

Time's Twilight

by
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Jeff Ketten was hungry.

There wasn't a whole lot that he could do about it. Maybe when the battle was finally fought and over he would be able to feast like a pig in heaven. But until that time came, he would continue to be hungry, never finding enough to eat, constantly fighting with his fellow soldiers for whatever putrid scraps came their way. At least it was life.

And then again, maybe when the battle was fought and over he would never need food again.

He was almost past caring.

Jeff sat dejectedly on a large, lumpy rock, ignoring the black, carbonized soot that stained his fatigues. It was impossible to avoid, anyway. Since the beginning of the final, devastating series of alien raids, nearly a month ago, there was very little left to be found anywhere on Earth except ashes and burned residue. Even the oceans had been reduced to stinking cesspools of death.

So what am I even fighting for? he wondered dejectedly, absently listening to the background murmurs and rumbles of the vast army camp. *I once had a home, but it's gone. I once had a nation, but it's gone.*

I once had a world, and now it's gone, too.

If he closed his eyes, he could still remember the way it used to be, the way life was back in his nearly forgotten youth. Oh, he had complained. He had complained to his parents; he had complained to his teachers; he had complained to his friends. If only he had known...

No one would have suspected that Russia would come under the control of Muslims. Maybe it was some sort of just revenge for the years of tears and slaughter in Chechnya. Maybe it was an al Qaeda plot. Maybe it was just sheer bad luck. Whatever the reason, it had transformed what had been a promising nation—a nation finally managing to crush the powers of organized crime and corruption that had threatened to drag it to destruction—into just another fanatic bunch of terrorists.

The nuclear war of 2019 had followed in less than a year.

In Jeff's mind, that was the great dividing line that separated all of history. Before 2019, life had been normal. People got up in the morning and went to work, or to school, or took vacations, or just plain did whatever they pleased. For most people, it was a foregone conclusion that there would be food on the table at mealtimes. Whatever poured down out of the sky was beneficial, watering and giving life to the world. Cities were gleaming conglomerates containing millions of

human beings who performed daily the rituals of modern civilization, who ate Mexican food and then complained about flatulence, who courted, mated and gave birth to the next generation to continue the traditions of their elders.

The year 2019 was also the year that he lost Julie.

They had begun dating during his freshman year at the University of North Dakota. Neither one of them called that flat, square state home; Jeff had grown up in Colorado, spending most of his years in Durango, where his parents owned an outdoor recreation shop. In his high school summers he had worked as a volunteer in Mesa Verde National Park. Grand Forks was not at all like home. At times he still wondered what had taken him from the grandeur of the West up to the frozen north.

Julie Anne Thorne was a small town gal from Libby, Montana. Like Jeff, she hadn't come to UND to get away from it all. She had just wanted to see more of the world. They had met in freshman Composition and Literature and hit it off right away. At Christmas she went with him to Colorado to see his home and meet his family and learn to ski.

Looking back, the storm clouds had already begun to gather on history's horizon. The followers of Allah had just taken power in Moscow, following a campaign of lies and deceit. Within two weeks basic freedoms were gone, and before the end of '18 Russia had given refuge to most of the various Islamic terrorists still roaming free in various parts of the world and killing Jews and Americans for the sheer fun of it. This, of course, had not set well at all in Washington.

By the time classes had ended in '19, the two major nuclear powers were already on a collision course. Nevertheless, Jeff had pretended things were still normal and accompanied Julie to her home in northwestern Montana, where they had spent a week camping and hiking out in the sticks. With hands still over ears, eyes and mouth like the three monkeys, they had then decided to take an extended vacation out to the Pacific Northwest.

Jeff would never forget that morning when two Park Service trucks roared into the campground in Olympic National Park where they had been staying. In subdued voices, the rangers had gathered everyone together and announced that there had been a disastrous exchange of nuclear weapons during the previous night. Most of the country lay under a radioactive pall. There was no word from the government. And since Olympic was west of the nearest major city, all the poisonous crud in the air had floated off in the opposite direction. As a result, the campers had been blissfully unaware that anything was happening.

The days that followed were a jumble. Somehow, Jeff and Julie had made their way to Port Angeles, along with several hundred other park visitors from the area. Port Angeles had been a madhouse, a mixture of federal, state and local authorities all struggling for control, and a vast, seething mob of angry, frightened, and confused citizens. Rumors of a Russian land invasion only served to spread further panic; Jeff never did find out whether they were true or not. By then it didn't matter.

The Australian freighter captain who took them on would never tell them why. Hundreds of desperate citizens had begged, borrowed and stolen, but in the end he had accepted a mere half-dozen, including Jeff and Julie. Jeff later wondered if the captain had possibly had it in mind to dump him overboard and latch onto Julie, but as things turned out, no one would ever know.

