

THE ARMOR

by

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I. TEMPEST

When John saw worry in Captain MacInnis's eyes his stomach cringed. There were rocks out there, somewhere off the starboard bow, and the captain knew it. The merciless storm was driving the *Bonnie Bess* ever closer to them despite MacInnis's best efforts at the helm. It was all he could do to keep the square-rigged merchant brig from foundering in the fierce wind and waves. Guiding it around unseen hazards in the thick blackness of this night was hopeless.

John's shipboard experience with storms had been limited to a few minor squalls; never anything like this. He had heard stories of the fierce weather experienced by the vessels that sailed around Cape Horn and through the Straits of Magellan. His voyages up and down the eastern seaboard were far less eventful. They had never even been accosted by the pirates that plagued the Caribbean. This was something entirely different. At first he had been ashamed of the terror he felt as the ship lurched, pitched and groaned. He had taken solace in the belief that his fears were the irrational result of inexperience. *Just follow orders*, he had told himself. *The others have all been through this dozens of times. They know how to survive it.* Unfortunately the rest of the crew, normally brash and unflappable, had done little to validate such trust. Jack Montgomery, a loud-mouthed instigator, had worked part of the crew into a frenzy earlier in the day. He reportedly had seen an omen of doom; just what it was, John had not heard.

Like sailors throughout history, this crew subscribed to a rabid belief in superstition, folklore and even pagan religions. To that was added a sprinkling of Christianity, apparently just to provide legitimacy. John was a relatively new Christian but even he could tell there was little correlation between their brand of religion and scripture. Earlier in the day he had chuckled under his breath at their foolish concern over this "omen." He had stopped laughing when the storm

kicked up. That had started him praying. Still, up till now his real reliance had been on the captain—an old salt for whom the sea seemed to hold no surprises. Now, to see MacInnis’s face mirroring that same worried look everyone else wore was unnerving. John’s heart began to pound.

“Kid!” came a voice. Though shouted, it sounded feeble above the storm’s roar. He looked forward and Griz was beckoning him. He hurried against the stinging spray as best he could on the bucking deck.

“What is it?”

“A cargo container has broken loose in the forward hold. We have to secure it before it crashes through the hull.”

He immediately followed. With the help of two other crewmen they got the container lashed down quickly. Just as they finished, the vessel shook them off their feet and the wooden hull near the bow gave a deep cracking sound. Though not completely broken-through, sea water spewed instantly from a half-dozen cracks, all in a two-foot radius.

Griz answered John’s frightened look. He pointed to the dent in the hull where the cracks were. “We’ve hit a rock,” he shouted over the hiss of the water streaming in. “Praise God, it must only have been a glancing blow.”

Such a statement was unusual for Griz who, though the only other practicing Christian among the crew, kept his faith to himself. Only after John’s own conversion had Griz revealed it. Then he had become John’s mentor. His uncharacteristic reference to God served to squelch John’s rising panic. There were probably more rocks out there, and the next could sink them. Though his fear was still very much present, he was faring better than the other two men.

Matthew Carver was stumbling and shrinking backwards away from the gushing water, his eyes wide with terror. James Lloyd was in even worse shape. “Montgomery was right,” he was ranting. “The ship is doomed. We’ve got to get off. It’s a death ship!”

Griz was the one non-officer whose few words were never ignored, countered or questioned.

“Carver,” he barked, his black eyes aflame. “Go aft and bring every bucket you can lay your hands on. Now!”

The terrified man scrambled away stumbling and tripping. Next Griz turned on James Lloyd.

“And you, get some help and man those pumps.” Lloyd had other plans, namely to get in the nearest dinghy and off the ship. Indecision left him standing dumbstruck. “Don’t stand there gaping.” Griz whirled him around and gave him a mighty shove. “Can’t you see the water rising, man? Now go!”

“And forget Montgomery and his omens,” John called after him. “We are not doomed, not if we trust in God to rescue us.”

Griz gave a slight nod affirming John’s words, then spoke to him. “Kid, we are going to need to bail for all we’re worth and pray this weakened hull holds,” said Griz. “Get every available hand to form a line.”

John headed up the ladder just as several crewmen arrived at the top along with the first officer.

“What’s happened? Is she damaged?”

“Aye, sir,” called John. “Crack in the hull. She’s leaking but not broken through. We need hands for a bucket brigade and some help on the pumps.”

When John arrived on deck it was to Mr. Tolbert, the first officer, threatening the paralyzed crew for not responding.

“It’s no use,” Montgomery said. “This ship won’t survive the night. The boats are our only hope, sir. We have to abandon ship.”

“Abandon ship? Are you all mad?”

“Not mad, sir, superstitious,” said John. “They think an omen has shown that the ship will sink this very night.”

“You slow-witted fools. While you stand here our chances of saving this ship are slipping away. Now, I’ll have no more talk of abandoning this ship unless ordered by the captain. I’ll give you an omen you can rely on: get down in that hold or I’ll throw the lot of you overboard *without* boats.”

It was a bold statement, but one Tolbert could not possibly back up. The men appeared ready to start launching boats any second, threats or no threats.

“How long till daylight sir?” asked John.

“An hour, maybe two,” he said, frowning at the odd question.

“Listen men,” said John. “I believe the God of heaven is greater than any other power. He has made clear to me that we will not be lost. Jack, if we are to sink as you believe, it will happen this night, will it not?” Montgomery nodded, frowning. “Then help us bail just till daylight. If we survive until then we will know that God has prevailed. That is no more than two hours. If anything worsens during that time, you can man the boats without opposition. Fair enough?”

It was a deal he had no authority to make. As the youngest, least experienced crewmember, he had no business even addressing the others. But in the fury of the storm, there was no time to worry about proper protocol.

“Two hours, then; no more,” they agreed and headed for the cargo hold. Jack Montgomery protested to their backs, but the decision had already been made.

II. CLIFF HARBOR

Once their minds had been made up, the men set to work in earnest. They bailed continuously, passing bucket after bucket up to the deck to be dumped. Those on deck tied themselves down to prevent going overboard. After an hour the storm had calmed enough that the ropes were no longer needed. The water level below decks had been held steady by their efforts. Although it was hard work, their fears abated as the storm did. The sky did not become noticeably brighter for another hour and a half, but no one kept track. The worst was long over with. By the time the sun was up behind the overcast, the shoreline—and safety—could be seen directly ahead.

Seen from shore, if a ship can be said to limp, the *Bonnie Bess* indeed appeared to be limping into port. The starboard list, ragged canvas, and broken yardarms gave the vessel a haggard and wounded look.

Ironically, the view from the ship's deck had little to recommend it, either. The approaching village, though inhabited, was as drab and lifeless as a ghost town. There was something depressing, even ominous about it. It was more than the heavy, dark overcast or the tired gray ocean. There was something else. Something more than the colorless buildings, the black silhouettes of leafless trees, the few straw-colored patches of dead grass. Though it was well into April, not one sign of green leaf or budding blossom could be seen. As backdrop to the dreariness—and somehow the cause of it—stood immensely high cliffs that defined the semicircular limits of the community. They ran in an arc of about a mile radius on all sides save the east, that being the oceanfront. The only break in the cliffs was a sort of crack to the southwest out of which led a road from the town. The road's progression was halted abruptly by a huge jumble of rock and rubble, obviously the result of a landslide.

To John Stander, his negative feelings toward this dour little town, unimaginatively named Cliff Harbor, were quite surprising. He should have been rejoicing at just being alive— elated at coming to safe harbor again. The young deckhand did feel genuine relief to be nearing land. Yet, he was certainly making no plans to kiss the soil of this melancholy little village. He was simply unable to shake the feeling that something was wrong about the place.

Undoubtedly the townspeople were a contributing factor. In John's experience the arrival of any ship was cause for a good deal of attention from those on shore. It pleased him to have wide-eyed children gather around and hang on his every word as he recounted tales of distant lands. Of course, his tales needed considerable embellishment since, until now, his voyages had all been pretty uneventful. News of a storm-ravaged ship entering port ordinarily would have spread to every citizen instantaneously. Yet along the wharf waited only a handful of businesslike dockworkers and a few curiosity seekers. There were less than a dozen all told, and no children at all.

Maybe there was nothing to this sense of foreboding though. Maybe he was just fatigued. They had all worked continuously since the storm, and he had just finished a long stint at the bilge pumps. He was tall, lean, and muscular and could pull more than his share of work; and last night he'd had to.

His curly dark brown hair and blue eyes gave him boyish good looks and the nickname "kid" aboard ship. His leadership during the storm had earned him considerable respect. He thought it funny that he should achieve such esteem among his peers at this point, knowing that upon his return to Boston he would not renew his career as a seaman. In fact, they should have been almost to Boston now. Instead, the ship's condition dictated putting-in at the nearest possible port: Cliff Harbor.

"I've an uneasy feeling about this place, kid," a deep quiet voice broke in. It was the ever-somber Griz. Whether that was his first, last or nickname John did not know; only that it was just Griz. He was completely bald and beardless, his black eyebrows standing out in stark contrast. His gaunt, wiry frame had a look of advanced age but his ability to outwork any three other men denied it. Hardly anything was known about him. He was an excellent sailor who did his job but kept to himself. His aloofness sometimes extended to his going days on end speaking only when his duties demanded it. All of which caused quite a stir among the crew when he had suddenly

taken the kid under his wing about six months earlier. Following John's return to the ship after a brief stay in a southern port the two had become, to the crew's observance, kindred spirits.

The crew had no notion how right they were. During that particular stay in port, John had heard the true gospel of Jesus Christ at a little church he had visited. He had responded and become a genuine, saved, born-again, Jesus-is-my-Lord Christian. In his excitement back aboard ship he had gone to Griz and told him of his newfound faith. He chose Griz because, as a man of few words, John assumed he would not waste them in pointless ridicule. John was thrilled and surprised to learn that Griz was also a Christian, albeit not a very outspoken one. His silence regarding his faith was a mystery that remained unexplained for as long as John knew him. Yet, on reflection, John recalled Griz spending many hours alone with an ancient tattered book—a Bible, he now knew.

From that time on, the two of them had spent nearly every spare minute reading scripture. Griz had provided occasional commentary and John absorbed the Word of God like a sponge. John was glad to have someone aboard who shared his values, his perspective, and now his reaction to Cliff Harbor.

“You feel it too, Griz? I was beginning to think it was just because I'm so tired.”

“It is more than weariness, I think,” responded Griz. “There is something...evil...about this place. Brings to mind the Lord's admonition to the seventy to wipe off the dust of any city that would not receive them. I'll surely wipe off the dust of this city, and be glad enough to leave it.”

The two were roused to action by a stream of commands designed to bring the ship into port. When at last the ship was docked for repair, the captain of the *Bonnie Bess* addressed all hands. Aaron MacInnis was a comical-looking old Scotsman. He was short and rotund with two undersized stobs for legs, not unlike the drawings one sees of Humpty-Dumpty. His wiry gray hair and mustache-less beard splayed out in all directions. His eyebrows were longhaired and stuck straight up giving him a surprised look. His portly face was ruddy and his mouth was never without a short black pipe. In point of fact MacInnis' face looked like he had once confused gunpowder with pipe tobacco. His buffoonish appearance might have made him an object of ridicule. Instead, to a man, the crew readily acknowledged him as a most capable and just officer.

John, too, had great admiration for him, and had been pleased to find that the captain had taken a liking to him. MacInnis interrupted his own orders to make a general announcement to the crew.

“Lads, tis no sma’ debt o’ gratitude we’re owin’ the A’mighty for our verra lives,” he said. “He’s brought us to safe harbor where you’ll be spending some time ashore. Mr. Tolbert’ll be assignin’ three shifts to keep watch that no loss o’ cargo occurs while on shore. It’ll take a while before we can leave for Boston. In the meanwhile, deport yourselves like gentlemen and report here to the pier at six bells for news on the progress o’ the repairs.

“Mr. Tolbert, get the cargo unloaded while Ah see the harbor master ashore.”

“Aye, sir,” responded the boatswain, who began barking orders to the crew as Captain MacInnis headed for the gangplank. Suddenly the captain detoured and took John aside.

“One moment, lad. Ah’ve heard the reports o’ how you kept the crew from losin’ heart durin’ the storm. It appears Ah owe you a debt o’ gratitude as well. If there’s any way Ah can ever be o’ help to you, lad, doona hesitate to ask. Ah’m beholdin’ to you.” The Captain smiled and patted John on the shoulder.

“Aye, sir. *Thank* you, sir,” said a dumbfounded John finally as the captain waddled off down the gangplank.

John worked at unloading until late in the day, then was saddled with the first watch. At its conclusion, on the brink of exhaustion, he finally found sleeping accommodations at the town’s only inn. His was not the peaceful slumber expected of one so weary, however. Instead it was troubled by fitful dreams of fierce conflicts with faceless, shadowy opponents. No matter how hard he fought and struggled, he made no headway against them. Indeed, his adversaries seemed to laugh at him and to treat his efforts as of no consequence. Though he could remember none of the details of the dreams, something woke him with a start just as the first hint of dawn was lighting the horizon. He rose up on one elbow for a moment, panting, trying to clear his head. Sleep quickly overtook him and he readily yielded to it. This time it was mercifully sound and dreamless. The former terrors that had plagued his sleep were apparently unwilling to renew the battle in the advent of daylight.

III. THE APPARITION

John awoke to a gray morning. He was determined to push from his mind all vestiges of his earlier tormented dreams. He walked out to the pier to find that Griz was on watch.

“Griz, my friend, I think I shall take a little tour around this fair city. Do you wish me to bring back a souvenir?” John somehow felt compelled to be lighthearted around Griz as if compensating for his somber demeanor.

“You go to find a treasure,” Griz intoned mysteriously, “one of great cost—but it will be worth the price.” It was a statement, not a question, and certainly not levity.

John puzzled over the words a moment. Griz’s look was even graver than usual, and that was cause for worry. Griz—how could one put it?—*knew* things. He had a sort of sense about impending events—things with lasting consequences. John could tell that Griz had nothing further to say; no interpretation or explanation. He looked up at those dark cliffs brooding over the town. They still looked as unfriendly as the day before.

“Treasure? Hmph. Can there any good thing come out of Cliff Harbor?” John teased. Griz just stared at him a few seconds, his mind preoccupied, then slowly turned away. This was peculiar behavior even for Griz. *This place is really having an effect on him*, thought John. He returned to the Inn for breakfast, bath, and shave. He was feeling relatively chipper so long as he ignored the sense of dread just below the surface of his conscious mind.

He pulled his dark blue stocking cap onto the back of his head and began strolling toward the south end of the wharf. Sea gulls’ squeals echoed across the water.

Near the end of the wharf he noticed a solitary figure leaning on a railing and looking out at the ocean. As he came nearer, it became obvious that “figure” was the operative word. It was a young woman, about five foot four, and the words “perfectly proportioned” were the first that

came to his mind. She wore a modest but flattering beige dress with dark gray-blue trim. She also wore a cream-colored kerchief-scarf on the back of her head. Plain, simple, but on her, gorgeous. She was clearly not one of the “ladies of the evening” the other sailors so easily found among seaport taverns.

John slowed as he approached and got a better look at her. She was, he guessed, maybe a couple of years younger than him. But one thing required no guesswork; she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her light auburn hair lay in curls across her forehead, her skin was smooth and fair, her lips full and expressive. She glanced his way briefly and her soft brown eyes under perfectly arched brows left him weak in the knees. She wasn’t glamorous exactly; indeed John could not pinpoint what specifically had so taken him about her. He had seen lovely young women before, but somehow she was something special. Her beauty went beyond her appearance alone; beauty also seemed to radiate from within her.

He walked past her a few yards and then, as casually as he could, he also leaned on his elbows at the rail. Appearing casual was no mean feat for him since his pulse was pounding and he had butterflies in his stomach. He tried to look at the ocean, as she was, but he found he could not keep his eyes away from her.

What is wrong with me? It’s as if I had never seen a girl before, he reasoned. Reason and rationality were, however, no defense against those long silky eyelashes looking wistfully out to sea. She felt his eyes on her and glanced his way. He immediately averted his gaze to some gulls hovering beyond her, then turned back toward the ocean. When his peripheral vision caught that she also had looked away, his gaze was again drawn like a magnet to her. They continued to play eye-contact peek-a-boo for a short while, when at last she backed away from the rail. He began to panic at the thought of her leaving. His mind raced, trying desperately to think of a way to start a conversation.

He had always been somewhat awkward around girls. He’d had one brush with romance, a certain Miss Patricia Barnett. Ironically, the pretty, blue-eyed blond was as gregarious and outgoing around males as John was the opposite around females. Differences in personality aside, after two months of increasing closeness they seemed to be headed toward a significant relationship. It was then that the time had come for him to go to sea; something he had put in motion well before they had met. The blossoming romance had wilted in the glare of his absence.

