boa Mountains. They’re on the left side of the cargo transport to the way we’re heading. I can’t see many buildings here at all. We’ve been on a fairly straight road for some time.

“You must be on the Boa Open Road, going south, leaving Carmel.”

Sophay spotted two towering shapes, dark against a yellow and grey sky. “Yes! You’re right. We’re approaching Truby Day and Truby Night. It’s getting too dark to see much more. They won’t tell us where they’re taking us, Pete. They won’t let us pray. They’ve got a device –”

“I’ve heard about it. The Carsons told me.”

“We can’t pray, Pete. We can’t talk with God. What do we do?”

Silence.

“Pete?”

With help from the other selecteds, Sophay clambered off Nick’s shoulders. She looked down at the mo-com, silent in her hands, then at Nick.

He placed a hand on her shoulder.

“You’ve done your best, luv. That’s all you can do – and every one of us thanks you for it.”

\* \* \*

After his call with Sophay ended, Pete was about to slip his mo-com back in his jeans pocket when someone grabbed him from behind and pushed him into an alley.

His mo-com flew out of his hands and landed near a sheer stone wall of a building, the base stones three-times his height. He was pushed again and punched by two assailants and was barely able to gain his balance before being pushed deeper into the alley. Anti-Christian epithets rang in his ears.

Halfway down the alley, Pete recovered enough to punch one of the strangers in the face and the stouter man in the gut. Free of their hold, he sprinted back toward the mouth of the alley, scooping up his mo-com as he passed.

He slowed upon reaching the main street and sought the shadows of an alley doorway. Glancing back at the men, he saw the stout man nursing his gut. The other, chasing him, stumbled and fell heavily.

Much fitter than his assailants, Pete knew he could outrun them if necessary. Relaxing, he straightened his jacket and brushed back the unruly hair from his forehead, his fingers passing over the scar.

His hand dropped to capture the cross on its silver chain. A dead give-away. He unfastened the chain clasp and shoved the religious symbol deep into a jeans pocket. Looking back at the men, he saw them sitting in the alley, their excitement from assaulting a Christian extinguished.

Pete moved from the shadows and scanned the street in both directions. The new curfew was having an effect. There were few people about. He relaxed a little and glanced at his watch. In less than half-an-hour he had to be off the streets.

He would barely reach his personal space in time. He stepped into the main street and walked smartly toward his apartment. He looked over his shoulder at a tall personal space building. Many of its windows were alight. At least he had seen the Carsons home safely, though without their son.

A burning church was the last thing he expected to find when he reached Bright Light earlier that afternoon. He had watched the inferno feeling numb and helpless, the fear crawling in his gut. The Carsons had been too distraught at losing Tyrel to tell him much of what had occurred beyond the basic facts. He frowned hard. A device detecting prayer seemed too farfetched to be believed.

He had always considered his life to be well ordered and fairly secure. But now the nails in his life's foundation were seriously coming adrift. His close friend, Pastor Bill Riley was dead. His fiancée had been snatched by Martez's security force. All in a few short hours. He had to get her back.

He punched a well-used number on his mo-com and felt all the better for seeing a friendly face on the screen.

“Madrid Hayes. Hey, Pete, any word from Sophay?”

“She’s okay for the moment. Being taken south with other Christians.”

“How are the Carsons?”

“Not doing too well. They’re missing Tyrel. He’s with Sophay at present.”

Madrid’s dark eyes slipped to the left and right. “Hey, from what I can see, you’re still on the streets, buddy. Carmel’s first curfew starts,” he looked away from the screen and back again, “in five minutes thereabouts. You gotta get off the streets, Pete, or you’ll be an open target for Martez’s uniformed scum. They’re not too shy when it comes to shooting Christians these days, you know.”

“Curfew or not, I’ve got to get to Sophay. I need transport, Madrid.”

Pete scanned the street in both directions. Day-light gone, street lights and lights from thousands of windows lit up the city. He felt a light drizzle on his exposed skin and flipped up his jacket collar.

“You want my tor-bike?”

“Yeah, I’m heading your way now, that okay?”

Madrid winked. “Okay by me so long as you look after my girl. I’ve worked long and hard to have her humming the way I like her. She can outpace any security force tor-bike. Where are you? I’ll meet you part way.”

Pete’s gratitude seeped into his voice. “Thanks, Madrid. No need. I’m close.”

He reached an intersection and turned the corner.

“Just turning into –”

Pete melted into the nearest shadow and punched down the volume on his mo-com.

“There’s a long line of people out front of the building, Madrid. Seems they have to go through a security check before they can enter. At a guess I’d say an officer’s got one of those anti-prayer devices. He’s scanning everyone going inside.”

Madrid swore. “Yeah, they said there’d be random scanning from now on.”

“From what I hear, I won’t be detected so long as I don’t pray.”

“That seems to be it.”

“Well, here I go then.”

Pete stepped out of the shadows and started walking toward the building to join the queue. He found it difficult to believe a piece of man-made technology could detect people's prayers. He was sure the Carsons were mistaken.

The officer scanned four people and they walked unhindered into the building. A woman stepped forward and the officer aimed the device at her. A sudden loud alarm sounded. Stunned, Pete stopped in his tracks as shocked by the alarm as was the woman. She looked round terrified and confused.

"You've made a mistake," she protested. "I wasn't praying!"

A second officer grabbed hold of her arm and jerked her out of the queue.

"It can't be me. I wasn't praying!"

"I could tell she's one of them just by the way she's dressed," someone yelled.

"By the way she talks!" another yelled.

"Get her off the street!"

"Re-Earth for Re-Earthers!"

The security officer hauled the scared woman to a waiting prisoner transport, what Pete assumed was a scaled down version of the one Sophay was in. As she passed the spectators, they lunged forward to pull her long hair and punch her. She fought all the way and, struggling wildly, broke free of the officer's hold. Terrified, she ran down the street in Pete's direction, the spectators' foul comments following her.

The light from a window picked out the bracelet on her wrist. Pete suddenly recognized the woman. She had linked her arm in his and saved him from a confrontation with a security officer earlier in the day.

Instead of giving chase, the officer lifted his gun, aimed and fired without uttering a warning. The laser shot hit the woman in the back. She gasped and with an expression of surprise fell face down on the shiny, wet street.

The spectators clapped, jeered and laughed.

One of the security officers looked at Pete standing alone under an electric light, his mo-com in his hand. The suspicious security officer took a step in his direction.

Pete withdrew into the closest personal space building, his body trembling. He went to the window and saw the officer had redirected his attention back onto the queue.

Pete shook his head in disbelief. An innocent woman had been selected by the anti-Christian device and shot to death as if she were a criminal. Because she set off an alarm. He felt as if the world had gone crazy. Worst of all, there was nothing he could have done to save the victim.

He looked at the body in the street. Some of the spectators were already bending over the woman's body and stripping it of valuables. One man held the bracelet up to the nearest light source to study it closer. Another fossicked through the handbag. A third was claiming the woman's shoes.

Distressed by what he saw, Pete turned his back on the scene. Somehow, there had to be a way to even the odds against a device that detected a person's very personal communication with their Creator, a way to save Christian Re-Earthers from such an undignified end.

Worry etched his brow when he remembered the woman's words. Assuming she had told the truth and had not been praying, there had to be something else about her Christianity the device detected.

"Hey, Pete, what's wrong? You look as if you've been given a glass of Gratner to drink."

Hearing Madrid's voice, Pete held up his mo-com to see his friend's worried face. By the way he was feeling, he could almost believe he had sampled the toxic mix.

"Doesn't look as if I'll be going in the front entrance."

"Okay, let's think for a moment. My girl's parked in the underground transport park. Level 33A. How about I meet you at the back entrance? Can you make it?"

Pete had never gone the back way before and said so. Madrid gave him directions.

"Got it. Meet you there."

Pete poked his mo-com into his pocket and stepped out of the shadows. His back to the security officer holding the device, he felt a ready target, but reached the corner without incident. He followed his friend's directions as far as he could before contacting Madrid on his mo-com.

"Security officers are at the back entrance as well," he warned. "Whatever you do, don't come anywhere near the device."

"Hey, two more floors and I'll be there."

“No, Madrid! Stop where you are!”

Pete heard the smile in Madrid’s voice. “I’ll be all right. I’ll pass their check point ’cause I won’t be praying. Then we’ll go get Sophay and the rest of them.”

“That’s what the woman must have thought, that she would be safe so long as she wasn’t praying.”

Pete told Madrid what he had seen and heard.

“The Carsons put it down to prayer alone, but I’ve got a hunch there’s another nasty sting to Martez’s selection toy. It must sense something else about Christians apart from their prayers.”

“Like what?” Madrid sounded perplexed. “I’ve not heard anyone mention anything. Everyone’s putting it down to prayer. That it’s selective in what Christians it picks out – those who are praying.”

“No, there’s definitely something else. Something else apart from praying.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not sure, not yet.” Pete paused. “Madrid, we have to get hold of one of those devices.”

“What about Sophay? I thought you wanted to get to her.”

Pete felt an ache at the core of him. He wanted her safe beside him as soon as possible and would risk everything, even his own life, to free her from Martez’s murdering protection force. But cold, hard logic pushed a more sobering argument.

“Until we solve the mystery, I doubt we’ll get out of Carmel without being detected. And we won’t be able to get close enough to Sophay to rescue her. Brunar Martez, for his own personal ends, is cleansing Re-Earth of Christians, Madrid. We have to face that fact, as unpleasant as it is. We can sit back and let it happen or we can try to stop him. We certainly won’t be safe until we know more about the device and the only way to know more about it is to get our hands on one.”

“What about Sophay, little Tyrel, Jamieson, the Drubermores?”

“For the time being, there’s nothing we can do for them.”

Pete looked at a patch of night sky – they were in God’s keeping.

“Meet me tomorrow at my apartment, as soon as you can make it. We’ll hatch a plan then. And Madrid –”

“Yeah?”

“Keep your eyes peeled and keep as far away as you can from those devices.”

\* \* \*

When Pete arrived back to his apartment he switched on Re-Earth Media. Frightening images flooded the room of what was happening around Carmel City. Gangs of citizens were burning churches. A Christian, detected by security officers, was gagged, his feet and hands bound, and tossed unceremoniously into the flames. In another incident, officers stood by while Carmel citizens bashed their victim to death. Across town, security officers, not satisfied with merely scanning people with the device at check points outside apartment blocks, were entering buildings. They were shown aiming the device at the walls while they strode down the corridors. When the device sounded the alarm, the officers broke down doors and dragged out their hapless victims.

Pete's mo-com alerted him to an incoming call from Madrid.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing on Re-Earth Media?" He sounded scared.

Pete scowled. "The curfew seems to apply to Christians only, not lunatics. The security officers are doing nothing to stop the attacks on innocent people."

"They don't think Christians are innocent."

Pete turned away from the screen. "Months of Martez's propaganda has shaped their scruples and impressions of Christians. He's been breeding hatred in non-Christians for years."

"They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them," Madrid said.

"Their hatred had to surface sooner or later, one way or another. And it's going to get worse."

"The way things are shaping up, perhaps we should get out of Carmel while we can."

"And go where, Madrid? There is nowhere to go. We're stuck here. And any assistance we might expect from Old Earth will be a long time coming."

"But once they hear what's happening —"

"How long will that take, do you think? And who's going to pay for the assistance to get here to save — what? A paltry percentage of the population. The Old Earth bureaucrats will take months deciding that issue alone. We can't run from this. This is one evil we have to face. We have no choice."

Pete ambled to the utilities bench, opened a small container and popped a red tablet into his mouth and swallowed. With all the disturbing happenings occurring, he had forgotten to take his Cabul tablet for the coming month. He was surprised the REP had not withheld the tablet from known Christians. Without the tablet to neutralise the low-level toxins that existed in Re-Earth's atmosphere, they found their way into the human body. The REP could have murdered them in a less brutal and more leisurely way.

He moved to the food cooler and looked inside. There was little worth eating. He and Sophay were to have gone shopping for food after choosing a window-dressing.

Sophay. His heart softened and his gaze rested on her portrait. Sophay.

"We have to get one of those devices, Madrid. Don't you see that? With our electronics know-how we should be able to figure something out."

He pulled a near empty bag of bread out of the cooler and put his mo-com on the utilities bench to make a sandwich.

Madrid looked jittery. "I don't know. I think I'm gonna split. Hey, what was that?"

Pete looked toward the apartment door. The loud commotion came again. He snatched his mo-com off the bench and grabbed the bag of stale bread.

"At a guess I'd say the extermination party has arrived. I'm ending our connection, Madrid. If I get out of this alive, I'll let you know."

He grabbed his jacket off the back of the couch and shrugged it on, his eyes all the while on the door.

"Get out of there while you still can, Pete. Go!"

"I'm at the door now. In the meantime, come up with a plan on how we can separate an officer from his anti-Christian device."

Pete switched off his mo-com, opened the door a fraction and peered out. No one was outside his apartment. He opened the door wider and looked along the corridor in both directions. Empty. Noises came from his right. A door stood open a short way down, on the opposite side of the corridor. Pete knew the two university students who shared the accommodation. Loud voices reached him.

"He's one of them, officer!"

"A Christian?"

“Yes! Get him out of my space. I don’t want to associate with Christians. Christians aren’t welcome here!”

“He has to be scanned. My partner’s coming up in the elevator with the device.”

“Get him out now!”

“We’ll see what the device says, first, shall we? If it reads him as normal, there’s nothing I can do about you getting lumbered with a rotten flatmate.”

So the officer didn’t have a device with him. Pete, feeling a little more confident, stepped into the corridor and headed for the stairwell farthest from the elevators. He reached for the door, pulled it open and stepped into the stairwell. Argumentative voices echoed in his ears. He looked down, over the balustrade, and saw a hand sliding up the balustrade four flights below. The hand extended from a security officer’s uniform.

The hand stopped, disappeared, and reappeared with a device. Its alarm shrieked.

“We’ve got one close! Hiding in the stairwell!”

“Up or down?”

“Down. No! Up!”

Pete did not wait to hear more. Grateful he had paid the exorbitant price for Old Earth produced rubber-soled sneakers, he ran swiftly and quietly up two flights of stairs, pulled open the door and cautiously looked down the corridor. Empty. He ran its length to the farther stairwell and entered.

Silence.

Breathing hard, more from nerves than exhaustion, Pete remained where he was, listening intently. He stepped closer to the balustrade and looked down. Nothing. He leaned over the balustrade and looked up. Nothing.

He climbed twenty more flights of stairs, taking two at a time, exited the stairwell and headed for the elevators. He pushed the button to summon the elevator. Shortly afterwards the door opened. He stepped into the empty elevator and pushed the highest number. The door whisked closed and the elevator ascended, giving him a fast, smooth trip to the top floor.

Out in the corridor again, Pete jogged to a large, artificial plant. Making sure no one was watching, he reached into the greenery and pulled out a swipe card. Relaxing, he re-entered the stairwell nearby and climbed the narrow, steep stairs at a

slower pace. When he came to the door to the roof, he used the swipe card to gain entry. He pushed open the door and stepped outside. The drizzle had ended. A cold wind hit him hard.

Barely had Pete orientated himself to his new surroundings when a shadow appeared out of the darkness. It lunged at him. By the dismal light Pete saw enough to sidestep a long, narrow, metal pipe that narrowly missed his shoulder. The man's face turned into the light. Pete recognized the man instantly.

"Hey, Barney! Stop! It's me, Pete Ford."

The shadow stopped still, the metal pipe above its head.

"Pete? Is that really you?"

The pipe dropped to the man's side. Pete laughed and grabbed hold of the hand the elderly man extended in welcome.

"What are you doing up here, Barney?"

"Same as you, I guess. No place else to go. Just because I'm the building caretaker for the upper fifty floors doesn't mean they'll overlook the fact I'm a Christian."

Pete zipped up his jacket and followed Barney to a spot out of the wind. Barney had made himself at home. Under an awning there was a sleeping bag, plenty of blankets, a heated flask, a large bottle of water, sliced cooked meat and an assortment of cooked vegetables.

Pete chuckled. "Looks as if I interrupted your dinner."

Barney invited Pete to join him and beckoned to him to sit.

"I've got plenty. Tell me about that sweetie of yours. It's good to see you. I was getting lonely up here by myself."

Pete placed the bag of bread among the other food items.

"My contribution. Sorry, it's not much. Had to leave my apartment in a hurry."

While Barney served him up a portion of the food in one of the containers, Pete gave a brief account of what had happened to Sophay.

Barney shook his head. "I'm sorry to hear what's happened, I truly am."

They sat side by side eating their meals in silence for a time, looking out over the city flowing down the Elman Heights. Pete felt the ache in his heart. The memories of happier times swamped his mind. This was where he had brought Sophay on many occasions, up here on the roof to be apart from the madness that

was Carmel City. A special place for the two of them, Barney had said, the day he showed Pete where he kept the spare swipe card in the artificial greenery.

“It’s become a strange world, Pete. Whatever happened to loving thy neighbour, like the Good Book states?”

Pete shook his head and looked at the many buildings, wondering at the horrors being performed against Christians.

“Most of Carmel’s never heard of Jesus Christ. They don’t want to know. They turn deaf ears to the message. And where’s it got them? They don’t want to live by what they call Christian restrictions. But what bondage have they settled for instead? Neighbour against neighbour; family member against family member; friend against friend. Utter chaos and terror – Martez’s playground – the devil’s playground.”

## Chapter Eight

“I arrived at Nrocks prison before the captured selecteds. Nrocks is a sprawling place with a conglomeration of buildings added to it over the years as the prison population swelled to bursting. I met with the prison controller, a hard, beady-eyed man by the name of Rasten, and gave him my credentials. I did not appreciate the condescending manner in which he treated me. When questioned, he wouldn’t explain what would become of the Christians when they arrived. I asked if they would receive food, water and medical assistance. He looked at me as if I was stark raving mad.

“‘Adrow Hurfle,’ he said in his condescending way, ‘there’s not enough of anything at Nrocks to go round. Even *you* are a waste of water, food and space. I suffer you because I have to. Because the REP says I must. But you dare so much as cause trouble and you won’t leave Nrocks alive. I’ll feed you to the prisoners. They’re always grateful for a piece of meat. Especially a nice, hydrated piece from the north.’

“And this is the man entrusted with the captured Christians’ lives. I shudder at the thought.

“I found it a tough enough journey south to Nrocks in my mini-T. I have no idea how the Christians are faring, packed into the cargo transports. Outside the Carmel City Basin I passed through the agricultural region of New State, green and lush through irrigation projects, before entering the barren lands of the south. Throughout the journey, I passed some of the great air purifiers and water

detoxification plants that mark this hostile planet as tamed by man. Yet their presence ever reminds me of how fragile life is here.”

Hurfle stopped recording. Re-Earth was nothing like Old Earth. Caught up in a cyber world where he met his many students on a regular basis, he admitted to himself that he had never really faced the reality of living on Re-Earth before. He had never known just how tenuous humans’ existence was on the planet until this journey south.

With summer having come early, it was sweltering in the Carmel Basin when he left, with record temperatures. It was worse walking over the rock field to the Nrocks bank of air purifiers. Heat waves shimmered over the field and rose up from the service road, two dusty tracks worn to bare dirt in a field covered with sharp rocks. The hot, dry air was hard on his lungs. He stopped and wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his top before trudging on.

Reaching the purifiers, Hurfle ducked into the shade and leaned against the rusting housing. He opened his water bottle and drank thirstily. After resting for a time, he walked the length of the housing, turned left and walked the width of the massive construction. Coming to the front of the purifiers, he moved to the edge of the concrete platform and looked down.

Hundreds of feet below, under a covering of swirling gas was the Gratner Ocean. Confronted with the expanse, it dawned on him what a curse as well as a blessing the Gratner was to Re-Earthers. When the sun heated the toxic ocean it generated a deadly gas. Without the monster air purifiers on standby and the natural height of the perimeter of New State, the gas, heavier than air, would creep ashore and the populace would be gassed within hours. Without protective gear, the waters of the Gratner would melt flesh and bone. Without the water detoxification units working day and night, there would be no refined Gratner water to drink.

An attack of vertigo had Hurfle stumbling backwards into the shade.

\* \* \*

*Greetings friends.*

*Christianity lurks everywhere. It steals your space, your resources, your future. It steals the food out of the mouths of your children. There is no place for Christianity on Re-Earth. We have put up with them and their secretive ways for far*

*too long. They need to be taught a lesson. Now is the time to assert ourselves – while we have a President who is not afraid to stand against them. Either the Christians will join with us or forever be against us. It is their choice.*

*Have you noticed how those who have been rejected are a sad lot? Don't turn your back on them for a minute. Watch them close. They've shown themselves to be weak and deluded. At the slightest sign of trouble, protect yourself – contact your protection force. They are here to protect you.*

*The Christian threat will be eliminated.*

\* \* \*

The doors of the cargo transport opened wide and sunlight flooded the cargo hold. Sophay peered into the brightness. A security officer appeared out of the dazzling light and yelled for the captives to get out of the hold. Sophay, lethargic after an inadequate night's sleep, stayed where she was.

When no one moved, the officer yelled again and bashed a rung on the ladder with his baton. Another officer reached into the hold and grabbed a woman by the ankle and started pulling her out of the cargo transport.

More officers appeared out of the brightness and disappeared to bash the sides of the transport. Her eyes adjusting to the light, Sophay recognised the man with the recording stick, standing to one side, muttering his observations and looking wretched and tired.

An elderly man named Raymond stood up with difficulty and complained of his arthritis and the miserable conditions he had endured loud enough for the officers to hear. Laughter came from outside.

Sophay stood up and helped Jamieson to her feet. Tyrel took hold of the widow's hand and the two moved toward the exit. Sophay followed close on their heels. Ahead of them, people were climbing down the ladder while the more nimble jumped down from the hold.

Once out of the transport, Sophy identified the acrid smell of the Gratner which mingled with the earthy pungent smell of the compound to which they had been brought. Both were baking under the sweltering sun. Jamieson was already wiping the sweat from her face.