After several days of dodging radioactive rainstorms laden with fallout from Russia, the freighter had managed to cross the equator. The following day a rogue warship, not flying the flag of any nation, caught up and boarded them. From their appearance and speech, it was obvious that the crew came from some Oriental country. Jeff guessed that they might have been North Korean, or possibly Chinese. Whatever their origin, they ended up seizing all of the women and hauling them off. Including Julie. It was the last time he had ever seen her.

He only hoped that she had died quickly.

After another week and a half at sea the freighter put in at Sydney. Jeff and the other American refugees were unceremoniously dumped ashore and left to fend for themselves.

Somehow, he had survived. After weeks of eating a la garbage can he had managed to find work. It wasn't the world's greatest job, but it paid for food and lodging. And that was the way things went for the next dozen years or so.

It was an existence. At least Australia had remained relatively untouched by the waves of anarchy that swept the world following the demise of the Global Policeman. War and revolution had plunged South America and Africa into chaos and mass death, as often by starvation as by violence. And they were simply the worst cases. Yet in spite of it Jeff had maintained a cautious optimism. The world had gone through some pretty bad times before and had always come through it. Eventually, he expected things to sort themselves out.

But they didn't.

Perhaps if we had been left alone, he often mused. If the aliens or whatever they were had not begun their program of systematic destruction of life on Earth, we could have probably eventually worked out a new global political order.

But it hadn't happened.

At first, people had believed it to be a random meteoric bombardment. Large chunks of rock fell from the sky, wreaking havoc. Jeff still remembered the first one. It hadn't impacted directly; rather, it had streaked through the heavens at an angle, disintegrating with a series of thunderous blasts, leaving a fine powder to drift down through the atmosphere and poison nearly a third of the water supplies on the planet. A later strike hit in the northern Pacific Ocean, with equally devastating results.

It was when the strange creatures began to appear that people started to sit up and take notice of the idea that there might be an intelligence responsible. Nobody ever managed to capture any of the creatures; they were powerful, elusive—and vicious. The worst was an invasion by a tremendous horde of hideous monsters riding equally hideous mounts. The number of people killed by them had never been counted. For months, they roamed the world seemingly at will. Where they passed, none returned. Then they simply vanished. Jeff had seen pictures, and his imagination had no trouble envisioning whatever horrible, dark world had given them birth.

Ironically, it was the Muslims who finally began to offer hope of an organized resistance to these attacks. Following the fall of America, a series of treaties and swift coups in the Middle East created a ten-nation confederacy, a sort of United Islamic Republic, which covered most of the territory historically claimed by the long departed Ottoman Empire and the caliphate that had preceded it. To this day many people still wondered at the speed with which this new alliance had arisen.

Jeff had grown up an agnostic. In fact, it was his lack of belief in any kind of deity that had been the one sticking point between him and Julie. And that, coupled with his memories of what Muslim-controlled Russia had done to the Land of the Free, did not endear the new Islamic regime to him.

But they were willing to fight. And to die. And to all men there comes a time when one must put aside prejudices and other hatreds and pull together in order to face an even greater foe. So it was that, when the mysterious aliens finally decided to show their faces, Jeff was able to bury the past, at least temporarily, and heed the call to come and fight against the enemies of all mankind.

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“Still nothing.”

Jeff glanced up at the speaker, Tony Hunt, as he squatted down on the rock next to him. Tony was a Brit, a former member of the Royal Marines, who had ended up in North Africa after the War of 2019. Short and squat in contrast to Jeff's more typical physique, he had the annoying habit of being surly, but at the same time absolutely refusing to actually lose his temper. A couple of Jeff's buddies from Australia had tried to crack his calm more than once.

“You said it, mate,” Jeff replied. In his years Down Under he had picked up a number of Aussie mannerisms and expressions. “But they’re up there.”

Tony nodded. “You know it.”

Both men stared past the multitude of soldiers gathered from all points of the globe, up to the Judean hills surrounding Jerusalem. Up there, holed up in the ancient city for reasons none of them could fathom, the aliens lay hidden. Since the actual invasion nearly a month ago they had wreaked havoc upon the world, using weapons of unimaginable power, but save for their brief appearance as they descended from the skies, they had not shown their faces. If they had faces. Nobody knew.

After either kidnapping or outright killing countless human beings at the time of their arrival, they had proceeded to devastate the planet with death and disease. Plant life everywhere had been wiped out in terrible sheets of flame that fell from the sky like the apotheosis of napalm. The oceans had been reduced to gigantic basins of deadly poison. Wells and springs spewed rot and corruption. With nothing to eat and very little to drink, animals everywhere were dying in numbers unimaginable. A vast charnel stench hovered over most of the world. The aliens had even done something to the sun, causing it to increase its energy output as if they wanted to fry the planet like a side of beef. Melted ice from mountain tops and glaciers now provided the only drinkable water available anywhere. If the aliens wanted to outright destroy the Earth, they were sure going about it right.

So why did they bother to invade?

“Any news?” Jeff asked quietly.

Tony shrugged. “Who knows?” he replied with a slight shake of the head. “I did hear another boat’s come in full of tanks and stuff,” he added, almost as an afterthought.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep. Don’t think we’ll get any of it. We’re not regular army.”