Not long after, he had received word of her engagement to one Philip Weston, Esq. The sting stayed with him a long while but eventually faded into a “life lesson” learned.

Now he found himself totally captivated by this young woman. Shy or not, he was determined to talk to her and not let her just walk away. To his relief she remained where she was for the present and he caught himself praying silently for help in speaking to her. Then he felt embarrassed for bothering God with such trivia.

He watched a lone seagull wheel and hover just in front of them.

“How would you like to be able to do that?” he asked finally. She looked at him quizzically. He pointed toward the gull with his chin. “To be able to just glide along on the air like that, and then fly off anywhere you wanted?”

The wistful look intensified as she watched the gull. “I think...I think that would be wonderful.” Her voice was soft and slightly high with a little tremor in it that gave it a melodic quality. John thought it perfect, the kind of delicate voice he could not imagine being used for screaming or shouting.

“Which way would you fly?” he asked, looking back out to sea. “In toward the cliffs or out toward the ocean?”

“Toward the ocean, then up the coast—or down it. Anywhere, just far away from here.”

He had expected her to reciprocate the question, giving him a chance to talk about his home in Lexington, Massachusetts. Instead she just left her melancholy statement hang. He was determined to keep the conversation going. “Do you do this often?” he asked. “Come and look out at the water, I mean?”

“No, not often. They say the sea is ever changing, but not for me, not from here. It always looks the same. That rock there, covered with barnacles, it has looked just like that since I was a little girl. Besides, I have too much to do to fritter away time staring out at the harbor.”

“You’ve lived here all your life?”

“All my life.” She didn’t seem pleased at all about it.

“Do you plan to do some traveling?”

“No.” There was finality, and sadness, in the way she said the word.

“Let me tell you, there is a lot of world out there. I’ve seen a fair piece of it myself,” he exaggerated. “Why, the things I could show you. For instance, the sugar you like so well in your tea, I’ve seen the cane plantations where they grow it.”

She smirked slightly. “How do you know I like sugar in my tea?”

“Ladies of sweet disposition have sweet tastes.”

She smiled, more at his clumsy come-on than anything else. Something in her eyes said she had taken a liking to him. For his part the smile doubled his heart rate. “I see,” she said. Then added teasingly, “You know a great deal about women?”

He looked down shyly. “Actually, no. Not much at all, to be honest.” He quickly refocused the conversation on her. “Anyway, what kinds of places do you like?”

She turned and looked back at the ocean. “You don’t understand. When I said I’ve lived here all my life, I meant exactly that. I’ve never been away from Cliff Harbor. Ever. Not even once.”

“Well, that definitely has to change.” He tried to sound lighthearted in contrast to her near-despondent tone. She looked at him with that same sadness in her eyes as in her voice. Then her eyes lowered to the ground.

The look had a profound effect on him. Whatever was troubling her, he wanted to fix it. Although he did not even know her, he could not abide that anything would bring her unhappiness. In that instant he determined that he would get to know her, discover the problem, and solve it—somehow. It was as if some force from within him was overpowering his natural reticence around females. Yet there was so much ground to cover. He smiled and spoke gently. “Pardon my impoliteness. We’ve not even been introduced. I am John Stander from off the *Bonnie Bess* there out of Boston.”

She smiled deliciously for a second or two and seemed about to speak. He anticipated her introduction in return, or at least a “Pleased to meet you.” Instead, her eyes suddenly widened. She looked around furtively as if having realized something was not right. He tried continuing the conversation casually, hoping it would alleviate her unexplained nervousness. He turned and pointed up the wharf toward the ship.

“That storm last night almost finished us. For a while none of us thought we would make it, but we managed to keep her afloat until we could get to Cliff Harbor. If you look closely

down near the water line there you can see the damaged section of the hull. Did the storm cause any damage here?" No response. He turned to repeat his question and found no one there.

He spun in all directions looking for her. How could she have left so silently? How could she have vanished so quickly? He caught a fleeting glimpse of something disappearing behind a warehouse several yards away. He ran to the corner and looked, but found only an empty alley. He rushed up one street and down another to no avail. There were only a handful of businesses in the town and he entered each hoping to find her. Again, nothing. He revisited them one-by-one, this time asking the proprietors if they had seen or knew of the young woman he described. At the smithy, an old man gave a curt "No" without even looking up. A younger man, about John's age, appeared frightened, and without a word made it clear he had nothing to say. There was no one to speak to at the livery stable. At the apothecary, the owner responded with a headshake then practically ran into the back area behind the counter. At the Inn there was a lot of derision and teasing from his shipmates, but no one had seen her. The general store owner went even further than the others, claiming no person of that description lived in the town—never had. Unlike the other stores, there were actually customers in this one. A small, ragged Black lad was oblivious to John. He was preoccupied with a jar of licorice as if willpower alone would cause a piece to leap into his hands. However, two women who had been casually shopping stopped short at hearing John's conversation with the proprietor. They both stared at him in alarm.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," he said doffing his cap toward the nearest one. "I was wondering if maybe you—" She shook her head then quickly laid her wares on the counter. Trembling, she scurried out the door without a word. The next woman also laid her items down. John quickly positioned himself between her and the door.

"Ma'am," he said a bit more sharply. "I can tell from you folks' reactions that this is more than just a case of you not knowing the girl I've described. There is something else going on here and I would like to know what it is. I saw and spoke to this girl not half an hour ago just down the wharf from here. All I am asking is where I might find her or at least her name. Will you not at least extend me the courtesy of an answer?"

The woman stood glaring at him, undecided, for an uncomfortably long time. Finally she spoke. "You're off that ship, aren't you?" He nodded. "What right have you got coming here to Cliff Harbor, stirring up trouble? You have no idea what you are dealing with, young man. Folks

hereabouts learned long time ago not to go poking into things that are none of their business. Only causes misery and grief.” Her voice became choked with emotion. “Go back to your ship, young man. Go there and forget you ever saw that girl. Leave us be to deal with our own trouble. We don’t need you bringing more upon us by getting mixed up with her.”

IV. LICORICE

Her accusatory tone turned John's mounting frustration to anger. "I'm afraid I cannot just go back to my ship, ma'am," he said sharply. "It has a hole in it. Besides," he said toward the proprietor, "I thought this girl did not exist."

The owner shot a severe look at the woman, then began backpedaling. "What she—um—means, son, is that we don't want our young ladies getting mixed up with sailors. They have a certain reputation, you know."

John looked back to the woman. "You were not speaking about young ladies in general. You mentioned a specific girl."

Having taken a cue from the owner, she recanted. "I guess maybe I misunderstood whom you meant."

John refused to let the issue die. "Like I said, she's very pretty, light reddish-brown hair, brown eyes. She's wearing a sort of a tan dress—"

She and the owner looked at each other and shook their heads, a bit too quickly and earnestly. "Oh, oh no, I know of no one like that; not around here," said the woman.

"Look, if it is her honor you are protecting, I assure you I just want to talk with her. Right here in public if—"

"I know who she is," interjected the boy. "It's Miss Holly—"

"Burton!" snapped the two adults, cutting the boy off. The owner continued, "You get on back home and stop interfering in folks' conversation where you got no business. Besides, you don't have money to buy anything with anyhow. So run on home now before I take the broom to you. Now git!" The boy did not scurry away as might have been expected, but sidled out the door, his eyes never leaving John.

“Son of a recently freed slave woman,” said the owner. “Always making up stories and buttin’-in hoping folks will take notice of him.”

“I really need to go,” said the woman, heading for the door.

“Ma’am, what about your goods?” said John. She looked back at him quizzically but continued through the doorway. “There on the counter,” he said pointing. “Are you not going to buy them?” She hurried on out the door. As she did she again scolded the little boy who apparently had not gone far.

John and the owner exchanged looks, each of which said silently, *You’re not fooling anybody.*

John gave a sidelong glance at the front door then said, “How about a piece of that licorice?”

Now it was the owner’s turn to look at the door. “You, uh, like licorice?” he said slowly.

John stared straight into his eyes. “I’m partial to it.” After a long stare-down, the owner turned and took the jar down from the shelf and opened it. “How many?”

“One should do. How much?”

“One—uh, no, three cents.” John raised his eyebrows. “We don’t get much call for candy,” said the owner. “Guess I wouldn’t blame you if you changed your mind.” He started to put the lid back on, when three pennies spun on the counter. As he headed for the door with his purchase, the owner called after him. “Sailor boy. Mrs. Pearson was right. Go on back and join your shipmates. And you be real careful with that licorice. If you use it wrong, it could lead to lots worse than a belly ache.” John paused only a second, then went out and found Burton sitting on the far end of the porch. He looked at the boy, then at the licorice, then back to the boy. Nodding slightly at Burton he walked on down the street. As he had expected, the boy tagged along.

“You know, it’s strange,” said John looking straight ahead as he walked. “Whenever I have trouble finding something, I feel like eating sweets. The rest of the time I don’t even like candy. I just give it away.” He looked back toward the store where the owner was frowning at them from the end of the porch.

“You give candy away?” Burton’s eyes never left the piece of licorice.

John still did not look at him, but kept his eyes on the end of the road. “If I find what I’m looking for. Or, at least, get some idea where she might be.”

“You mean Miss Holly? I know where she most likely is my own self. I know where she lives.”

“How about you just go there, real quietly while I follow. When we get there, just come take this licorice and be on your way. No need to talk.”

The boy shrugged and marched double-time down the road. John followed unhurriedly. There was no need, given Burton’s short legs.

The road reached clear to the base of the cliffs, almost a full mile. They had walked three quarters of its length before Burton stopped and pointed with his forehead at a cottage. It was tiny, with an even smaller bungalow behind. The latter could not have contained more than a bed and fireplace, but its curtained windows suggested that someone used it. John nodded appreciatively and looked around. No one was following them. He handed the licorice to the wide-eyed boy who darted off toward some neighboring houses.

John strode up to the door of the cottage and knocked. No answer. After repeated tries he checked around back, even knocking at the bungalow. Except for the subdued clucking of an occasional chicken the place was silent. On behind was a large fenced plot of ground serving as an attempt at a vegetable garden. As with everything else in Cliff Harbor, it wasn’t exactly flourishing. Beyond the fence was a dilapidated barn. A milk cow, calmly chewing, was watching him but not terribly interested. It did give him an idea, though.

All right, nobody home, eh? I’ll be back, and I know just when, he thought. As he headed back around toward the front of the house, a gnarled hand quickly retreated behind the curtain in the bungalow.

V. HOLLY

The pre-dawn found him approaching the barn. A lantern was lit inside.

“Just as I had suspected,” he said aloud. “Where there’s a cow, there’s someone up early doing the milking.” He spoke softly to avoid startling the barn’s inhabitants. Even so, Holly jumped to her feet from the far side of the cow.

“Mr.—”

“Stander,” he said. “John Stander. We were just introducing ourselves as I recall when you performed quite an amazing feat of magic. Vanishing, I mean. How did you do that anyway?”

“You should not be here.” She was nervous, almost frightened.

“Ah, but I come to help. I’ve done some milking in my time.”

“No,” she said sharply. Then, more gently, “I mean, you needn’t. I should be done soon.”

“Fine. Then we can get better acquainted.”

“Oh, no, I am sorry. I couldn’t.” She looked past him to see if anyone was coming as she stepped from behind the cow. “Please, you really must go.”

“Not until you at least tell me your name. I don’t give up so easily.”

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling, then looked at him, shook her head and smiled. “Very well. Holly. Holly Young.” Then she spun him around playfully and added, “Now will you please go.”

“But I just want to speak with you,” he said as she was pushing him along.

“Yes, yes, fine.” She lowered her voice to a whisper as they exited the barn. “But not here.”

“Where, then? When?”

“The wharf. Where we met yesterday. Noon.”

“Till noon then, fair maiden,” he said with a chivalrous bow. Holly put her finger to her lips and shooed him off.

At noon Holly was nowhere to be seen. John looked up and down the wharf and along some of the streets perpendicular to it to no avail. He began chastising himself for pacing around like an expectant father. He leaned on a rail and looked out at the gray ocean. The overcast hinted at rain. He sighed deeply, feeling that his frenzied pursuit of this mysterious girl should be abandoned. It was becoming obvious that she was brushing him off. He turned to go, taking one last look around and found her standing at the other end of the railing not ten feet from him.

“How in the world do you do that?” he said. She responded only with a slightly quizzical look. “Well, at least you’re here now. So, where did we leave off yesterday?”

“Not here.” She was again looking around apprehensively. “Walk with me.”

They were silent as she led him down the wharf, over two streets, and on among several abandoned houses. She chose a particularly run-down one and sat on its high porch. Then, as if allowing herself to really look at him for the first time, she smiled at John and patted the place next to her.

As he sat down he turned to her and said, “So, is it permissible to talk now, Miss Young?” The sarcastic edge to his voice was a bit harsher than he had intended. He mumbled an apology, but she showed no offense.

“Yes, if you’d like. And, just ‘Holly.’ Please.” She smiled coyly, making her even lovelier. In one swift stroke his plans to demand answers to her strange behavior were demolished.

In the gentlest of tones he said, “All right Holly, and please, call me John.” He looked down at his hands. “My shipmates, they call me ‘kid.’ I prefer John, though.”

She gave a little laugh. “Very well, John, I promise not to call you kid.”

“You have a very lovely smile. You should use it more often.”

She turned away with a slight blush, then looked back at him. “So, what happened to your ship? I believe you said it was damaged.”

“Yes, most definitely, in the storm.” He started the story then stopped short. “I should be happy to share my tale of desperate men battling the wrath of the sea. But first I want to know about you.”

“Me?” she said uneasily. “There is very little to tell. As I said, I have never been outside Cliff Harbor.”

“Ah but there is. You must admit you are woman of mystery.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Well, apart from your vanishing and reappearing, there is the mystery of why no one in town will admit you exist.”

“I believe I should be going now,” she said, standing.

“No, no. Please, Holly. I’m sorry. Sit a while longer. Just tell me about your farm. Do you live there with your parents?”

She sat back down but looked away. “No. My parents are no longer living.”

“I’m sorry,” he lamented. He was at a loss for words. It seemed he kept having to apologize for one thing or another.

Holly relieved his embarrassment by moving the conversation along.

“I live with my great-aunt Muriel and my sister Catherine. As for the farm, well it’s not much, really, just a dairy cow, an old horse, a few chickens, and a vegetable garden. Enough for our own needs with a little extra to sell. I take care of the place. Auntie Muriel is quite elderly and cannot do much, not even for herself. Anyway, my sister and two other women have a dressmaking business just a few streets from here. They ship them to a store in New York. That’s where most of our spending money comes from.

“Of course, everything is shipped out from Cliff Harbor. I mean, literally shipped. Ever since the landslide that blocked the pass, we have had no other access to the rest of the world except via the harbor. There is a small ship that stops once a week as it runs up and down the coast. Hardly any other ships stop here anymore, unless they’re damaged or something, like yours, the—what was it?”

“The *Bonnie Bess*.”

“Yes. So, what happened to her?” she asked. He described to her the adventure of the storm. As his tale unfolded a cold wind urged them to vacate the porch. They walked slowly up

the road as they talked. John's penchant for exaggeration among harbor children was invoked on this occasion as well. Although not much was needed for this particular tale, his personal role became, as it were, larger than life. This was spurred-on by how Holly's eyes danced with admiration and awe of his every recounted deed. This, in turn, encouraged him to relate (and inflate) more of his heroics. Soon the cycle had him somewhere between Sinbad and Jason of Greek legend.

He was not at all attuned to the often-subtle signals of women's attitudes. Yet, even he could sense something happening between them. Something marvelous. For his part, he was falling for her hard and fast—and loving it.

"I could never be that brave," she said. "I would be so terrified I'd probably just go find a corner to hide in." For no explicable reason he truly doubted that. Then his conscience jabbed him for portraying himself as being innately courageous.

"I could never be that brave either—on my own."

"What do you mean?"

"It was not my doing that saved the ship. Or any other member of the crew. It was the Lord. And it was my confidence in Him that kept me from hiding in that same corner."

All the color left Holly's face. She stepped away from him and looked all around herself. It was as if she expected a lion to pounce on her from the bushes, which greatly unnerved John.

"What is it, Holly? Are you all right? Did I say something to upset you?"

"No, no," she said unconvincingly. "I'm—fine. Really. It's just that—I mean, if only I could—" She searched in vain for words to explain the turmoil within her. She was short of breath and tears were forming in her eyes. She forced a smile. "You must think..." She shrugged and shook her head.

John took each of her hands and looked into her pretty eyes. "Holly, there's something strange happening here. Something concerning you and that concerns me. Whatever it is let me help. Please."

She swallowed hard and a look of determination came over her. She released from one of his hands, but held the other. She moved close beside him and resumed their walking and talking, only this time they were hand-in-hand. He was thrilled.