The cargo hold, backed up tight to a high, open wire gate, left no opportunity for escape. There was only one direction for the selecteds to move – forward along a wire corridor. On the left side, bare-footed men in dirty, pale grey uniforms raced across a barren area toward the wire. More flooded out of the shabby, austere buildings. They hooted and yelled obscenities, pointed at the newcomers and grabbed the wire and shook it.

Tyrel moved closer to Jamieson. Sophay took hold of his free hand to help encourage him along. She glanced at the men side on. Men? Wild animals would have been a better description. They seemed to lack something more than the taming influence of civilisation. They housed the same emptiness that haunted the non-Christians living in Carmel City. They lacked the Holy Spirit, she believed, and seemed to have lost their own, existing in this hellish place.

“I can’t read the word stamped on the front of their clothing.”

“Best not look at them, Sophay. Best ignore them,” Jamieson instructed, her eyes straight ahead.

“Where are we?”

“I’d say Nrocks Prison.”

A prisoner, his face a grimy mixture of dirt and sweat, spat at them as they passed. The phlegm fell close to Sophay’s sneaker. Jamieson steered Tyrel nearer to the fence on the right side of the corridor. Beyond was a flat piece of land covered with small jagged rocks that suddenly came to an end, indicating the land dropped sharply to the ocean.

Sophay pointed in the same direction.

“Look, Tyrel, the Gratner, lost under a covering of gas.”

Tyrel looked with interest. “I’ve never been this close to the ocean before.”

“Me neither,” Sophay admitted. “I’ve lived my whole life inside the Basin. My parents used to warn me of the dangers of the Gratner.”

Both her parents had died in an air transport accident in an unexpected sand storm over the Dredden Desert. They had worked as scientists onboard a scientific vessel in the northern reaches of the Gratner. She remembered seeing one of the vessels in dry dock. Her father told her the Gratner Ocean was denser than the oceans on Old Earth, so the ships needed more powerful engines to push them through the water. The hulls of Re-Earth ships were thicker, too, than those of the ships on Old Earth. Gratner water corroded the hulls and that was why the scientific

vessels were painted with a thick, protective skin that was reapplied every three years or so.

Once past the prisoners' exercise area, the wire corridor turned sharp left. Sophay could see down the length of the stone building. On the opposite side, standing on a short stubby peninsular was a bank of air purifiers. A service road wound its way through the jagged rocks to the purifiers which sat on a solid flat, concrete foundation and appeared to be positioned too close to the steep cliff face.

Sophay looked at Grant Drubermore, who had come to walk beside her with his wife.

"I can't hear the purifiers. I thought they worked continuously."

Ruth drew closer to her husband. "A misconception held by many."

Her husband nodded in agreement. "They function only when the gas generated by the ocean threatens to break over the high lands to put human life at risk. We've not needed use of them for well over fifty years."

Jamieson looked displeased. "How I dislike this weather! There's hardly any moving air."

"What happens if they're broken?" Tyrel asked, looking at the purifiers.

Grant laughed and leaned round Sophay to tousle the boy's hair. "That's not likely, son. They're serviced year round by dedicated technicians."

They past another exercise area. A short distance beyond, prison guards, dressed in black uniforms, formed a human wall across the corridor. Silent and hard faced, they waved their batons to direct the selecteds into a low building that was a fresh, new wood addition to the prison.

Inside, the newness of the building materials filled Sophay's nostrils. There were two windows, both with bars. A pile of old blankets sat near the door, under a window. A privy door stood open at one end of the room.

Sophay heard the main door being locked and went to a window. She grabbed hold of the iron bars, warm from the sun. Outside, the guards were talking among themselves as they ambled back along the wire corridor. Sophay instinctively stepped away from the window, not wishing to interact with the guards. She called softly to Tyrel to move away also, but he continued standing on top of the blankets so he could see outside.

Jamieson, looking tired and despondent, sighed and leaned against the wall.

"There's not even a chair to sit on."

Raymond added his complaint to Jamieson's while he rubbed a knee.

A guard raked his baton across the bars as he passed the window.

"You won't be here for long, and you won't need a chair where you're going."

Sophay noticed Tyrel was watching the guards with a great deal of interest.

When they were out of sight, he jumped off the blankets, his arms flaying the air, and ran to Jamieson. Her eyes were shut and he stood looking up at her as if deciding whether or not he would disturb her. A frown showed on his forehead until he saw Sophay, beckoning to him. He ran to her and wanted to whisper in her ear. Sophay bent low and he cupped his hand to her ear and whispered his message.

Sophay straightened and looked at the boy in disbelief.

"Are you sure, Tyrel?"

The boy nodded, his eyes gleaming. Sophay took his hand and together they walked to the centre of the room where she called for everyone's attention.

All those present moved into a tight circle around her, even Jamieson, who pushed herself reluctantly from the wall. The long journey in the cramped cargo hold had caused the elderly woman much physical suffering, Sophay knew.

When everyone was gathered, Sophay made an announcement.

"Tyrel has noticed something very important."

Nick hoisted the boy upward to sit on his shoulders. "Then he'd better tell us what it is."

Tyrel beamed down at them.

"They can't stop us from praying."

A murmur spread through the group. Raymond, looking up at the boy, limped closer.

"What do you mean?"

Tyrel laughed. "They don't have those little black boxes."

Sophay smiled. "No anti-prayer devices! So let's make the most of this time. We don't know when another opportunity will come."

Raymond and Jamieson were the first on their knees.

\* \* \*

"I have no idea how the Christians endured hours cooped up in the holds of those cargo transports. The smell that preceded them out of the holds was atrocious and

yet there is hardly a complainer, with many smiling upon their exit. Perhaps their religion dulls them to reality and what Martez has in store for them.”

Hurfle crouched against a wall out of the harsh sun.

“Unfortunately, not all have reached Nrocks alive. One cargo transport, not fully converted to carry the prisoners, revealed its human cargo as dead on arrival. I turned away in horror at the sight of over two hundred bodies lying still.

“When I finally spoke to the security officer in charge of their safe arrival, I unearthed the reason behind the deaths. He could not stop them from praying and in retaliation, he turned on the freezer unit, still connected and operative. The hold became a death trap.”

Hurfle pushed the stop button on his recorder and hung his head before looking at the distant horizon where the blue, blue sky met the pale gas layer on the green-black water of the Gratner. He resumed his recording.

“From the officer’s statement and the malice in his eyes, not to mention his outward glee at finding them dead, I must state for the record what I, Adrow Hurfle, believe that he, Gazerth Bowl, never intended these Christians should reach Nrocks Prison alive.”

## Chapter Nine

Daniel Ford had always thought himself a hard, uncompromising man before he met Brunar Martez. Early in his business dealings with the man from the slum, he realized he could never be as ruthless as the REP. Brunar Martez was in a class of his own.

Ford stopped pacing in front of a large, oval wall mirror and turned to his reflection. Brown hair. Silver in the groomed sideburns. Expensive casual wear that was not out of place in the lavish surroundings of his retreat in the Boa Mountains. Rich, deep-coloured rugs on a polished wood floor. Light varnished solid wood furniture. Green upholstery. High ceiling with a patterned cornice.

He looked straight into the unreadable grey eyes dulled by years of cynicism and disillusionment. No amount of resources could stop the self-loathing that welled inside him. In comparison to the REP, he considered himself a weak, ineffective pawn. Martez's pawn in a game of life and death he had played for months.

He might have saved himself from disappearing, as so many had who opposed the REP, but he had traded his life for the deaths of numerous others. Agitated, he continued pacing and shook his head in disbelief. Martez would gladly murder thousands of Re-Earthers because of a prejudice. A capacity Ford had not wanted to acknowledge. He groaned. Unless he could prevent it, his son and his son's fiancée would be among the dead.

Ford left the confines of his luxury multi-space for the patio. Unlike Martez's property, there were no grapevines, merely the raw grandeur of the mountains. Distracted, he failed to see the grand view of Carmel. Instead, his mind's eye

plagued him with the picture of his son and soon-to-be bride that had been given him by his assistant weeks prior.

“Any luck, Tad?”

His young assistant, who sat on the edge of a recliner, looked up from his flat computer on a low table in front of him.

“With all due respect, sir, you asked me the same question less than five minutes ago. As I said then, I’ve not hacked into government files before. This may take some time.”

“They don’t have time. I need more than pictures, Tad.”

Tad scratched the shadow of a beard on his chin and continued his task. “Yes, sir, I understand.”

“I need to find my son.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ford glared at the Elman Heights. “He was a few years younger than you, Tad. Eighteen, he was when he told me he was a Christian.”

Ford ground his teeth when he remembered his rage at the news that forced Pete from his home. Afterwards, pride set in and shut out his son when Pete attempted to smooth over their differences on many an occasion. Finally, he stopped taking calls from his son, and his son stopped attempting to repair their relationship.

“I don’t blame you, Pete,” Ford mumbled under his breath. “I don’t blame you one bit.”

Furious at himself for his past conduct toward his own flesh and blood, Ford stormed back into the house, past the mirror and to the drinks cabinet in the corner. He poured himself a glass of white wine.

“You want a drink, Tad?” he called over his shoulder.

“Not for me, sir.”

Drink in hand, Ford continued his pacing, stopping in front of the mirror.

“If you hadn’t gone along with Martez and developed the device,” he said to his reflection, “he would have killed you and taken over your company. Either way he would have got his hands on Ford Electronic Technologies and still manufactured the device.”

Nowadays, Martez’s spies worked at every level of FET. At least his presence meant he generally knew what Martez was planning. He held his glass up to his

image in a mock salute and downed a mouthful of wine. He continued pacing, stopping at the patio doors.

“I should have done something long before now, Tad. I should have done so much more. I should have had enough backbone to warn the Christians somehow.”

“Probably just as well you didn’t, sir. Martez would have easily traced the leak back to you or taken it out on FET staff not loyal to him.”

The problem was Ford had no idea where Pete lived or how to make contact with him without spies alerting the REP. He stepped outside and glanced at Tad, one of the few loyal employees left at FET.

“Any luck?”

“Not yet.”

Ford swallowed the rest of the wine. “Ah! Brunar’s a wily one. He’s had years to take control of all communication systems on Re-Earth –”

Tad laughed. “Under the guise of protecting citizens from what he labels ‘the Christian threat’.”

“By de-evolving public communication, Tad, it’s easier for him to control.”

Tad typed furiously for a moment before looking up from the keyboard.

“Minimal computer communication system. Government uploads what it wants via New State Wide to brainwash citizens with its views, while citizens can no longer upload their views. How unlike Old Earth! They’re years more advanced in global communication technology than this backward planet.”

Ford felt his fingers increase pressure on the empty glass. “And Martez’s stranglehold will keep it that way.”

Tad pressed the same key a number of times, pausing between strikes. Ford watched his assistant’s face become flushed with excitement. His heart pounded faster.

“Got something?”

Tad sighed. “I thought. . . No. Not what we want. Contact numbers for businesses and the like, what we already have access to on New State Wide.”

“It’s the voluntary list of citizen’s private numbers we need, Tad, the list that used to be on New State Wide before Martez got his chokehold on it. Pete’s number has to be there somewhere.”

Tad, concentrating on the screen, nodded and typed furiously. “It’s an inconvenience not having access to that list.”

Ford watched him type in another string of commands in a computer language he did not understand.

“The REP’s chokehold limits communication within the general populace, Tad. It’s a power reducer, one that keeps Re-Earthers unable to locate others with ease and unable to share their opinions en masse. Yes, he is indeed a wily one.”

Ford, about to return to the house, turned to view Carmel City where smoke still rose from the church buildings set ablaze the previous night. His anxiety expanded. After Martez delivered his speech on Re-Earth Media that evening, the reaction his anti-Christian propaganda would stir in the hearts of non-believers would result in far worse than the previous night’s disturbances. He wiped his face with his hand in frustration. He had no idea how to make things right.

Tad looked up from his computer.

“Sorry, sir. No luck.”

“None?”

“I’ve been dodging their security. Any longer and they would have jumped me. Security’s tight around the information you want. I might not be able to get it.”

Ford, unable to speak, nodded.

“I’ll try again later.”

Ford nodded again and turned away. His bottom lip quivered. So what if his son was a Christian? He preferred living among the Christians and their God than worshipping a man like Brunar Martez. A self-made man. A self-made god.

Back inside, Ford poured himself another glass of wine. As he raised the glass to take a sip, a thought struck with such force he stared at the blank wall in front of him, the glass in his raised hand forgotten for a time.

What might the Christian God think of the competition? The glass touched his lips. He took his time savouring the liquid and pondering the thought. Perhaps the Christian God would act to protect His flock. Perhaps the Christian God would prove He existed in more than the context of a book. Yes, indeed, an intriguing thought.

\* \* \*

Other transport loads of selecteds arrived and soon there was very little room inside the bare wooden barracks. Sophay sat with Jamieson and Tyrel, her back against a

wall, close to a window. Her stomach was empty and creating the strangest sounds that kept Tyrel amused. Jamieson snored quietly.

Across the room a continuous prayer group sent their pleas to God. A lookout at the window kept watch for prison guards. Sophay yawned. Intense prayer wore her out. Amazingly, Raymond was still on his knees. All new arrivals showed enthusiasm in joining the prayer group to bolster their numbers. At no other time on Re-Earth could she remember Christians of different persuasions putting aside their niggling differences in theology and practice to band together united under one God for one good cause, albeit to ease their own desperate plights.

Sophay sank to the floor and used a coarse fibre blanket as a pillow. Her eyes heavy, she needed to sleep. There was something comforting in having prayed to God, being among other Christians and hearing the soft murmurs from across the room. She felt contented. Her stomach might be empty but her spirit was full.

## Chapter Ten

Madrid arrived at Pete's personal space accompanied by Jarris Claymore, another member of the Bright Light congregation. Pete was not happy to see Jarris. There was something disturbing about the man, something intangible he could not define. Whatever it was, it prevented him from trusting the newly baptised Christian.

After welcoming the two men into his personal space, Pete made some berrin. He handed a cup each to Madrid and Jarris who sat on the couch, and settled himself in the easy chair.

Madrid stretched out his long legs. "It took us a while to get here, Pete. There's a lot more of those devices around."

"All security officers must have them by now."

Madrid turned to glance at Jarris, his pony-tail moving across his back. "We were dodging them everywhere, weren't we, Jarris?"

Jarris nodded.

Madrid laughed. "Up alleys, down alleys, up stairs, down stairs, into buildings, out of buildings. For a minute there, we'd have been caught if it wasn't for Jarris's quick thinking."

Pete's gaze tangled with Jarris's. It occurred to him that Jarris never offered information about his past. He was a mystery. His eyes were a shifty yellow-brown and there were numerous indents in his lower face and neck that possibly spoke of a violent past, almost as if he had been sprayed with Gratner water. The marks reminded Pete of similar scars he had seen on a programme on Re-Earth Media highlighting gang retribution.

Pete tried not to stare. “Thanks, Jarris. Madrid needs all the help he can get to keep out of trouble.”

“Hey, I can take care of myself if I have too.”

Jarris remained silent.

Pete looked at the man in an attempt to include him. “Last night I had to do some dodging of my own.”

“Madrid said.” Jarris held up his cup. “Great berrin.”

“Thanks. The point is, the device detected me and I wasn’t praying, so it must be registering something else about Christians other than prayer –”

“Hard to believe.” Jarris sipped his berrin, looking sceptical. “Perhaps another Christian in the stairwell.”

“I don’t think so. The officers were coming up the stairs and I went up a number of flights. There was no one else.”

“Sure?”

“Jarris has got a point, Pete. Another Christian could have been there. They could have left the stairwell before you saw them.”

Pete took a deep breath. “You may be right. All the more reason to get hold of one of those devices so we can find out what makes it shriek, don’t you think? We’ll see if we can get one this afternoon –”

Jarris’s eyebrows rose.

Pete felt on edge with Jarris around. It was as if the man was questioning his ability to formulate an appropriate plan to recover one of the anti-Christian devices. Just as he didn’t trust Jarris, it seemed Jarris had a difficulty with him too.

They stared at each other.

“You have a problem with that, Jarris?”

Jarris’s hands were close to becoming fists.

“Hey, guys, I feel the tension.” Madrid looked from one man to the other. “Jarris, cool it. Pete’s a good guy. And, Pete, Jarris is here to help. He didn’t have to come, you know. He’s risking his life by helping us. We all want what’s best for Sophay and the others. We need all the help we can get. I know Jarris can help us. Trust me on this one.”

Jarris looked at Madrid. An understanding seemed to float between the two men and gave Pete the impression Jarris must trust Madrid enough to have confided

in him. Information he lacked in order to have a more informed opinion of the man. A lack of information that kept him as the third spoke in the wheel.

Pete took a moment to calm himself.

“You’re right, of course.”

He looked down at his hands to hide the tender emotions that arose every time he thought of his fiancée. They seemed out of place around a man like Jarris.

“I’m concerned for Sophay, and the others. Every passing hour is an hour closer to losing her . . . if we haven’t already.” Pete paused. He was having difficulty controlling his emotions. “Sometimes, in my concern, I don’t think clearly. This morning when Re-Earth Media announced the selecteds were being taken to Nrocks –”

“Nrocks?”

Something in Jarris’s tone made Pete glance up. The man’s countenance had hardened still further. He looked meaner than ever.

“That her?” Jarris nodded at the portrait.

Pete looked at the portrait and felt a deep pain of longing within him.

“Recognize her from church. Seen you two together. Beautiful lady.”

Pete nodded, aware that Jarris was watching him closely. At that moment he couldn’t speak.

“They were to be married a few days from now,” Madrid added.

Jarris made no comment, his steady gaze still on Pete.

Pete, collecting himself, extended a hand. Jarris shook the hand, seeming to take the gesture for what it was. The tension melted away, though not Pete’s distrust of the man.

“So, you disagree with going this afternoon?”

Jarris shrugged. “Night better. Cover of darkness.”

Pete frowned. “I suppose so. I thought we could wait at the intersection just down the road and ambush an officer. We’re on our own turf, so know –”

Jarris shook his head. “No.”

“No?”

“Too public. Too many eyes to alert the authorities. Too close to home. Don’t ever mess your nest.”

“Uh-ha.” Pete, his eyebrows raised, looked at Madrid. “I take it you have a better plan?”

Madrid grinned and nodded at the man beside him.

“Jarris does.”

Pete leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

“Okay, then, you’d better tell me.”

Jarris had his full attention.

\* \* \*

Sophay sat still and silent. All around her the selecteds were preparing for the worst. They had already accepted what she was mentally grappling to acknowledge. She gulped back the mounting tension and looked down at the borrowed Bible she held and wondered at how much time was left to her.

Yet inside she still felt hope. Hope that there was some slim possibility of rescue. A greater hope, not in the continuation of her life, but in knowing there was something far more precious beyond death.

“As Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.’”

Looking up at the ceiling she whispered, “And, Lord, please, keep Pete safe.”

\* \* \*

Jarris watched the two men. Patience was his closest friend, his greatest skill – one he had honed through hard experience. Pete stood by the window, talking on his mo-com to a pastor from a church that stood, until last night’s arson, on the same side of town as Bright Light. Madrid, at the utilities bench, was making another round of berrin.

With both men’s backs to him, Jarris took the opportunity that might not be his again. His mo-com aimed at the portrait, he captured the image of the woman, his eyes always flitting to the men.

“Beautiful lady.”

“You say something, Jarris?”

He hid his mo-com just as Madrid turned from the bench with cups of berrin in his hands.

“You too slow with berrin.”

“Here you go, buddy.” Madrid, with his easy smile, handed him a cup.

Jarris tried a smile in return. His face felt peculiar so he let the smile slip away. No one smiled where he came from, unless it was through observing someone else’s pain. But among his new Christian friends he was learning of purer sources.

While Pete and Madrid talked among themselves, Jarris’s thoughts lingered on Peace, Happiness and Salvation, foreign concepts until he met Pastor Bill Riley.

Jarris hung his head. Pastor Bill was dead and many innocent lives were being ground to nothing. He knew what it was like to exist as nothing and he knew the torment that came from despair. Now, the one extraordinary saving grace that had pulled him out of the darkness and into the light, that gave him hope and a future worth considering, was being erased from Re-Earth.

What a dark place the planet would be when the Light was snuffed out.

Where he came from evil always prevailed. After all, this was Re-Earth, and the content of the Bible was intended for Old Earth not Re-Earth, he believed. He looked from Madrid to Pete, Christians who seemed to overlook this point. He had no idea where that left them. Would God save the beautiful lady in Nrocks Prison? Perhaps His succour, His saving grace was meant only for the teeming billions on Old Earth alone.

Jarris ground his teeth in frustration. His commonsense told him the beautiful lady was doomed. Doomed.

He wanted to pray to God to tell Him of the beautiful woman, but law now forbade prayer. Nowadays, the act of praying would bring the evil he dreaded right to his door. He gulped down a mouthful of scalding hot berrin. If not holding the cup and in the company of Christians, he might have punched a hole or two in the walls to relieve his anxiety. Evil may not always prevail on Old Earth, but as far as he was concerned, it did on Re-Earth. All Christians on Re-Earth were doomed.

\* \* \*

Back in Carmel, in his presidential penthouse suite, Martez wallowed in an ornate bath. He balanced the antique crystal candy bowl on his chest and picked the last soft pink candy out from among the white ones and popped it in his mouth. His mo-

com, connected to a larger screen, sat on a porcelain shelf that extended from one side of the bath, near his thick toes.

Martez knew the man whose image filled the screen. He and Rasten grew up together in the Keel slum, squabbled over food, water, shelter, clothing. His mother and both Rasten's parents died before they were eight years old. He never knew his father.

He pushed the candy to the side of his mouth, leaned back in the bath and clasped his hands behind his head, the bowl balancing on his broad chest.

"Good to see you again, Rasten. How are things at Nrocks since I was last there?"

"What do you want done with them?" the Nrocks controller demanded without preamble. "Many more and we'll have nowhere to house 'em. The buildings your government funded for the purpose are filling fast."