Jeff snorted mirthlessly. “Yeah. We’re just ray-gun fodder.”

“Well, this ‘ray-gun fodder’ is hungry, let me tell you,” Tony grumbled. “They can keep their lousy tanks. I want some food.”

“Probably just be more of the same.” The ‘same’ consisted of months-old, half-rotted vegetables, powdered milk and maggoty slabs of beef and pork. It was all that could be found.

“So what?” Tony demanded. “At least it’s grub.”

Footsteps made them both look up. A uniform hove into view, this one with captain’s bars on the collar. Jeff and Tony started to climb wearily to their feet.

The captain waved them back down and both men gratefully complied. “Save it, you two,” he said gruffly. “The colonel’s got a job for you.”

“Yes, sir,” Jeff sighed, not bothering to hid his lack of enthusiasm.

The captain smiled thinly. “You both get extra rations,” he added.

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“I hate Jews,” Tony muttered as the two men trudged along a secondary road, hoping that the aliens weren’t watching.

“Why do you say that?” Jeff wanted to know.

“We had a few back in Egypt,” came the answer. “Before we deployed here. Bunch of preachy-mouthed fanatics, you ask me.”

“That one back there wasn’t,” Jeff pointed out.

After the captain had come to get them, they had been led to a headquarters tent. The colonel had been waiting, along with an old man in tattered rags who did not speak English. The colonel had explained that the old man was a Jew, a former resident of what was now a burned out collection of rubble about halfway to Jerusalem.

He said that he had seen human beings in the capital city.

Jeff and Tony had been sent to investigate.

“I don’t care,” Tony retorted. “If this one had kept his mouth shut we wouldn’t be here right now.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jeff countered. “Back in good old Camp Saddam, waiting for some green-blooded, pointy-eared freaks from outer space to blow us to bits with their ray guns.” He paused. “At least this way we’re *doing* something.”

Camp Saddam. A couple of the other Aussies had given it that epithet shortly after the whole contingent, including Jeff, had arrived. It was widely rumored that the president of the United Islamic Republic was an illegitimate grandson of the former Iraqi dictator ousted by the United States back in ’03. True or not, it lent him an air that he took advantage of.

And although Jeff believed in the cause that they were fighting for, he did not like the UIR or its enigmatic leader.

The road curved ahead. Once upon a time it had passed along the side of a green hill, probably planted with crops tended by people from the abandoned village below. Today, it was bare, scorched earth. Jeff and Tony slowed down, trying in vain to see around the curve before they got to it.

Nothing. Well, before too long they would have to abandon the already abandoned road and take to the countryside. Again, once upon a time it would have been a fairly easy task to conceal themselves amid the vegetation. But today it was nothing but rocks and ash.

“I heard a funny idea from some old lady back in Egypt,” Tony ventured after several minutes of hiking in silence. “Sort of scared me, it did.”

“Well, what was it?” growled Jeff. He had had enough of theories. He just wanted it all to be over.

“The old lady thought this might be the Second Coming, or so she said. I don’t know if she was serious—”

“Oh, come off it!” Jeff snapped. “I heard that crap, too, back in Aussie-land. It’s a bunch of baloney. There isn’t any God, so that’s that.”

“Well, excuuuuuse me!” Tony retorted. “I didn’t say I believed it.”

“Then why’d you bring it up?”

Tony shrugged. “To tell the truth, I really don’t know. I guess I just thought of it. You know,” he went on, “it is kind of odd that all this should be happening here in Israel, just like the Good Book said it would. And Fearless Leader isn’t exactly the nicest guy in the world.”

Jeff stopped and whirled around. “Why do you think it’s happening here?” he snarled. “These aliens have been watching us. They know where the biggest opposition is. So of course they come here! It’s like spitting in our face, that’s why. Once they knock out the UIR, they’ve got it all.”

Tony held out his hands in a placating gesture. “Okay, okay. Sorry I stepped on your toes. What’s the big deal, anyway? You really seem worked up about all this.”

Jeff felt the anger draining away. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry. It’s just that I used to have this girlfriend, you know. She was the religious type. She’d have been right in there with you arguing. Other than that, she was the best gal I’d ever had.”

“So you don’t want to believe in God because it reminds you of her?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. No, I do know. I guess I stopped even trying to believe in God after the war. If there were a God I don’t think He’d have let all that happen.”

Tony sighed. “I guess you’re right.”

“You don’t sound too convinced,” Jeff said skeptically.

Again a shrug. “I don’t know. I mean, I don’t want to believe, but that old lady did make some sense. I just can’t stop thinking, ‘What if she’s right?’”

“‘What if she’s right?’ You’ve got to be kidding.”

“If she’s right, we could be in a world of hurt,” Tony pointed out.

“Yeah, well she’s not. Believe me, she’s not.”

For nearly a minute the two men stood quietly, each staring at the other. Finally, Jeff spoke up again.

“Come on, we’ve got a job to do.”