“John,” she began. Her tone made it clear she was about to say something important. As they came to a crossroads, she looked up at him, then something up the road to their right caught her eye. She backed up abruptly, out of sight of whatever she had seen. John caught a glimpse of two women talking on a corner a block away.

“I have to go,” she said, pulling away from him.

“What? Why?”

“I just have to. Please, go back to the inn. I mustn’t stay.”

“No. I’m not leaving, nor are you. I’m not allowing you to disappear yet again.” He started to go with her then saw the urgent pleading in her eyes.

“I’ll meet you. Tomorrow. At the wharf again.”

“Promise?”

She smiled sincerely and looked meaningfully into his eyes. “Yes. I promise.”

He took her hand and kissed it. “Till tomorrow.” She offered no resistance, but when he released her hand she hurried off back the way they had come. After a few steps she stopped and turned, giving a little half-wave, then hurried on.

VI. THE BARGAIN

The two women were no longer at the corner when he went by on his way back to the inn. There he puzzled the rest of the day away over the enigmatic, but heavenly, Holly Young. He was certain that she was warming up to him. He believed she was beginning to enjoy his company almost as much as he did hers. It was this impression that prevented him from giving up on her in frustration. That, plus his unshakable desire to fix whatever was so obviously bothering her.

Despite his best efforts at keen observation the next noon, Holly once again managed to materialize out of thin air. Her beauty never failed to exceed the heavenly visage his memory carried from meeting to meeting.

In contrast to his enthusiastic greeting, she was subdued and fretful. She was clearly preoccupied by a trio of townspeople watching them from across the street.

“I’m afraid I can’t continue meeting you. I’m sorry.” She was trying mightily to sound matter-of-fact, but failing miserably. She tried a brave pretend smile. “It is unfortunate. I’ve enjoyed making your acquaintance and listening to your stories, but I really must go now. I doubt our paths will cross again, so let me just wish you good fortune.” Hers was the most pathetic attempt at lying John had ever heard. Her eyes fairly shouted her wish to continue—and further—their relationship.

“Why? What’s happened? Is something wrong?”

“No. Nothing. It’s nothing to do with you. I just—there’s so much work to do on our farm, and Auntie Muriel is not well, you know. It really isn’t right for me to fritter my time away—I have far too much to do.”

John felt that her resolve, for whatever reason she had arrived with it, was weakening. “Holly, I believe you.”

“You do?”

“Yes, of course. I’ve seen that there are any number of repairs needed around there—your barn is in especially bad shape.”

“Oh, yes, that’s it exactly. I mean, with my regular daily chores and so much left needing doing, obviously I dare not spend my days in frivolous chatter.”

“Quite correct,” he said with a grin. “And I have the perfect solution. Or rather, I *am* the solution.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Miss Young, when is the last time your family had a man available to attack some of those projects around your place? A good long while, I’ll wager. Well, here I am, at your service. I’m certain you will find me more than adequate in the use of tools. And I’m no stranger to hard work. Ask any of my shipmates. They’ll tell you.”

“Oh no, I could not allow it.”

“Why not?”

“Well because I—I just wouldn’t think of—of imposing on you.”

“Nonsense. I would not have offered unless I genuinely wanted to help.”

“But I—” Her reaction was of one backed into a corner. Then an idea struck. “I simply could not accept charity. Nor could my aunt and sister. We are a very proud family and we have survived on our own this long. No, I’m afraid that would never do.”

He thought a moment. “I have a solution for that, too. I’ll trade you my help for yours.”

She eyed him suspiciously; certain another trap was about to spring. “What do you mean?”

“Two things. First, how well can you cook?”

“Cook?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“All right, I guess. Auntie and Catherine seem to like it.”

“Excellent. The only food on this earth worse than that I’ve had to endure this stint aboard ship is that served in the inn. I would build a dozen barns from scratch if it meant getting some decent meals. So, I will work for my meals.”

“You said two things.”

“Yes. The second is even easier. I would ask only that you give me a tour of your little town here. That should be simple enough for a lifelong native such as yourself. True? And it should take rather less than an hour, I dare say. In exchange I shall provide a full day’s work, sunup to sundown, every day we remain in port. Sound like a fair deal?”

“Oh but I—” She was wringing her hands but all the conviction was gone from her voice.

“Holly,” he said in a deep, soft tone. He took her hands. “You must know that I would do anything to be near you. I will go to any lengths to do so. I simply will not allow us to stop seeing each other. In your heart, you don’t want that either, do you?”

She looked deeply into his eyes, hers swimming. His heart began to pound, for they were swimming with the same feeling he had. “No,” she whispered, closing her eyes and giving a little smile of relief. It was all he could do to keep from kissing her gorgeous lips right there in front of the three busybodies.

“It is settled then? We have an agreement?”

She stood for a long moment, apparently battling the decision out inside herself. She looked across the street at the group that had now doubled in size. They were watching John and her warily. She narrowed her eyes at them and set her jaw. Finally a look came over her that seemed to say, *I don’t care, I’m going to say yes anyway*. She looked straight into his eyes and said defiantly, “All right Mr. Stander, one genuine guided tour of Cliff Harbor coming up. But mind you, I’m a hard and demanding taskmaster. You’ll more than pay for it, I assure you.” She flashed a sparkle-eyed, dimpled smile at him and he practically leaped for joy.

“The most demanding task will be but a frolic when done for one so lovely,” he gushed. He held out his arm. “Lead on, Miss Young.”

“Right this way, Mr. Stander.” She took his arm and they headed out toward the center of town.

There was not much to see. Holly dodged any questions regarding the town’s recent past, so the two mostly talked about themselves. Holly focused exclusively on the present. The only information forthcoming about her past was her early childhood; nothing about future plans or dreams. John, on the other hand, talked at length of what awaited him in Lexington. His father had done well enough in business to live comfortably. He had been a Navy man in his earlier days. As a child, hearing his father’s exploits had established in John a determination to go to sea

before settling down. This was to his father's delight and his mother's worry. Now, with his imminent return to Boston, that goal would be fulfilled. Though his father lived in town, he had acquired a sizable piece of land with a house on it in the country. John would live there and work the land, perhaps raising horses in his spare time. It was understood that eventually the property would become his.

As the two walked arm-in-arm, zigzagging through the town, several things struck John as peculiar. One was the number of empty houses. Not so strange, Holly pointed-out, considering how isolated the town had become since the landslide three years ago. That somewhat made sense. Even stranger, though, was the complete absence of children, Burton having been the lone exception. They passed the schoolhouse Holly said she had attended. It appeared to have been unused for some time. Holly's only response was that this was "not a very good place for children," and would say no more about it. But these abnormalities paled in comparison to the reception the young couple got from the townspeople. Those they passed on the street stared open-mouthed. Curtains were closed then pulled aside so those within could peep out at them. Neighbors in their yards would stop what they were doing and confer with one another in hushed gossip tones. John could not envision any different reaction if he had been walking through town with two heads. Holly continued to talk and pretended not to notice, but John was getting more and more agitated with each occurrence. Most disconcerting of all was that the people's awe or disapproval or whatever it was appeared to be directed, not at him, but at Holly.

VII. BURTON GILBERT

The odd looks and stares intensified as they approached the main central section of town. No woman they encountered had a “Good Day.” No gentleman doffed his hat. Not one person offered a smile or even so much as a nod of the head in greeting, though John tried all these things. The only reaction was that with each of his attempts Holly would squeeze his arm a bit tighter. With each snub she would raise her chin slightly and turn away in defiance. John made several references to what was going on, but Holly just changed the subject. Finally he could stand no more and confronted her directly.

“What on earth is wrong with these people? Have they never seen a man in the company of a beautiful young woman before? They all act as if seeing an apparition, or as if they have lost their senses, or something. Holly—”

His interrogation was cut short as they rounded a building and collided with Burton, clad in ragged overalls and bare feet. His initial reaction after he collected himself was, “Oh, ‘scuse me Miss Holly.” This was followed by a look of shock at Holly and John arm-in-arm that surpassed any they had encountered so far. His mouth dropped to an elongated “O” and his eyes looked like two saucers. Even John had to snicker a bit at the expression the child wore. Holly shook her head and suppressed a laugh by tightening the corners of her mouth into a smirk.

“Good afternoon, Burton,” she said. Instead of answering, the boy continued to stare at them with upraised eyebrows. “Burton, this is Mr. John Stander. John, this is Burton Gilbert, he’s my reading student.” With that the boy’s mouth closed but his wide-eyed stare continued.

“We’ve already met, haven’t we, Burton.” John stuck out his hand. With agonizing slowness Burton wiped a dirty hand on his overalls and then shook John’s. “Nice to make your acquaintance,” said John.

“Now Burton, be polite,” said Holly gently.

“Yes’m, Miss Holly. Pleased to meet you again, Mr. John,” he said, still in shock. He kept looking at Holly as if expecting some explanation.

“You never mentioned being a teacher, Holly,” said John.

“I’m not really. I just help Burton a few nights each week. He’s learning to read. Reading is something his mother wants very much for him.”

As Holly was speaking, Burton kept tugging at her skirt and calling, “Miss Holly,” in a loud stage whisper. When at last she looked down at him, he held his hand edgewise beside his mouth so as to keep John from seeing. Actually it hid nothing. In that same loud whisper he inquired, “Miss Holly, ain’t you scared?”

She knew John had heard. “Burton,” she snapped. “Don’t be silly. What are you talking about?” There was a note of warning in her voice. She shook her head as if the boy should be ignored. John detected too much uneasiness in her manner for the question to be without meaning to her.

“You know, Miss Holly, the curse; the *Debil*.” He hissed out the last word as if he thought it would spring Holly into action of some sort. Instead she continued to act as if she had no notion as to what he was talking about. Still, she obviously wanted Burton to shut-up. John was again confused and burning to know what all this was about. This had become his natural state since meeting Holly. Nevertheless, his desire to relieve any anxiety she was feeling took precedence. It was remarkable how deeply he cared for her in such a short time. He thought maybe a change of subject would help.

“So, Burton, you’re going to learn to read, huh?” Burton just stood there.

“Burton, aren’t you going to answer?” asked Holly.

“Yes’m.” He looked at John. “No sir, I already can read my own self. Miss Holly taught me.”

“W—how old are you?” John asked with mock amazement.

“Nine.”

“Nine? And you say you can already read? Naw, it’s not possible,” he lied. “Can’t no nine-year-old be already reading unless he’s a genius of some kind.”

“Uh huh! I can so read, can’t I Miss Holly?”

“You sure can, and improving at it every day.”

John kept up the charade. “I suppose you’ll be telling me next that you can read one of the words on that sign over there.” He pointed to a nearby building.

“Mm-mm,” he shook his head. “I can read the who’e sign my own self.” A look of smug confidence came over his face.

“The whole sign? Come on, now you’re just teasing me. I know that no boy that’s only nine years old can—” John was interrupted by Burton’s slow, deliberate, but accurate rendering of the sign. He pointed to each word as he read it.

“Duncan Livery Stable, Founded 1-8-2-8, Richard Duncan, Owner.”

Burton cocked his head with self-satisfaction and squinted out of the corner of his eye at John. Mouth agape, John behaved as if he were dumbstruck. The accolades John poured forth produced an ear-to-ear grin on the boy. Although Holly knew John was overdoing it, she was pleased as well.

“Yes sir,” John was saying. “Keep this up and you’ll be reading an entire book before you know it.”

“I already did that too, my own self,” Burton responded. “And I’m most way through another one.”

“Well then, I guess there’s only two things a fella can say about that. You must be one of those geniuses folks talk about, and Holly must be about the best reading teacher ever was.”

“I don’t know much about bein’ a jenus, ‘cept if you say I am I guess that’s so. But it’s for sure that Miss Holly’s the best teacher they ever was, her own self. And, Mr. John,” he pulled him aside and began stage whispering again. “She sho’ is pretty, ain’t she.”

“Burton, you are so right. But it doesn’t take a genius to know that.”

Holly gave a little blush and smile of appreciation. “You be on time tonight, Burton.”

“I will, Miss Holly. You gonna be there too, Mr. John?”

John laughed nervously and was about to try and dodge the question when a slender black woman in a near-threadbare flour-sack dress rounded the corner.

“Burton Charles Gilbert, where have you been?” she scolded. Then she stopped short. “Oh, hello Miss Holly, I didn’t see it was you. Has this boy been a-pesterin’ you?”

“Oh, of course not Mrs. Gilbert.”

“He was just reading for us,” John interjected, “and quite well, too.”

Mrs. Gilbert seemed stunned to realize that John was actually with Holly and not just a bystander. “Mrs. Gilbert, I’d like you to meet John Stander,” said Holly. “John, this is Burton’s mother.”

John doffed his cap. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am”

“Fine. Just fine, thank you,” she replied enigmatically. “Are you a—a friend of Miss Holly’s?”

“Yes. That is, we only met a few days ago, but at least I hope she thinks of me as a friend, I mean—” John was blithering, but no matter. A twinkle of understanding had already appeared in Mrs. Gilbert’s eyes and her attention had shifted to Holly.

“Why that’s wonderful,” she gushed, grabbing Holly’s hand in both of hers with an “it’s about time” air. Then, as if catching herself, “I—I mean, it’s just that Miss Holly’s such a wonderful person. You just couldn’t find no better person to have for a ‘friend,’” she said with a sly smile directed at John. He knew exactly what she meant. “She sho’ has been a gift from the Lord to Burton and me.”

Holly had begun fidgeting and quickly changed the focus of the conversation from herself. “You’ll be sure Burton is on time for his lesson tonight won’t you?”

“Oh, yes’m Miss Holly.” She looked at her son, “Now don’t you be causin’ Miss Holly no trouble tonight, or Miss Catherine’ll—”

“Now Mrs. Gilbert, you know full well that Burton’s never any trouble. He’s a fine boy and he works hard at his studies.”

“Well, he ain’t no stranger to his share o’ mischief neither,” she answered playfully. There could be no doubt: Burton was her pride and joy. “All right, come on along now, Burton, and don’t be botherin’ these folks no more. ‘Sides we got things we gotta do today. Thanks again, Miss Holly, and it was nice meetin’ you,” she called as she headed off with Burton in tow.

“I guess it’s time to be getting back home,” said Holly as she watched them leave.

“Ah yes. Tour’s over, and what a grand tour it was, in the company of so charming a hostess. Now for a chance to really show-off what a Massachusetts boy can do. Just show me what needs doing and—”

“John, you know you don’t have to do any—”

“Holly,” he interrupted. “Surely you won’t begrudge a poor malnourished seaman a chance to earn a decent meal or two. I am certain a tenderhearted soul such as you has that much compassion.” Then his jovial grin disappeared and his voice lowered. “Besides, you know full well that I would do anything, if it lets me be near you.” John was astounded at how easily the words came out. He felt, even in so short a time, that he had somehow passed a point of no return with her. He could recall his mother giving a long dissertation on the impossibility of “love at first sight” and how that only fools believed in such a concept.

“Love takes time to grow, to mature,” she had said. “Two people have to get to know each other, understand one another’s likes and dislikes if there’s ever going to be harmony in a marriage.”

That all made sense, of course. Marriage was difficult enough when a couple thought they knew each other well, but— Marriage? Was he out of his mind? Who said anything about marriage? *Granted Holly is a sweet, charming, beautiful woman but, good heavens, man, let’s don’t get carried away*, he reasoned. Once again, however, his reasoning powers were not worth a whole lot when Holly was present.

“All right. I guess there’s no dissuading you,” said Holly. Her voice snapped him out of his reverie.

“No, indeed. I’m ready and anxious to start.” He offered his arm. With only a slight hesitation she took it again and they headed toward her house.

They had walked only a short distance, when John commented on how good it was for Burton to be able to read.

“Even more amazing considering that up until a few months ago he was a slave; he and his mother and father. It’s quite a story, one which leaves me with only the greatest admiration for Mrs. Gilbert.” John urged her to continue.

“The three of them were owned by an especially cruel master somewhere down in Georgia. As with many slave owners, he did not acknowledge the Gilbert’s marriage as in any way binding. In fact, when the opportunity came, he sold Mr. Gilbert to another plantation quite some distance away. Burton was only three at the time. The owner ignored Mrs. Gilbert’s pleas to be rejoined with her husband. If anything, he treated her especially badly from then on.

“His only heir, however, was a daughter who despised the whole concept of slavery. When he died suddenly, she not only freed all his slaves, but gave each a small parcel of land for his own. This, needless to say, created quite an uproar for miles around. At that point, Mrs. Gilbert took advantage of the greed of the neighboring plantation owner and sold her parcel to him. She’s a clever enough woman that she took Burton and immediately headed for Ohio. Next she started working on a plan to get her husband freed.