"What about the rest of Nrocks, surely there's room elsewhere?"

Steel-hard eyes bored into Martez's.

"There isn't any room elsewhere. They'd have to mingle with the general prison population."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Don't look the innocent with me, Brunar. There are women among them. Just their being here is causing problems. I've dead guards and prisoners already. All because a female Christian decided to sing –"

"Sing? What on Re-Earth would there be worth singing about at Nrocks?"

"They say she has the voice of an angel –"

"How would they know?" Martez laughed.

"She doesn't sing of Nrocks."

"Then what?" Martez asked, his head jutting forward.

"Remember the Christians who visited the slum once a week with an armed escort to offer us sustenance at a price?"

Martez reached for another candy. "Missionaries, they called themselves, from civilised Carmel. I remember. When we were young they came south to spread the gospel to us savage heathens."

"Before they allowed us to eat their food, do you remember how we were forced to listen to their preaching and pray to their God? She sings of the same things, Brunar, of the Son of God. How He can break the chains of oppression and

bondage. She sings of a better place, of God's grace and mercy and love for humankind. The men fight for the best places to hear her, up near the corner of exercise yard number five."

His hard, grimy face closed in on the screen. "Brunar, I'll tell it to you straight. I've a serious situation developing here. We already have water and food shortages at Nrocks which, I might add, your government has done nothing to rectify. I don't have the resources to deal with the influx. Your Christian friends worsen life for the rest of us. A decision must be made."

"And it will be –"

Rasten tilted his head to one side. "Perhaps you're stalling because you're fearful –"

"Me? Of what?" Brunar scoffed.

"Their God. After all, you're the one who got baptised."

"You know why!"

Martez sat up, ready to defend a past act, the candy bowl in one hand. It chinked against the porcelain.

Laughing, Rasten nodded. "I remember you dragging me to classes when they set up their missionary school."

Martez hid his disdain from the controller. He was the one who visualised the opportunities education might bring, not Rasten. He excelled in the classroom, not Rasten. Rasten lacked his quick intelligence, his fluid verbal charm and outward appearance of sophistication, honed during his university days. It was there, among the theories on power and leadership and the rise and decline of Old Earth civilizations, despots, kings and dictators he dreamed a dream.

A magnificent dream of a planet with no Old Earth ties binding man so man might develop as he should and take his rightful place on Re-Earth. No ancient doctrines to restrict his actions or his thinking. A new Re-Earth. Re-Earth in the raw without Old Earth additions. He thought of the wooded land beside Bright Light Church, an artificial and unnecessary addition to the planet's raw state. Gone. He felt good at the thought of its destruction.

He smiled at his childhood slum-buddy. "Christianity, for me at least, became the way, the light out of Keel – from the hell of the slum to the paradise of Carmel."

"With that golden tongue you turned yourself into their favourite. I always said you should be a politician, Brunar. Your scheme with the Christians worked

well enough. It got you a university education. And I worked my way up to become controller of Nrocks. We have achieved great things.”

Some more than others, Martez mused, studying his friend’s grimy attire and the gloomy backdrop he remembered well from a recent visit. Steel chairs with flaked paint. Desk made of fractured wood, stained walls and floor, and a cracked wall mirror by the barred window. He looked at Rasten with pity. Even the controller was a prisoner of Nrocks.

At least the prisoners could boast of a roof over their head, a place to sleep and, if lucky, one meal a day, unlike those living in the slum. His nose still registered the tainted air of the foul prison. The smell of Nrocks permeated everything. Given time it seeped into a man’s pores, his being, until even his outward breath gave him away as an inhabitant of Nrocks.

Through the open doorway drifted the constant background noise from the prison population. His time in the slum built his immunity to the sounds of suffering and torment. There were worse horrors to scream at in the slum. His face turned as white as the candy he stuffed into his mouth. He chewed hard and rapidly. The bowl he placed on the floor beside the bath. The sweetness trickled down the back of his throat, but did little to eradicate sour memories.

A young boy and his mother living on the streets were open prey to others who were as homeless and as much without hope. When he left her for the last time the rats were already gnawing on her bones. There was barely enough flesh on her to keep them happy.

And then there were the missionaries. The missionaries who drove away week after week in their fancy transports with Biblical slogans on the sides. The missionaries with their songs and their laughter, driving away, back to Carmel to warm homes and full larders –

“The anti-Christian devices arrived at last.” Rasten sounded disgruntled. “I thought we were supposed to get them before the prisoners arrived.”

Martez sat forward in anger. “You didn’t? You should have. Why didn’t you?”

“A mix up at the land cargo company.”

Martez gripped the sides of the bath and leaned closer to the screen.

“Are you telling me the contaminateds have had the opportunity to pray? Yar! Pray en masse?”

Rasten shrugged. “Nothing we could do to stop them until the devices arrived. But we’ve put an end to the prayers at least. That’s why the woman started singing. They started worshipping instead. Your device is not a cure for that, Brunar.”

“It’s the praying. Don’t give ’em the chance. Don’t ever give ’em the chance. The praying awakens –”

“What?” Rasten’s eyes glittered with curiosity. “What is it you learned about them when you were among them, Brunar?”

“What indeed! And what did I read about them in that book they call the Bible?” Martez laughed and changed his position in the bath. “Their God is a figment of their imagination. Their God is –”

Martez caught himself and smiled at his secret. “All will be revealed when I make my announcement live on Re-Earth Media tonight. Then you and the rest of Re-Earth will learn the truth about the Christians and the necessity for New State to purge itself of every single contaminated. After tonight, the hunt begins in earnest. There will be no place the Christians can hide.”

“There’s severe overcrowding on Re-Earth. Ridding Carmel of Christians not only makes sense, it makes room for the rest of us.” Rasten bowed his head with false humility. “But what of the overcrowding at Nrocks?”

“I see no reason to waste valuable resources on them. After a night of rioting, the anti-Christian sentiment is proof the majority of citizens care nothing for the contaminateds. The hate-speech of the past eight years has polished their sweet prejudice. Yar! How she shines!”

Martez noticed Rasten’s eagerness for instructions. His boots no longer on the table, he was sitting upright and attentive, ready for action, ready to spring from his steel chair to do whatever deed Martez commanded.

“Relieve yourself of them, Rasten, as you would Nrocks garbage. Do so as soon as possible. Re-Earth only knows what their prayers will conjure! Get rid of as many as you can while you can. And, Rasten, one more thing, commence extermination in the block in which our nightingale is caged. That’ll have them singing a different tune.”

Martez shot out a hand to end the link. He did not wish to know the details of how the deed would be performed. Knowing it would be done was enough, and he could rely on Rasten to ensure it was. Past promises to the controller, of him one day heading the security force in Carmel, would see to that.

He submerged his body and sat upright in the bath, his hands pushing water from his face and thick, curly hair. He extended both his hands and watched their unnatural trembling. Talking of annihilating thousands was one thing. Actually sanctioning the deed, quite another. But that was not what disturbed him.

## Chapter Eleven

Pete, dressed in dark clothing, jogged to the corner of the warehouse while Madrid parked his tor-bike in heavy shadow close by. Although he had initially opposed Jarris's plan, he now approved of its logic. As Jarris had earlier stated, the industrial area to the north of Carmel that lay close to the Boa Mountains was deserted at this hour of the night.

Street and external building lights threw their feeble rays into a night that hung black, still and unexpectedly cold. Pete looked up at the night sky and the twinkling stars of the Valmarth constellation. Remembering Barney's description of Old Earth's moon, he tried to picture a big round glowing ball in the Re-Earth night sky and could not.

A soft droning alerted him to an approaching pack of security force personnel. Five in total, each astride a tor-bike. They talked and laughed among themselves. Pete heard Madrid jogging up behind him. Without taking his eyes off the pack, Pete extended an arm behind his back to signal the danger to Madrid. The jogging instantly stopped.

As the pack closed in, Pete moved away from the corner, into a shadow where he pressed his back hard up against a warehouse wall. He looked for Madrid and saw his dark shape likewise positioned a few metres farther along the wall.

The pack droned past without incident. Pete returned to the warehouse corner and scanned the road in both directions. The pack turned down a side street. Nothing stirred. Madrid appeared at his side.

“I thought Jarris was supposed to meet us here,” Pete said in a low voice that sounded tense even to his hearing.

Madrid shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. He seemed to be feeling the cold.

“He’ll be here. Give him a chance. It was difficult enough for us to get here, wasn’t it?”

Pete grunted his agreement and tried to relax a little. Martez’s thugs were out in force all over Carmel. He suspected the increased security presence must in some way relate to the REP’s live appearance on Re-Earth Media this evening. An appearance which had been repeatedly advertised by the broadcasting station for most of the day. Whatever Martez planned to announce, his expectation must include a furore.

“Jarris was right about one thing though.” Madrid leaned against the warehouse wall. “Marte’s security squad is not operating anti-Christian devices here. They don’t expect civilians to be in this district at this hour of the night. If they were, we’d be dead by now.”

\* \* \*

Across the road, Jarris saw the two amateurs and rolled his eyes. Night time in the Carmel Basin had a way of carrying sound. He could hear their fervent whispering even from where he sat in deep shadow on a metal staircase that rose steeply to a door five storeys above him.

Mo-com to his ear, he waited for the familiar voice, his impatience growing. The important call came first in his mind. After, he would join the two across the road and take them to the unmarked warehouse a short distance away. Among its stores, in Aisle 153, an acquaintance had assured him, he would discover a goodly number of the anti-Christian devices packaged in plain unlabelled boxes.

“At last,” he said, barely whispering, his hand sheltering his mouth to channel his rough voice into the mo-com.

“Never thought I’d hear from you again, Jarris,” the voice laughed.

“Need help.”

“Sure, after you saved me from those murdering prison rats.”

“I sent picture –”

“You don’t say. Of what?”

“Beautiful lady.”

“Not too many of those here,” the voice said and laughed.

“You save her.”

The laughter ceased. “You mean she’s one of *them*? Jarris . . .” The voice faltered and became fear-ridden. “What you’re asking –”

“Get her out.” Jarris scanned the vicinity for eavesdroppers. “Save her, Ballend. Save beautiful lady.”

Ballend sighed. “All right. Suppose I might as well try, ’cause I don’t see her God saving her, not from what the controller’s got planned for them on the morrow.”

The sound of an empty container being knocked over came from the other side of the road. Jarris flicked his mo-com shut and was on his feet in an instant, ready for the slightest sign of trouble. He crept to the corner of the alley, his slim figure a swift shadow of knowing. He scanned the vicinity, every muscle poised for action, a knife now in one hand. The main road lay deserted in both directions. Across the road one Christian rebuked the other for being the cause of the disturbance. What they didn’t see, however, were the five shadows moving in on them from behind.

\* \* \*

All round her where the sounds of people sleeping and talking quietly. Close by, an elderly man, frail and with a grey beard, held a small, thin torch over a paper-based Bible and read aloud in a hollow voice with the aid of the flickering light.

Elsewhere, Sophay saw the faces of readers reflecting the green or blue lights of their pocket-sized electronic books. Nick sat on her left murmuring the verses along with the man. Jamieson and Tyrel dozed on her right.

Sleep, however, eluded Sophay. More than anything she wanted to pray, to connect with the Creator of all things. Something which could not be achieved while the anti-Christian devices remained outside with the guards. Having grown tired of holding the devices, they had placed them on the ground, ever ready to capture any connection with the living God.

Sophay covered her face with her hands. A little sob escaped against her will. She felt Nick’s arm encircle her shoulders. His voice came close to her ear.

“Everything will be all right.”

She kept her face covered. She could not believe him. She languished in Nrocks because of her religious beliefs, because of others' religious intolerance. Over the years anti-Christian sentiment had seen her non-Christian friends abandon her and shun her. What started as infrequent comments against Christians had become a barrage of contempt. Anti-Christian sentiment had isolated her, forced her to associate with only those inside the Christian community. She did not understand the hatred that had put her behind bars. She was sure her beliefs had never been the cause of her inflicting suffering on others. Nick seemed to sense her confusion.

“Long ago people were targeted because of the colour of their skin.”

His comment startled her into looking at him, a dark shape like her, sitting in the blackness.

“Prejudice once came in many forms. Nowadays, we humans generally accept each other for what we are physically. It's our ideas that still separate us. For some reason, Martez is against the ideas we represent. And since our religious ideas set us apart from other Re-Earthers, they make us an easy target in a carnal world.”

Sophay covered her face again. Fear. His words, for the briefest of moments, gave respite from the disturbing fingers that gripped her inside, but now they returned. Fear of the unknown future. The fingers expanded inside her. A steady torment. She could not free herself of them. Fear of physical harm. There was something in the prison guards' demeanour in the late afternoon that inspired the fear. Fear stemming from being a target. Their secretive looks, their knowing glances yelled knowledge of their prisoners' fate. Fear of suffering pain. They knew what was to become of the contaminateds. Fear of not seeing Pete again. Fear of not being able to connect with God through prayer. Fear of one's life ending. They were running short of time. Running out of time.

Nick pulled her close. “Remember when the disciple Paul was imprisoned. Remember he found contentment even in the midst of the despairing conditions he endured. ‘For I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content’. Don't let fear steal your faith, Sophay, or your confidence.”

“But he could pray, Nick. He could pray even though he was imprisoned.”

Her voice came as a distorted, brittle whisper and her answer left her feeling more wretched for rejecting his attempt to comfort her.

“‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.’ Remember that Sophay. Just because we can't pray doesn't mean God is not with us. Think of His

greater plan. Those who believe have eternal life. We may not be able to pray, but there's power in His word, in speaking His word. Jed, that elderly man, he'll keep speaking God's word throughout the night. God's word is covering us, even now. Jed won't let it be otherwise. As long as he has breath in him and God's spirit inside him, he'll keep on speaking the Word. The Word has power."

Sophay looked at Jed, sitting on the floor, a blanket over his legs. By the flickering light of the torch, she saw him look her way. He could not have seen her in the darkness and yet he looked straight at her.

A thoughtful expression on his face, he turned the pages of his Bible, looked again at her, and started to read.

"Do not be afraid of sudden terror, nor of trouble from the wicked when it comes; for the Lord will be your confidence, and will keep your foot from being caught. . . ."

He could not have overheard her conversation with Nick and yet his words were the words Sophay needed to hear. She buried her face in Nick's chest, ashamed of her weakness and her immature faith that could not conquer her fears. It was as if God was speaking directly to her, Sophay Winters, a speck of insignificance in the vast universe, locked away in Nrocks Prison on a planet God probably never intended man to inhabit. In the humbling experience she marvelled at how she was worthy of being called a follower of Jesus Christ. And she was left to marvel at God's grace, His love. His Almighty purpose.

Whatever happened, whatever fate awaited them, Nick was right – everything would be all right.

## Chapter Twelve

The five shadows quickly surrounded Pete and his friend before he knew what was happening. He saw Madrid was also taken by surprise as the security officers swarmed in for the attack. Brutal. Decisive. An electronic shriek. Once. Twice. The officers' threats echoed loud into the night as they tormented their victims. Anti-Christian epithets rang louder. Pete fought back, to break through the wall of uniforms, batons, fists, boots. But with surprise on their side, and with the numbers and weapons, the security officers easily overpowered him.

\* \* \*

Across the road Jarris, silent among the shadows, watched for an opportune moment to rescue his companions. Loud, now familiar shrieks erupted out of the night to identify the two men as Christians. There was much jeering and shoving of the men and both Pete and Madrid took punches to their bodies and faces.

Jarris looked up at the night sky and wondered why God desired to make it so difficult for His followers. He expected the two men to be shot dead there and then. To his surprise, miracle of miracles, they remained alive to have their hands restrained with wristlets and to be driven ahead of the shadows back along the side road.

Jarris darted across the road to follow the group at a safe distance. Pete and Madrid were forced to sit astride separate security force tor-bikes that gleamed orange, black and silver under the street lights.

His mouth forming a hard, thin line, Jarris observed the group heading up the road. All the while he pondered what he should do next. Impossible for him to keep up with the tor-bikes on foot at the speed they were travelling. If he knew the starter code, he would have followed on Madrid's tor-bike. But, without the code, it would take him too long to by-pass the tor-bike's security system.

By his calculations, the prisoners were being taken north. Probably travelling to the security forces' station, close to the major route north out of Carmel. Once a guest of the police at that particular station, before Martez reorganized the police force into his own private army, Jarris knew it to be a small, isolated place. One where there were few of the comforts to be found at the larger station to the east, where the majority of the security officers in the vicinity tended to migrate. By his reckoning, this small group had probably been ordered to inhabit the isolated station for the night, in between their usual rounds, in case of trouble stirring in the far northern reaches of Carmel.

Seemed it was turning out to be the Christians' lucky night after all. But if he were wrong, if the isolated station was not their destination, Pete's and Madrid's chances of survival declined a hundred fold. In all likelihood, he would never see the pair alive again.

"Quick way. Quick there," Jarris muttered, his tone urgent as he set out at a steady jog, taking alleys and side-roads he knew amounted to a shortcut to the station.

When he reached the two-room shack-like construction that sat on a large, bare patch of dirt, it was in darkness. At first he thought the rundown place was no longer used as a resting station and overnight holding pen for prisoners. He circled the place several times, cursing his ineptitude. On his fourth circuit, the pack appeared out of the darkness, engines droning, headlights cutting a path through the cold, black air.

The Christians were manhandled off the tor-bikes and into the station. The security officers all the while voiced their need for berrin. Lights went on. A window opened. Noises of officers making themselves at home mingled with their jolly voices and drifted out of the shack and into the night.

Jarris moved to the open window. The Christians were being locked inside a cage that barely allowed them to stand upright. The fetid air in the room leaked out

the open window and reminded Jarris of his time behind bars. He moved to another window and peered inside the larger room where officers joked and prepared berrin.

“Too much action. Need quiet. Men still. Too alert,” Jarris mumbled to himself.

He would wait. Pete and Madrid were not going anywhere for now. He remembered Pastor Bill once telling him he possessed the patience of Job. He may not know the Bible in detail and he still struggled with his reading, but he was gifted with an abundance of patience and an eye more attuned to the night than to day.

Jarris settled down in the shadows to wait. He pushed aside his own tiredness, thirst and discomfort, determined to wait for as long as was necessary. There were two Christians tonight, at least, who would not die, not if he could help it.

His hands cold in the cooling night air, he flipped open his mo-com and brought up the picture of the beautiful lady. She no more belonged in Nrocks than her fiancé or his good friend Madrid belonged behind bars at the station.

“Good people.”

The words came as a heart-felt plea. He looked up at the bright stars overhead and held up the portrait for the heavens to see.

“Good people.”

It was not a prayer. He dared not pray and let the evil find him. A frown wrinkled his forehead. So if it wasn't a prayer, did that mean God took no notice?

### Chapter Thirteen

“Under my revolutionary leadership much has been achieved to alleviate our difficult situation on Re-Earth. No more under-skilled migrants and space tourists from Old Earth to waste our valuable resources. Many Christians owned luxury hotels and so encouraged the waste. Those same Christian-owned hotels are now in government hands, to be converted into permanent accommodation for Re-Earthers. The Christians have encouraged our sub-standard living conditions for far too long. They would have us living on the streets while foreigners languish in over-sized rooms that are larger than the accommodation entitlements allotted to our higher income earners.”

Brunar Martez smiled into the floating camera eye and visualized the millions of Re-Earthers absorbing his every word while sitting in their bleak, cramped personal spaces, their eyes feasting and growing wide on what he possessed. Power and material wealth. But, above all, space, the crowning status symbol of success on Re-Earth. Many would manipulate, deceive or cut the next person’s throat to step into the desired job, the desired life that would grant a fraction more space to call their own. This was the true human being who inhabited Re-Earth. The human beings Martez knew well. Those who knew that the here-and-now was what really mattered.

He sat authoritatively in one of the grand easy-chairs in the spacious lounge of his Presidential Suite, his hands on the broad chair arms, his legs crossed in a casual manner. Relaxed and affable, he was aware the viewers would note the spectacular night-time view of Carmel behind him. All he need do was appeal to their greed,

their base human natures, to their addictions, their idols, their phobias, their fears. His smile broadened. These were the people he knew and understood because they were pure human . . .

He turned his head a little to the right and the hovering wing-cam moved in unison.

“The detoxification units are now out of Christian ownership and in government control as I promised. Six more will be constructed to detoxify Gratner water. You would not be surprised to learn the Christians deliberately reduced fresh water flows to escalate the prices throughout the water grades . . .”

\* \* \*

On the other side of the room, his presence requested by the REP, Daniel Ford turned his face away from the travesty. Christians had never owned detoxification plants or luxury hotels. Two of his business acquaintances, one an owner of a detoxification plant and the other the owner of a prestigious tourist stay, disappeared several months prior. Within hours of their disappearances, Brunar Martez’s paid cohorts, backed by security officers, had taken control of the companies.

He wondered how many viewers tagged Martez’s speech for what it really was. Another deliberate campaign by the REP to achieve his own ambitions through targeting hostility toward a minority group within Re-Earth society.

“Lies, lies, lies,” he muttered, unable to contain his feelings of outrage.

A Re-Earth Media representative, standing next to him, raised his eyebrows and sidestepped away from him, clearly alarmed at hearing opposition to the REP’s opinions.

“Sir, might I suggest it’s a dangerous idea to go voicing hot opposition while in a Re-Earth sand hole,” Tad whispered into Ford’s ear.

Ford looked at his young assistant long and hard, and nodded his understanding. His thoughts drifted to the Dredden Desert stories of unseen holes lurking under a superficial layer of debris. The sand holes were said to go a long way down. The sides of the holes appeared stable, but move one granule of black grit, either by touch or a careless breath and the hole caved in. It could bury a man alive and none would be any the wiser.

He noticed the suspicious Re-Earth Media representative was edging closer to a security officer.

“He means Martez is not fully disclosing the true extent of the Christian conspiracy to take over Re-Earth and convert the rest of us to their eccentric ways,” Tad said, with a convincing smile.