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The villages near Jerusalem were all deserted. It was not the work of the aliens, that much Jeff could see. No, this was the work of UIR forces, long before the aliens had landed. Fearless Leader beating on his chest, Jeff thought sourly, one booted foot clamped down on the necks of his hated enemies, the Jews. Fearless Leader. Recalling some of the pulp fiction he had read as a kid, Jeff thought it rather ironic, if not downright silly, that the president of the Islamic Republic, the most powerful man on Earth now, would take such a ridiculous name. Well, it probably sounded better in Arabic.

Three and a half years ago he had simply been President Mohammed. He had not been born with that handle; he had taken it in honor of the founding Prophet of Islam. Those days it had seemed grandiose enough. But after some remarkable events that Jeff had trouble believing, he had changed his name. Actually, Jeff thought “Ruthless Leader” would probably be more accurate; he wasn’t that much different than his commonly accepted grandfather. And that First Minister who acted as his mouthpiece was even worse. Dark rumors of weird powers and involvement in dreadful occult practices sent currents of fear through many circles.

Still, they were the only leaders left on Earth willing to stand up to the aliens. For that, Jeff was willing to forgive them for a multitude of sins.

“We should be able to see the city when we get around that corner,” Tony murmured.

Jeff shivered. “None too soon for me, mate.”

Tony turned his head to look at him. “You feel it, too?”

Jeff, who had not been walking very fast to begin with, stopped completely. “Yeah,” he admitted. “It’s... creepy. Like there’re eyes watching us, or something.”

Tony glanced around. “You know, I sort of felt this way when I met Fearless Leader,” he said. “But this feels... different. The same, but different. Know what I mean?”

Jeff shook his head. “Not sure that I do. But I haven’t actually met our Number One yet.”

“Believe me, you probably don’t want to. But this...”

Jeff started, then hesitated. “It’s hard to describe,” he finally said. “Part of me wants to just rush up there and meet it. The rest is scared spitless and wants to go hide in a cave.” He paused. “Do you think the aliens are using a ray on us or something?”

Tony shrugged. “Who knows?”

Jeff forced his feet into motion again. “Come on. Just a bit further and we can go back and tell the colonel we had our look.”

In silence the two men made their way warily around the shoulder of the last hill. As they emerged, the city of Jerusalem lay spread out in front of them, nestled on hills and valleys in all of its ancient and modern splendor. They stopped.

“Looks like it’s glowing,” Tony finally said.

“Yeah. I wonder why. Maybe the aliens are burning it down.”

Tony shook his head. “I don’t think so. I don’t see any fires anywhere.”

“Give me the binoculars,” Jeff demanded. Tony reached into his backpack to retrieve them.

At that instant a movement caught their attention out of the corners of their eyes. They turned to look...

A man stood in the road. At least, it looked like a man. Whatever it was, it was gazing at them with an unreadable expression. And it glowed a brilliant, shining white, seeming to radiate light and power from the very core of its being. There was nothing threatening in its posture, yet both Jeff and Tony felt a thrill of terror go through them like a ten thousand volt electrical shock.

For nearly three seconds they simply stood, rooted, unable to move. Then the paralysis broke, and they turned and ran screaming in fright.

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“I tell you, it was an angel.”

Jeff snarled and spat. “Don’t get back on that crap again,” he retorted. “It was an alien.”

“Then why did it look human?”

“I don’t know!” Jeff practically yelled. “Maybe they look like us. Maybe they’re shape shifters or something. Does it matter?”

The two men were sitting on the shattered remains of a bus stop bench in an abandoned village. Around them, the all pervading stench of death was particularly strong. Jeff could see one corpse, bloated and rotting, half-hanging out of a broken window. Streaks of dried blood smeared the wall below it. Dead, stiff dogs littered the street.

Such things were so commonplace these days that neither man even noticed.

After a minute Tony spoke again. “We’ve got to go back,” he said.

“What?” Jeff demanded. “Are you out of your bleeding skull?”

“Orders, bub. Remember? Got to get a look through the binoculars.”

“What good will that do? More likely just get us killed.”

Tony shook his head slowly. “I don’t think so,” he replied. “That... whatever... didn’t bother coming after us.”

Jeff thought about that for a few moments. “Okay,” he finally said. “But we don’t go back the same way. And we get just close enough for a look, then we hightail it out of there.”

Wearily, the two men rose and started off again, leaving the dead village with its dead inhabitants behind. After about a half-mile, they came to a fork in the road. The first time they had gone to the left. This time they went right, along a winding dirt track barely wide enough for a good sized truck.

The track evidently at one time belonged to a private residence on top of a hill overlooking a valley in front of the city. Prime real estate, Jeff thought, wondering why whoever it was had never bothered to have the road paved. Maybe he wanted to discourage visitors. Whatever...

The residence had at one time been palatial. Now, like so much of the world, it was merely another pile of wreckage. Out back, the men discovered the remnants of a swimming pool. Amazingly, it still held some water, and except for a coating of green scum, the water looked normal.