“The money, though a fraction of what the land was really worth, was just about enough to buy him with. But she couldn’t risk going back to Georgia personally. She decided she needed enough extra money to pay someone to go buy her husband, free him, and provide his transportation north. So, she set about working, town by town, until she had earned enough. She found a man she thought she could trust, gave him all her money, and sent him on the mission. Not knowing where she would find work in the meantime, her instructions were that they would meet at the train station in New York City in four months. She had planned to get there much earlier and wait for him. Unfortunately she only got this far when she completely ran out of money. Now she has been here three and a half months and still hasn’t enough for passage to New York. With Cliff Harbor being like it is, she can’t even walk there from here. I feel so bad for her. To be so near her goal and yet unable to go the last step.”

“But, passage to New York can’t be that expensive,” John interjected.

“It is when the only work you can get is cleaning out chamber pots and outhouses for a penny here and there. With a growing boy to feed, saving is almost impossible. They’re living in one of the empty houses near ours. I give her some eggs, a cup of milk, or some vegetables whenever I can without my sister knowing it. As I mentioned, most of the money we get is from her dress business, and it isn’t much. Plus, Mrs. Gilbert really hates accepting charity. I think that is because, as a slave, she couldn’t earn her way, everything was doled-out to her. Anyway, I don’t know how close she is to having enough, but time is running out for her. Still, she goes ahead in faith as if it will somehow work out. That’s why she asked me to teach Burton to read. She feels it’s the only chance he has to make something of himself. Burton confessed to me that after each of his lessons, his mother has him teach it to her. And I’ll bet she’ll teach her husband once they’re together.”

“You sound as if you believe she’ll make it. She’s got a lot going against her. Whoever this fellow is she sent to get her husband could just as easily keep all the money for himself. Or what if his owner won’t sell? Or it isn’t enough?”

“It just has to succeed. She’s been through so much, she just can’t fail now. I don’t understand how people can treat other people that way—put them through such misery. How do people justify slavery, anyway?”

“Y’know, I heard a preacher once say that since the Bible tells slaves to obey their masters, then slavery must be permissible. But then when I asked Griz—that’s my friend and shipmate—anyway, when I asked him about it, he opened his Bible to Philippians 2:3 and read ‘...in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves.’ Then he looked me right in the eye and said, ‘No man can own a slave and keep this command.’ As far as I’m concerned, that settles it.”

Holly stared at him in wide-eyed wonderment but said nothing. John was hoping to lead the conversation around to revealing that he was a Christian—Holly needed to know that, he thought. Just then a door of opportunity opened to him. They were passing a dilapidated church building. It was the only one he had seen in town. It had obviously fallen into disuse a long time ago.

“Holly. Doesn’t anyone attend church services here?”

“No. Not for quite some time,” she answered nervously. Then she tried to walk on.

“Isn’t there a preacher here?”

Holly stopped. “Mr. Byington. But he’s not a preacher anymore. He and his son Tom are blacksmiths now.” Holly fidgeted as if she was afraid of where the conversation was headed, then walked on briskly.

Blacksmiths? John wondered. “That’s mighty peculiar, don’t you think?” he called after her. He caught up to her. “Disappointing, too. I was hoping, after all this time at sea, to be able to sit in a real church service.” He gently took her arm so she would stop and look at him. Then he took a deep breath. “See, Holly, I’m a Christian.” He was disappointed in himself that he blushed after he said it, but his mind was quickly distracted by Holly’s reaction.

She looked away and then backed away from him two or three steps. She bit her lower lip and seemed to be looking for somewhere to run. Finally her shoulders sagged and, slowly

shaking her head, she covered her eyes with her hand. Turning her back to him, she began weeping quietly.

Of all the mystery John had endured surrounding her, this was the pinnacle. “Holly? Holly, is something wrong? Did I say something to upset you? What is it?” He carried on like this for a while until he realized that it was not helping any. Then he just stood by her, his arms hanging helplessly at his sides. What he wanted most at that moment was to put his arms around her and tell her that he would make the problem go away. Whatever it was.

Eventually her crying turned to sniffing, and seemed to be under control. He gave her his large handkerchief which she used for her tears and reddened nose. Then, when he thought it might be safe to try, he spoke to her.

“I must say, no one has ever reacted to my faith like that before.”

“I’m sorry,” she said haltingly.

He probed a little deeper. “Please, dear lady. What, exactly, is so upsetting about my being a Christian?”

She took a deep breath in and out in little shudders. Then she looked him straight in the eyes. With her chin still twitching slightly, she announced, “I am too.”

VIII. CATHERINE

John started to speak, then rubbed his chin. Holly had her back to him looking out into a small grove of dormant apple trees beside the road. She continued sniffing and dabbing at her eyes and nose with his handkerchief. Finally he found his voice.

“I think I must have missed something. I fear I’m not a terribly perceptive person.” He paused. Holly stood in silence. “Somehow your being a Christian is supposed to explain why you are so upset.” He walked around her to look in her face but she diverted her eyes to the ground. “But I simply I do not understand.” She remained silent.

John paced around in all directions, his confusion and frustration mounting with each passing moment. *This is the limit, he told himself. I have not asked her to reveal any deep sinister secrets. She doesn’t owe me that. But the least hint of explanation, even a lie, would be better than this. Strange people treating us like freaks, a town with only one child in it, churches all gone or boarded up, the preacher shoeing horses, and her going to pieces at the mere mention of my being a Christian. A man can only tolerate so much.*

He was ready. He steeled himself for the confrontation. “Holly—”

“John, I need to ask you a favor.” Her soft voice sounded tiny and helpless. “I know you wonder at my strange behavior.” She looked up at him earnestly. “I wouldn’t blame you if you just went back to your ship and forgot you ever knew me. In truth, that is exactly what you should do. But if you stay I—oh, what’s the use. This isn’t fair to you. It’s just no good.” She turned and was on the verge of tears again. John gently turned her toward him and placed a hand on each of her arms. He looked into her tear-streaked, but still lovely face.

“What is it? How can I help? I don’t want to leave. What is the favor?”

“Please, the things that make no sense to you, that you cannot understand; just accept that I cannot give you an explanation. I know this is unreasonable to ask of you, but...” She just shook her head as her voice trailed off.

“Don’t worry yourself further, dear Holly. I’m fine,” he said in the tones one uses around an infant. “You owe me no explanation. Nor will I ask for any. Whenever you’re ready to tell me what causes you such anguish will be soon enough for me. And if it’s never, that will be fine too.”

She looked into his eyes with hers brimming, her face joyously relieved. “I believe you’re the kindest person I’ve ever met.”

Hand-in-hand they continued on to her house, Holly wearing a look of triumph and defiance. Upon arriving, Holly procured a set of tools that had been her father’s and John set to work immediately. There was no dearth of tasks needing done. He attacked the weather-worn barn first. As dusk approached, he turned to chopping firewood. He split and stacked it so furiously that it seemed a shame winter was not coming on instead of nearing its end. In the receding light, movement caught his eye. An ancient, gnarled woman hobbled from the bungalow to the house, glaring at him the whole time.

Holly also was hard at work around the place. Yet, whenever he paused to wipe his face onto his sleeve, she was right there with cool water and a glowing smile. Invariably the latter gift instilled more energy and rededication than the former. He chastised himself for having felt anything remotely akin to anger at such a precious jewel. She could hide all the secrets she pleased as long as he could keep seeing her.

At length it grew too dark to work any further. Holly insisted, over his very mild protestations, that he stay for supper—his first wages. She escorted him into the house where he was immediately confronted with the old woman. She was thin and fragile, her wrinkled, blotchy skin stretched tight around her bones. Her hands indicated advanced arthritis.

“Auntie Muriel, this is Mr. John Stander, a—friend of mine. It is he that has been working so feverishly out back all day,” she said proudly. His heart double-pumped. “John, this is Miss Muriel Fairchild, my great-aunt, and my dearest friend in the world,” she said, giving her a gentle hug. The love in the old woman’s rheumy eyes confirmed that they had a very special relationship.

“I am honored to make your acquaintance, Miss Fairchild.”

There was a brief silence as Aunt Muriel flashed a sad look of regret toward Holly. It was as if to say, “My poor dear, you know this cannot possibly work.” Then she turned to John.

“I’ve watched you today, young man. You’re a good worker. Do you always work this hard or just when there’s a pretty young lady around to impress?” Despite her grating voice and crotchety manner, there was the hint of a smile. She had already given him the benefit of the doubt.

“I consider myself a hard worker by nature, ma’am. I must confess, though, your great-niece is indeed an inspiration.”

Though she smiled, once again that look of sadness came over her. She turned toward the large dining table. “We’re glad to have you stay and eat with us. Holly’s a fine cook.”

“Come on in and wash up,” said Holly, leading him to a pitcher and basin. As he followed her he could see that the house was two rooms. One was the kitchen one entered at the front door which had an open area where the fireplace was fronted by an oval rug. Beyond, a bedroom with two beds visible through the doorway. The furnishings were sparse and functional, but there was a decidedly feminine touch to the place. Curtains with a bit of lace and ribbon, a bow on each of the plain candleholders, a needlework wall hanging. These were little things that he realized males living in similar circumstances would not think of. As he dried off, he looked at the stone fireplace and the cast-iron kettle hanging over it.

“Something sure smells good.”

Holly just started to answer when the front door opened. A young woman came in, stopped in her tracks, and surveyed the scene very intensely. She was one of the women they had seen at the crossroads.

“Oh. Catherine,” said Holly, rushing over to help her remove her shawl. She was of approximately the same build and stature as Holly, though slightly taller. She had jet-black hair arranged in long coiled curls and a creamy-smooth complexion. Her most striking feature was her startling crystal blue eyes. She was obviously well skilled in her craft, for her outfit was a lacy white blouse with a blue skirt and matching waist-jacket, which served to highlight her eyes even further. She was glamorous, incredibly beautiful, even exotic—but not attractive. That is to say, whereas John had been almost unable to take his eyes off Holly since he had first seen her, such

was not the case with Catherine. There was something about this woman that made him want to put as much distance as possible between himself and her. Where Holly's loveliness radiated from within, there was a coldness, a bitterness about Catherine that was evident even though she had not spoken a word yet. John waged an internal war to keep this automatic dislike for her suppressed.

"Catherine, this is John Stander." There was a pause while Catherine began removing her hat and gloves.

John broke the silence. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Young," he lied. Another pause. He cleared his throat. "Holly—" he suddenly felt uncomfortable referring to her so informally. "Holly mentioned that you were a dressmaker. I must say you are very good at it. The dress you're wearing is very pretty." Another pause. Holly, who by this point was literally wringing her hands, took a shot at ending the tense silence.

"John's been working furiously around here nearly all day. You should see the stack of wood he's cut." She gave a little laugh, "Why it's enough for two winters." At this Catherine stopped in the middle of removing her second glove.

"Holly, have you hired this man?" she asked, as if he were not present.

"Oh. No," she laughed nervously.

"No, ma'am," John broke in. "You might say I was repaying Holly for her kindness in showing me around your city."

"Yes," she hissed through clenched teeth. "I heard about your little escapade this noon from at least a dozen different people. Just where is it you come from, young man, that you needed this personal guided tour? Mm?"

"Name's John, ma'am," he shot back. She half closed her eyes for an instant and nodded slightly with an unpleasant smile, but said nothing. He was losing the battle not to dislike her. His mind was starting to cloud with grumblings. *Where does she get off with this "young man" stuff? If she's more than two years older than me I'll eat a snake*, he thought. With a Herculean effort he decided to calm down for Holly's sake. He changed his tone to friendly, even cheery. "I'm from the *Bonnie Bess* out of Boston—the damaged ship there in the harbor."

Suddenly Catherine's demeanor changed, and some of the edge came off her voice. "Oh, then you won't be in town long?"

“No, ma’am. Cap’n says no more’n another week.” John did not want to think about leaving.

The tension in the air seemed to dissipate almost instantly as Catherine relaxed noticeably. “Well then, I hope you’ll be able to join us for supper.”

John bristled. He had already been invited, not only by Holly but by their great-aunt as well, whose existence so far Catherine had not even acknowledged. His brain circuits overloaded with smart-aleck retorts, but he held his peace.

“Holly, dear,” said Catherine, her voice dripping with condescension. “I notice you’ve used our special-occasion china. Whatever for?”

Holly, whose hand wringing in the presence of this bully had frustrated and riled John, to his great satisfaction stood her ground. “It seems perfectly reasonable since we have a guest, Catherine.”

Catherine looked from Holly to John, then with a sort of suppressed chuckle, said, “Oh yes, of course.” It had that “you mean your little friend” air to it. Her attitude toward Holly was insufferable as far as John was concerned. Worse yet, Holly waited on everyone hand and foot, while Catherine didn’t lift a finger. He determined he was going to offer to help with the dishes afterward.

The food was a simple meal of chicken stew and freshly made biscuits. John raved about the meal until Holly blushed. It would have taken a dreadful meal indeed for him to feel any other way, given who made it.

The meal progressed uneventfully. Catherine had apparently decided to call a truce for the moment. *Perhaps she finds being catty hard on her digestion*, he thought. Holly pressed him to recount the shipwreck story for the others. He downplayed his part in the drama somewhat this time. Holly accused him of being overly modest, although this version was nearer the truth. He failed to mention the Lord’s role in it. He told himself it was to avoid another bizarre reaction, but secretly he felt guilty at not giving the Lord His due. Somehow also, so subliminally his mind never actually formed the thought, he knew Catherine would object. This knowledge was based on something beyond the absence of Christian love in her manner. There was something else making it quite clear to him that she wanted no part in Christianity. Even if true, it served as no adequate excuse for keeping his faith a secret around her, but he had much growing to do yet.

Near the end of the meal, John turned to Aunt Muriel, by very calculated design, and addressed her. “Miss Fairchild, I noticed that your corral fence and your porch steps are in need of repair. I’d be most honored if you would allow me to come back tomorrow and see what I can do with them. It’s not charity. Holly has offered to supply a few decent meals—something unavailable elsewhere in Cliff Harbor.”

“I’m afraid I really don’t—” Catherine began, but Aunt Muriel cut her off.

“We’d be most obliged to you, Mr. Stander. I suppose Holly’s showed you that you needn’t worry about tools. The girls’ father left behind anything you’ll be needing.”

“Yes, I’m sure they will be quite adequate. I’ll be here at first light tomorrow morning ready to get started. Oh, and please, call me John.”

“I’ve never had a boy call me Auntie Muriel, but it’s high time one did.” She shook a finger in John’s face playfully as she spoke. “So it’s Auntie Muriel from now on, y’hear?” Catherine glared icicles through her, stood up and left the table in a huff.

As John watched Catherine, a strange uneasiness gripped him. She was more than merely unpleasant. He could not escape the feeling that there was something basically evil about the woman. Her presence under the same roof with Holly was no small concern to him.

When the meal finished, he made his offer to help with dishes. Holly’s reaction made it clear that having done so was just short of a hanging offense. Holly and Muriel invited him to sit awhile, but John was cautious not to overstay his welcome. He glorified the meal and the hospitality a dozen more times and said his farewells. As he stepped out onto the porch Holly stepped out right behind him. She closed the door, and they walked silently together down the steps.

“I’m glad you’re coming back tomorrow,” she said, so softly and sincerely that his heart did a back flip.

“It seems impossible that we have only known each other such a short time,” he said quietly. “I feel like—”

Suddenly the door opened noisily. “Holly, you better come in and get these chores done,” Catherine commanded. “That little boy will be here soon and you’ll have no time to do them then.”

Holly did not answer but only glared at Catherine until she went back inside. “A lot she cares about Burton or his mother. She treats him as an annoyance when he’s here. Then she checks up on me regularly to see if I’ve given anything to help them. I manage to do so anyway.” She looked up at John and a smile replaced her anger. “Guess I should go in. I’ll have breakfast waiting for you in the morning. Don’t oversleep,” she teased.

“Not to worry. I’ll probably not even go to sleep,” he called after her as they parted. “Good night, Holly.” She stopped in the doorway and gave him a little wave, then went in. John’s mind whirled and spun as he headed back toward the Inn.

However, with no moon or stars because of the overcast, the streets were extremely dark. That, combined with his giddy condition, caused him to take a wrong turn. He found himself standing at the base of the cliffs. Inexplicably a shiver ran through him. He thought he heard something high up on the cliff above him, a low ominous moan. Although there was almost no light, he was certain he saw something flying up there. It was not small like a bird, but the size of a man or larger.