“It’s terrible, terrible,” Ford muttered, a lie for the first time tasting unpleasant in his mouth.

Nodding his approval and visibly relaxing, the Re-Earth Media representative seemed suitably mollified and smiled at the curious security officer.

\* \* \*

The wait was not as long as Jarris anticipated. The large, bright Xertor star moved but a little in the western sky before four of the five security officers left the station on their tor-bikes. Jarris moved to the closed window. The lone officer, lounging in a chair, was watching the REP’s live speech on the wall screen. Jarris moved noiselessly to the open window at the rear of the building. He would have climbed into the room if not for overhearing the conversation between the two Christians.

“He must have set us up.”

“Come on, Pete. I know Jarris. His past is a bit shady, sure, but he’s a Christian now. He wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“Are you sure? We’re living in rocky times, Madrid. Martez’s snoops are everywhere.”

“Jarris is not a Martez boy.” A long pause. “Oh, I don’t know.” Another pause. “You’re right. He wasn’t there to meet us.”

“Those security officers met us instead. They knew exactly where we were.”

“With all the noise we were making, it’s not surprising.” Another long pause. “Bit of a coincidence the way they doubled back on us like they did.”

“Because they knew where to find us.”

Jarris felt a hurt deep within him. He turned from the window and sagged against the side of the station. These men were supposed to be Christians, his friends, and yet they were quick to malign him.

Reacting on his first impulse, he edged away from the window and walked across the wide dirt stretch to the entrance of the station, every step fuelled by disappointment and resentment.

At the fence line, he stopped and looked back at the building, his shoulders sagging. The Christians' rejection of him scratched at old memories and caused him to despise himself for who he was and where he had come from. Not even his growing awareness of the living God and the subtle changes occurring within him made him acceptable to the two men. When it came to a crisis of trust, they rejected him. They judged his present character as belonging to the non-Christian of his past, one shadowed by questionable deeds and capable of betrayal.

Jarris looked into the darkness, his keen eyes picking out the lay of the road under the starlight. He was cold and hungry. Follow the road and he would find his way home. But he could not take another step and leave the pair caged in the station.

With a pinched expression, he looked up at the heavens, realizing that if he were in the cage his thoughts would have turned as theirs did. He, too, would think his friends had betrayed him.

Jarris stood for a time in the darkness and fought conflicting emotions. Unable to stand still any longer, the pain inside him winning, he started jogging away from the station, following the road.

Coming to a bend, he stopped and rubbed his face with his hands. He sweated from fevered indecision, not from the exertion of running. He felt alone and empty, more alone and empty than he had ever felt in his life before.

Suddenly, he heard Pastor Bill's voice. The kindly voice was so clear the dead pastor might have been standing next to him, to guide him now as he had in the past.

"What would Jesus Christ do, Jarris? What would His love for you have you do?" the voice asked him.

Without hesitation, Jarris turned and jogged back to the station. With every stride the conflict melted from him. Reaching the shack, he checked on the security officer and found him still watching Martez live on Re-Earth Media, occasionally grunting, in full agreement with the highly inflammatory anti-Christian remarks.

Jarris moved back to the rear window and forced it open wide enough to clamber into the small room. Once inside, he sought refuge behind a stack of boxes.

The caged duo stifled their surprise at seeing him, but not well enough. Through the open door, Jarris saw the security officer turn in his seat and look into the prisoner holding room.

Jarris put a finger to his lips. Pointed to the open doorway. Pressed the finger against his lips once more. The pair understood his meaning and quietened. The security officer turned his attention back to the wall screen and laughed at something the REP said. Jarris moved to the cage.

“Jarris, we weren’t expecting you,” Pete said in a low voice. “How did you find us?”

“Follow you from meeting place.”

Madrid reached through the bars and grabbed Jarris’s shoulder in welcome. “Good to see you, buddy. I knew you wouldn’t let us down.”

“You were there?” Uncertainty raised Pete’s voice.

Jarris locked eyes with the man and saw the suspicion disappear, then reignite at the depths of the dark eyes. For a moment it was as if Madrid was not there and it was just the two of them, one personality grating against the other. He could still leave the men in the cage for having doubted him. He did not have to rescue them. He thought of the beautiful lady and how sad she would be if anything should happen to her fiancé.

“I there,” he announced to Pete and dropped his gaze to hide the inflating hurt and the rise of the combatant spirit within him.

He examined the padlock holding the cage door fast. The padlock was a type T4Z.

Jarris pulled a bunch of rods of differing lengths from his pocket. Each contained three buttons at one end. He selected the correct size for the T4Z, pushed one button to activate the device, pushed the other two and inserted the rod into the padlock. A red light flashed on the device. Jarris pushed the buttons in a different sequence and the light flashed orange. After several more attempts, the light continued to flash orange.

From the pair’s whispered comments, he guessed the device was a new gadget to them. He ignored their remarks and continued working to set the men free, aware that every moment he lingered increased the likelihood of his being discovered.

Finally, the light flashed green. Jarris pulled out the rod and selected a finer rod to free the men of the wristlets. Impatient to get out of the cage, Pete and

Madrid took the initiative to release the lock from the door. In their hasty, clumsy attempt the padlock fell to the floor with a loud clatter.

Jarris's instincts moved him behind the pile of boxes. Through the open doorway he saw the security officer, already on his feet, laser gun in hand, move with speed to the prisoner holding room. Before Jarris could shout a warning, Madrid and Pete broke free of the cage, at the same moment the security officer burst into the room. The gun trained itself on the unarmed Christians. Pete and Madrid, side by side, disabled by the wristlets, backed into a corner by the window.

"Hey, we don't want any trouble," Madrid said, the peace-maker Jarris knew him to be.

Hate and anger twisted the security officer's face. "Martez is right. You lying, scheming Christians! You have no place on Re-Earth. You withhold water and space from the rest of us."

"That's not true! It's all lies," Pete protested, the idealist Jarris imagined him to be.

The REP's laughter floated through the open doorway from the adjacent room.

"And as I said, Christians are against progress." The golden tongue coated every word with believability. "They do not want us to use the stronger strains of genetically modified crops. They would prefer to grow useless woods where they gather when Xertor is at its height and perform ancient, unnatural rituals in the name of their god. They curse us so they can be blessed. And then they have the audacity to criticise the way the rest of us live our lives. They hold with ancient ideas of engagement and marriage and would do away with our freedom to express our love for each other as we see fit . . ."

Jarris sensed death closing fast on the pair. The security officer's decision to kill the men reflected in his growing, hateful grin. A grin Jarris knew too well from his time inside Nrocks prison. His fingers touched the pocked skin of his face. His heart pounded.

The inevitable was closing in on him. Would push him to do what he would have to do. He did not want to, but there would be no other choice. His friends had left him with no other choice. His heart pounded all the more with anxiety and anticipation.

The security officer raised the gun to shoot the men.

Jarris heard the men protest. Saw them back farther into the corner. Saw the long, thin finger settle decisively on the trigger. Imagined the beautiful lady weeping, weeping . . .

Jarris stepped from behind the stack of boxes. Saw the surprised look on the officer's face. The laser gun swung in his direction.

Stunned and inexperienced in such situations, the pair remained in their corner.

*Zaamp.* The gun fired. Jarris stepped to one side to dodge the shot. Not quick enough, he felt the hot searing in his upper arm. The officer aimed the gun more accurately. Still the Christians remained where they were.

Too late, Pete melted into action and searched around him for a weapon. Madrid ran at the officer. Ignoring the shooting pain, Jarris dodged another round of laser fire.

The gun turned on the pair. *Zaamp.* The shot narrowly missed Madrid's head. He froze, just as Pete rushed at the officer, a metal chair in hand ready to strike the gun from the man's hands. The officer took aim. This time, Jarris knew the officer would not miss.

A knife flew through the air and entered the officer's heart, disorienting his aim. *Zaamp.* The laser fire hit the ceiling instead of Pete. The gun dropped from the officer's hands. He fell to the floor.

The three men stood in the tense silence staring at each other and at the fallen man.

Jarris was the first to move. He took the bunch of rods from his pocket, selected the appropriate size and set about releasing Pete and Madrid from the wristlets. Only then did he concern himself with his wounded arm.

"Gotta get out of here. Fast. Now. We go."

Pete threw the wristlet onto the floor. "You killed him!"

Jarris swung round to confront the man. "He kill you otherwise."

He didn't understand the Christian's anger toward him. He had saved the Christian's life. Unable to withstand the undisguised disapproval in the man's eyes, Jarris turned away, the hurt and rejection growing inside him.

Madrid rubbed his wrists, now free of the wristlets. "Come on, Pete. Be reasonable. He saved our lives."

"My life is not worth another man's."

Pete bent over the officer lying on the floor and searched for a pulse.

“He’s dead.”

Jarris retrieved his knife and cleaned it on the security officer’s shirt. He moved nervously on the spot.

“Must go. Others come back.”

“I’m with you, Jarris. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Madrid edged past the body and into the adjacent room.

Pete followed the men into the lounge space. A small compact area, it housed a table and chairs, a worn sofa, a notice board and a utilities area.

Madrid snatched an anti-Christian device off the table and tossed it to Pete.

“At least we’ve got what we need.”

“At a high price – a man’s life.”

Jarris felt the disapproving eyes settle on him and knew the idealist would never accept him, not now he had confirmed through deed what already floated in the mind. They no longer needed him. They were in possession of what they wanted, the device.

Feeling sick at heart and nursing his wounded arm, Jarris walked out of the station and into the night. Madrid called after him. He paid no heed.

Madrid the peace-maker. Pete the idealist. Jarris wondered what that shaped him in the great scheme. He had killed a man tonight and with every beat of his heart regretted the unavoidable death. But perhaps that was the reason he was here in the first place. To do what the peace-maker and idealist could not have done.

## Chapter Fourteen

Not long after Jarris's departure, Pete left the station with Madrid, the anti-Christian device in his pocket. Once out of the station grounds, they jogged along the road. Their plan was to collect Madrid's tor-bike and head back into Carmel City proper. They would examine the anti-Christian device in more detail after they had returned to Pete's personal space.

From what he had seen of the device before they left the station, the active range was a good fifty hezels. Probably more in open terrain. The more distance they put between the station and themselves the better. The security officers would start a full scale search when they found their dead comrade and, this time, their devices would be active, now they knew the escapees to be Christians.

Pete glanced at the dark shape of his friend pounding the road next to him. "I wasn't praying when they used the device on us earlier tonight."

"Me neither."

"So it does pick up on something apart from prayer, something else that signals us as being Christians."

"Now all we need do is figure out what." Madrid huffed. "Doubt it's going to be easy."

On either side of them multi-storey warehouses were tightly packed into the available space. With no traffic on the road the place seemed unnaturally quiet. Their every footfall and sound of exertion echoed back at them.

Up in the sky, manmade lights shone among the stars. Pete pointed the space transports out to Madrid and counted ten without much trouble. They were

spacecraft caught en route between Old Earth and Re-Earth after Martez stopped all communications with the home planet. They didn't have enough fuel to make the trip home. They needed to refuel and empty their cargo holds.

Pete wondered if the REP would carry out his threat to shoot them out of the sky if they attempted to land without his permission at the spaceport north of the Carmel Basin. While the freighters awaited favour from the capricious REP, Pete guessed the warehouses surrounding them were coming close to being empty, while overhead floated tonnes of supplies needed for Re-Earthers' survival. If the standoff went on for much longer, he imagined there would be more than dead Christians on the planet.

Madrid stopped jogging to catch his breath, his hands on his hips.

"You could have handled matters differently with Jarris tonight."

Pete heard the disappointment in Madrid's voice. He came to a stop beside him. "Perhaps."

"Jarris saved our lives."

"Jarris didn't have to kill the officer outright."

"Face it, Pete. That man's dead because of us. We didn't take the opportunity Jarris gave us to –"

"We stood there like scared idiots. Yeah, I know."

"Jarris put his life on the line and we failed him. He got injured and –"

"We acted as if it didn't matter. I know."

"He rescued us and we never thanked him. All we were concerned about was getting hold of one of the devices. I feel ashamed thinking about it."

Pete already felt convicted for his treatment of Jarris. He didn't need Madrid to rub it in.

"All right. Enough said. As soon as we get back to my space, we'll contact Jarris and sort it out."

\* \* \*

As Pete and Madrid neared Carmel City proper on the tor-bike, they found the place in a state of uproar. The curfew abandoned, mobs roamed the streets, rioting and yelling their hate messages for Christians to hear. Sitting on the tor-bike behind Madrid, Pete grew anxious when one such mob, comprising at least forty

individuals, rounded a corner singing their hate slogans and smashing windows. They spread across the street, an unruly line, coming straight for them.

Madrid kept the tor-bike on a collision course with the crowd, the engine at a steady, low purr. The crowd swallowed them, yelled curses and threats and shoved broken bottles and weapons close to their faces. Pete smelt the aroma of peyjl and sweat heavy on the crowd. A moment later, the tor-bike jerked beyond the ragged line.

They passed through several more mobs, but the crowds paid them little heed. Pete suspected it was the dark clothing they wore and the racy tor-bike. Both were not usually associated with the stereotypical conservative Christian.

Victims' shouts and screams, piercing and soul-wrenching, came from all sides. Pete searched the faces of the crowds. They were hard and uncompromising, filled with hate and malice. They lacked the light of humaneness. The people seemed void of a spiritual or moral code that might lift them beyond their base human natures. And with no code to refer to, with nothing to lift them beyond their fleshly concerns, Brunar Martez could tease them and mould them any way he wished.

"Something's happened," Madrid said over his shoulder.

Pete noticed more than one Re-Earther showed the flesh wounds of a recent dispute.

"Something's happened all right. Something big. Where's the nearest public screen? Aim for that. Let's see if Re-Earth Media is talking."

At the next intersection, Madrid slowed the tor-bike to dodge the bodies lying still and forgotten on the roadway.

"Law and order has left Carmel City for the night."

"No, I've seen Martez's troops about. Look!"

Pete pointed down a side street at security officers unearthing Christians with their devices and handing them over to a mob. The crowd came their way, dragging the young Christian family with them, tormenting them as they went.

Madrid brought the tor-bike to an abrupt halt.

"We have to help them!"

Pete placed a staying hand on Madrid's shoulder in case he got it into his head to rush into the fracas in a valiant bid to save the Christians. He kept his voice level, even though the dreadful sight before him affected him deeply.

"There's nothing we can do, buddy."

Madrid shook his head. "I can't believe that!"

"We're out numbered. Our best hope of helping is to work on the device. Figure out a solution so Christians can't be targeted in the first place."

A man belted one of the female captives across the face. Pete felt Madrid's body tense under his hand.

"Get us out of here, Madrid, before those officers pinpoint us with their devices or we'll be of no use to anyone."

Pete grew more insistent as the group neared, in case either one of them lost their powers of reasoning and attempted to do the impossible in an impossible situation. What any humane person would want to do. But there was no saving the family. A body dropped to the road. The father, the husband, Pete guessed, was dead already. He did not want to imagine the fate awaiting the women.

Pete felt Madrid's reluctance.

"Now! Go! Go!"

The tor-bike pulled away and Pete, his thoughts turning to Sophay, blinked aside the moisture rising in his eyes. He remembered her anxious voice when he spoke to her via mo-com. Her last known destination was the back of a cargo transport, travelling south to Nrocks. He remembered the stories of Nrocks the men in church told, and always out of the women's hearing. Nrocks, a brutal place where barbaric deeds were performed daily in the name of survival. He shuddered at wondering what brutal treatment Sophay was experiencing. Quite possibly, she was no longer alive.

\* \* \*

When they reached Burray Square where Re-Earth Media usually aired its programmes up against the side of a building, on a stone wall painted white, there was evidence of a large crowd having gathered there earlier in the night. No doubt to watch the REP's live speech. Litter and imitation glass fragments from smashed windows scattered the area. Unwanted items from looting were strewn across the square. The smell of smoke filled the air.

Madrid parked the tor-bike under an awning. A group of drunks sang together at one end of the square. At the other, prostitutes walked their customers in and out

of a dark alley. In one corner four individuals were walking in tight circles, the side-effect of the latest recreational drug.

On the wall screen was an oversized image of Brunar Martez, no doubt a repeat screening of his live speech, courtesy of Re-Earth Media.

“... That’s right, my good Re-Earth citizens. I stated there was something important you need to know about the Christians. I have tried to keep this from you, to protect you against the evil forces at work, but I find I can no longer do so. The security of Re-Earth is as much in your hands as it is in mine. I cannot keep New State free from contamination without your assistance.”

Brunar Martez got up from his comfortable chair and with head hanging in supposed despair, walked to the window to look out at Carmel City. Pete judged the action would not be lost on his audience. He would be seen as the caring leader, the people’s protector.

Martez turned his back on the view, his face expressing some deep inner turmoil at what he was about to share.

“The Christians are not like us. There is something different about them. You’ve noticed it. I’ve noticed it. You’ve probably suspected it for a long time.” He paused. “It is because they are not all human.” His hand pressed down the air in front of him in a repetitive action as if he were quietening a crowd – his audience’s apprehension and incredulity.

“There is something else inside Christians. Something that invades them and changes their thinking, the way they want to live their lives, even the way they talk and dress, and their outlook on life. They say it is God. I say it is not. There is no God.

“And how do I know? Because I’ve lived among them as one of them to test their claims. No miracles came my way. My life did not miraculously change for the better. It was by my own hard work I made progress. To become your devoted leader. To save you from the contaminateds. Do not listen to their lies. Do not at any time risk becoming a contaminated. If they cannot be like us, then they should not be.”

Martez, a frown on his brow, paused and looked down at his shoes as if giving immense thought to his words.

Pete sat forward in the tor-bike seat, waiting to hear the new charge the REP would place on those who shared his religious beliefs.

Suddenly Martez looked up to catch his audience's eye.

"There is no God, no. Invisible beings exist inside them. Invisible to our eye, these aliens have come to live inside the contaminateds. They seek out the weakest minded, those who do not have strength of mind to stand against them, as I did.

"The invisibles know when to attack humans, when they are at their most vulnerable. They give sustenance to strengthen their hosts, especially when life seems too much to endure. The host becomes addicted to the sustenance. I saw it all too often . . ."

Madrid shook his head. "I don't believe I'm hearing this. Am I really hearing this?"

Pete, realizing his bottom jaw had dropped, closed his mouth.

Martez smiled reassuringly. "But don't you worry, Re-Earth citizens, our technologically advanced anti-Christian devices pick up the communication between human and alien, what the contaminateds call prayer."

"What else apart from prayer? Tell us," Pete urged, looking up at the oversized REP.

Martez smiled again, long and slow. "Be assured, our devices also pick up the alien presence within the Christians. The presence which has developed to a dangerous level of what the Christians call 'faith'. The stronger the faith the more the human is under the alien's control."

The REP walked without speaking to his chair and sat down, his air one of supreme confidence.

"You understand now why we cannot permit Christians on Re-Earth and why all communication has ceased with Old Earth. Old Earth succumbed to the alien invasion of the human race. I will not let that happen here. Re-Earth can be self-sustaining. You will be as free to conduct your lives as you see fit. To live your lives without the fear of alien rules implanted in your mind. You will not undergo the old ritual of marriage that spawns families and reduces your space. We do not have the space on Re-Earth for such alien notions that overpopulated Old Earth centuries ago and in so doing provided numerous hosts for the aliens.

"But do not fear. Above all, do not panic. The alien contagion is under control. The Christian aliens will not last long on Re-Earth, not now we can detect their presence. With your help, good citizens, we shall hunt down every last one of them!"

“Get us out of here, Madrid. Get us out of here fast!”

Madrid, who seemed as shaken by the REP’s speech as was Pete, revved the engine and they sped out of the square.

\* \* \*

Annette Carson, hugging herself, stood alone next to her missing son’s bed. For years she believed she was a Christian with God’s presence on the inside of her, but the anti-Christian device had rejected her and stolen her son. She had not safeguarded him as a mother should and strangers had dragged Tyrel from her arms and taken him away in the back of a cargo transport.

“Now Martez speaks of aliens inside Christians.”

Annette placed a hand over her heart where the pain inside was growing too great to bear.

She had always believed her faith was strong, but according to the device her faith, her prayers, did not register. Their weak capacity was not enough to bring hope to the possibility that her son might survive, might still be alive somewhere.

She remembered the security officer’s cruel words, of her prayers being worthless when Tyrel was being led away. She shook at the thought of aliens invading her son’s little body. Even if she were to get him back, there was no saving him from the alien that lived on the inside of him.

Annette left her space and took the elevator to the roof. On top of the building there was a landing pad for heliairs. In a fog of misery, she walked the deserted space to the perimeter of the roof.

If there was no God, there was no hope.

Annette stepped from the roof into air.

\* \* \*

Back at his personal space, Pete pulled the anti-Christian device from his pocket and made a more lengthy inspection of it than time and circumstances had permitted at the station. It was a small rectangular shaped device that sat neatly in the palm of his hand and was heavier than he had expected for its size. The exterior was of black plastic.

A display screen took up half the length of the device and underneath were aligned an ‘on’ and an ‘off’ button. Beneath these, a button labelled ‘prayer’, and next to this a button labelled ‘alien’. Back at the station, the latter button had been a mystery to Pete, but after hearing the REP’s speech, it now made sense. A third row of buttons included one for volume and another labelled ‘duo’. The latter button Pete assumed permitted the simultaneous detection of the duo aspects of Christianity that Martez was targeting.

Madrid was furious. “An alien presence, can you believe Martez?”

“It picks up on the power of prayer and the power of our faith.”

“That won’t work up the majority against us. But say we’re being influenced by aliens. The President fires up a whole new load of contention. Who in their right mind wants an alien living inside them, never mind next door? He’s misinterpreting the facts to suit his purposes. To make himself out to be Re-Earth’s saviour. Now that’s rich!”