Green scum. For nearly a minute Jeff stood gazing at the rare spot of life left on the devastated planet Earth. How it had survived the bombardment and fires he had no idea. It didn’t matter. Green scum couldn’t feed people. Maybe the aliens had left it as a form of thumbing their noses at humanity.

Jerusalem was plainly visible below the dingy gray clouds that covered the heavens. Again, both men noted the strange glow. It wasn’t electrical lighting; the color was all wrong. Peering more closely, Jeff saw moving dots.

“Give me the binoculars,” he ordered, reaching for them. Again, Tony handed them over. This time, no glowing humanoid, either angel or alien, showed up to frighten them away. Jeff lifted the binoculars to his eyes.

After nearly a minute Tony reached out a tentative hand and tapped Jeff on the shoulder. “See anything?” he asked softly.

Slowly, Jeff put the binoculars down, then held them out. “Yeah. People.”

Tony grabbed them and shoved them in front of his own eyes. After another minute he lowered them.

“See what I mean?” Jeff insisted.

Tony nodded. “This is scary, fella,” he replied. “Real scary.”

“Hunh? Why do you say that? You’re not thinking about that religious claptrap again, are you?” Suspicion colored his tone.

Tony turned to stare at him. “Well, isn’t it getting pretty obvious? There aren’t any aliens over there. Just people. And more of those whatever-it-was that we saw. Like I said, angels.”

Jeff swore viciously. “Those are the aliens, you idiot! Just because they look like us doesn’t make them some kind of supernatural being, now does it? Come on! You’ve beat that dead horse bloody.”

“Jeff, I recognized a face.”

“What do you mean?” Jeff hissed. “You mean one of the people? So what of it? They kidnapped a whole bunch of people about a month ago, remember? When they showed up. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. I also remember that this bloke was dead. He was killed in a riot about three years ago. How could he have been kidnapped a month ago?”

Jeff stared at Tony openmouthed for a moment, then grabbed the binoculars back. Jamming them in front of his eyes, he dialed the magnification all the way to maximum. Then he slowly scanned across the city.

All at once he jerked the binoculars down with an oath. Then he brought them up again. “No...” he breathed. “That’s impossible...” His hands were trembling.

Tony reached out and took the binoculars from Jeff’s grasp. He did not resist. “What was it?” he asked softly. “What did you see?”

“Julie,” was all Jeff could say.

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“I don’t get it,” Jeff snarled fifteen minutes later. “What’s she doing over there with them?”

The two men were sitting in the lee of a boulder on the side of the hill away from Jerusalem, a couple of hundred feet down from the wrecked estate. A little ways away lay the burned and gutted corpse of a wolf, killed in the violence of recent days. Under any other circumstances scavengers would have long since picked it clean. But the scavengers were gone like everything else.

“So that was your girlfriend?” Tony asked quietly. “The one you were with when the bombs fell?” Jeff nodded.

“Don’t you get it yet?” Tony continued insistently. “It’s the resurrection, bub. I see this bloke I used to know that’s dead and you see your dead squeeze. It all makes sense.”

Jeff’s head snapped around. “How many times have I told you to cut the crap!” he hissed. “Besides, the last time I saw her Julie wasn’t dead.”

“I thought you said—”

“They kidnapped her. I don’t think they were going to kill her.” He hesitated for a second. “Might have been better for her if they had,” he added more softly. “But they didn’t. Maybe the aliens took her when they snatched all those people.”

Tony nodded, conceding the point. “But what about the fellow I saw?” he wanted to know.

“Are you sure it was him? What if it was just some guy that looks like him? You didn’t get a real close look, you know.”

“You were pretty sure about your girlfriend,” Tony pointed out.

“That’s different.”

Now Tony turned to face Jeff. “You just don’t want to believe, do you?”

“Do you?” Jeff shot back, incredulously. “Come on!”

After a moment, Tony lowered his gaze. “Not really. It’s just that, well, with what that old bat said and all that’s going on, it does make a kind of sense.”

“Read your history books,” Jeff spat. “They said the same thing about Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein. Some people thought that birthmark on Gorbachev’s forehead was the Mark of the Beast.”

“I know,” replied Tony. “And speaking of that, what about that ‘loyalty tattoo’ Fearless Leader makes everybody wear?”

“Well, where do you think he got the idea?” Jeff demanded. “He’s just being smart, that’s all. Weeding out traitors and all that.”

“So where’s yours?” Tony wanted to know.

“I’m not part of the UIR,” Jeff insisted stubbornly.

“So? I heard there are a bunch of Aussies wearing it anyway.”

“Hey, it’s my choice. Besides,” Jeff added, “I’m not a Muslim. I don’t want people to think I am one.” He paused for a moment, then went on. “Look. There’ll always be things like all this crap going on now. And there’ll always be gullible fools shouting that the sky is falling. We’ll get over it. Someday we’ll all look back and laugh.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Jeff broke the silence again. “Anyway, we’ve done what we came to do. We took a look. They’re expecting us back at camp, remember? Maybe we should get going.”