IX. THE REQUEST

He rapidly headed back toward town, being more careful about his directions this time. By the time he reached the inn, many of his shipmates were in various states of drunkenness. Strangely, his reception even from those who were still sober ran from ice-cold to lukewarm at best. There was an undercurrent of gossip circling the tavern on the ground floor of the inn. Yet anyone to whom he spoke became quiet immediately. He shrugged it off, as he had already done with the incident at the cliff and the confrontation with Catherine. He would allow nothing in his thoughts except Holly. His brain was busily waxing poetic in comparing her loveliness to roses, rainbows, and stars in the sky. He managed to spend just enough time on planet Earth to prepare for bed and turn in. He had been wrong about not being able to sleep, however. The wood splitting had seen to that.

Before he drifted off he looked up from where he lay and began to pray: “Lord in Heaven, You know, I’ve met this wonderful young woman—of course You do. Thank You for bringing her into my life. I do not know what it is, but something troubles Holly, and I’d do anything to help if I could. She’s really special, Father, but for her to be so upset about being a Christian—I don’t understand. Certainly You know the entirety of it and what it is she needs but, Lord, use me. Use me to help, use me however You will. I’ll go wherever You send me and do whatever You show me. She needs You, Lord, needs Your help. Of that I am certain. In the scriptures You tell me that if I lack wisdom I must but ask. Well, I’m asking. Please make it unquestionable to me how to help her. Indeed, this whole town looks in need of help. I also could use some wisdom in my relationship with Holly. I have little knowledge of such things, but there is no denying that I could easily grow most fond of her. If that is Your will for me, please show me. If not, reveal that to me, too—but, please, do so gently. Oh, and Heavenly Father,

whatever it takes to soften Catherine's hard heart—Lord, I do not wish to feel bitterness toward her. If it is not too bold of me, there also I am in need of some help. It's so good to know You, Lord, to know You're listening. I praise and thank You for the grace You give through Your Son Jesus, in Whose name I pray. Amen.”

As with most people, had John any inkling of what he was really asking for, or committing himself to, he'd have been scared stiff. For such a recent convert, John had done remarkably well at realizing that prayers aren't to be requests for God to redesign His plans to fit our desires. That they instead are requests for Him to fit us into His plans. Still, when wholeheartedly offering to be a tool in The Master's hands, one should expect some hammering and scraping is forthcoming. Though John had no concept of where this prayer might lead him, to his credit, he was genuinely willing.

* * *

Catherine was in rare form. “I simply cannot believe you could be so foolish,” she ranted at Holly. “You know what this kind of thing could lead to. Have you lost your senses? Now the townspeople are starting to get in an uproar.”

“What difference should it make to them what I do? I'm the one at risk, not them. Besides, he will only be here a week.” She was fighting tears; she was determined not to let Catherine get her started crying.

“Because they think that anything that gets all this stirred-up again will cause more trouble for them. You know how they are. You must use your head, Holly, and tell that young man you cannot see him again.” Then, drippingly, “It's for your own good, dear.”

“I'll tell you what's for my own good. Spending a few precious days with someone who truly cares for me. I'll have to stop seeing him, true enough. But he will understand it no better tomorrow than he would a week from now. In the meantime, I need a few days of happiness; just a few days to dream like anyone else. That's what's good for me, something to keep me from losing my sanity. To feel normal. Isn't that true Auntie Muriel?”

Before she could speak, Catherine stepped in. “You know perfectly well what it would take for you to be ‘normal’ again. The opportunity is available at any time—right now, if you wished.” A sly subtlety came into her voice, “Just think, Holly, that nice young man, John—a big,

strong, and, I'll be the first to admit, handsome fellow—could be yours. You could be free to let your heart go wherever it wants. And it's all so easy."

"Don't do it, Holly," Aunt Muriel interjected. "You know there must be something very evil about what she asks or there wouldn't be so much misery connected with it. Besides, you know what's right."

"You're a fine one, old woman," Catherine raged. She scrunched up her face and in a whiny, raspy voice mimicked, "'It's Auntie Muriel from now on, y'hear?' You feeble-minded old bat."

With that, Holly's fuse went off. "Don't speak to her that way! Don't you ever speak to Auntie Muriel that way." Holly was livid and Catherine, who had never seen her quite this upset before, could tell she meant business. There was a pause, then Catherine turned and retreated to the bedroom, mumbling about how she could talk to her any way she pleased. She groused something about it being her money that kept them going and slammed the door.

Holly looked at her aunt. "I'm not going to cry, Auntie, I'm not."

"Good for you, Holly. Sometimes crying is good, but sometimes it's good to stand firm." They both sat down on the crudely made settee. The crook-backed old woman took her great-niece's head and laid it on her shoulder. "Don't worry, dear. God will see you through this, somehow. I feel somehow that an end of all this is near, and soon." That was good news to Holly. Her great-aunt seemed to have a knack for knowing when changes were coming.

Holly raised her head and looked her aunt in the eyes. "I love you, Auntie." Tears began to roll down the old woman's wrinkled face. "Now stop that," Holly said with a smile. "How do you expect me to keep from crying if you start?" The old woman smiled, too, and they hugged. After a few silent moments there was a knock at the door. The entrance of Burton's cheery face was an excellent tonic to relieve the bad air left by the earlier quarrel.

"Good evening, Mrs. Gilbert," said Holly out the door, for she would never enter their house no matter how much Holly coaxed.

"Fine, just fine," she said. "I'll be around to pick him up at the usual time, and thank you again so much, Miss Holly." It was only about the thousandth time she had expressed her thanks for Holly's help. Holly had no doubt that the thousandth carried as much sincerity as the first.

X. POISON IVY

The next day dawned in a pouring rain. It did nothing to dampen John's spirits, though. As he hurried toward Holly's house he wondered if this was all some childlike infatuation. Perhaps with a more detached view he would recognize her as just a lonely sailor's girl in port. How deeply involved with her could he be in so short a time? *What if today I don't feel the same about her?* he thought. *What if it was just some sort of temporary enchantment that will fade when I see her again?* Best to realize it now before it goes too far, he admitted. He was doing his best to be levelheaded, realistic. Deep down, though, he felt certain that, if anything, his feelings for her had grown even stronger overnight. Sure enough, his first look at her that rainy morning made his heart skip a couple of beats. She was even more lovely and radiant than he had remembered. It impressed him that being with her in person far exceeded any of the dreams his imagination could conjure up.

Despite the downpour, John got right to the work. He was well underway before Holly could drag him in for breakfast. Catherine was preparing to leave when he came in. Although he did his best to be friendly, she did her best to ignore him. Holly's—and Muriel's—protestations that he should not get any wetter were to no avail. Immediately after breakfast, he was back to work again. He completed several more long-neglected repairs before the midday meal. It wasn't a long break. Yet every moment he and Holly spent together increased their fondness for each other geometrically. Aunt Muriel, too, had taken a real liking to him. This polite, hard-working, kindhearted young man was all she could have wished for her beloved great-niece. It was delightful for her to watch the light in Holly's eyes when he was around. Muriel got so caught-up she allowed herself to join in the fantasy, ignoring that it was doomed to fly apart all too soon.

For Holly's part, her heart was far outracing her head, and she had completely turned loose of its reins.

When she and Catherine had been little girls, they had once been playing by rolling themselves down a little knoll covered with some kind of greenery. Only after a long while did they realize that it was poison ivy. At that point they had decided that they might as well continue to enjoy themselves. After all, the damage had already been done and the misery that would follow was assured anyway. Now, in like manner, Holly was resolved to go ahead and play in this new strain of poison, which was growing and surrounding her more every moment.

The rain stopped around two. After a while Holly came out to work with John who was repairing the door on the bungalow. Holly revealed that Catherine had long ago determined that her great-aunt should be relegated there and had vetoed Holly's efforts to switch with her.

Holly was in every way feminine, but was by no means fragile or delicate. To say she helped John in his work is not to imply that she did any less than a full share. He was greatly impressed with yet another addition to the overwhelming list of qualities she possessed. As they worked, they talked about nearly everything—except certain specific topics. They laughed a great deal, and really began to see who one another were. Both liked what they saw. They lauded each other's efforts with each success. When mis-coordination would result in some bumbling setback, laughter and jovial self-deprecation followed. Neither could have believed that there could be this much fun in performing tasks that normally were drudgery at best. Indeed, neither could remember ever having had such an enjoyable time.

That evening at supper, their high spirits continued as they recounted the events of the day. This was to the delight of Aunt Muriel and the consternation of Catherine. She seemed to be doing a slow smolder all evening. John had brought his battered French-harp with him. Since Burton was not coming that night, he started the accompaniment for a sing-along. Aunt Muriel requested to just sit and listen. Holly's natural soprano was delicate and pretty. To everyone's surprise, Catherine, who had treated John as a leper to that point, joined in. She had a rich, confident, magnificent voice. When harmonized with Holly's it literally gave John goose bumps. He begged them to sing the song again, and then a third time, fearing that even switching tunes might somehow taint the magic. His enthusiastic praise of their voices was so genuine that even the stoic Catherine thanked him. She even exchanged affectionate smiles with her sister. It was

the first such occurrence he had witnessed between them. He started them off on several other ballads and ditties, each done as beautifully as he had ever heard it. Caught up in the moment he then started in with the strains of an old hymn. It was one he was sure would fit marvelously with their voices. The instant the tune was recognized, Catherine's eyes widened and her face paled. Holly gulped discernibly. A second before John recognized what was transpiring, the rasping voice of Aunt Muriel began soloing. While her vocal quality was not pleasing to the ear, she hit every note with faultless pitch. Holly stared at her, transfixed. Halfway through the song, Catherine jumped to her feet and stormed into the bedroom. John's heart sank that the mutual joy among the four of them, especially between Catherine and Holly, had been so short-lived. He and Aunt Muriel finished the song, but he knew it was time to leave. As Holly accompanied him down the porch steps she apologized profusely for her sister's behavior. She offered no explanation. Refusing to let their day end on a down note, they spent a few minutes reliving some of its highlights. As they parted, he had a frantic desire to take her in his arms. But enough of his old residual shyness remained that he dared not. Knowing he would return tomorrow would have to suffice.

The following dawn's overcast was lighter and suggested the chance of some partial clearing before the day was over. At midafternoon John was replacing a rotted floorboard in the kitchen. Aunt Muriel opened a cupboard and pulled out an empty sack.

"Holly, looks like we're out of flour. There's enough in the egg-money jar for a 25 lb. sack. Guess you'd better go down to the General Mercantile and get some. Seems a shame to have to hitch up the wagon just for that, though. Course, I know you wouldn't want to carry that big of a load walking."

John spoke up immediately, "I'll carry it for you, Holly."

Although Holly never let on, she was concerned at the prospect of the two of them being seen around town together again. She sought in vain for an excuse to avoid it but refused to say anything John could misconstrue as her not wanting to be with him. Finally John's enthusiasm for the idea prevailed and they were on their way. This time the reactions were less of shock and more of thinly disguised anger. The storeowner filled their order in cold silence. John started to rib him about this "non-existent girl" he was with. The owner's demeanor was so volatile, though, that John held his tongue. Soon they were beyond the more populated sections of town

and headed for her house again. John stomped along carrying the sack of flour over his shoulder. The attitude of the people had upset him despite his efforts to ignore them. Holly's cheerful chatter as they walked, however, soon revived his good humor. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a dark thought which he had been suppressing leaped into his consciousness. It would not wait any longer.

"Holly." He stopped, put the sack down, and looked deeply into her eyes. "There's something I've been thinking about, something I want to discuss with you."

"Oh?" she said nervously, fearing what was coming.

John forged ahead. "When my ship leaves, I'll have to go with it, naturally. But after I get to Boston, I can come back. You know, on that little coastal sloop that comes by every week. Of course, I'll have to spend a couple of days with my parents, but they'll understand. I could be back here within a week or two." Holly was staring down the road at nothing. "What I'm saying is that we can continue to see each other even though I have to leave for a little while." It was obvious that she had understood, so he decided to just shut-up for a minute and hear her reaction.

After a long pause, she turned to him. "John, please, let's not think about the future, two months from now, two weeks from now, tomorrow even. I just want to concentrate on right now. I've never been happier than I am this very minute," she placed her palms gently on his chest, "being here with you."

A small part of his mind was trying to make sense out of the doubletalk he had just heard. It was easily overwhelmed by a singular focus that simply would not be denied.

"Oh Holly," he whispered, as he took her in his arms and kissed her. It was a long, tender kiss. Once again reality surpassed even his most vivid imaginings. The sweet, soft, warmth of her lips quite literally left him breathless. His pounding heart was situated somewhere just above his adam's apple. He and Patricia had kissed on several occasions, and it had been enjoyable. But nothing, *nothing* had ever affected him like this. His mind was on overload, and as their lips parted, there was only one coherent sentence it could construct. There was only one phrase that had not been shrunk into irrelevance by the glory of the moment. Still holding her, he gazed into those luscious eyes and tried to gasp in enough air to make speech possible. Then he whispered, "Holly I—"

She reached up quickly and put her fingertips on his mouth. “No, don’t speak. Whenever you kiss me, whenever you hold me, don’t say a word. Just hold me close.” Then she kissed him, and again his heart thrashed around like a drowning man. Given the thrill he had just experienced, he was only too willing to comply with her request. He did, however, spend the rest of the day puzzling about it.

XI. THE SERVICE

It can be taken as a general truth that most men are pretty obtuse about things romantic, but John was not without a modicum of perception. He quickly grasped that Holly had known what he was about to say and had purposefully prevented its being uttered. But why? Why would she, or anyone, not want to hear another person verbally hand her his heart? It placed no obligation on her; he was not demanding that she respond in kind. What, then? Ah, too soon. Yes, that must be it. After all they had only known each other such a short time. Why, then, had she made the request so open-ended, off into the future? Did she feel there would never come a time when he would be free to tell her what he felt? Maybe she had been hurt before. Maybe some clod had proclaimed his undying devotion to her only to prove himself a fraud. It was hard to imagine anyone treating Holly that way, and in any case it wasn't a very satisfying answer. Nonetheless it would have to suffice until something more concrete came along.

Even with these mysteries swirling about, he still spent the rest of the day gliding around on a cloud. As the evening progressed he found himself eagerly anticipating that little stroll down the porch steps with Holly. There would be no mere hand squeeze tonight, no sir. He, John Stander, the common and unworthy, would kiss the lips of the most beautiful woman to ever grace the globe. Unfortunately Burton arrived nearly an hour early and wanted to start his lesson immediately. He wanted "Mr. John" hear him read some of his book "his own self." John worked mightily to hide his disappointment as he was leaving. Holly paused the lesson momentarily and went with him only as far as the edge of the porch. There they shared a quick hug and an "I'll see you tomorrow" and he left. Not what he had hoped for. Still, having her in his arms again, even for so brief a moment, helped him glide all the way back to the inn.

The hoped-for patch of blue sky appeared about noon the next day. John's efforts had started to make the place look rejuvenated. Late that afternoon, when Holly brought him a cup of water, he turned serious for a moment. "I want to ask you something and it doesn't need to upset you. If you would rather not do it you can tell me 'no' and I'll leave it at that. All right?"

"All right."

"Today is Sunday. I'd like you and me to have our own little prayer service. Tonight. Maybe over in that little grove of trees. Would you come with me?"

Holly thought awhile and then, to his surprise, said softly, "All right, John, I'll come with you." The look of innocence, of trust on her face affected him deeply.

"Fine, that's fine," he said quietly. "Right after supper, then?" She nodded. "Oh, Burton's not coming tonight is he?"

"No, he doesn't come over on Sundays."

"By the way, that reminds me," he added. "Burton's mother—and your Auntie Muriel—I somehow get the impression that they might want to come too. It might make it more—"

"No," Holly interrupted. "They wouldn't come. They'd be too—" She caught herself and stopped short.

"Too what, Holly?"

"Nothing, they just wouldn't come, that's all."

John had learned that when he got an answer like that from her, there was no use pursuing it. Besides, getting Holly to agree to come was enough of a victory to suit him. He was not going to press his luck.

That evening Holly announced as casually as possible that she and John were going to go out and "walk and talk for awhile." Catherine's face showed more than passing concern, but the two left anyway. It had cleared off, and the gibbous moon was bright enough for them to find a good spot. There was a small log on which Holly sat, and a short stump about three feet away for John.

"I gather you'd prefer not to make this too public, so I we'll not be doing any singing. I'm not much of a singer anyway. I sure do love to hear you, though." Holly, sitting with her hands in her lap, just smiled. John cleared his throat. "Y'know, I don't even have a Bible."

"I don't either," she said quietly.

“I mean, I got one back home, although I never used it much then. See, I only became a Christian a short time ago. I’ve been reading Griz’s Bible. He snapped his fingers. “Oh, now there’s a blunder. I should have invited Griz out here. He could have preached a whole sermon or something. You’ve never seen anybody knows as much about the Bible as he does.” He bounced the tips of his fingers together for a minute while no one spoke. Then he took a deep breath and said, “I suppose we’ll just have to do the best we can.” He cleared his throat and looked straight at her. “I’m no fountain of Bible knowledge, but I know this: God loves you, Holly, He sincerely does.”