Pete turned the device over in his hands to look at the back plate while Madrid tried contacting Jarris on his mo-com. As Pete suspected from the logo he found, the plastic outer shell came from the sole plastic manufacturing company on Old Earth. This alone made the device an extremely expensive toy. His eyes fell on another logo incorporating three impressed capital letters, ‘FET’ inside an oval symbol. When full recognition occurred, Pete felt the blood drain from his face.

Madrid looked at him askew.

“Hey, Pete, what’s wrong?”

Pete looked at his friend. He suddenly felt nauseous. He gripped his midriff and shook his head, unable to believe what he had stumbled across. And all the while he had condemned Jarris –

“Pete, talk to me.”

Pete could feel the sweat beading on his forehead. It took a moment for him to regain his speech.

“These anti-Christian devices. They’re manufactured by FET. Ford Electronic Technologies. My father’s company.”

\* \* \*

Baldwin walked in a mob of a dozen men. He felt cheated, duped, betrayed. The Christians had conned him into believing there was a God, when all the while it was invisible aliens who wanted to take control of his mind and set back his personal progress by decades.

The anti-Christian device did not select him. Instead, for all the tithes and donations he had fed into Bright Light Church, his ultimate payment had not been the assurance of eternal life and a place in heaven, but a broken nose. He touched it gingerly, remembering the humiliation he suffered outside Bright Light when he stood in a line, the jeering spectators across the road.

But the anti-Christian device had proved he was strong enough to withstand the invisibles even after baptism. He had remained himself, true to himself. He was not one of the contaminateds and he was proud of it. No wonder prayer had always seemed a waste of time.

“I was too human for them.”

He looked proudly about him, feeling free of Christian restrictions.

“There’s no greater power than man. Man owns Re-Earth and Re-Earth will remain in man’s control.”

“Re-Earth for Re-Earthers,” a man next to him chanted.

The dozen came across a security officer with a detected Christian in wristlets. At Baldwin’s suggestion, the security officer handed the prisoner over to the brooding mob.

Baldwin threw the first punch.

“Beat it out of him, boys. Beat it out of him so it won’t want to return. There’ll be no invisibles on this planet.”

He stood back, watching the mob, feeling well pleased with himself. No Christian would dupe him out of his money again.

## Chapter Fifteen

Sophay jumped to her feet the instant the guards burst into the barracks. They appraised her and the other contaminateds, staring back at them in the packed, stifling room. The guards' faces were as cold and hard as the laser guns they held at the ready.

As the black mob moved closer, Sophay and the other prisoners backed away.

Suddenly, without a word, four of the guards darted forward and started manhandling prisoners out the door. One. Six. Ten. Fifteen. Soon, twenty prisoners with dishevelled hair and clothes stood in the early morning light, blinking their bewilderment and fear.

Surrounded by guards, the group was marched in a tight pack formation down the wire corridor to a gate.

Sophay, standing at a barred window, watched the guards force the captives through the gate and onto the winding service road that led to the bank of purifiers. One woman was crying. Another hugged her handbag. A man wearing one shoe moved awkwardly.

In single file, they were marched at a brisk pace to the end of the road. They mounted the shallow stairs and stepped onto the concrete platform on which sat the air purifiers. Insignificant against the massive rectangular construction, they walked almost the length of the platform, turned the corner and walked the width of the housing in the direction of the Gratner Ocean. They turned the corner and marched along the platform that protruded in front of the purifier housing and disappeared from sight.

Sophay spun from the window when the door burst open a second time. Another black mob swarmed into the unfurnished room and swooped on its prey. The prison guards cared little who they selected. Three. Five. Sixteen. This time twenty-six were herded along the wire corridor to the gate and started their march along the worn service road.

At the same time the first mob of prison guards reappeared round the corner of the purifier housing and walked the platform along the side of the construction. There was no sign of the prisoners.

Jamieson appeared next to Sophay.

“This is it, pet.”

Sophay nodded and watched the first group of prison guards walk the length of the concrete platform to the steps at the back of the construction. She heard Jamieson breathe deeply.

“Ah, but we’re going on to something better.” Jamieson spoke softly, almost as if she were speaking to a child.

Remembering Tyrel, Sophay looked round her, but the boy was not standing next to her friend.

Jamieson put a hand on Sophay’s shoulder. “He’s with Nick. Over there.”

Sophay let her eyes be directed by the widow’s pointing finger and saw Tyrel fully focused on something Nick was telling him. What surprised her was the smile on the child’s face, bright and innocent in the black despair that surrounded him and with Death’s approach so near. She looked out the window and saw the first group of guards move to one side of the service road to let the prisoners pass by. The way clear, they stepped back onto the dusty track and headed toward the wire gate.

“What are we going to do, Jamieson? Our turn may well be next.”

Sophay looked at Tyrel whose face was bright with the smile.

“We can’t let this happen to Tyrel. What are we going to do?”

Jamieson made no reply. She stood motionless, her face expressionless.

They stood together in an uneasy silence, watching the guards. Behind them the sounds of fear and alarm grew as those at the other window relayed information on the happenings outside.

Sophay looked behind her into the room where people were huddling together. They were preparing to suffer in the Lord’s name, reciting passages and

worshipping. Over to one corner, sitting on the floor, the old man was hunched over his paper-base Bible, reading the Word aloud.

“Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. . . .”

Sophay turned from the window and started praying aloud, her voice tremulous. Others were quick to join her, bowing their heads or stretching their hands high above their heads. Several collapsed prostrate on the floor. A man with a much stronger voice than Sophay’s spoke with extraordinary wisdom and alacrity. She let him take the lead.

Nick, holding Tyrel’s hand, hurried him across the room to Jamieson. The elderly woman took the child’s free hand in hers, brushed the unruly hair from his forehead and bent and kissed the top of his head. The three bowed their heads while others looked beyond the ceiling to the source of their hope and inspiration.

Outside, the anti-Christian devices shrieked their protests at the prayers. The black mob, back from their first journey to the purifiers, entered the barracks and threatened to shoot the captives if they did not stop their prayers.

More determined, Sophay prayed on with the others without faltering. The prayer leader’s voice grew stronger still. His words and God’s grace raised her above the oppressive circumstances. She felt an incredible calm seeping through her. They were coming to the end of their lives, and she, as it seemed with the rest of the prisoners, would prefer to die praying to their Creator.

Defeated by the prisoners’ persistence, the black mob stopped their threats. One of the guards ordered the devices to be turned off. Many of the contaminateds laughed and cheered at their minor victory until the mob commenced shoving more victims out the door.

This time, Sophay did not count the number. She bowed her head and closed her eyes and held on tight to the peace within while around her came the screams from the guards, the stamping of boots on the bare wooden floor boards, and the sounds of terror from the contaminateds. The smell of sweat and heavy footfall came close to where she stood. She did not move, a still being in the midst of chaos. Any minute she expected to feel a hand grab her arm to haul her out the door.

The door slammed shut. Whimpering and crying fractured a brittle silence. Sophay opened her eyes to see who remained. Jamieson, Tyrel and Nick stood at

her side. The praying had ceased. The old man, not looking at his Bible, sat on the floor quoting the Word aloud, his voice barely audible after long hours of self-sacrifice.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. . . .”

Out the window, Sophay saw the largest group of bedraggled prisoners gathered yet. The man who had led their prayers assisted a frightened younger man to his feet and passed around words of encouragement. He commenced praying anew as the group was led to the wire gate and the inevitable that awaited them beyond.

Tyrel looked up at Jamieson, his eyes filled with confusion.

“What’s happening?”

Sophay saw Jamieson gulp back her emotions and force herself to smile.

“We’re going for a little walk.”

“To where?”

“To a better place than this.”

Nick smoothed back the hair on top of the boy’s head. “And you can ride on my shoulders when the time comes, if you like.”

Tyrel looked round the room, his hazel eyes large. “They’re going to kill us, aren’t they? What have we done? Why don’t they like us?”

Jamieson pulled the child closer. “Hush! No such thing will happen to you.”

The young, wraith-like figure of Clarazen stepped light-footed to the window and smiled down at Tyrel. She looked outside and started to sing. From out of her mouth came the most exquisite voice Sophay had ever heard, the voice the Nrocks prisoners had fought to be closer to, some losing their lives.

Other Christians moved to the front of the barracks and joined in the singing. Sophay heard the voices of the Christians in the other barracks blend with theirs. By their song, the prisoners walking the service road would know they were not alone.

The man who led them in prayer, who was walking his final walk, turned at the waist and waved to them.

Beyond the group the second black mob was returning. Sophay looked round the room: their number had already diminished considerably.

Emily Hollender, Bible in hand, sat on the two-seater couch in the narrow, windowless space allocated to a female Re-Earther of her income bracket. The couch, which converted to a bed, was up against one wall. Where it ended sat a storage unit up against the wall on the other side of the room. There was barely enough space to walk between the two pieces of furniture. At one end of the room, the front door swung back onto a wardrobe. Opposite stood the personal cleaning box and toilet behind a curtain. At the other end of the room, where grander spaces boasted a window, was the utility space with cooling cube, a mini-table and chair.

She had called in sick to the school where she worked. After the device rejected her at Bright Light Church, she felt her world had somehow altered, or perhaps it was something within her that had changed. Either way, she did not feel her usual self, or up to dealing with a class of numerous students who took after their parents in believing there was no future to be had on Re-Earth. She found it a sad outlook in those so young who looked at her with dead eyes, their spirits dead within them.

The incident at Bright Light was forcing her to appraise her life. In so doing, she realized she had not given God enough of her life or her time. God had a purpose in all things, she believed. Her rejection gave her a new awareness of God. How He had worked in her life and how she had taken His mercy for granted on more than one occasion.

“Aliens inside, what rot!” she said aloud. “Brunar Martez is quite mad. He can’t be allowed to get away with this. Someone must hold the madman accountable. There has to be something I can do to help the body of Christ.”

Emily read her Bible intently, hoping the answer would come, as it did to more than one of her religious friends. It did not. After two hours, Emily gave up on Bible reading and prayed instead. She could hear the security officers outside in the passage, stomping their way along the corridors, no doubt with devices in hand, searching out ‘true Christians’.

Hearing their approach, she prayed harder, asking God to guide her in how she might best assist the persecuted. The security officers passed her space, her connection with God not registering on their devices.

She did not let that little fact deter her, even when her question remained unanswered.

“All things in God’s timing happens according to His schedule, not mine,” she muttered to herself to keep her spirits up, not remembering the exact words of the Biblical passage. She sighed her disappointment at receiving no answer, put her Bible to one side and went about her day.

Not long after, an old friend from her university days connected. Adrow Hurfle, the most inventive and creative man she knew.

“Adrow Hurfle! How wonderful to hear from you. What? You need someone to compose propaganda to counter Brunar Martez’s hate campaign.” She laughed. “I’ve been wondering what I could do to help.”

A greater vision came to her when she thought of Annette Carson. Together, with Adrow’s ingenuity, they would form a group of rejected Christians to not only assist the persecuted, but to support the rejecteds and to gather in prayer. Prayer undetected by the devices.

When her connection with Adrow ended another idea flittered into her mind. Somehow, with God’s help, she would see His light spark in her students’ dead eyes. Emily sat at the mini-table with her flat computer. There was much work to be done. Praise the Lord!

Martez’s device might have rejected her, but God, she believed, had not.

\* \* \*

Jamieson looked round the barracks. There were not many of them left now. She helped comprise the last group that would be taken to whatever awaited them on the other side of the bank of purifiers. The Drubermores were no longer among their number or the young girl, Clarazen, with the exquisite voice, or Jed, the old man with his Bible. Gone too were elderly Raymond and his daughter, a mere short embrace before the two were separated, the father first to go.

A black mob was walking toward them along the wire corridor. One of their number lagged behind with a slight limp.

Jamieson steeled herself for the walk to come, wondering how best to soften the experience for the boy.

The last of their number was praying. Sophay stood still and quiet, seemingly wrapped in calm, her eyes closed. Nick held Tyrel’s hand and both were praying earnestly. The remaining fifteen or so were people whose names Jamieson did not

know and she sadly realized there was no time left in which to become acquainted. At any moment the door would fly open and they would step outside and stand under the hot Re-Earth sun, under a vivid blue sky, for the last time.

Her one regret since the insanity began was her failure to recognize an opportunity in which she might save Tyrel.

When the door did not open on cue, Jamieson looked anxiously out the window and saw the mob pushing its way into the barracks next to theirs. Not long after, people were being forced out into the harsh sunlight. They were starting the extermination process in the barracks next door. Jamieson presumed the disposal of those remaining in the first barracks would be the task of the other mob, yet to make its appearance at the purifier for its return march along the service road.

Hundreds of individuals gone already, perished because they chose to live their lives in a manner foreign to Brunar Martez.

The tailing guard limped past the growing number of prisoners and stopped a short distance from Jamieson's position by the window. He pulled off his boot, fussed over the toe of his sock, put the boot back on and retied the lace.

Jamieson pressed her face closer to the bars. "Full summer's heat has come early this year."

The guard gave her a sidelong glance. "If this keeps up the purifiers might see action in the coming weeks."

"The last time on record was over fifty years ago, wasn't it?" Jamieson asked, to further draw the guard into conversation.

He pulled a face and adjusted his sweat stained cap, pushing it backward on his head.

"Makes no difference when it was. We're safer here than those in the north. The Elman Heights are the lowest land mass bordering the sea. They don't act as a sufficient barrier to the sea gas."

"Didn't the first settlers die because of the gas?"

"They did. Most were gassed in their sleep. So up go the purifiers all around New State. A waste of resources – resources that could have been better employed to improve conditions for those in the south."

Jamieson looked seaward. "There's no hill range here to block the gas moving inland."

The man chuckled and showed his discoloured teeth in a lopsided smile.

“We’re on high ground here. You’ll soon get a good view of what keeps us safe.”

His callous tone chilled Jamieson. She disliked talking to the hardhearted man, but there was the child to think of. She looked at Tyrel behind her, then out the window at the prisoners from the next barracks being escorted along the wire corridor to the gate. Time was running out. She beckoned the guard closer and he sidestepped nearer.

“There’s a little boy . . .”

The guard’s suspicious eyes flittered past her into the darkness of the room beyond and back to her face.

“I’ve seen him.”

“He’s only seven years old.”

The guard shrugged. “Nothing I can do whether he’s seven or sixty. It’ll soon be over. Nothing to get excited about. Do what you’re supposed to when the time comes. Some of ’em have been a bit stubborn. We’ve had to make examples of them by not shooting ’em before they go.”

His easy talk of their coming demise weakened Jamieson’s legs. She gripped the bars tighter.

“Surely the child might be spared?”

“If I help a contaminated the controller will get rid of me same way he’s getting rid of you and without a merciful shot. Believe me, it’s not the way I’d choose to go.”

Jamieson nodded. “I understand.”

The guard would not risk his life to save the boy’s. He was immune to their suffering. He had his orders and could as easily kill hundreds of people as sit down to eat a meal. She studied his face, tanned to a dark brown, narrow and near fleshless. The blue eyes glowed, not from the effects of knowing God, she believed, but from walking in the shadow of a darker force.

The huddle of prisoners was being forced through the gate and onto the service road. The other guards were commencing their return march across the rock field.

Jamieson felt her breath come rapidly. Her heart pounded. It would all be over in the next half hour.

She tried not to show her desperation. Such emotion, she was sure, would have the guard turning his back on her and walking away.

“I understand you can’t save the boy. But –”

“What?” The hard eyes narrowed.

The black mob, on its return journey, was halfway across the rock field.

“Can we soften what is to come for the boy in some way?”

The eyes narrowed still further. “What do you mean?”

“When we get there,” she paused and looked at the bank of purifiers, “let the boy be the first, so he’s not aware of what will happen and be unduly fearful. Let him wear a blindfold of some kind.”

The man nodded slowly, thoughtfully.

“It’s not much to ask.”

“Such things can be arranged for a price.”

The calculating eyes settled on the gold cross and chain that hung around her neck.

Jamieson felt physically sick at the man’s use of her affection for a child to gain him profit. Her gaze dropped to the dozen or so crosses already dangling from chains that hung from the guard’s buttoned chest pocket. At least a dozen crosses representing a dozen lives and now he wanted to add her cross to the number.

Jamieson fingered her cross and hesitated in handing it to him. A gift from her husband, it had become a part of her, of her identity. It was the one possession above all others she determined over the years not to part with.

The black mob reached the wire gate. Jamieson watched them walking along the wire corridor, their initial energy already sapped by the scorching morning sun.

She looked down at her cross and at Tyrel and realized she was no less a Christian for the absence of the cross. She pulled the chain over her head and handed it to the guard. He grabbed it from her at the same moment the mob stormed into the barracks.

Time had run out. Jamieson sighed deeply. There would be no tomorrows, no more earthly cares.

“Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; according to Your mercy remember me, for Your goodness’ sake, O Lord.”

She went to Nick and they embraced in silence. She kissed him on the cheek and followed him outside where she kissed and embraced both Sophay and Tyrel and held their hands.

One last walk. They were going home.

## Chapter Sixteen

*Greetings friends.*

*It is our sad duty at Re-Earth Media to inform you that the 'true Christians' will not change their ways. The Government has given them every possible opportunity during their stay at Nrocks Prison to accept a thorough integration into our Re-Earth society. They will not change their ways. They are contaminated. Something alien within them sets them apart. They are not like us. After long and painful deliberations our esteemed President had no other choice. The planet can no longer sustain those who fight against it. Our President must consider the wellbeing of the majority.*

*The Christian threat is being eliminated.*

\* \* \*

Once again, Sophay found herself at one end of a shoulder-to-shoulder line. Jamieson, positioned towards the middle of the line, held Tyrel's hand. She could hear the widow quietening the boy who did not appreciate the current game playing itself out, although he had enjoyed riding high on Nick's shoulders across the rock field. If not for Nick holding his other hand, Sophay was certain Tyrel would have torn off the dirty cloth acting as a blindfold and seen what no youngster should be permitted to see.

Sophay felt as if she were viewing the world and events through a mental haze in which time and action seemed to have slowed. She considered the peculiar

sensation was the result of a lack of food and water and the heat from the Re-Earth sun blazing down on them. Even standing upright was proving difficult. Her whole body swayed forward.

The short, stout man to her right grabbed hold of her and steadied her.

“Hey, honey, don’t make it easy for them.”

Sophay let loose a gentle, uneven laugh. For some reason she found his words the source of humour. Wing-cams hummed over her head. Still laughing, she reached out and tried to grab one and missed.

Her laughter caught in her throat the moment she looked down.

The tips of her shoes were drawn equal to the edge of the concrete platform which extended out from the side of the cliff, not by man’s design, but by nature’s. Far below lay the lugubrious Gratner Ocean. It was a long way down and through the shifting gas cloud, floating on the surface of the green-black liquid, appearing as nothing more than specs, were the bodies of those who had already met their fate. The liquid, heavier than water, would hold the corpses suspended for a time. Slowly, it would envelope them, until they sank beneath the surface to melt in the toxic substance.

Sophay shivered when she heard the prison guard’s heavy tread behind her. Laser gun in hand, he stopped when he came to the blindfolded boy.

“What’s happening? I don’t like this game, Jamieson.” Tyrel squirmed to free himself of the adults’ hold. “When can I take the blindfold off? I want to see where we are.”

Jamieson could not speak to answer the boy. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

Nick spoke in her stead. “Be patient, Tyrel, not much longer now. You’ll soon see a wonderful place when we get to a much better place than this.”

The guard raised the laser gun barrel equal with the back of the child’s head.

““And the act of violence is in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood,”” the stout man beside her murmured.

Their deaths would be an impersonal affair, their murders performed by merciless men who lived their lives according to different principles. Sophay was grateful for that. It made for stable hands and precise shots.

“I am REP. You’ll do what I say,” Brunar Martez yelled into his mo-com.

“And I’m the controller of Nrocks prison. In this matter the safety of my men comes first. No more prisoner transports, Brunar.”

“Why ever not?”

“The prison population got wind of the extermination in progress.”

“They were bound to sooner or later.”

“Brunar, we’ve had to stop sympathetic factions from starting a full-blown riot. So no more Christians!”

Brunar Martez sat back in his seat and looked out the transport window while he considered the controller’s argument. Carmel City the day after his live appearance on Re-Earth Media was recovering slowly from its bruises. A few corpses still lay in unnatural poses out on the streets. The scent of violence lingered in the air. People wandered through the streets in a daze, some with open wounds. Martez almost felt as if he were back home in the Keel slum.

Smashed glass crackled under the special tyres of the presidential transport. He contemplated the results of the previous night’s mayhem with an intense satisfaction. Citizens responsible for the death of Christians were now linked with him on a profound level. Linked through the act of bloodletting.

“So, how is the extermination proceeding?” he asked glibly.

The controller growled in frustration. “Slow. Too slow. Instead of taking them in groups to be exterminated, we’ve resorted to one long line from the barracks to the extermination site. They accept their fate. None have tried to run from it.”

“Their God gives them false hope and must surely desert them at the end.” Martez huffed his contempt for the Christians. “Not even a struggle. Their God does not have the power to save them.”

“No more prisoner transports, Brunar. Nrocks will not accept any more. There must be a faster way to get rid of the problem.”

“Perhaps there is.”

A new plan forming in his mind, Brunar ended the connection.

\* \* \*

Members of Martez’s security force were again patrolling Personal Space Building number 5130. Roo Gylespie heard the harsh commands and the heavy foot-fall

invading the corridor. They were coming closer, moving steadily along the corridor toward his family's personal space. His anxiety growing, he stood up from the couch and stared at the door, his heart beating rapidly. They would have the anti-Christian devices with them, scanning each personal space to locate the 'true Christians'.

His wife must have heard them too. He sensed her presence and smelt the faint, sweet perfume of her freshly washed hair when she came to stand beside him. He wrapped a protective arm round her and drew her closer. One by one his five children appeared around them and clung to him and his wife. Not daring to speak, he stared at the door as they did. Listening. Waiting for the device to give its verdict. Wondering whether today would be the day the device wrenched apart their family unit.