For an answer Tony levered himself to his feet. “What do we tell them?” he wanted to know.

“There’s nothing to tell them,” Jeff answered as he followed suit and stood. “Other than posting scouts, they aren’t doing anything except just sitting there.”

They started walking. “Do we tell them about the people we saw?” Tony asked.

Jeff shrugged. “Why not? I say we tell them everything. After all, that’s what we came for, isn’t it?” Tony said nothing, and they trudged on in silence.

Julie, Jeff was thinking to himself. What are you doing over there? Did you manage to escape? Where have you been?

Do you still love me?

For just a moment his stride hesitated and his head started to turn back. Tony didn’t notice. Then, resolutely, Jeff pushed the thoughts of Julie from his mind.

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The vast camp had not changed much during their absence. An enormous, amorphous glob of multinational soldiery, weapons of every description, mess tents, latrines, jeeps and everything else military spread for miles and miles across the barren plain of Megiddo. In the distance, the hidden sun was bringing a brilliant red tint to the clouds hanging over the immense cesspool otherwise known as the Mediterranean Sea. It was depressing.

Jeff sighed as he picked at the evening slop served by a surly Russian cook. Maybe it was a matter of communication, he sometimes wondered. The cook showed no sign of speaking English. And Jeff certainly knew no Russian apart from a few simple words like *da* and *nyet*. *He probably thinks I’ve got a bad attitude*, he thought with a mental shake of the head. *Who really cares any more, anyway?*

The colonel had taken their report without comment, then promptly proceeded to assign another pair of soldiers to another recon mission. There wasn’t much else to do. It was make-work. Still, one of these days something *had* to happen. This ridiculous stalemate couldn’t go on forever.

Julie. What in the devil was she doing there with the invaders? He had no doubts that it was her. The same eyes, the same dark hair with the single curl over her forehead, the same half-smile. He shook his head. Got to get her off of my mind...

Just before dinner, Fearless Leader had made yet another in a series of what he referred to as “inspirational speeches” to the troops. Jeff found it easier to just tune him out. He didn’t hear the original product spoken in Arabic; all he got was the translation into English, made for the benefit

of the group of English speaking soldiers he billeted with. Still, even though he found the speech less than inspiring, there was something about the man that made him sit up and take notice. It was an uneasy feeling. Once he had likened it to finding out that your one great hope in the world was the one thing you couldn't bear to have. The mother of all losing situations. At least the First Minister had kept out of sight. Fearless Leader made Jeff nervous. The First Minister scared the crap out of him.

The hidden sun sank beyond the horizon and the sky grew dark. Jeff found himself sitting outside on a rock, gazing in the direction of Jerusalem. There was no mistaking where the city was located; the glow that he and Tony had noted on their mission was sufficient to reflect off the clouds. He sat quietly, resting his chin on his fist.

She's there, he kept repeating to himself. *She's up there with the enemy*. He found himself thinking back to their last trip together, recalling the laughter and simple fun of driving down Interstate 90 with the big blue western sky providing an absolutely knockout backdrop for the whole world. It had been a good world, full of green trees and hope, with very little hint of the horrors soon to come.

Maybe I could go get her and bring her back.

The instant that thought strayed into his mind he thrust it away with a snarl.

You know, this Russkie slop isn't half bad, he said to himself as he mopped up the last bits with a piece of old, stale bread. *Maybe when this is all over I'll take a trip to Russia and check out some of their world famous cuisine...*

Julie.

What the devil was she doing up there with the invaders?

He tossed the empty bowl aside and buried his face in his hands. *I've got to stop thinking about her*, he insisted. *Why do I still think about her? It's been more than a dozen years. I've had other girlfriends since then. Why aren't I going crazy over Theresa, or Kate?*

Why Julie?

Maybe it was the simple fact that she was up there with the enemy, and that he had seen her. Of course, that had to be it.

But understanding the reason didn't make it any simpler to cast her from his thoughts.

Maybe I could go and at least try and bring her back.

Maybe?

He thrust the thought from his mind and ruthlessly forced himself to work on a logistical problem regarding rifle distribution.

* * * * *

In the dark, the road looked different than it had during the day. Unrelieved blackness surrounded him. Not even the eerie glow from Jerusalem could be seen, hidden as it was behind the bulk of the hill in front of him. And it was silent. Silent and dead.

Jeff slowly inched forward, feeling his way with a stick, keeping close to the right edge of the pavement. Twice he had been forced to detour around wrecked vehicles. He recalled them from his earlier trip, but in the dreadful night they took on a new menace, transforming themselves from rusting metal hulks to crouching alien monstrosities, waiting to skewer him through the navel with dreadful weapons.