She looked away from him, her chin trembling and her eyes brimming. “I know He does, John,” she said in a husky voice. Something was tearing her up inside again.

“Good,” John said gently. He tried to be helpful. “I remember a verse that says ‘with God all things are possible.’ Do you believe that?” She did her best to smile, and nodded. “Maybe we should just each pray. How would that be?” She nodded again. “Guess I’ll start.” He bowed his head. “Lord, we know how great Your love for every person is. Your love is powerful enough to overcome any need that Your precious daughter, Holly, has. Above all, dear Lord, in Jesus’ name, give her peace. Amen.”

Holly took a moment to collect herself and then began softly in a shaky, emotion-filled voice. “My dear, loving Father, forgive me Lord. Forgive my weakness, forgive my faithlessness, and forgive me for neglecting Thee.” At this point she paused to regain control of her tears. “I thank Thee for these days I’ve had with John. Please protect him with Thy most special care. Please, please forgive me for what I’m doing, forgive my selfishness, forgive me for hurting him. I am so sorry.” She broke down into a torrent of tears, somewhere mouthing a silent “amen”. John, once again, was mystified—something he was finding to be a daily occurrence since he had met her. One thing he did know, this time she would not cry alone. He sat on the log next to her and held her close. She laid her head on his shoulder and he stroked her hair while she wept quietly.

When, at length, she recovered she smiled at him sweetly with heavy, reddened eyes. It was a “thank you for being here” that needed no words. They then took a walk, hand in hand. It was not long before the emotional wringer they had just been through was set aside and they were

talking lightheartedly again. It was their first moonlight stroll and there seemed to be more stars than either of them had ever seen before.

When they reached her front steps, John put a hand on each of her arms and looked deeply into her eyes. “Holly, I have to echo one statement you made. I, also, have never been happier than I am right this minute.” She smiled and they kissed. At that instant the door flew open. Catherine, with one look, said that Holly was in for a tongue-lashing. It certainly broke the spell. John bid her a hasty goodnight and left. He was angry with himself for letting Catherine make him feel embarrassed for no reason.

Catherine staged a repeat of the fracas that had gone on the first night. As the battle heated-up, however, she switched to a new tactic.

“All right, then. You say you will break it off with him eventually anyway, so you may as well enjoy it while it lasts, huh? Well what about *him*? Are you so unfeeling that you’d keep leading him on while he gets more and more deeply involved, knowing full well that you’re eventually going to crush him? I saw you locked in his arms tonight. I’m telling you he’s falling for you, young lady. You’re going to tear that poor boy’s heart out, and the longer you let this go on the worse it becomes. Now do you really consider that fair to him? Are you so cruel, so selfish?”

Hearing the words of her own confession thrown back at her broke Holly down completely. She was defeated. Auntie Muriel, wishing desperately that she had a way to quell Holly’s heart-broken sobs, could only admit, “Catherine’s right, dear heart, it’s no good going on like this.” Catherine’s eyes registered shock that Aunt Muriel would take her side. She considered a snide comment, but knowing she was winning she decided it best to hold her silence. “I know how it hurts, cuts right down to your soul,” Aunt Muriel continued sympathetically. “But it has to be done, dear. Tomorrow. You’ll have to tell him tomorrow.”

Catherine stood and stroked Holly’s head. Then, with that condescending tone in her voice, added, “It’s for the best, Holly dear. It’s best for everyone.”

XII. THE CURSE

From the moment John arrived that morning, he knew something was wrong. Holly's greeting did not contain the usual cheerfulness. Her hug was not the hug of affection but of desperation. He busied himself with some whitewashing; half hoping she might join him. She, on the other hand, bustled furiously at her chores, always away from where he was. The clincher came at noontime. She announced that there was food on the table for him, but she needed to make a quick trip to the General Mercantile and would be back soon. She conveniently arrived after he had started back to work again.

She disappeared somewhere for a long time during the midafternoon, and he was in emotional agony.

Where she had gone turned out to be their "moonlight grove" as they had dubbed it. There, by the stump, she knelt in tearful prayer.

"O Lord, my life is worthless. It's not a life; it's not even an existence. I cannot find love. I cannot serve Thee. I am an outcast to the townspeople, and now I must destroy the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me. My burden is greater than I can bear. I've cried until I have no more tears. Take my life, Lord. End it now before I hurt or grieve anyone else. Only, Father, didn't I hear that there would always be a way of escape? If it's there, no matter what it is, please help me find it." She stayed a long while waiting for the evidence of her crying to dissipate.

When she came out to announce supper, John took her aside. "Holly, we must talk."

"I know. Tonight, after supper, in the moonlight grove."

When they arrived at the grove Holly's palms were sweating and yet she was shivering. She was obviously in turmoil, and stood with her back to him. She contemplated which of the thousand rehearsals she had done in her mind she should use to begin.

"Holly, what is it?" he asked. "Please, let me help." With that he walked up behind her, put his hands on her shoulders and his cheek against her temple.

She pulled away, turned around, backed up a step and begged, "Don't love me, John Stander. Don't. Please don't love me."

There was a brief pause, and then John replied in a very calm, quiet voice, "It's too late, Holly. I already love you. Totally, completely, and unchangeably."

She let out a timid little moan, then regained her composure. She raised her head and sniffed in a deep breath. She decided to proceed with her originally planned speech. She looked away from him and began slowly. "John, I—"

He broke in. "Wait, Holly, I know you have something very serious to tell me. But I ask only one thing. Please, please, just tell me the truth. Don't speak in circles or be mysterious. Holly, I beg of you, please be completely honest with me."

This caught her off guard. Not that she was going to lie to him, exactly. She was just going to give him some nebulous words about how it could never work between them. She would dodge around his inevitable requests for explanations and if necessary resort to running to the house in tears. There Catherine would most assuredly let him know he was never to see her again. But now, she knew she just couldn't. He was too important to her to disregard his plea for openness. *May as well tell the whole story*, she decided. *The end result will be the same anyway.*

"John, what I'm about to tell you will sound impossible, ridiculous, maybe even laughable. But I assure you every word is true." Her shoulders sagged and she looked up at the sky for an instant, then at him. "John, I'm under a curse."

"A curse?" he said, shaking his head slowly. "I don't understand."

"The whole town is, really, but me especially. I know this sounds crazy, but in those cliffs, deep down inside, is an outpost of the Evil One, Beelzebub—there are many names for him. This town seems to be, I don't know, a kind of staging or transition point between our world and

his pit. Have you noticed that air of foreboding, of evil, that seems to permeate this place?” John frowned and nodded, remembering his negative first impression of Cliff Harbor.

“Even so, Cliff Harbor was a growing, productive community up until about ten years ago. Then strange occurrences started being reported: sightings of horrible flying creatures, people going up on the cliffs and never being seen again—not even their bodies—things like that. Many people simply refused to believe it, but many others were frightened. It was then that Catherine and two of her friends began dabbling in some sort of strange ritualistic activities. I believe it is black magic, but no one is sure. The dressmaking business they have across town, no one is ever allowed in the back room. I fear they practice some unspeakably evil rituals there. Anyway, one day Catherine showed up with an elaborately ornate scroll she said she found near the cliffs. She showed it to the newspaper, to the Town Council—everyone. It claimed to be from the Adversary himself, saying he wanted this town for his own purposes and warned everyone to leave. The consequence for not leaving would be that no child would be born here from that day forward. It scared some folks away right off, but many stayed. Some, because they wouldn’t leave their land, their possessions. Others because they didn’t expect any more children anyway. Some, like my parents, and my best friend Amanda’s parents, stayed partly because they didn’t believe it. But they stayed on also partly because of that Yankee stubbornness that can’t abide being told what to do.”

Holly paused for a moment and got a far away look in her eyes. “Amanda. Amanda Marsh.” She gave a little laugh. “We were the same age and we were so close. My folks called her my shadow and her parents referred to me as their ‘other daughter.’ Our families did everything together, and our fathers mutually resolved that they weren’t going to let some silly curse story run them off. But as the years went by and no babies were born, more and more people became alarmed. Most of those who had children left for fear somehow something would happen to them. We got letters from people saying they’d begun having children again as soon as they relocated. Still a fair number of people hung-on doggedly, determined to not give in. Harold Byington—the preacher I mentioned—was so distraught to see his congregation dwindling away he finally decided to take action. He called a town meeting and declared that he was going to pray this evil of Satan away from here. He also said he was certain, and would guarantee, that someone in his congregation would have a child within the year. He defied the forces of evil to

stop it. Then Catherine, without the pretext of a scroll this time, claimed to have heard the voice of the Serpent himself. She announced that any professed Christian still in town after one year would never be allowed to leave. Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Byington, not a young woman, discovered she was pregnant. It looked like they had won. Understand, Amanda's and my parents' only brush with religion was to claim to be Presbyterians because that's what their folks had been. But even they were impressed. Then, when the time for delivery came, the baby was stillborn. A few days later Mrs. Byington died of an infection. The congregation fled. Mr. Byington, embittered, and his surviving son, Tom, left the pulpit for the smithy.

"This once prosperous city had become a mere shell, and our parents began talking about the possibility of leaving. Still, it galled our fathers to have to admit defeat, so they held off. About three years ago, a ship needing repairs—a broken rudder or something, I think—stopped in port. All the passengers had to disembark for a few days. Among them was a missionary couple with an infant, who were on their way home. Amanda and I were at the General Mercantile when we saw them. The mother, Mrs. Atkins, let us hold the baby. John, you can't imagine how we felt. There we were holding this precious little bundle of life and potential, after not even having seen a baby in almost seven years. We realized how cruel and wicked this curse was. The Atkins's were, naturally, very proud and pleased with their son. They kept talking about how he was a blessing from the Lord, and how good God was to them. So we asked them to tell us about God. Of course, there's no question a missionary would rather hear. But they really weren't heavy-handed or pushy with us. They just told us about Jesus and how He gave His life so that we could be right with God. They said His power could give us victory over the Devil. Both Amanda and I were convinced we wanted to commit our lives to Christ and were baptized that very day.

"That evening, while our families were together, Amanda and I announced what we had done. Auntie Muriel said it was wonderful, our parents seemed worried, but Catherine was furious. She ranted and raved for a bit, then took on a horrible, unearthly voice. She said that because we had dared to do this, we not only would never be allowed to leave Cliff Harbor but, unless we recanted, we could never marry. She said that on the day we did either of these things we would be taken into the pit of destruction."

John overcame his astonishment long enough to interject, “But Holly, surely if you escaped from this accursed town you would be free.”

“Wait. There’s more. Amanda’s parents became frightened and decided to try to get her out of town through the pass. As they were loading up their wagon to leave, my mother tried to stop them. When she failed, she got my father and they rode off after the Marsh’s. I heard them leave and ran after them. When they entered the pass, the earth shook and started the landslide. The Marsh’s were crushed by the rubble. My parent’s wagon turned over and they were killed. When I got there, out of breath, I was amazed to see that Amanda had been thrown clear and was unhurt. As I ran toward her I saw these three hideous ‘things’ swooping down on her from the sky.”

XIII. THE PLAN

“Things? What kind of things?”

“John, I know this sounds insane, but I swear it really happened. They were reptilian sort of creatures with bat-like wings and long teeth and tails. They were about the size of a man—maybe a bit larger, with horns and huge muscles. Their faces were like, well, have you ever seen paintings of those huge old European buildings, the creatures they have carved as rainspouts?”

“Gargoyles?”

“Yes, that’s it exactly, gargoyles. They picked her up, and flew off with her toward a cave in the cliffs.” Holly, choking with emotion, put her hands to her ears. “I can still hear her pleading for someone to help her.”

“And she hasn’t been seen since?”

Holly shook her head.

John sat quietly for a long while trying to absorb what he had just heard. Finally Holly broke the silence, her voice soft and gentle. “So you see now why it can never work between us? Why I should never have let it get this far to begin with?”

“There has to be a way out of this. Somehow. Some way...”

“No, John, there is no way.”

Suddenly John sat upright. “Holly—I just realized what a weight you’ve been carrying. All this time the pressure for you to renounce your faith, it must have been unbearable. And yet you’ve been faithful.” He sniffed in amazement. “And with only one day’s teaching. Here I thought I was so noble. Yours is real faith; faith that’s heroic and unshakable.”

Other than from Aunt Muriel, this was the first positive reinforcement of her stand she had ever received. “Thank you for saying so.” She choked back the tears that were welling-up. “But I don’t feel very heroic. It’s been so hard sometimes. It’s so hard to go on.”

John wasn't through. He got up and began to pace, thinking hard. "Wait, Holly, I think maybe there is an answer. You trust in God, right? Well, I've already proven His power to overcome Satan. Remember the shipwreck I told you about, the one that brought us here? As I mentioned, it was His power that kept us from doom, I'm certain of it. You can come with us when we leave, and I know God will keep you safe."

"Oh, no, John. I would endanger your ship, your entire crew."

"But, don't you see? With your faith, and Griz and me, why we're certain to have the Devil on the run. I know it will work; it has to work. Somehow I just cannot escape the feeling that God has brought me here, brought us together, for some important reason. And getting you out from under this curse simply must be part of it. Are you willing to try?"

Holly stood with her hands folded, her thumbs pressed against her lips. She was trembling and her voice showed it as she answered meekly, "I don't know, John, I just don't know."

All at once a thought hit him like a load of bricks. *Stupid fool*, he thought, *stupid, selfish fool. Sure, you can easily dream up grandiose experiments—with her life. She's the one who faces all the danger. John, you emptyhead, how could you be so insensitive?*

"Oh, Holly, I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. Of course I wouldn't ask you to take a risk like that. It was thoughtless of me." The next words he tore out of himself, and each was like a dagger being plunged into his heart. "I guess you were right, after all. We had better just go our own ways. Now. Before you start to care for me too much." He looked at the ground. "I don't want to make this any harder on you. I'll just go." He turned away quickly so she wouldn't see the tear trickling down his cheek, but his voice betrayed him as he said, "Good-bye, Holly."

"Wait," she cried, stamping her foot. "You can't leave." He stopped and turned his tear-stained face toward her. She shook her head slowly and whimpered, "It's too late for me, too." They threw themselves into each other's arms. They used every phrase and inflection for saying "I love you" that the English language provides. Having determined that they would not live without each other, they returned to John's earlier plan for a shipboard escape. This time with a different wrinkle. Again the poison ivy proverb came into play, as John knelt before his beloved. After rehashing all the dangers and reasons she should refuse him, he asked her to be his wife.

She pondered the question for an eternity-long moment, another struggle taking place inside her. Finally, her internal foe vanquished, she blossomed into a smile.

“Yes, John, I’ll marry you,” she answered joyfully. Their resulting embrace was cut short when she suddenly asked, “Only, how can we? There’s no preacher here.”

John thought for a minute, then said brightly, “Captain MacInnis can do it, soon as we’re aboard ship. He said if there was ever anything he could do for me all I had to do was ask. I’ll speak with him tomorrow before I come see you.”

As they prepared to say good night, Holly had him wait for a moment. “John, my acceptance of your marriage proposal has one condition,” she said solemnly. “You must promise me that you will reconsider everything we’ve talked about tonight. You must use your head as well as your heart. If you decide our plan is too foolhardy, which it probably is, just don’t come tomorrow. It will be easier that way. I’ll ponder it in my heart too, and if my mind changes, I won’t be here if you do come.” He agreed, confident that no change would result.

Holly said nothing about her plans to Aunt Muriel or Catherine that evening. True to her word, she pondered and prayed about her decision until dawn. Her overriding thought was that while she fully expected it would mean her death, her life as it had been—and now particularly life without John—was not worth holding onto anyway. Once her mind was set to go through with it, she felt a great peace come over her. She immediately began to look forward to this, her wedding day.

Holly announced her plans that morning and a long argument ensued with frequent references to the unfortunate Amanda Marsh. Catherine was incensed, while Aunt Muriel was fearful of harm befalling her beloved Holly. Nevertheless, it became obvious that Holly could not be dissuaded. As she was admonished, for about the twelfth time, to stop and think it over, she revealed her parting words to John the night before.

At that point, Catherine raised an eyebrow and said, “By the way, where is John? Isn’t he usually here by now?” It was well past ten o’clock.

“He had to meet with the captain to make our arrangements,” she answered hopefully. But the seed of worry had been planted. She took some handfuls of grain in her apron and went out to feed the chickens. She tried to be as inconspicuous as possible when looking down the road toward the wharf. As time moved inexorably past eleven o’clock, she hung out a load of

clothes, always with one eye on the road. It occurred to her that his ship might have set sail during the night. She climbed up on the fence to see over some buildings in the distance. No, the masts were still visible. Her stomach was so tied in knots she almost felt sick. As she climbed down, Catherine, who uncharacteristically had stayed home that day, walked up to her.