Ever since the device rejected him outside Bright Light Church, Roo Gylespie realised he had been living in fear. The stress and fear of existing in the new Re-Earth culture being shaped by Brunar Martez had bowed his shoulders. His gaunt face with its eyes heavy from insufficient sleep stared back at him in the mirror when he shaved. Nowadays, fear was his closest companion, not his wife and not God.

When the security patrol passed by without incident, Gylespie dropped onto the couch, his legs weak. The danger past, his children suddenly scattered light-hearted, laughing and chattering to resume their activities. His wife headed for the utilities bench.

"I can't go on living like this," Gylespie admitted in a faint, thin voice.

His wife stopped in her tracks and stood still and quiet for a time as if pondering his words. She turned and crossed the room to sit next to him.

Gylespie felt empty and alone in his desperation to regain a semblance of the former life he once knew. The recent rapid changes within Re-Earth society left him mentally battling with God and the principles upon which his former life had been propped. Nowadays, his behaviours, extending from a state of mind balancing on fear, were affecting the way his entire family lived their lives.

He looked at his wife and saw the deep concern for him burning in her alert eyes. His inability to control his rampant fear was pinching her face and stealing her beauty.

Gylespie picked up her hand, out of her lap, and held it tightly on his thigh. “You’ve been patient with me.”

Her hand squeezed his. “We all need time to adjust. After everything that has happened, the bans, the riots, the patrols, I’m just happy we’re all safe and together.”

Gylespie kissed the captured hand. “It’s the enforced isolation and not being able to gather with others at Bright Light. I miss the worship, the fellowship. I miss them all. I wonder if one of us will be arrested and taken to Nrocks. You’ve seen what’s happening to the Christians. What a tyrant! What a fiend Martez must be to feed their suffering, their last moments of life through Re-Earth Media for casual entertainment!”

His wife nodded, her sadness evident in her eyes. “Everyday I’ve thanked God the device rejects you. What would we do without you? Those who don’t follow our faith are unaware of the strength and support that comes from being part of a family unit, because they don’t live as families as we do. And we’re still a family, Roo. God has kept us together, protected us. In these chaotic times that is surely a miracle.”

As Gylespie pondered his wife’s words, he felt the heaviness lift from his spirit. God in His wisdom had kept him from harm so he might be the husband and father his family required. God in His mercy gave him favour so he might continue to raise his children.

Frowning, Gylespie looked at two of his children imitating the security guards on patrol, their young faces contorting into bitter and mean expressions.

“I’ve been putting myself first instead of God and my family,” he said to his wife. “You should have said something, drawn my attention to it.”

“In the state you’ve been in you wouldn’t have heard me if I had. You needed time to arrive at that conclusion yourself. But you’re back with us again, Roo. I feel it.”

Gylespie nodded. “Yes, I’m back. I should never have let the contagion, the blackness Martez is spreading envelope me.”

He stood up and clapped his hands. “No more playing that game, you two.”

He would ensure his children had more appropriate role models than the security officers who frequented the corridors.

“It’s time we prayed again as a family,” he announced.

His wife, for the first time in a long while, smiled brightly and gathered the children together while Gylespie fetched his electronic book pad and brought the Bible on to the screen. They sat on the floor in a tight circle.

Fear, Gylespie determined, would not stop him from living a Christian life. He kissed his wife on the cheek and sent a quiet prayer of gratitude to God that his wife was at his side.

His eldest son crossed his arms and scowled in protest. "But our prayers don't count."

"Why not?" Gylespie asked.

"Because the anti-Christian devices don't pick up our prayers. Everyone says the prayers of the rejecteds are empty and powerless. And we don't have aliens inside us to give us the power of faith. The devices say so. We're not Christians."

"We would let man, through his technology, define what it means to be Christian?" Gylespie smiled and ruffled his son's hair. "Like you, I've been doing the exact same thing by allowing the device to defeat my beliefs."

In his mind's eye, he saw the devices, installed by security officers on every floor of Personal Space Building 5130, just as they had been installed in every personal space building in Carmel City. High on the wall, they represented Martez's growing power and the oppression of a minority group within Re-Earth society. There they were on the wall when he passed by on his way to work where colleagues who once ate lunch with him now laughed and jeered at him. There they were on the wall when he returned home, alert to private actions deemed unacceptable by Martez, and all the while protected by the aura of fear they spread.

No one dare tamper with them. To do so meant death for every person on the floor. Stories of such slaughter filled Carmel City gossip-vines.

Gylespie put the book pad on the floor in the centre of the circle and clasped the hands of family members sitting on each side of him. Everyone followed his lead.

He looked from one expectant face to the next.

"We *are* going to pray. And we'll keep praying every day. Remember, we're not praying to a device, but to God. And God alone is our Lord and Master."

## Chapter Seventeen

Pete used his electronics knowledge to bypass the security system to the luxurious Boa Mountains estate. He climbed over the high outer wire fence and ran to the lower secondary fence and clambered over. The multi-space, made from hand-chiselled Boa-bricks, lay on the top of a rise, its four stories taking advantage of the excellent views. Only a few lights shone from its windows. The other real glass windows reflected the light from Xertor or the glow from Carmel City.

Pete ran up the barren slope. Reaching the multi, he jogged the length of the path heading toward the back of the property. He stepped round the corner and behind a Yanz-Yeng plant, its thick, rough stem, wider than a man. From his vantage point, he scanned the multi and found his target without difficulty.

One ground floor room, many times the size of his duo-space, was lit up as bright as a Re-Earth day. Inside, a man poured himself a drink and strolled to the couch. He sat with his back to the open glass doors. They exposed him to the crisp night air that settled over the Boa Mountains at night. The air was heavy with the scent of the zee-tops that were already withering in the early summer's heat.

Pete pulled the handgun from a jacket pocket and walked the short distance to the open doorway. He raised the gun and aimed it at the back of the man's head. Untameable emotions lashed at him and scratched at each other. More than anything, they coaxed him to pull the trigger so the man might die as the Christians were dying at Nrocks prison.

As Sophay had died. A single shot through the back of the head.

“Hello, son.”

The deep, calm voice startled Pete out of a black haze. He had thought his presence undetected.

Daniel Ford twisted in his seat. With steely eyes, he looked from the gun to Pete's face. The weapon seemed to make no impression on him.

"In your eagerness to pay me a visit, you missed the secondary security system. But I'm glad you've come, Pete. I've been trying to locate you. We have to talk."

Pete stepped into the multi-space and moved round the couch to stand in front of his father.

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Then you had better listen."

Distracted by the large space, Pete looked round the room. After living for so long in cramped conditions, he felt ill at ease in the ample space. Something he had taken for granted when growing up.

His father gestured toward the easy chairs. "Take a seat. We have to talk. It's important."

Pete remained where he was, the gun aimed at his father's face. A face changed by time and yet familiar still. He felt numb, lost, alone. The boy in him had run home to be with his father at a time of great pain. The adult man wanted revenge.

"She's dead."

Ford looked startled. "Dead?"

"I saw her standing in the line. I saw her on Re-Earth Media. You killed her. You killed them all! I'm going to kill you --"

"Pete, listen to me, Sophay is not dead."

"How do you know her name? How do you know she's not dead? I saw her at Nrocks prison. On the wall screen. I saw them killed --"

"No! You didn't." Ford leaned forward in his seat. "Think, Pete."

Pete shook his head in his attempt to remember the news story. "She nearly toppled into the Gratner without the blessing of a laser shot. The man next to her saved her. The wing-cam moved forward when she did. I saw what she saw through the gas. She's dead because of you."

"No, Pete. Not Sophay. And not the boy. They survived."

Sophay was alive.

After seeing her at the brink of death, Pete was having difficulty believing the new reality. He remembered saying his 'good-byes' to kind-hearted Jamieson, to the strangers as one by one he watched them fall to the Gratner. He had turned away, unable to endure the scene. He could not watch Sophay being executed. Instead, he had run to the hygiene space and vomited into the toilet.

But Sophay had somehow survived.

He stepped forward, the gun pointing at his father. Brunar Martez, the device, the needless death of Christians, the degeneration of New State, none of it was important to him anymore. Not without Sophay safe at his side.

"If she's alive, where is she?"

Ignoring the gun, Ford rose from the couch and walked to the drinks cabinet. He held up his empty glass to Pete.

"You want one?"

Pete shook his head and watched his father pour himself another drink. He seemed old, weary and disillusioned, not the proud, arrogant man Pete remembered.

"Where is she?"

Pete stepped closer. He felt as desperate as he had been when, as a teenager, he had attempted to reach out to a father who had shunned his new found faith.

But this time his father would listen to him.

"Where is Sophay? Answer me!"

Ford gulped down half his drink, filled the glass again and with rounded shoulders, resumed his seat.

"Sources tell me Sophay and the boy were spirited out of Nrocks by a prison guard and were held in Keel. I thought I might locate her. Hide her here. But it seems the REP is interested in your fiancée also." His penetrating gaze settled on Pete's face. "Any reason why that would be the case?"

"No idea. None whatsoever. Why would he want her? Where is she now?"

His gun hand shook uncontrollably. He held it with both hands in an attempt to keep it steady.

Ford gulped back the remainder of his drink and placed the thick crystal glass on the padded chair arm.

A lack of sleep and too many hours without connecting with God left Pete feeling overwrought. He wanted, needed answers from his father. The calm that

held back impulsive behaviour was vanquished. He stepped forward and slapped his father across the face.

“Tell me! Where is she?”

At the sudden blow, Ford’s hand knocked the glass off the chair arm. It hit the soft, deep carpet and lay on its side. In that moment, for all his power and wealth, for all the space he commanded, Daniel Ford looked vulnerable sitting on the couch, like a child taking a beating from a bully.

Pete stepped back, ashamed of his behaviour. His gun arm dropped to his side. The crazy, dizzy heights that had given him reckless energy dissipated, leaving him weary. He sank into an easy chair. Already his act of violence convicted him.

“I’m sorry.”

Ford touched his red cheek and moved his jaw from side to side.

“It’s me that’s sorry, Pete. All those years ago I let my pride destroy my precious relationship with my boy. I let neglect steal the life from your mother. When I had finished with her I cast her back into Carmel . . .” He covered his mouth with his hand, as if trying to hold back unpleasant information.

A moment later, having regained control of himself, he took his hand away.

“Lately, I’ve been feeling things inside. So many things. So much regret. Emptiness.” He lifted his chin to look round the room. “All this space and no one to share it with.” He paused, a sorry-looking man. “I thought I could outsmart Brunar, but I couldn’t. Together, perhaps we can.”

Pete looked out the open doors into the darkness. The chill air penetrated his clothing. The cloying smell from the dying flowers teased his nostrils. He watched his father lean forward, pick up the fallen glass and place it on a low table.

“My sources tell me Brunar holds Sophay and the boy captive somewhere in Carmel.”

“Why would the REP want Sophay?”

“That’s what my sources can’t tell me and what concerns me. But she’s alive. So is the boy. From what I’m told, both are unharmed.”

His anger quick to surface, Pete jumped to feet. “Unharmed? Unharmed, you say?”

He pulled the stolen device out of a pocket and threw it at his father.

“You’re responsible for what’s happening,” Pete yelled. “Your company designed the devices. Hundreds of innocent people, good, decent people, are dying because of you.”

“You think I don’t know that –”

“I want the plans for the device!” Pete aimed the gun at his father.

“Pete, please! Listen to me –”

“There has to be a way to prevent the device from detecting Christians. It’s the only way I’ll be able to get close enough to Sophay to –”

“Now you’re thinking, son. I can do a lot to help.”

Ignoring the gun, Ford rose to his feet and crossed the room to a high wall shelf. He pulled a chair close to the shelf and stood on the seat to retrieve a mundane trinket box.

Pete joined his father at the desk. Ford placed the box on the desktop and opened it as if it were a precious item.

Pete stared at the pendants inside the box.

“I’ve no need for jewellery.”

“They’re far more than pieces of jewellery. This is why I’ve been trying to locate you.” His dull eyes red and tired, he looked at Pete. “You have to believe me, son. It made sense to remain at FET. I could keep track on what Martez was up to.”

“You must have known what he was capable of doing.”

“I didn’t. But I’ve been able to design a counter-device.”

“Something to outsmart Martez’s selection toy?”

“That’s right.” Ford looked into the box.

“You mean, these pendants?”

Ford smiled. “What you see here is my need to regain a little of the power Martez stripped from me. I admit I was his willing accomplice at first.”

Pete shook his head. “His smooth lines are believable, only if you don’t stop to think on them.”

“He played my weaknesses against me, son. As time went by, I saw what type of man he really is.”

“He’s unpredictable. He’ll do anything to gain control of Re-Earth.”

“He wants to annihilate the Christians, Pete. That’s his aim at present. My name on Old Earth has more clout than his and there are parts of the device that

must be sourced from Old Earth. They can't be manufactured here. That's why he kept me alive; as a figurehead for FET, why I haven't disappeared as so many have."

With slow, deliberate movements, Ford laid the pendants in a line on the desk.

"These pendants are made from punotar, a rare metal found deep underground at only one mine in the mining region in south New State – the Tdelt Mine," he said.

Pete placed the gun on the desk and picked up one of the pendants. At the end of a plain chain hung an oval piece of punotar, about the size of the first segment of his index finger, beaten to the thinness of a strand of human hair. One side of the punotar, coloured a dull, grey-pink, was painted with a scene from a popular tourist spot in the Boa Mountains. Other pendants depicted pictures of zee-tops, well-known buildings or other scenic spots. The pendants gave the impression they were nothing more than pieces of cheap jewellery space-tourists might purchase as a remembrance of their time on Re-Earth.

"There are only six. I dare not create more. Martez has spies everywhere. I might have been discovered."

Pete stared at his father in disbelief.

"Are you telling me that if I wear this flimsy thing it'll stop the device from registering me as a contaminated?"

Ford looked like a man who, at long last, with most of his life behind him, had finally done the right thing. He placed a hand on Pete's shoulder.

"I am. And these are for you."

Pete could not believe his good fortune. Now he would be able to move round New State without being detected. He would be able to get to Sophay. Save her. Pete looked from the pendant to his father.

"But every Christian needs one."

"And that's the problem. I've been planning how I can fit out a warehouse to make more pendants without Martez being any the wiser. But I need people I can trust."

For the first time since hearing of Martez's latest bans, Pete felt hope. In this multi high above Carmel City, he dared to raise his thoughts and praise to God.

He swept up five of the pendants in his hand and placed them into a zip fastened pocket. The sixth pendant he slipped over his head. The punotar settled flat and ice cold against his skin, out of view under his top.

His father slammed the lid of the trinket box shut. At the same time, a rapid knock sounded against the door. Not waiting to be given admittance, a young man blundered into the room. His quick eye movements and strained expression, the fingers raking through his hair were enough to alert Pete to his distress.

“Pete, this is my assistant, Tad.”

“You’re his son.” Tad smiled weakly. “We’ve been trying to find you.”

Ford hurried to the young man’s side.

“Tad, what’s wrong? What’s happened?”

“It’s Martez.”

“What’s he done now?”

“Sir, he’s announced an amnesty for the Christians.”

“Amnesty?”

“Christians have until tomorrow evening to get out of Carmel City before an all out hunt commences to cleanse the city of Christians once and for all.”

“This is it, a complete purge.”

“Any Christian detected after the amnesty expires will be crucified on the purifiers on Elman Heights.”

Ford spread his arms wide. “But that’s good, isn’t it? At least he’s not butchering them at Nrocks.”

Tad, white faced, shook his head. “There’s only one place he’ll allow the Christians to go, sir – into the Dredden Desert.”

\* \* \*

Her hands were bound behind her back, her legs at the ankles. Tyrel, likewise bound, sat on the pew beside her, propped against her, asleep, whimpering. Responsibility for the boy’s well-being since his separation from Jamieson now rested with her.

“Shhh. It’s all right, Tyrel. Nrocks is far, far away. We’re safe. Quietly, quietly. Everything will be all right, Tyrel. Everything will be all right.”

The nightmares visited him every time he shut his eyes. Sophay hoped her soothing words would quieten the boy in his sleep, but he let out an anguished cry.

She imaged his utterance corresponded to the moment Ballend, the prison guard and their saviour, ripped the blindfold off the boy's eyes. The precise moment Tyrel saw Jamieson shot and falling to the Gratner far below.

The stories of Old Earth said the moon tugged the oceans toward and away from the many land masses. As she admired the simple stain glass window at the front of the church, highlighted by the light of Xertor, she wondered what the bottom of the Gratner Ocean would be like. She wondered at the power of God to part the Red Sea on Old Earth and what such power could do to assist the persecuted on Re-Earth. Perhaps it was His unawareness of their plight that resulted in the Christians dying at Nrocks . . .

Sophay squeezed her eyes shut. Doubt, subtle doubt, insidious and destructive doubt crept into her thoughts with more regularity since Ballend aided their escape from Nrocks. Prayer would quieten her mind and bring the inner peace she craved. But she could not pray. Although two of the three security officers dozed at strategic locations inside the church, and a third sat alert several pews behind them, all three of their anti-Christian devices were aimed at the prisoners.

Tyrel stirred beside her and leaned back in the pew.

“Where did the dream end this time, Tyrel?”

He yawned and blinked, his eyes drawn to the stain glass window depicting the crucifixion scene.

“Ballend leading us into the purifier.”

Little by little, each time he dreamed the dream his mind was moving him beyond the moment of Jamieson's death. Soon he would view the complete episode of their journey to the church instead of halting and stumbling on the tragedy occurring at Nrocks.

She smiled down at him to encourage and comfort him.

“And we spent the day hidden in the purifier engine room, and when night came, Ballend came for us and took us out of Nrocks.” After hours spent listening to the *zaamp* of laser gun fire, each burst representing another life lost. “And where did we go?”

“To Ballend's mother's space. Then the security officers came and arrested us.”

Sophay looked up at the coloured glass and remembered the terror that followed. Thankfully, the officers took Tyrel out of the elderly woman's space before they killed both mother and son.

“Why can't we go home?”

“I'm not sure, Tyrel. But we're not at Nrocks and that is surely a good thing.”

The door of the church opened and Sophay turned to see a tall, broad-shouldered man stride inside. She knew who he was immediately. So did Tyrel. They had seen his image on Re-Earth Media often enough. Tyrel grew excited and squirmed on the pew to get a better view of the advancing man.

Without a sound, Brunar Martez walked along the aisle toward them, his eyes not leaving them. He came to a standstill a short distance away from them, looking down at them.

“It's President Martez. He's come to rescue us!”

“Somehow, I don't think so, Tyrel.”

With the wave of a hand, the REP ordered an officer to free the prisoners from their bindings. He ordered the Christians to stand up against the altar and laughed.

“Two Christians ready to be sacrificed.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Motane looked out the window of the purifier engine room. A patch of rose-green light showed on the horizon. The sun was rising.

He spun on his heel to face the swarm of engineers below him.

“Get a move on! We’re running out of time. Till early afternoon at the most, people.”

“The engine’s been reset,” the chief engineer called back.

“Start the thing, then. Start it now, for crying out loud! Do you know how many Re-Earthers are depending on us? Four million may end up dead because you can’t get this old piece of rubbish technology to work!”

His heart pounding, Motane ran to the edge of the metal gantry. His hands gripped the metal railing as he looked down on the underground engine room. The chief engineer depressed two green buttons simultaneously. Everyone looked up at the ceiling and imaged – willed – the great fins of the purifier above to start rotating.

His impatience getting the better of him, Motane clambered down the rungs of the narrow stairway, his footsteps on metal loud in the busy silence. He ran to the chief engineer’s side.

“I can’t hear anything. We’re supposed to hear it, right?”

The engineer ignored him and yelled orders to his staff. Some ran from one side of the room to the other to check consoles. Others called back crisp, curt replies that had figures flying fast and furious through the air. All of them went straight over the top of Motane’s head. Not an engineer, he had no idea if the situation was saveable or not.

Soon the sun would be high enough to heat the Gratner and more of the dangerous gas would be generated. He pulled out his mo-com and brought up the time. The REP expected a report by mid-morning. He closed the mo-com and chewed on his bottom lip.

One piece of equipment he understood. He moved to the antiquated security camera system that pointed some of its old-fashioned security eyes at the Gratner Ocean, on the seaward side of the Elman Heights. He fine tuned the screen image that showed the gas precariously close to the top of the Heights. By his calculations, the gas would reach the top of the Elman Heights by early afternoon and start flooding the Carmel Basin soon after.

Motane swore under his breath. In his opinion, the REP should have warned the residents of Carmel that a gas flood was pending, the likes of which had not been experienced since the first pioneers settled the Basin. At least that would have given most of the population time to get to the high ground of the Boa Mountains.

“The REP is adamant these purifiers will do the job they’re meant to.” Motane spoke so everyone in the room could hear him. “He sees no need to panic the population of Carmel by advising them of an event that is, in his esteemed opinion, highly unlikely to take place.”

Motane looked at the set of screens showing images of Carmel. Thousands of lights showed through windows representing thousands of people who were going about their daily lives unaware of the threat right on their backdoor step. Many would be overtaken by the gas as it crept along the streets, through gaps, round doors and through open windows. Thousands would be left stranded in the higher levels of the taller buildings and on rooftops, where the gas wouldn’t reach.

“I must report to the REP whether or not you can get the purifiers to work.”

The chief engineer looked up from the sheet of figures in front of him.

“Tell him it’s not working at present and we have no idea what the problem is. Suggest to him, as a precaution, that it’s about time he evacuates the Basin.”

Looking at the screen, Motane watched the Christians who were already exiting Carmel. He swore. “At this rate, only Christians will be left alive.”

Pete drove the luxury vehicle along the roads of West Carmel. With slow, deliberate movements his father, sitting beside him, closed his mo-com and sat back in the seat to stare out the window. During the brief connection, Brunar Martez had done most of the talking, as he had for the last two connections. Pete expected one of his father's informants to tell them of Sophay's location. In the end, it was Brunar Martez who was leading them to her, but in a roundabout fashion.