Bit by bit, the alien shine above Jerusalem came into view, reflecting off of the perpetual overcast, but illuminating nothing of the road Jeff was traveling. As he began to make it out, all at once a strange sensation came over him, of approaching the only source of light and hope left in a dark and demonic world. Dead rocks took on new significance, and he almost found himself expecting to see horrible monsters with blood red eyes and slaving, fang-lined jaws leaping up from behind them. For a moment he almost started to run toward the glow of Jerusalem.

He forced himself to stop by sheer willpower. *This is ridiculous*, he grated silently, cursing the alien invaders for whatever kind of ray or hypnosis that they were using on him. *Got to be firm. Got to. Can't let them mess up my head...*

He was passing the point where they had encountered that terrifying, glowing white man the first time. Jeff's legs were trembling as he took one cautious step after another, barely able to stay erect, dreading the moment when the alien would appear again. The last time it hadn't done anything; they had saved it the effort by running in sheer fright. But he now purposed to keep going no matter what happened.

What would the creature do if he didn't run?

Ever so slowly he could feel his legs ceasing to shake. After what seemed like a thousand years he had left the encounter point nearly a quarter of a mile behind. The strange glow enveloping Jerusalem now filled the horizon in front of him. He could make out individual buildings, streets, and vast, amorphous shapes that had to be enormous multitudes of people. Peering more closely, he could see that the glow seemed to radiate from some central, hidden point. Again, he was seized by conflicting emotions that wanted to both pull him joyfully forward and fall prostrate at the feet of whatever it was, and to repel him in sheer horror of something so frightening that words did not exist to describe it.

He was on what had once been the final approach to the city along a secondary road. Formerly lined with trees, only blackened stumps now lurked semi-invisible in the darkness. Here and there he could make out the shadowy outline of a building, faintly visible in the shine from ahead. All were deserted. Whatever the invaders were doing, they were apparently pulled together into the heart of the ancient Jewish capital.

Suddenly he stopped. Up ahead, he could make out a faintly gleaming outline of something on the road moving toward him. For a second he almost turned and ran, gibbering in fright, then he managed to resolutely clamp down on his emotions and force himself to plant his legs. For just a moment, the truth of the situation blared in his brain; whether he faced the coming menace now or waited for it with the army made no difference.

He could now see that the figure was a person. Unlike the frightening figure that he and Tony had encountered earlier, this one was not radiating light and power and terror. This one seemed smaller, more human... He strained his eyes, peering into the blackness. The figure approached, began to take on definition. Suddenly, his heart gave an odd leap, a mixture of elation and puzzlement.

Julie?

It was impossible.

Of all the thousands—no, millions—of people holed up in Jerusalem, why would she be the one sent to greet an interloper?

Impossible!

A dim illumination seemed to surround him, and the approaching figure stepped into its circle. Jeff saw a mass of dark hair billowing past shoulders, with a single lock curled over the forehead. The same angular face with sparkling eyes.

The same Julie.

Impossible! his brain screamed again.

Yet, she was different. The half-smile was gone, replaced by an expression that Jeff found beyond his ability to comprehend, a mixture of such love, concern, pity and sadness that it almost overwhelmed him. She was dressed differently than he had ever seen her, in glistening white, like that creature that he and Tony had encountered. But most of all, she seemed to radiate a sense of such *purity* that he found himself feeling unclean, afraid to touch her for fear of soiling her. She spoke.

"Jeff."

The sound of her voice was like a knife piercing his soul. It was Julie. Yet it wasn't Julie. It was as if she had become some kind of transcendent being, no longer of the sordid world that he lived in. Tentatively, in spite of his self loathing in the sight of her purity, he reached out a hand toward her.

"Julie?"

She took his hand in hers, unafraid. At her touch, a thrill of something indescribable rushed through him, and he almost fell to his knees with the desire to weep. Somehow, he managed to keep himself upright. He felt renewed strength flowing from her, permeating his very being.

"It is not too late, Jeff," she said, softly.

Now the tears flowed. He clung to her hand as if it were the very source of life itself. He tried to speak, failed, then tried again and found his voice.

"Not too late for what?" he asked, almost in a whisper. A part of him feared that he knew the answer, and it was not an answer that he wanted to hear.

"You must give yourself over to the Lord," she replied, gently yet firmly. "You must follow Him."

No!

"He knew that you were coming," she continued. "I was sent to give you one last chance."

No!

"Yes, Jeff."

"Why?" he managed to croak. "Why did you come?"

Now she smiled, that same expression that he knew so well, the one that had drawn him irresistibly to her in the first place. "Because I love you, Jeff."

"Still? After all these years?"

"Yes, after all these years." She gazed into her eyes.

As he gazed back, he realized that she was talking about love on a level far above anything that he had ever experienced in his entire life. It wasn't an infatuation, or any other kind of petty human desire. This was something as far above mortal passion as the most distant star was above the Earth. Looking into her eyes, he realized that at the same time he had both found her more truly than he had ever believed possible, and lost her equally as much. He had lost her to—what?

To whom?

Or Whom?

Was there really a God after all?

No!