“You should be thankful that he’s wise beyond his years. He’s only doing what’s best for you. You should be proud of him. I must say,” she added patronizingly, “I’ve always admired the character of that young man.”

Holly walked away. She did not want to hear it. As noon approached, her stomach had a lead-weight lump in it. She was no longer providing any pretense of working, but was pacing around with her mind in a daze. Then there was movement down the heretofore-empty road. In a few moments she saw that it was Burton, kicking a rock ahead of him as he walked. When he came closer, he saw her and his face bloomed into a smile.

“Mo’nin’ Miss Holly,” he said brightly.

A distracted nod and joyless smile were the most she could muster. He was perceptive enough to detect immediately that something was wrong. He decided to try to make her laugh.

“My mama says she’s gonna whup the skin right off me iff’n I don’t keep up with my readin’ lessons.” Holly never failed to laugh and remind Burton that his mother had never laid a hand on him when he talked like that. But not this time.

“You’re doing just fine,” she said stoically.

Burton put his little hand on her arm and asked, “What’s the matter, Miss Holly? You ain’t yourself today. And where’s Mr. John? He’s usually around here workin’ someplace.”

Holly squatted down and put a hand on each of the boy’s shoulders. “Oh, Burton, could you do me a favor? The biggest favor of my whole life?” she pleaded.

The boy grinned widely, “Sho’ Miss Holly, I’d do anything for you, my own self. Just name it.”

“All right, here’s what I want you to do. Go down to the wharf where John’s ship is and see if you can find him. When you do, and I’m counting on you, just tell him that Holly needs to know for sure if—if this is good-bye.” The last words caught in her throat. She swallowed hard and continued, her voice shaking. “And if it is, tell him I understand, and that,” tears began down

her cheeks, "I'll always love him, to the end of my days. Then hurry back and tell me what happened. Can you remember all that?"

Burton gulped. He had not seen Holly cry before. "Oh yes'm, I got it, I won't forget none of it."

"Oh, thank you Burton. And please hurry."

"Yes'm Miss Holly, I can go fast as lightnin' my own self." Off he went in a dead run. She watched him till he turned off in the distance.

A dozen lifetimes crawled by while she waited with her insides turning somersaults. She didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. She alternately wrung them, folded them, crossed her arms, and ran her fingers through her hair. Neither could she settle on whether to stand up, sit down, or pace around in circles. Still the road was empty.

At last she spotted a small figure moving rhythmically up the road. Burton was running as fast as his abbreviated legs could carry him. She hurried out to meet him, and when he reached her his eyes were rolling like marbles on a plate from exhaustion.

"Burton, did you find him?"

The poor lad gasped and panted, but managed to force out a few words at a time between breaths. "Oh yes'm Miss Holly. I spoke to Mr. John his own self."

Her hands on his shoulders were trembling. "What...what did he say?"

Burton swallowed and was breathing a bit easier. "He said he got the day watch duty till two o'clock but didn't have no way to get a message to you. He said for you not to fret none Miss Holly, that he'd talk to the captain and be here as soon as he could. He sho' was glad to see me."

"Oh Burton you're wonderful." She picked him up and hugged him, spinning around, and gave him a big kiss on the cheek. Once over the shock of it, Burton produced a grin larger than seemed possible for so small a face. He stood transfixed as he stroked the sacred spot on his cheek in awe.

XIV. THE WEDDING

The ship repairs were being wrapped-up. The reloading of cargo was slated for late that afternoon, with them getting underway as soon as possible thereafter. *Just enough time*, John thought. He had been in anguish all morning knowing what Holly must be thinking. He had even considered abandoning his post long enough to put her mind at ease, but knowing he still needed a favor from the captain, he did not dare. He had no chance of any of the crew covering for him or even taking her a message. They had inexplicably become increasingly hostile toward him with each passing day. Today no one would speak to or acknowledge him. The only one he could be sure would help him was Griz, and he was nowhere to be found. He had nearly wept for joy when Burton showed up with “a ‘portent message from Miss Holly.” John’s heart had broken when he heard it. It was with great relief he watched the boy dash back to Holly to let her know everything was fine.

When his duty shift ended he found Captain MacInnis in his cabin, seated at a desk.

“Captain? Sir? May I have a word with you?”

Instead of the hearty, convivial greeting John might have expected, the captain’s response was subdued. “Aye, lad, we’ve a need to talk. Come in and be seated.”

As soon as he sat down, John started right in. “Sir, can you perform marriages?”

“Marriages?”

“Yes. Aboard ship, I mean.”

“Well, this bein’ a cargo vessel, Ah doona get much call for tha’ sort o’ thing. But, aye, Ah’ve done a few over the years.”

“Then, Captain, sir, I’d like to take you up on that favor you offered me when we arrived. You see I’ve met someone—Holly Young is her name. I’d like your permission for her to sail with us to Boston. And we want to be married as soon as possible.”

The portly Scotsman removed his pipe and began fidgeting with it. His face showed a mixture of pain and embarrassment. “She’s the young lass you’ve been seen aroond with.” John nodded, though it wasn’t really a question. He seemed to be stalling for time. “Ah’m sorra lad, Ah canna do what you ask. It pains me to go back on m’ word, but Ah’ve no choice in the matter.”

“But sir, I’ll pay her passage—”

“‘Tis no’ that, lad. ‘Tis the crew. They’ve heard tales that the lass is accursed, and that her sister’s a witch. They say their lives’ll be in peril, even if you alone sail with us.”

“But, have they forgotten what helped get us here safely to begin with?”

“Ah know, lad. And were it up to me, Ah’d not refuse you. But the crew would mutiny sure if Ah tried it. And more than that, ‘tis for your own safety. You and the lass would never reach Boston alive. You’ve seen how the crew behaves when they’re afraid. They’ve even convinced themselves that just bringin’ you along is too dangerous.” He dropped his eyes as if unable to look John square in the face. “Ah’ll leave passage money for the both o’ you for the coastal sloop headed north that arrives tomorra’. Ah’ll see you get your full wages when you get to Boston. Ah’m sorra, lad, ‘tis the best Ah can do.”

“Never mind about the passage money,” John said dejectedly. “I have enough. But, Captain MacInnes, could you at least allow us on board and perform the ceremony? There’s no preacher here.”

“How soon?”

“This afternoon, if possible.”

The captain pondered this awhile, then slapped his hand on the desktop, “Aye, lad, that much Ah’m good for. Bring your lovely lassie and Ah’ll do right and proper by you both. Mind you, it’ll be brief.”

“You don’t think the crew will—”

“Bah. Ah’ll give-in to their fears to protect your lives, but ‘tis my ship and Ah’ll no’ give them the run of it. Doona concern yourselves about that. The crew’ll behave or learn how severe the discipline o’ Aaron MacInnis can be.”

“Thank you, sir. Oh, and Captain, glad to have served under you.”

“‘Tis Ah who’ve been privileged, lad, havin’ you aboard. And, lad, may the A’mighty bless and protect you and your new Mrs.”

He accompanied John on deck and they set the time for the wedding. Griz appeared just as John was about to leave. John excitedly told him of his wedding plans and asked if he would “stand up with him.” Griz solemnly agreed, then intoned, “You’ve found your treasure, then. Fight for it, kid. Fight for her with every bit of strength the Lord gives you. Fight and never quit.” John was in such a hurry to get to Holly’s that he just nodded quickly and left.

The desperate joy he and Holly shared when she leaped into his arms confirmed that, right or wrong, the decision they had each made could have been no other.

Her stomach turned over, however, when she heard about the change in plans. They would have to wait until the next day to leave Cliff Harbor. A voice inside her said this was a bad sign. Outwardly she pretended that it was actually advantageous, giving her more time to gather her things. John eagerly agreed but didn’t believe it either.

The immediacy of the wedding helped Holly push the worry out of her mind. She felt obligated to ask Catherine to be her attendant at the ceremony. She was not surprised when her sister told her the only way she would show up was if she thought there was some way she could stop it. Auntie Muriel, though deeply fearful for Holly, agreed to “give her away.” Holly made a special point to invite Mrs. Gilbert and Burton to the tiny, makeshift wedding.

“Mrs. Gilbert, there’s going to be some hostile people there, and I’ll understand if you decline, but I’d be very proud to have you as my matron of honor.”

“Me, Miss Holly? You’re asking me?” Her lower lip began to quiver as tears rolled down her cheeks. She was so choked with emotion that all she could do was nod.

Holly hugged her and said, “Thank you, Mrs. Gilbert, thank you.”

She leaned back and shook her head. “Mm-mm. Lila. Call me Lila.”

Holly smiled and nodded. “And it’s Holly. Not ‘Miss Holly’ anymore, just Holly.”

John, standing nearby, put in, “In fact, it won’t be ‘Miss’ anything very soon. It’ll be Mrs. John Stander.” The three of them shared a smile, a laugh, and some more hugs all round for a moment.

It was to be their last lighthearted moment for a long while.

The wedding was now less than an hour away. As Holly was rushing to get ready, Catherine was issuing a steady stream of dire threats with an occasional plea that Holly reconsider while there was still time. Holly ignored her, and as she prepared to leave, Catherine became more frantic.

“You can’t go, do you hear me? I won’t let you. I—I forbid it. You’re going to stay right here, young lady.” Holly just stared at her for a moment and, without a word, turned and walked out the door. Catherine caught her by the arm but Holly pulled away and kept going. She began screaming at Holly. “Come back here, Holly Young. Get back here right this instant. You have no idea what you’re getting involved with; the powers you’re trifling with. Holly, listen to me, you don’t know them like I do. They’ll never let you leave, they’ll take you and never let you go. Holly? Holly!” Holly and the rest were well on their way down the road. Catherine became furious. “All right then. I’ve tried to warn you. So I wash my hands of it, you hear me? It’s on your own head. You’re going to your doom.”

The atmosphere did not improve greatly when they got to the wharf. A more joyless wedding ceremony would be hard to find. To guard them from the crew and the increasingly alarmed townspeople, the captain had placed men-at-arms at strategic locations. One group was around the gangplank. Another was between the foredeck, where the ceremony would take place, and the crew watching from the aft part of the ship.

Though she had no wedding dress as such, Holly was ravishing in a silver-blue satin dress and matching bonnet; an outfit bought by her mother shortly before her death. Lila had protested mightily before finally conceding to let Holly loan her a dress. She was quite stunning in emerald green with a white broad-brimmed hat.

Captain MacInnes wondered how long he could keep things under control. He began as soon as the tiny wedding party was assembled. He decided to use an extremely abbreviated version of the wedding vows.

“Dearly beloved, we’re gathered here in the sight o’ God to join this man and this woman in the bonds of Holy Matrimony. Who giveth this woman’s hand in marriage?”

Auntie Muriel managed to squeak out a feeble “I do” before she broke down into uncontrollable sobs. Burton had to escort her back down the gangplank. Of all the tears shed at weddings, these contained meanings far beyond the usual. Holly and Lila squeezed each other’s hands for moral support.

The captain got right to the point. “Join hands. Do you, John Stander, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward till death do you part?”

John looked deeply into Holly’s trusting brown eyes and felt that same thrill as the first time he ever saw her. For a brief moment all the troubles and worries that surrounded them disappeared. “I do,” he said proudly.

“And do you—” the captain got a panicked look for an instant. He leaned toward her and whispered, “Lass, Ah’ve forgotten your name.”

“Holly Young,” she whispered back.

“Aye,” he said nodding in remembrance. “And do you, Holly Young, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward till death do you part?”

So this was it. The words she spoke in the next moment would set the course for her life like no others she would ever speak. While this is true of all wedding vows, she was fully aware that these words might very well be her death sentence. She lifted her head high, looked at John and said boldly, “I do.”

“Ah now pronoonce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

The kiss was interrupted by an angry shout, “You’re bringing a curse on us all.” It was Jack Montgomery. “You’ve made this a death ship.” The rest of the crew joined in with a chorus of savage curses and threats toward the wedding party. Above it all he could still hear Jack: “You shouldn’t have allowed it, captain, they’re devil’s children. We’re doomed as long as they’re alive.”

“You’d best get goin’ lad,” warned the captain, and John heeded it immediately.

There was now a thunderous din of dire threats and violent hostility. As Lila, Holly, and John reached the gangplank, someone grabbed him by the arm. He whirled around to find Griz

standing there, holding his Bible. “A wedding present,” he commanded. John started to protest at receiving Griz’s most prized possession. A volley of musket fire—a last ditch effort by the men-at-arms to control the crew—sent him scurrying down the gangplank.

In the instant of silence which followed the shots, he could hear Griz shouting, “The armor, use the armor. It’s in—” at which point his words were drowned out by the mob’s fury. John glanced back and saw Griz gesturing, apparently indicating the Bible. Although his lips moved, he could not be heard.

For all the bad that had befallen them that day, John and Holly had two strokes of good fortune. One was that the wedding’s haste had not allowed widespread knowledge of it in the town. Thus only a small group was there to harass them after they were off the ship. The other was that they had, for Aunt Muriel’s sake, driven the wagon to the wharf instead of walking. This enabled the entire group to make a mercifully fast getaway. They hoped for an “out of sight, out of mind” effect on their newfound enemies. Nevertheless, as they picked up speed away from the ship, a middle-aged man came running, wild-eyed, beside their wagon.

“You’ve killed her,” he screamed at John, shaking his fist. “You’ve brought the curse of death on us all.” The wagon quickly left him behind, and when John looked at Holly her face was buried in her hands. After a moment she looked up and, staring straight ahead, monotoned, “That was Mr. Byington.”

At last John felt it safe to slow down. When his terrified passengers caught their breath, Burton tugged at John’s sleeve. “Mr. John, what did that man say?”

“What man?”

“The one that gave you that book.”

“Griz? I don’t know, something about ‘use the armor.’ He seemed to be referring to the Bible.”

“That’s a Bible? Is it made out of armor?”

John smiled. “No, I think he meant that God’s word is as strong as armor. Or maybe that there’s a reference to armor in it. Seems to me I recall there being something about armor in there somewhere. ‘The armor of God’ or something. I can’t remember exactly.”

“What did he mean?” At that moment they arrived at Holly’s house. John jumped down to help Aunt Muriel, who had been quite shaken by the events at the wharf. He looked back at Burton and answered his question with a shrug.

John began loading the wagon with the belongings Holly was to take with her, while she went in to change clothes. She wanted to wear her wedding dress on their trip the following day. She had discovered too late that all her “everyday” dresses were packed. She put on a blouse and an old pair of buckskin pantaloons she managed to find. She apologized to John for her appearance but, of course, in his eyes her beauty was undiminished. She helped him lift a trunk onto the wagon. He explained that he wanted everything loaded and ready to go at a moment’s notice. That way, as soon as the weekly coastal runner arrived the next morning they would board it. Hopefully that would convince the town that they were off Cliff Harbor soil and, therefore, no longer a threat to them. He also was considering the possibility of their sneaking off to one of the abandoned homes to spend the night. If any of the angry group that witnessed the wedding came looking for them no one would know their whereabouts. Holly agreed and was in surprisingly good spirits considering how her wedding day had been spoiled. She gave him a peck on the cheek and headed back to the house for one more small bag.

Burton had initially gone home with his mother. He now appeared at John’s side asking where Holly was, so he could say good-bye. John sent him to the house and an instant after he went in, a voice began screaming. It was Holly’s voice.

John raced full-tilt toward the house as Burton bolted out like a shot.

“Mr. John! Mr. John! They got Miss Holly. It’s those debils, Mr. John, they’re takin’ her into Hell.”

XV. THE ARMOR

As John reached the door he could hear Catherine's voice yelling, "Hurry, he's coming," amid Holly's screams. They were screams of uncontrolled terror from a voice he once thought too delicate to ever do so.

John burst through the door, with Burton a step behind. He found Holly struggling furiously in the grips of two hideous gargoyles. A third hovered near the ceiling. They looked just as she had described them, gray-green in color with scales and yellow reptilian eyes. The two that had Holly hand and foot, were proceeding into a trap door in the floor. The large oval rug that usually occupied that spot was half draped over the back of it. The hovering gargoyle was holding it open. Catherine stood back against the wall, her eyes wide. John charged the nearest gargoyle, but the hovering one intercepted him. With a swipe of its clawed forepaw it cuffed him, redirecting him ninety degrees. The blow sent him crashing over the large kitchen table where he landed in a heap. Undeterred, the feisty Burton attacked next. He was sent sprawling back towards the front door with an effortless flick of the wrist by one of Holly's abductors.

John recognized he was no match for them barehanded. He picked up one of the broken oak table legs, sprang to the middle of the room and swung at the hovering creature with all his might. The club was caught in mid-flight by a powerful forepaw and pulled out of his hands as one might take a "no-no" from a baby. The beast casually threw it through the window and made a grimace that ostensibly was a smile of satisfaction. John stepped back and searched for another weapon, knowing he had to act quickly. They were nearly down the trap door. Burton had regained his senses somewhat, and saw Griz's Bible sitting next to him atop Holly's travel bag.