"Take the next left."

Pete did as his father instructed and turned the sleek six-door transport into a wide road. Personal space buildings loomed on either side. Ahead, the sun's rays were breaking over the Elman Heights. If the day was anything like the last, the Basin would again swelter under record breaking temperatures.

"Is he playing games with us again? There was nobody at the Cathedral. The FET warehouse was empty. Where is she supposed to be now? Back in Keel?"

"Pete, relax. This is typical Martez. This is what he does. He's playing with us."

His father sounded too calm for Pete's liking.

"Turn right."

Pete opened his mouth to speak, but Ford spoke first.

"Look, I don't like this any more than you do. It's frustrating. It's diabolical. But you have to play the game if you want to see Sophay alive again. Understand?"

Pete nodded, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"Go straight to the end of the road and take a sharp left. We're going to Star Church. You know it?"

"Yeah, it's a small, isolated church on the outskirts of West Carmel. A scant wooded area on one side, open land on three sides --"

"The sort of place Martez would keep a prisoner, don't you think?"

Pete made no comment. Soon the amnesty would come to an end and Christians would once again become open game for anyone with a grudge. He wanted to get Sophay out of the Carmel Basin before then.

Already there were signs of Christians leaving the city. Many were taking advantage of the cooler hours of the morning to make the trek. Some walked with suitcases, others with backpacks. Others drove transports packed with material possessions that Pete knew at a glance would give no protection from the Dredden's extreme conditions. Young children clung to their parents and to water bottles and

favourite toys. He turned down the volume on the Re-Earth Media news report that echoed the exodus scene playing itself out just beyond the windows of their transport.

“He says Sophay is still alive. He thinks I’m responsible for getting her out of Nrocks.”

“You didn’t.”

“And, what’s more, I don’t know who did.” Ford shook his head and folded his arms. “He’s calling me a Christian sympathizer. He wants me to kill Sophay and the boy to prove otherwise and so save my own skin.”

Their eyes met. Ford was the first to look away.

At the end of the road, Pete took a right instead.

Their eyes met again.

“Relax, dad, I’ve got an idea. We’re going to add a little surprise to the game. Martez isn’t going to have it all his own way.”

Not long after, Pete was running fast through the wooded area connected to Star Church. It was not as dense in growth as the one that once was connected to Bright Light. He covered ground quickly and easily.

Nearing the outskirts of the wood, he slowed and watched his father’s transport arrive outside the church. It glided to a stop close to another sleek transport. Ford got out of the driver’s seat. A lone security officer approached the vehicle and escorted him toward the church’s front entrance and inside the wooden structure.

Pete scanned the area for security officers and seeing none, ran across the narrow strip of open ground that lay between the wood and the church. As he walked along the side of the building, he heard the church door close and assumed the officer had exited the building to take up his post at the front entrance once more.

He poked his head round the corner of the church and to his dismay, came face-to-visor with the officer.

As the officer was levelling his laser gun ready to shoot, Pete knocked the helmet off the man’s head and punched the bearded face.

He attempted to snatch the gun from his opponent, but the officer kept a tight grip on the weapon. Pete would not let go either. They started dancing an odd

dance together while fighting to gain possession of the gun. At times risking a one-handed hold on the weapon to throw punches.

Pete manoeuvred them away from the front entrance, into the graveyard, fearing those inside the church might hear their tussle. The officer was a fraction heavier and taller than Pete. In among the gravestones, he shoved Pete up against the flat, tall concrete base of a statue. The laser gun started turning on Pete to aim its trajectory at his chin. All the while the angel on top of its pedestal looked down at them with wings open wide and blank eyes.

Thinking fast, Pete let go of the weapon, stepped round and behind the man and shoved him hard against the concrete. The officer's head hit a sharp edge of the pedestal and he slumped to the ground.

Stunned by what had happened, Pete stood as still as the statue above him and stared at the body.

Life returning to his limbs, he bent over the officer to find a pulse. There was none.

An uncontrollable shaking took hold of Pete's body. He covered his face with his hands and sank to the ground, his back against the pedestal, his knees drawn up tight to his chest.

The angel had witnessed him killing a man, and so had God.

He looked up at the sky. For the first time in his life he felt a great, empty gap, a void between him and God. Saddened, he hid his face from the staring angel.

He thought of Jarris and the unconscionable way he had treated the man. How he had been too quick to judge by sight alone. How he had kept the man an outsider. How he had not let his trust settle on the new Christian.

Getting to his feet, he wandered in a daze through the graveyard. His pride disintegrating, he fell to his knees and prayed.

\* \* \*

"Now the pleasantries are over and done with, Daniel, and you have met the woman who was to be your daughter-in-law, it's time you prove your loyalty. I want you to shoot her."

Brunar Martez, looking sly, held out his large hand, palm upward. On it balanced a small hand gun.

Ford was tempted to grab the gun and aim it at Martez, but was aware of the three security officers within the church, each with their guns trained on him. Instead, he ignored the weapon presented to him and looked the slim, young woman up and down from head to toe. She stood in front of the altar, an arm round the boy's shoulders.

"I don't know her."

Brunar Martez laughed. "Of course you do. I saw your reaction at my estate when I showed you images of the contaminateds at Bright Light."

"Any man would look at her twice. She's a beautiful woman."

Martez raised his eyebrows. "Ah! But no one in their right mind would chase all over the city to save a contaminated unless there was a good reason. Nor would they risk stealing her away from Nrocks."

"I had nothing to do with that. Sorry, Sophay, I wish I could say otherwise, but my resources and contacts don't reach into the prison."

"That's all right, Daniel, really. At least we got out. Please, tell me, is Pete all right? Is he safe?"

"He's safe, and you and the boy will be too."

Wide-eyed, the boy looked from the gun to Ford.

"I don't want to go to heaven. I want to go home. I want my mummy and daddy. Please, can I go home?"

"That's why I'm here, Tyrel, to take you to your parents."

Ford turned to Martez. "The reason I'm here, Brunar, is the amnesty. No violence toward Christians, remember? They are free to leave the Carmel Basin. *She* is free to leave. I will not break the amnesty. And that is the true test here today, is it not? Whether I will keep your commandments."

The church filled with the REP's laughter.

"Yar! Such a wonderful way with words!"

Suddenly, the laughter stopped and the smile disappeared from the REP's face.

"I've enjoyed our verbal parries over the years, Daniel. I don't know how you managed it, but you got her out of Nrocks. Your little secret! Ballend did the dirty work. But I can't believe he was your contact at Nrocks. So who was it? As you can imagine, the prison controller is not a happy man. Rasten wants to skin you alive in one of the underground cells to make you talk."

“You monster! You had Ballend and his mother killed!” Sophay yelled.

Martez strode toward her and struck her hard across the face.

“Keep your mouth shut, Christian!”

The force of the blow had Sophay falling to the floor. Ford ran to her and helped her to her feet.

Tyrel started crying. Sophay hugged him close. Martez glared at her, his face close to hers.

“Rasten wants you back, little lady. You’ve left Dredden dust on his face. Made him the laughing stock of Nrocks and Keel. There’ll be a surge of prison escapes now. All because of you. If he had his way, your ending wouldn’t be the Gratner. Just be thankful I saw you as easy bait to lure,” he poked a finger at Ford’s chest, “him out into the open to expose him for what he is. A filthy Christian sympathizer.”

“Like I said, Brunar, I had nothing to do with it.”

Martez’s eyes narrowed as they settled on Ford. “You have proved yourself to be a traitor and you will go to Nrocks to atone for your sins.”

“And the bulk of Christians will go into the Dredden, so the Dredden can finish them off for you. Bravo, Brunar! How convenient!”

The sly look returned. “Ah! there’s far more than the Dredden to finish ’em off. How I despise Christians and any person who associates with them. They’re dangerous, dangerous people, Daniel. I thought you realized that. They spread an ancient alien theology to bind us to them and release alien powers to shape the world as their master sees fit. I shall rid Re-Earth of the contamination if it’s the last thing I do.”

He looked round the chapel.

“So, where is that son of yours? I want him to see his father kill a Christian, his very own fiancée. I presume Pete was the one the city cameras picked up driving your transport through the streets of Carmel earlier. Not your usual chauffeur.”

Martez turned to the three guards. “Search outside and keep searching until you find him. He’ll be there somewhere. Keep your wits about you.”

Martez sat sideways on the edge of a pew, his long legs sprawled into the aisle, his eyes resting on Sophay.

“Daughter-in-law. A quaint, ancient term associated with Christians, because Christians are the only ones who marry these days.” He looked round the church

and threw his arms wide. “Ah! Daniel! Now there are no witnesses to the deed! I’m being as fair as I can. Now you can kill the Christians and save yourself.”

Ford knew the REP had no intention of handing over the gun, not while he was outnumbered and the security officers were outside.

Martez looked at the gun in his hand and chuckled. “But I’m guessing you’ll refuse to do my bidding.”

“You guessed right, Brunar. Not while the amnesty holds.”

“Then she’ll go to the Lec Scientific Outpost with the boy when the summer gas has dissipated. She’ll be experimental fodder for the scientists there. They’ll study them closely to learn more about the alien within. They won’t be gentle.”

Ford noticed Sophay draw the boy close. A red mark was showing on her cheek where she had been hit. She was trying not to cry, he guessed for the boy’s sake. But a lone tear leaked out of an eye and over the red skin.

The front door creaked open and Ford turned to see the three guards escorting his son into the church and up the aisle. He looked tired and defeated.

“Pete!”

Sophay ran to Pete and they hugged.

The boy, looking scared, ran to Ford’s side and, crying, clung to him. Ford put an arm round him and tried to quieten him. Not far from him, Martez draped an arm over the back of the pew and watched the family reunion.

\* \* \*

Motane stood transfixed, staring at the security screen. Over the last few hours he had watched the gas grow thicker over the Gratner. Now the gas level was rising once more. The chief engineer was about to turn away, but Motane engaged him in conversation.

“I thought the purifiers were serviced on an annual basis by your people.”

The chief engineer picked up his electronic clipboard. “They are. This is the crucial bank of purifiers for the Carmel Basin and a great deal of care is given them. But, for some unknown reason, they’re not working. Absolutely everything checks out, yet they’re not working. To be honest, we have no idea why they’re playing up.”

Motane held up a chart. “According to this, they were checked last month and all the purifiers in this bank fired up as they should.”

“We can’t explain it. They should be working, and they’re not.”

“It’s far too late to evacuate the city in an orderly manner. Once word gets out there will be pandemonium.”

The engineer shrugged his shoulders. “That’s got nothing to do with me. I’ve enough trouble to deal with here. If you’re going to leave, I suggest you leave now. In about ten minutes I’ll be ordering a complete shutdown. No one will be able to get in or out of this room.”

“You’re staying?” Motane thought of his current partner and children as he looked round the room at the people hard at work.

“We don’t have a choice. We have to get this purifier working to stop the leakage into the Basin. Once the gas level on the Gratner drops –”

“That could be days.”

The engineer showed no emotion. “Once it drops, we must turn this bank of purifiers toward Carmel, adjust their angle, and get as much of the gas out of the Basin as we can.

“You’re talking as if you don’t expect to fix the problem.”

“It’s difficult to fix something when it appears to be in working condition. I’d suggest you get out of here while you can and take a few extra Cabul tablets just in case. Tell the REP to get himself and as many citizens as he can out of Carmel as quick as he can.”

“There’ll be a stampede.”

“Absolute chaos.”

Motane’s eyebrow twitched under his anxiety. “Martez wanted to decrease the population of Carmel. Looks as if he’s going to get his wish en masse. And not just Christians.”

The engineer handed Motane a gas-mask. “In case we’re not successful.”

\* \* \*

Pete hugged Sophay close, kissed her and whispered his love for her in her ear. He registered her bruised eye and brushed a finger over the red, hot skin of her cheek.

Her eyes were brimming with tears, but she was smiling at him, her eyes filled with love and trust.

A security officer dragged her away from him and he was pushed forward and came to stand next to Ford.

His eyes met his father's. He saw the concern, the myriad questions. He knew his own eyes were red from salty tears and he looked down at the floor, ashamed at having failed those who had depended on him for their freedom, their lives.

Martez got to his feet, wedged the gun in his belt and ordered one of his men to hand him an anti-Christian device. He held up the small, black device between two fingers for everyone to see.

"This will decide what happens to your son, Daniel. Will it be Nrocks with you or the Lec Outpost with his sweetheart and the boy?"

Pete watched Martez strolling toward him, the politician's smile suggesting they were friends. The punotar pendant felt cold against his skin. He fought the urge to tear it off his person so he might sway the odds and be with the woman he loved.

He felt his father's hand on his shoulder and heard the whispered message.

"Forget us, son. Save the punotar to save others. Don't let them get hold of the pendants at any cost."

An officer moved closer and sliced the air between them with the barrel of his laser gun to silence them. Pete felt the widening gap as his father stepped away. Outside he could hear the distant anti-Christian chants coming from a mob.

Martez aimed the device at Pete. When it remained silent, he complained that he was not getting a reading. A security officer checked the device and gave instructions.

Martez made adjustments to the device and pointed it at Pete again. He swung to Sophay and pointed the device at her. Instantly, it shrieked in response. He aimed the device at Ford. When he got no reading, he directed it at the boy. A loud shriek filled the church. He swung it back on to Pete.

"Nothing! No alien inside. Looks like the son goes to Nrocks with his father."

There came a commotion from outside the church. Pete heard loud voices and what sounded like the windows of the transports shattering.

“We want more space! Give us more space!” came the chanting. To Pete’s ears many of the protesters sounded drunk and in a cantankerous mood.

A side window of the church shattered. The airborne rock hit a security officer on the helmet.

“Destroy the churches!”

“Death to the Christians. Burn the aliens!”

“Re-Earth for Re-Earthers!”

The security officers turned to face the threat, looking over their shoulders every so often at the REP for instructions. The distraction gave Pete the opportunity to move closer to Sophay. He took one of the pendants out of his jacket pocket and held her hand. He saw his father nod his approval.

Startled, most probably by the coldness of the pendant, Sophay looked at him. With surreptitious movements, Pete showed her the chain around his neck.

“Put it on. Hide it. I’ll explain later.”

Once she had the pendant on and hidden under her top, Pete chose his moment to pass another pendant to her.

“For the boy. Tell him it’s a secret he must hide.”

By this time, Pete was aware that most of the windows on one side of the church had been destroyed. A Molotov cocktail exploded in the aisle. Another two followed. Martez seemed at a loss to know what to do and was looking around frantically, as if not wanting to separate himself from his captives.

The floor and pews caught alight. Flames leaped to the rafters. The building was filling with smoke. Pete could hear the crowd moving round to the front of the church. The large stain glass window became the target. Pete pulled Sophay out of the danger zone as shards of glass crashed to the floor.

Brunar Martez ran down one side of the church toward the main door, his men following. Pete instructed his father to look after the boy. Ford swept the child up in his arms and they ran down the opposite side of the church toward the door, Pete leading, with Sophay close on his heels.

Pete kept an eye on Martez who, after some difficulty skirting round the flames and coughing on the swirling smoke, reached the main door. He ran outside and looked into the church to locate the others. Seeing Pete closing the gap between them, he ordered his men to shut and lock the door behind them.

Wasting no time in disputing the door with Martez, Pete ran back along the side of the church that was still fairly free from flames.

He could hear the crowd moving round to the same side of the church, to use the last remaining windows for target practice. He had little choice but to unbolt the side door and step outside. A number of the angry protestors saw their exit from the church and blocked their escape.

Pete pushed Sophay behind him and stepped out in front of his group to confront the protestors.

“Let us pass!”

His demand was met with angry retorts and hostile expressions. Pete could smell peyjil on the crowd. The mob edged toward them. He repeated himself a second time. Still the throng moved in on them.

“Kill the Christians!”

“We want more space, more resources!”

“Re-Earth is for Re-Earthers, not aliens!”

“Kill the aliens!”

He felt Sophay’s hand on his shoulder, her voice close to his ear.

“Pete, look! That woman has a device, they’ll find us out.”

“Oh, no they won’t,” he heard Daniel reply. “Go on, Pete, get them to use the thing so we can get out of here.”

When Pete hesitated, Ford moved forward with Tyrel in his arms and addressed the crowd.

“For crying out loud, I’m not a Christian. You’ve got an anti-Christian device, use the thing. We want to go home. I’ve got a tired, hungry boy here. Do the right thing, for pity’s sake!”

Pete heard a transport engine start up and saw Martez and the security officers leaving the church grounds in the REP’s transport. It was in a sorry state. Its windows were missing and the body panels and roof had been beaten in.

The crowd hesitated and murmured to itself, undecided. One of the windows at the far end of the church exploded from the heat of the flames. The crowd backed away and Pete and his group moved to a safe distance from the burning building.

Finally, a man snatched the device out of the woman’s hands and stepped forward.

“Baldwin! It’s Baldwin!”

Pete heard the alarm in Sophay's voice. He nodded to acknowledge the man.

Baldwin sneered and moved closer to glare at each of them in turn, his face red and sweating, his small eyes filled with hate.

"I know this scum. They're Christians! They're Christians, do you hear? Drive them back into the church! Let them burn!"

Most of the individuals in the mob edged closer, forcing Pete and his group back toward the burning building.

Suddenly, an older man stepped out of the crowd and confronted Baldwin.

"Use the device. I'll not kill our own." His eyes came to rest on the boy.

Pete heard the boy crying and felt Sophay's fear. But he dared not risk explaining the magic of the punotar. Instead, he drew her close.

Baldwin pointed the device at each of them in turn. When the device failed to register any 'true Christians' in their midst, Baldwin bellowed his anger.

The crowd, losing interest, started walking back to the road, leaving Baldwin standing alone, cursing the device and looking suspiciously at Pete and his group.

Pete grabbed Sophay by the hand and followed Ford to his transport.

## Chapter Nineteen

“The last of the Christians held at Nrocks Prison were dispatched this afternoon. The total process took longer than expected due to the high temperatures which restricted the extermination of the contaminateds to morning and afternoon shifts.”

Adrow Huffle stood in the middle of the empty barracks in the eerie silence. Blankets were scattered about the bare room. Here and there personal objects once belonging to the contaminateds lay abandoned. A comb. A necklace. A shoe. He continued recording.

“I’ve walked through the unfurnished barracks that housed these people during their short stay. I can’t explain the odd sensation that came to me. In some way the Christians have left an echo of their conversations, worship and prayers. Perhaps if I had not known the intentional use of these temporary dwellings they would not have had such an impact on me. Or perhaps the very wood of these structures has imbibed the feelings, emotions and passions of these people so that something of them will always remain, in an intangible form at least, at Nrocks.

“Everywhere I noticed signs of their once having existed. Bibles neatly stacked in piles against the walls, waiting for someone to pick one up and commence reading. I could not stop myself from flipping through some of them. I found passages underlined in the paper books. Passages highlighted in the electronic books. Important notes scribbled in the margins. Personal messages written in the front of the books. Even whole families recorded by date of birth, death and marriage.

“I have been a staunch atheist all my life and at times decried Christianity, and yet I have never read the Bible and know next to nothing of the Christian life. During my walk through, I decided to remedy this imbalance and took a copy of the Bible, in paper form, for my own research. The controller has banned Bibles at Nrocks. The REP has banned Bibles in New State. I feel it my duty to preserve at least one of these items for posterity’s sake. Perhaps someone from a future generation will consider my testament and read this book and view it with fresh eyes in an environment that is not conducive to its destruction.

“Do I fear the alien? If there is such a living form as the REP insists, it has lived with man for centuries. Is it the alien who wishes us harm? Or is it our neighbour? Personally, I fear man’s ignorance more, Christians notwithstanding.

“I must confess that I handed out the remaining Bibles to the prisoners, through the corner window, to the dirty hands reaching for some respite from the boredom that is life at Nrocks. The songs of worship that were heard, the Christians’ faith that kept them strong in a time of terror and the escape of a woman and child have prisoners wishing to learn more about the religion.

“Echoes and more echoes. There are many Biblical verses scratched into or written on the walls.”

Hurfle stopped recording and strolled to a far wall. He stood for a time looking at the different types of handwriting that marked the wood. His fingers brushed over some of the verses and verse references. Some gave the impression they had been written in haste.

One Biblical verse reference stood out, having been written much larger than the rest: 2 Corinthians 4:16-17. Hurfle worked out how to look up the reference in his stolen Bible. He read it out loud.

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”

Hurfle sighed deeply and moved to a barred window. He stared out at the purifiers for a time, then continued recording.

“These people expected persecution as part of their Christian walk. They expected it and dealt with it. They leave me with the thought that they have gone to some place better, a place that I would like to go. Yet I am left here to wonder after

them. They leave me wanting the strength and fortitude they have shown during their last hours here.

“Did they die with humility and dignity? As much as the REP and the Controller wished to strip them of these qualities, I think, from what I have witnessed, they died with much, much more. I stayed until the last shot was fired, bespeaking the last Christian to fall to the ocean, through the thick gas cloud that now covers the Gratner. I felt it was my duty to do so. My solemn farewell to them.

“I wonder if the aliens died with them. I hear a number of Christians are to be transported to the Lec Scientific Outpost for experimentation, to learn more about the aliens. How little value we Re-Earthers have come to place on human life. I am left to question what ideology will next fall out of favour with our President.

“‘Christianity is a choice’, someone named Miles Andrews wrote on the wall. So I am left, in my ignorance, with the question as to how dangerous Christianity can be if it is a person’s personal choice to follow this religion. The alien gives a choice. Martez has given no one a choice. He has used his position to push his own ideology for the purposes of uniting a mass of people against a minority in order that he might annihilate that minority for his own personal objectives and aggrandizement.

“As for me, the REP has ordered me back to Carmel City to report on the mass exodus and final annihilation of the Christians. I don’t want to return. If there is a God in Heaven, then God knows I don’t want to be a witness to more human brutality against human.