"I can't," he finally said, releasing her hand. "I know you believe, but I just can't." He indicated the eerily lit city behind her. "This is all some kind of... of lie. You've been deceived. They're alien invaders. They've twisted your mind." He felt himself babbling, not even making any sense to himself. It was as if something within him was desperately holding on, clinging to his very soul with a grip of iron and refusing to let go no matter what happened. For the first time in his life he wavered, feeling the struggle of opposing forces. In spite of his vehement denials, a part of him wanted to believe, wanted to just give up and go with Julie and meet her mysterious and terrible Lord.

Maybe He wouldn't be so terrible after all, if he could just let go of that something within him.

Now Julie's eyes took on a look of pleading. "Jeff," she said earnestly, "there isn't much time. The Lord has been patient and merciful, but He won't wait much longer. If you don't come *now* it will be too late."

At that, an old inner rage reawakened within Jeff. He recalled the few serious arguments he had had with her, all those years ago. And not only her, but with all of the other religious freaks that he had met.

“Oh, come off it! You’re always saying that. ‘It’s now or never.’,” he mocked. “Well, we just might have a few surprises for your friends up there if they do decide to try anything. We’re waiting.”

Julie said nothing. She just gazed sadly into his eyes.

“Look,” he went on, “why don’t you come back with me. There’s still hope.”

She still said nothing.

“All right!” he finally yelled. “Be that way. Don’t say I didn’t try to save you. Go back to your alien friends. Maybe that’s where you belong, you’ve forgotten what it means to be human.”

He turned away and started walking, his boots making angry clacks on the pavement. Yet even as he stalked away he was listening. A part of him still hoped that she would change her mind and come running after him. But he heard nothing. No patter of running feet. No screams of outrage. No pleading for him to return. Twice, he almost turned around to look. But he forced himself not to.

After a little while, all sense of her presence was gone.

* * * * *

Dawn was just breaking when Jeff came over the top of the last hill before the great plain of Megiddo. Ahead, he could see the vast army encampment, scores of thousands of lights scattered for miles and miles, and the faint movement of soldiers beginning a new day on the field. With the memories of Julie’s last words still echoing faintly in the recesses of his mind, the sight of the tremendous assemblage of military might was comforting. He started downhill, hastening his steps.

The ground trembled. It was the third tremor he had felt in the past hour. Somehow, it didn’t surprise him. With all of the other disasters that had taken place in recent history, what was one more? He snorted. Maybe it would even be a good thing. Maybe it would shake Jerusalem down around the ears of the invaders. He thought again of Julie, then thrust her viciously from his mind.

Another tremor hit, this one much stronger, nearly knocking him from his feet. Faintly, from underground, he heard a deep, long drawn out groan, as if the very bowels of the planet were crying out. At the same time, the sky behind him was suddenly illuminated in brilliant light.

He whirled around, then stumbled and fell as the earthquake shook the ground yet again. The glow was not the light of sunrise. Instead, it was coming directly from the location of Jerusalem.

Now the glow became overpowering, and Jeff’s eyes shut involuntarily. Beneath him, the ground shuddered and heaved like the surface of the ocean in a hurricane. Boulders tumbled past him, narrowly missing his head. He desperately scabbled in the dirt, trying to hang on.

Something unbearably brilliant rose past the hills and into view. It was as if his eyelids were transparent; eyes closed made no difference. Whatever it was, it was coming...

Jeff twisted his head away, trying to avoid the blinding glare, then a particularly vicious tremor flipped him into the air and flopped him back down again on his belly. His left leg struck a rock and he felt his kneecap shatter. Pain streaked up his thigh and into his spinal cord, then slammed into his brain with almost physical force. His eyelids flew open from shock.

All around, a tremendous glow was spreading, illuminating a terrifying scene. The vast army was seething, trying to mobilize. Here and there he caught glimpses of artillery fire. A rocket streaked up and over his head, toward some target behind him... above him...

A sound filled the air. It was a sound so huge, so powerful, that his ears refused to accept it. Yet it penetrated. It penetrated past the haze of pain washing up from his shattered leg. It penetrated past the layers and layers of emotional and psychological defense that he had built up through his entire life. It penetrated on a level beyond physical, speaking inwardly, wordlessly, to his very soul.

Ahead and below, on the vast plain of Megiddo, the tremendous army was shriveling, withering, dying. The glow was filling the sky, sweeping away the clouds of twilight to reveal a clear blue morning. Behind, in the east, the sun peeked over the horizon, illuminating the world for the first time in days. But its glory paled in comparison to the Glory shining above.

As the immense, powerful Word penetrated to Jeff Ketten's innermost being, baring his soul at last to the final, utter Truth, he realized that he had been deceived. Julie had been right. With his final thoughts, just before he died and went on to face the eternal consequences of his life's choices, he thought of her, tried to reach out to her with his mind.

I'm sorry...

He felt his consciousness slipping away, sliding into a new mode of existence that he had heretofore denied with his every waking thought.

You were right. I'm sorry...

I only wish...

Around him, the true New Day was beginning.