“I boldly state that there are enough resources for all citizens of New State if the more powerful were to stop their hoarding. If communication and trade are once again established with Old Earth. If the real estate in the Boa Mountains is allocated for housing projects for others than just the superrich. The extreme measures to which Martez resorts are not necessary. They were never necessary.

Hurfle walked out the door and pulled it shut behind him. For the last time he looked up and down the wire corridor and at the corroding purifiers which hid a terrible secret.

“I wonder what the aliens must think of us.”

\* \* \*

“The last of the Christians have been dispatched at Nrocks.”

Martez nodded his satisfaction upon hearing the news.

Rasten pulled a face. “It’ll be months before prison life settles back to normal. The escapes have hampered matters this end.”

“Surely you exaggerate,” Martez commented, eating the last of his sandwich.

“I wish I were. The Christians have left the prison population with hope –”

“After the death of thousands?”

“There’s too much hope here, Brunar. Prisoners are starting to care for each other. They’re more dangerous when united. They’ve caught on to the songs the Christians were singing. We’re trying to squash ’em, but as soon as a prison guard enters the vicinity, the singing stops and starts some place else. It’s going on all hours of the day and night. I need the culprit responsible for organising the escape. Or at least the two escapees so I can demonstrate to the prison population the futility of going against Nrocks’ well-established regime.”

“Who would have thought it! Happy prisoners at Nrocks!”

Martez laughed and put his mo-com on the nest of tables. He pressed a key so the prison controller’s image appeared on the wall screen.

“Yes, well, Daniel Ford was the culprit. A mob of anti-Christian protestors got to him and the escapees before I could send them your way. I saw a drunken mob corner them. No doubt they were thrown back into the burning building as seems to be the vogue.”

Rasten slammed a Bible on the desk. “And the prison is flooded with these! Those who can read are teaching others using –”

“Rasten, what can I say? You are the controller. You’ll have to think of something to steal away their new-found optimism. I’m sure your imagination will come up with a treat that will flatten their spirits.”

“What about the remaining Christians?”

Martez chuckled as he walked to the large picture window to look down at the street below. “They’re leaving the Carmel Basin even as we speak. The true and not so true and anyone who thinks they are. It’s a delightful scene!”

Rasten swiped the Bible off his desk. His taut face came close to the screen.

“You’re just letting them walk out of the Basin? You know they’ll drift Keel way. I suppose you’re expecting me to take care of them as well.”

“Calm down, Rasten, calm down. They can’t wander any place they like. They’ve been permitted to go into the Dredden Desert where a nasty surprise awaits them.” Martez looked at the time piece on the wall. “And in a short time from now an all-out hunt for stragglers commences in the Basin. Tonight will be quite a night. Tonight Christians will learn what it really means to suffer as their Lord Jesus Christ suffered!”

“What surprise awaits them in the desert?”

Martez watched the streams of people wending their way out of the Basin and into the Boa Mountains. He went to the viewing screen, the images courtesy of the many wing-cams that buzzed over the stricken crowd. Close-up shots showed Christians singing songs as they marched in the unseasonable heat. Children were crying. Adults were complaining. All along the roadside were discarded objects. Furniture, suitcases, clothes, toys, transports.

Some of the more resilient Christian sympathisers had set up water stations and emergency centres along the route. Closer to the mountains, a number of the aged sat on rocks staring up at the ranges before them, their infirmities putting a stop to their journey to safety. Some waved to others who were able enough to go on ahead. Empty water bottles were strewn along the route.

Martez laughed when he saw security personnel tip over a table. Medical supplies were trampled underfoot as the officers chased and shot the sympathizers. Other tables along the route had already been upturned. People were scrambling and fighting for whatever supplies they could get their hands on.

Martez strode back to the nest of tables, picked up his mo-com and another sandwich. Chewing on a mouthful, he returned to the wing-cam images and brought up the Dredden Desert on the screen. Instead of the usual black sands glistening to the green-black ocean, there was a dense layer of pale coloured gas spreading as far as the horizon. He turned his mo-com so Rasten could view the toxic scene.

“You see, Rasten, if my men don’t get them, the gas will.”

“There have been rumours in the prison that a bank of purifiers on the Elman Heights isn’t working.”

Martez eyed the controller in a thoughtful manner.

“How would they know?”

“One of the engineers at the Heights station connected with an engineer responsible for the Nrocks purifiers. From what the rumours say, they’re at their

wits end at the Heights station. They can't get the bank working, even though there doesn't appear to be anything wrong with it. I've been told a gas flood into the Carmel Basin is likely very soon. Shouldn't you evacuate everyone from the Basin before it's too late?"

"The Basin will not be evacuated! All this talk of evacuation! There is no need for an evacuation!"

"But, if they can't fix the purifiers there's going to be a disaster. A catastrophe. The Basin must be evacuated, Brunar, surely?"

"There will be no disaster. The purifiers will work. If there's nothing to fix they must be in a workable condition. The engineers are bluffing. This is their way of showing who's in control. Their latest pay rise was turned down recently. Of course the purifiers will work when and if they're needed. The engineers won't see thousands of their own perish just to prove a point. They're merely seeing how far they can push me. If that's to zero hour then so be it."

Martez adjusted one of the screens to get a wing-cam image of the main street of Carmel. The exodus had caused the traffic to grind to a halt. He looked at the image of Rasten on his mo-com and saw him smile.

"Perhaps you've been too obsessed with Christians of late, Brunar."

The flippant comment angered Martez. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're forgetting the safety of non-Christians. If there is a disaster, I'd say President Martez can kiss his political career goodbye."

"I'll merely blame the Christians for sabotaging the purifiers –"

Rasten laughed. "Your golden tongue won't get you out of this one. Looks as if you've been giving the Christians a head start out of the danger zone. I'm assuming at no time have you notified the general population of possible danger. Their faith in you will evaporate. Remember McVyre's political promises?"

Martez said nothing and looked away from the controller.

"Your predecessor would have had everyone kitted out with gas masks by now if he'd remained in office. You're the one who shunted him out of power. In the face of danger, the public's memory is short, but not that short."

Martez swung back to the controller. "There will be no gas flood!"

"Perhaps this is the Christians' God's way of protecting them from you. Perhaps the aliens have been toying with your mind, Brunar. Who in their right

mind would let the Christians walk to safety without being molested while the rest of Carmel sits and waits to die?”

Martez strode to the window to look down on the exodus taking place.

“Where is their God, Rasten?” he yelled. “Where is He in their time of need? Where was He in my time of need when I was a boy alone in Keel? Where was He when my mother needed help? Where was He when you were slaughtering them at Nrocks? There is no God!”

“The contaminateds are not stupid, Brunar. They’ll not go willingly into the gas. They’re just as likely to fight your men, and they do outnumber your men. Once they realise that you really will have a problem.”

Brunar Martez laughed. “I don’t need my security personnel for what I’ve got in store for them. I am their god now and my retribution will come from the heavens.”

## Chapter Twenty

Pete led Sophay out of his father's multi-space in the Boa Mountains and to a viewing platform. After a meal, they had prayed together before Sophay recapped what had happened to her since that morning when she had been taken prisoner in the cargo transport. He was thankful that she had only a black eye whereas so many others had lost their lives.

It was still a mystery to the both of them as to who was responsible for her escape from Nrocks. Sophay could give no clues as to what had inspired Ballend, a complete stranger, to risk his life for both her and the boy.

As Pete stood on the platform in the afternoon sunlight, he felt wretched and powerless as he watched the living, moving streams of hundreds of Christians who had left what was once the safety of their homes for an uncertain future. There had to be a way to help the persecuted, but no bright idea had manifested itself, not even during their prayer time. It was as if God no longer existed and the craziness playing itself out was the result of His leaving them to their own puny devices.

"I want to see God in this, but I can't. I just can't," he mumbled to himself.

Pete joined Sophay on the other side of the viewing platform to look at the view on the Dredden side. He placed his arm round her waist and drew her close, wondering at his privileged position when so many others were suffering. There was a time he thought he would never see Sophay again, a time when he had thought her dead. He kissed her cheek. She turned to him and he embraced her.

A moment later, she pulled away from him and pointed out the large, growing crowd that was flattening the wilting zee-tops just above the gas line.

“They can’t get to the desert, Pete.”

“Not with the gas stopping them.”

“The gas doesn’t normally flood this far up the mountains, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t. Knowing how Martez thinks, I’d guess when he ordered the Christians out of Carmel he knew all along about the gas. To enter the Dredden means instant death for sure. But if it’s this high on the Dredden side, makes me wonder what’s happening on the Elman Heights side.”

“There must be something we can do to help all these displaced people.”

“I’ve no idea how we can help them, Sophay. There’re far too many of them. We’ve prayed and we will keep on praying. But until God tells us his plan for us in this nightmare Martez has created, I’m not sure what we can do.”

Pete flinched and held his forearm up to shield his eyes when a strong beam of light appeared out of the sky. It shot toward the ground and caused an explosion to one side of the crowd. The crowd quietened and stood stunned, looking up at the sky.

“Pete! What’s happening?”

He grabbed Sophay’s hand and pulled her down with him onto the wooden planks of the viewing platform. Crouching low, he saw another shot hit a massive outcrop of rock that crumbled on impact. The fragments plummeted down a steep cliff face and into the gas cloud below.

Panic erupted in the crowd. People started running back toward the Carmel City side of the mountains, only to have their route blocked by the on-coming surge of humanity.

More explosions followed. Sophay covered her face with her hands. But Pete kept watching, mesmerised by the mayhem. People were running in all directions. Some ran or were pushed into the gas. Others were dropping to their knees and praying. A beam hit the sea of gas and the gas ignited. Tall flames leaped up the side of the mountain range, searing any living thing in its path. Drying zee-tops caught fire.

Pete looked skyward and saw a flash and another as the sun hit the man-made objects.

“Space transports!”

Sophay uncovered her eyes and turned her back to the carnage. She gripped Pete’s arm. “Why are they firing on the people?”

Pete sat beside her and hugged her close. “It’s their ticket to land their space transports. They’ve been circling Re-Earth for weeks. By now many are probably running deathly short on fuel. Martez must have made an agreement with them –”

“The lives of the Christians for their own.”

“Marte would have had them blown out of the sky if they dared land before.”

“So, fire on the Christians, destroy them, force them into the Dredden and they can land. That’s monstrous!”

“Look! There’s one there, did you see? They’re still a long way up. Any lower and gravity would have them burning more fuel. At that range some of the smaller space transports won’t be able to make accurate shots.”

“Pete!”

Upon hearing his name, Pete looked toward the multi-space and saw Madrid running toward the viewing platform. He jogged up to them and huddled next to them, his back against a wooden post.

Madrid leaned across Pete and patted Sophay’s arm as if not believing he was seeing her in the flesh.

“Good to see you again, girl.”

She smiled. “Madrid.”

“How’s the boy?”

“Fast asleep. He’s staying here with Daniel until we can locate his father.”

Madrid turned to look at the streams of people. “Good luck on that one.”

“What are you doing here?”

“It’s Jarris. Pete, we have to stop him. He’s going to assassinate the REP.”

“What’s that noise?”

Sophay still looked alarmed even though the space transports had stopped firing on the crowd.

Pete stood up in his attempt to locate the source of the wailing. He looked from the many people battling to put out the burning zee-tops with blankets and articles of clothing to the distant Elman Heights.

“That’s the purifier alarm system.”

Sophay got to her feet. “A gas flood must be imminent.”

“Where’s Jarris headed?”

Madrid rose to his feet. “The REP’s penthouse suite. He said the REP’s heli-air is on the roof, so he must be there.”

\* \* \*

As he sat astride Madrid's tor-bike, Pete was surprised at how fast the transport could travel and how well his friend could handle the powerful machine. To avoid the crowds flowing into the mountain range, they followed Ford's suggestion by taking a little known walking track out of the Boa Mountains. It was rough terrain and the still, hot air was filled with the smell of the drying and burning zee-tops.

By the time they reached the main road into Carmel, Pete was hot and dusty. The going became slow and sometimes they came to a complete standstill because of the numerous people pushing their way out of Carmel. Non-Christians now mixed with Christians in a frenzied attempt to beat the gas flood.

The closer they got to the central flat land of the Basin, the more concerned Pete became. The low hum of the outer purifiers told him they were working, but the crucial central bank of purifiers stood silent.

"How long do we have before the gas starts filling the Basin?"

"I think they give us an hour's warning."

Pete felt the anger rising in him. "Martez should have warned Carmel of the threat long before now. But to have done so would have meant alerting us to his plans for Christians. He's sacrificed the safety of all for his own vainglorious ambitions."

"Perhaps we should let Jarris kill the man," Madrid said, to revisit a conversation they'd had prior to leaving Ford's Boa estate.

"I must confess, I thought the same as you do, and so does my father. But if there's any vengeance to be had, Sophay is right, it's not ours or Jarris's, it's God's.

"'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord.'"

"I can understand Jarris's motives, but they're misguided. We have to save Jarris from himself."

In the centre of Carmel, transports of all sorts had veered off course and ended up in the front of shops and buildings or against lampposts or each other, in their drivers' haste to leave the city. Many of the Carmel city residents were ransacking and looting shops and offices. Broken glass and abandoned items lay everywhere. A group of teenagers were tagging buildings. In the narrower lanes, Pete saw people

lying still on the road, having been run down by transports or crushed in the stampede to get out of Carmel.

Suddenly, on several sides of buildings, Brunar Martez appeared larger than life in a crisp, white, button-less top, his grooming immaculate.

“Greetings friends. You are in danger, because of the Christians. The Christians have sabotaged the purifiers. Leave the Carmel City Basin immediately. A gas flood is imminent. The purifiers will not stop the flood because the Christians, seeking revenge against you and this presidency, sabotaged the purifiers. Leave the Basin. Or move to the highest levels within your building. Now you can understand why we must rid Re-Earth of Christians. You have nothing to fear except the Christians . . .”

Pete saw the confusion and anxiety on people’s faces. Some accepted what was being stated and walked back into buildings, out of the growing chaos and the stifling heat. Others started arguing and striking out at those they believed were Christians, choosing their targets based on appearance alone. What security force personnel Pete saw in the vicinity had given up on controlling the crowds and, in a time of emergency, were as intent on exiting the Basin as everyone else.

The going was difficult and strenuous, but Madrid managed to get the tor-bike through the thickest of the crowds without incident. Once they reached Control Building Central, Pete dismounted from the tor-bike and opened the wide door for Madrid, who wheeled in his transport. He parked it behind a row of tall-backed settees in the foyer area, out of sight of anyone who might want to steal it in their haste to get out of Carmel. He rejoined Pete at the elevators.

The door whisked open and they stepped inside the penthouse elevator. The only way up to the penthouse from street level was the designated elevator. Pete reasoned they had merely to wait for Jarris and talk him out of his hair-brain scheme when he made his appearance. But one look at the elevator control panel and he knew it had been tampered with. He pointed it out to Madrid.

“Jarris must have got here ahead of us. We’ll have to go up.”

He pushed the button to the penthouse and they took a smooth, fast ride upward.

When the elevator door opened, the luxurious lounge Pete had viewed many times on Re-Earth Media news broadcasts featuring the REP came into view. What

was out of place in the familiar scene was Jarris, lying on the floor on a colourful rug, nursing a bloodied arm.

Pete spotted the knife in Martez's hand at the same time the REP bent to use the knife on Jarris. He ran forward and grabbed Martez by the wrist, disturbing the downward thrust of the knife, so saving Jarris's life. Jarris seemed too dazed to function on his own.

"Get Jarris out of here!"

Madrid ran to Jarris, grabbed him under the arms and dragged him out of harm's way. Madrid seemed reluctant to leave Pete on his own with Martez. Pete saw his friend hesitate.

"I'll meet you downstairs. Go! We can't have much time left!"

Madrid disappeared into the elevator with a dazed Jarris. Pete circled the room in time with the REP, their eyes locked, their fists ready for combat.

Pete knew he was no match for Martez and started backing toward the elevators. To his surprise, Martez, instead of instigating a fight, grabbed a bag off a chair and, without a word, ran to a door on the opposite side of the room. When the REP opened the door, Pete saw a narrow staircase leading to the roof. The door closed and he heard Martez lock the door behind him.

When the elevator arrived, Pete jumped in and soon reached the ground floor. Madrid was waiting outside, astride the tor-bike, the engine idling. Pete got on the tor-bike and Jarris, more his old self, got on behind him.

Madrid pulled away from the curb. At that moment, the purifier alarm altered its warning. Instead of a continuous wailing sound, it pumped out shrill, discordant notes, then went back to wailing.

"The gas is coming!"

At Madrid's warning, Pete looked round, past Jarris, and saw a massive wave of gas erupt in the air and start rolling down the Elman Heights. The route out of the Basin flats was filled with transports and people on foot. Anger flared as desperate Carmel residents endeavoured to escape the coming gas. As many were blundering back into buildings as were blundering out of them to escape the coming danger.

"Madrid, you know the streets around here better than anyone. Get us out of here! Fast!"

"Hold on!"

Madrid took a series of side roads and lanes that were less congested and eventually they came to a wide, almost empty and fairly straight road. Pete began to understand Madrid's strategy. Instinct had most of the people travelling the shortest way to the Boa Mountains, but taking a longer route would in the end, because of less congestion, be the faster route out of Carmel.

Madrid put his foot down.

Pete felt Jarris cling more tightly to him.

"You're going too slow!"

Pete looked round and saw the gas wave gaining on them.

"Jarris is right, Madrid. Move it!"

"My baby's going as fast as she can!"

"Not fast enough!"

"It's the extra weight that's slowing her. She's going as fast as she will."

Pete looked round. The pale, thick gas was approaching fast.

"We're not going to make it!"

"Goodbye, friends."

Pete felt Jarris's grip on him loosen. He turned in time to see Jarris fall off the end of the tor-bike. He hit the road hard, rolled and got to his feet. Standing, he waved. A moment later, the gas swallowed him.

Pete felt the tor-bike rev forward under a decreased burden. The alarm stopped sounding and he heard the low hum of the purifiers grow in volume as the purifiers in the crucial bank started coming on line one after another. The rolling gas started to lose height and thinned.

Overhead, Pete saw the REP's heliair heading for the Boa Mountains, its destination most probably the REP's sprawling estate.

A flash caught his eye. As he watched, a space transport appeared out of the clouds and descended low enough to hover over the much smaller heliair. Suddenly, the spacecraft sent a beam of red light toward the REP's transport. The heliair exploded and burning pieces fell to the ground. Some entered the gas and ignited it on contact. Flames engulfed the gas-covered area, flashing back to the Elman Heights and beyond.

\* \* \*

When Pete returned to his father's Boa estate, he found Sophay on the viewing platform. She was watching the crowds that had been forced into the Boa Mountains making their way back into the Carmel Basin. On the horizon was the orange glow of gas burning on the Gratner.

Pete took Sophay in his arms and kissed her.

"Jarris?"

He looked down at her and shook his head.

Her face grave, she lowered her eyes, in an effort to hide her distress.

"You saw the President's heliair shot down?"

She looked up at him, her eyes glistening. "He's gone."

"Solves the problem." Pete pointed out the space transports in the distance coming in to land. "They either acted on their own or on Old Earth's authority. Either way, the assassination should deflate the government's focus on Christians for a time."

They held hands and Pete led them in prayer. They prayed for those who had lost their lives, for the inhabitants of the Carmel Basin and for the future of New State. They gave thanks that they were among those who had survived the REP's attempt at genocide.

Pete let his hand rest on Sophay's shoulder as they stood together for awhile watching the people returning to their homes.

"After all that's happened, the population of Carmel has been greatly reduced."

He felt Sophay tremble.

"But, Pete, hatred toward Christians still exists."

"It won't go away in a hurry, that's for sure. It'll go underground instead. Wait for another opportunity to resurface."

Sophay toyed with her punotar necklace. "Next time we won't be so complacent. We'll speak up."

"We must speak up."

She looked at the people making their way back into Carmel.

"Where will they go?"

His gaze came to rest on the blackened buildings on the Elman Heights.

"They look far worse than they are. Most of the personal space buildings are probably still inhabitable."

“We can go home.”

He smiled. “And start re-planning our wedding.”

Sophay laughed and playfully elbowed him in the ribs. “I still think curtains will suit our window better than blinds.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

When night-time descended, Martez left his penthouse for the last time and in secret climbed the narrow concrete steps to the roof of Control Building Central. Ever since he had seen his presidential heli-air explode, he had hidden out in his suite awaiting the cover of darkness to make his escape from Re-Earth.

As he stood on the roof waiting for his air transport to arrive, piloted by one of his most loyal staff, he remembered the wall of fire that had headed for the centre of Carmel earlier in the day. He had dropped to the ground face down on the roof of the building, his face in the crook of his arm to protect his eyes from the coming inferno. A sweltering wave of heat from the fire had swept past him, on all sides of the tall building. Only after the heat dissipated did he get to his feet.

All around him the stone buildings were scorched black where the flames had struck them. Smoke plumes rose from wooden structures and anything else that was flammable. The imitation glass panes in their metal frames had buckled and warped under the intense heat. The air smelt acrid and he could smell burnt flesh.

Within minutes of stepping onto the roof, a heli-air appeared out of the night sky and landed. Martez grabbed his brown fabric bag and ran toward the craft. He clambered in and gave instructions.

“Get me to the space transport landing area north of the Basin quick as you can!”

He settled back in the seat behind the pilot, fastened the safety belt and opened his bag to look at the bundles of paper inside. Some comprised the precious design

sheets for the anti-Christian device. Others were papers necessary for the migrant station on Old Earth. Papers that displayed his new name.

He closed the bag and with a smile on his face, gazed out the window. Without regrets, he mentally said his farewells to his current partner and Dober as the heliair passed his Boa estate.

When the heliair landed at the space transport landing site, Martez exited the craft and ran to a small space transport waiting on the runway, its engine turning over.

He settled into a seat for the long journey ahead. On Re-Earth he had loyal supporters who would fan the persecution fires while on Old Earth sentiment toward Christians was fast changing to one of intolerance. He patted his bag.

End