"The armor, Mr. John," he shouted and slid the large book across the floor to him. John picked it up and headed for the one creature that had not yet entered the trap door. John

approached it, holding the Bible in front of him like a talisman. The creature let out a low guttural laugh and flew at him with incredible speed. John was hit with such force that he was launched headlong into the kitchen cupboards amid a cacophony of crashing pots and breaking crockery. The Bible, with three deep claw marks scratched into the front cover, sailed back over to where Burton knelt and lay open in front of him.

When John collected his wits, the gargoyles, and Holly, were gone. Catherine still stood with her palms against the wall, her chest heaving. He ran to the rumpled rug and kicked it aside, but there was no seam in the floor, no hinges. There was no evidence of anything but solid plank flooring. He dug his fingernails into the cracks between the floorboards but to no avail, they would not budge. Besides, he had replaced some of the floorboards and knew there was no opening.

He turned to Catherine threateningly. "Where is she?" he panted. "Where have they taken her?"

She looked down at the ground and said matter-of-factly, "And why should I tell you?" She looked up at him, "What good would it do?"

"What good?" he asked incredulously. "So I can find her; get her back."

She looked shocked. "You, who personally sentenced her to death with your own selfishness, you want to get her back? She's not coming back," she fumed. "Not ever. You ensured that by filling her head with ideas of marriage and escape. You began arranging her death from the moment you came here."

"Holly was miserable before I came here."

"She was ALIVE before you came here," she roared.

"You're the evil here," he shot back. "You with your satanic rituals and pronouncements from the Adversary. But it doesn't matter who's the cause, I demand you tell me where she is." He came at Catherine threateningly and added through clinched teeth, "And tell me this instant."

She moved away a few steps and asked, "So you want to die too?"

"If that's what it takes, yes."

Her eyes were filled with hatred. "You. You make me SICK," she spat. "You've caused her death. And now to salve your tormented conscience you want to go off and give your life in the heroic effort to save 'the fair damsel.' Hoping, no doubt, that such noble behavior will purge

you of the guilt you so richly deserve. Well, you'll get no help from me." She pointed across the kitchen. "There. There's a butcher knife, go use it on yourself to assuage your guilt, but don't try to legitimize it with some hopeless 'quest.'"

"You vile, heartless witch, I'm not looking for my death, but for her rescue."

"Rescue? I saw your little exhibition just now. You're a—a joke. You were defenseless against only three fiends. How do you propose to overcome all the powers and the rulers of darkness? By beating on them with your book?" She laughed loudly for a moment and then hissed, "You're pathetic."

He stood slump-shouldered, unable to speak. She was right. He had been powerless against only a small contingent of the wicked forces that now had Holly in their grasp.

Burton began to sob. "Mr. John, we gotta do something. We can't just let Miss Holly die. Please, Mr. John." Big tears rolled down his cheeks as he lowered his head in anguish. A tear dropped onto the open Bible, and puddled so as to magnify a single word. As Burton reflexively reached to wipe it off, he read it.

"Armor...armor..." Then he began to read the surrounding words aloud. "'Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.' Hey, Mr. John?"

"Here. Let me see that, Burton," John said quietly. He scanned the page for a moment, then began to read aloud:

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints..."

From where he knelt, when he had finished reading, he picked up the Bible and, holding it high above his head, he began to pray.

“Almighty and gracious Lord, I come before You confident in Your promise to give whatever Your children need, if only we ask in faith. Most Holy Father, Your daughter needs deliverance from the hands of Your enemy. Give me the power of Your divine Spirit that I will be able to be Your instrument of her rescue. Give me Your courage, give me Your strength, dear Lord, but above all, I implore You, in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ of Nazareth, in Whom is all power and authority, GIVE ME YOUR ARMOR.”

There followed a brilliant white light, so bright that nothing else could be seen. Like the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus, John was totally astonished but, unlike him, he was not struck blind. Instead, when the light subsided, in his uplifted hands he held a glowing sword with a golden hilt. It was not merely shiny and reflective, but actually produced its own light. Its edge was so razor sharp as to almost reach transparency, and its point looked as though it could penetrate granite. Though he was no swordsman its feel was so perfectly balanced that he exuded confidence as he stood and swooshed it back and forth. On the blade, near the hilt, four words appeared:

THE WORD OF GOD.

The saucer-eyed Burton pointed at John’s feet and said, “Mr. John, look.”

There, around him, was the rest of the armor. First was a large round shield bearing a golden cross. Though it looked like metal it felt more rigid, of a material he had never seen before; yet it was lightweight and felt strong. A helmet and breastplate of the same material lay beside it. He picked up a large, wide belt made, not of leather, but of tightly interwoven strands of some also unfamiliar material. It contained a loop that would serve as a partial scabbard for the sword. Finally there were shoes, boots really. They were soft as velvet inside but of the same tough material outside, yet flexible and so light he felt he could run a footrace in them.

He quickly donned the armor. Then, sword in hand, turned toward the flabbergasted Catherine, his eyes blazing. “Now,” he demanded in a low, icy tone that meant he would waste no more time. “Tell me where they’ve taken Holly.”

XVI. THE CAVE

Catherine stepped back fearfully as John pointed the sword at her menacingly. “I thought yours was a God of love,” she said as she looked from the sword to him and back again. “Will you betray Him now by taking my life? Do as you wish, but I’ll not betray *my* master by revealing where she is.”

“Are you so completely enslaved?” he asked in astonishment. “Does Satan own your mind, soul, and heart so totally that you won’t even give Holly this one chance? In the name of Heaven, woman, she’s your own sister. Will you do nothing to save her? Is your hatred for her that deep?”

Catherine’s eyes welled with tears and she looked for a moment as if she would relent. Instead she blurted out, “No, I can’t tell you. I don’t dare. You don’t know what they’ll do to me. You don’t know what they’re like.” She buried her face in her hands and began to sob.

John was shaking with frustrated rage when a raspy voice spoke up feebly from the far corner of the room, near the fireplace. “They took Amanda to the cave.” It was Aunt Muriel, who had cowered in the corner throughout the preceding melee. She now stood up shakily, and pointed, “The cave. In the cliffs.”

Burton snapped his fingers. "The Debil's cave," he said. "That's it Mr. John. That's where you can find Miss Holly."

"Burton, do you know where it is? Can you show me?"

"Sure I can. I can even take you there. I climbed up there to it once my own self."

"Then hurry, Burton, let's get going."

As John headed out the door a gnarled hand clutched his wrist. "Bring our Holly back, John; and Godspeed."

"Pray for us. Most of all, pray for Holly. We'll be back, Auntie Muriel, all of us. You'll see."

"You'll never return," growled Catherine. "You're marching to your death." He hurried from the house. She ran to the doorway and yelled after him, "You pathetic fool. If I ever see either of you again I'll become as holy as a preacher's wife. She's dead. Can't you understand that? You can't help her. She's dead."

Burton led John to the base of the cliffs not too far from the house. John was pretty sure this was where he had wandered that night he got lost in the dark. "See, up there," Burton pointed. "Over to the left some; way up there. See that ledge with the tall boulder on it? There's an entrance to a cave behind it." The place he indicated was over a hundred feet up and about thirty feet left of their starting place. "You have to go up here and work your way over to it. Here, I'll show you. It's kind of tricky."

They began climbing with Burton in the lead. The boy was quite agile which kept him progressing steadily without making John wait. At about the halfway point, a series of horizontal striations provided a means of moving almost directly below their goal. Once again they began to ascend. "Whatever made you climb up here?" John asked.

“I heard ‘em talking about the Debil’s cave over t’ the General Mercantile about a month ago. They’s talkin’ about how some girl name of ‘Manda was taken there and never seen again. They said the same thing would happen to Miss Holly if she ever got a notion to get married or run off. So I came up here my own self to tell those debils to leave Miss Holly alone. But the cave was too dark and I didn’t have no light. Then I heard one of ‘em moanin’ and groanin’ way down in the cave someplace so I skee-daddled. Then my mama saw me climbing down. She said she’d whup me with a hickory stick till it was nothing but splinters if she ever caught me on these cliffs again.”

“Oh-oh. Does that mean you’re in trouble?”

“Mm-mm,” Burton shook his head. “She’d know this was a ‘mergency her own self.”

They had reached a point about five feet immediately to the right of their objective. Only now could they tell there was an opening behind the boulder. They climbed up a bit where there were adequate handholds and stepped down onto the ledge which fronted the small, low cave entrance. It was past sundown and John knew Burton needed to start down immediately to have enough light.

“Burton, you better head back now. I can’t thank you enough for helping.”

“Mr. John, I ain’t headin’ back. Miss Holly needs both of us.”

John had been afraid this might happen, but he was adamant. “Burton, I can’t let you risk your life any more than you already have.” He held up his hand to silence Burton’s protests. “I know how much you care for Holly; you’ve more than proven your friendship. But from here on she’s my responsibility. And you have your own: your mother. She was at our wedding and there were a lot of angry people there. By now the whole town might be looking to take it out on someone, maybe her. She needs you.

“Here.” He reached into his pocket and produced a twenty-dollar gold piece. “Give this to your mother and tell her she and you must leave on that ship that arrives tomorrow morning. This should be enough for the trip to New York. Tell her it’s not charity, it’s an investment. I expect her to send me twenty-five dollars from the first money she and your father get ahead. Can you remember that?”

Burton nodded dejectedly. “Hurry then, before it gets dark.” Reluctantly he started along the handholds and began to descend. John watched to make sure he did not try to follow him.

Just as John stooped to enter the cave, Burton called out, “Ain’t they nothin’ I can do to help Miss Holly?”

“Do you know how to pray?”

“Yes sir, my mama taught me.”

“Then pray for her, you and your mama both. Can you do that?”

Burton nodded and continued on. John whispered a prayer of his own and entered the blackness of the cave.

Only a few steps in, the cave was so dark that the light from outside was unable to penetrate far enough to help. He reviled himself for not thinking to bring a torch. As his eyes became accustomed to the darker interior of the cave, he noticed a glow to his left. Or rather, it was coming from his own left side. He drew his sword, and its fluorescent glow lit up the entire tunnel for some fifteen feet in front of him. His eye caught the words inscribed on the sword blade. They now read:

A LAMP UNTO MY FEET.

“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path,” he quoted, and then proceeded down the tunnel.

It ran straight for a while then began a series of twists and turns. After a particularly short right turn, a large square patch of ground ahead looked especially black with some lighter spots regularly arranged within it. He stopped and looked carefully, inching his way closer to the edge of the black area. It was, as he had suspected, a pit, about a dozen feet square. Holding his sword down for light, he could not see the bottom. The lighter “spots” were actually the tips of long spikes with spear points that rose to within a foot of the top of pit. The spikes were spaced a foot apart. Anyone stepping off the edge had not only to contend with the fall, but the high probability of being impaled. He thought he could detect a scrap of cloth on one spike. *No doubt the remains of some unfortunate person’s clothes*, he thought.

Although he had avoided stumbling into it, the pit still represented a formidable obstacle. The tight turn he had rounded left him with less than two strides “running room.” He had just enough light to see that the landing room on the other side was no better and perhaps less. Thus, he had no way to get a run at the pit to leap it and too little room to land on the other side. That is, even if a thirteen-foot standing broad jump was within his abilities—which it was not. The cave walls on either side of the pit had no ledge. They ran straight down from ceiling to, presumably, pit bottom. There was no going around. John rubbed his chin. *Maybe I could shinny down one of the spikes and then up another. Nah, not with this armor on.* He started to sheathe the sword but caught sight of new words on the blade:

BY FAITH YE STAND.

“By faith? Does that mean I’m supposed to do something?” he asked aloud. He wondered if it meant he should just stand there. Or perhaps just walk out across the pit “in faith.” He definitely wanted to think that one through before trying it. “Faith...faith...” he murmured. “Is there anything I could do or anything I have that represents faith? Of course! The shield.” He

looked at the shield a moment. It certainly would not fly him across. Something to do with “stand.” An idea dawned on him. He looped the grip of the shield over the end of the sword. He then reached it as far as he could toward the middle of the pit. There he gently placed it face down among four spike points. He hoped the spikes were as sharp as they looked and would grip the surface of the shield. He made a long, one-legged leap onto the shield then immediately swung his other leg in a second leap to the other side. He then reversed the process with the sword to reacquire the shield. It showed no dents or scratches. He gave the pit a slightly smug look of triumph, looked up and said, “Thank You for the advice.”

After winding his way along for a while, he came to a point where the tunnel straightened out and had lit torches evenly spaced along the walls. He put the sword in his belt and quickened his pace. He felt he was finally making real progress. At length the tunnel came to a narrow archway with a large chamber beyond. He cautiously entered the chamber. The left wall continued on across to another archway with a corridor beyond. To the right the chamber opened out with high ceilings and terraced down to a large living quarters. There were the complete furnishings of a home including a dining table. It startled him to realize that a family was just sitting down to eat.

There was a middle-aged man and woman, a girl in her late teens and a boy a bit older. They were all very large people, with the father the biggest overall, though the boy was slightly taller. John had walked well into the room before he noticed them. They saw him at the same time. Immediately they stopped what they were doing and stared at him.

“Mother, who is that? What is he doing here?” asked the girl. The man frowned and started slowly toward him. “Folks usually knock before they enter a person’s home,” he declared angrily.

XVII. THE FAMILY

The rest of the family came toward John, a step or so behind the father. He was a thick, burly brute with the irritated look of one whose privacy has been violated. Neither he nor the others picked up any weapons, so John refrained from pulling his sword.

“Who are you, and what do you want?” the man asked impatiently.

“Why is he dressed like that? Why does he have that sword?” asked the daughter. “Mother, he looks dangerous.” Somehow there was more ridicule in her voice than fear.

John felt self-conscious, and realized he must look pretty strange. He was also confused. “Do you people *live* in this cave?”

“This is our home; we make no apologies for it,” the man responded testily. “I believe I am entitled to some answers first, though, since you are the intruder.”

“I am sorry if I have barged-in on you. I’m John Stander, recently arrived in Cliff Harbor—the town out there.” He pointed back toward the cave entrance and began to feel very stupid. “I’m here looking for a young—for my wife.” It was the first time he had referred to Holly that way, and it brought a lump to his throat.

“What is he talking about?” asked the boy this time. The father looked at John as if he were babbling his lips, then looked all around himself. “Obviously, there is no one here but my family. What makes you think she is with us?”

“I’m not saying she’s with you, particularly, just in this cave somewhere.”

“But there has been no woman through here. One of us would have seen her. How long since she came through the cave entrance?”

“She didn’t come through the same entrance that I did. She was abducted and brought here another way.”

“Another way? I know of no other way here. How did she enter the cave if not through the entrance?”

“Through a trap door in the floor of her house.”

“Where is the house?”

“In the village.”

“I am sorry, I find this confusing,” said the man with a suppressed grin, the kind people use when listening to a child explaining something. He walked back down to the dining table and sat down. “You say she went down a trap door in a house down in the village and that caused her to end up here?” The wife got an amused look on her face. “I’m afraid I fail to see the connection.”

“Yes, why would you not go down this trap door to find her?” the boy interjected.

John took a deep breath and looked down at his feet. “It is no longer there.”

“Not there?” The man and woman smirked and gave each other a sidelong glance. “In any case, what makes you think it has anything to do with this cave?”

John was feeling both embarrassed and frustrated. “Look. A friend of hers who was abducted in the same way was taken to this cave, and I’m certain my wife was too.”

“There were two kidnappings? Well, how long ago was the other woman seen entering the cave?”

“It was three years ago.”

“Three y—” the woman exclaimed, hands on hips in exasperation. She turned to her husband, “Lucius, this has gone far enough. Tell this lunatic to get out of here so we can get back to our supper.”

“Now, Geneva, let us not be inhospitable.” He turned back to John. “You are obviously distraught about your wife, young man. Here, come sit down and eat with us. Maybe we can get a clearer understanding about all this and help you.”

John was reluctant to take the time. But he felt so embarrassed at how ridiculous it all must seem that he did as the man asked. “I appreciate your offer, but I really don’t have time to eat,” he said as he sat at the table.

“Quite understandable,” said Lucius. “Now, you say your wife was abducted. Did you see who did it?”

John hesitated to answer. “Yes. It—it was some gargoyles.”

The passing of food dishes, which had begun as the rest of the family had sat down, came to an abrupt halt. “What is a gargoyle?” asked the girl, who was sitting to his left.

As John started to answer, seeing her out of the corner of his eye he thought something about her was different for an instant. When he looked straight at her, she looked the same. He chalked it up to the poor lighting in the cave and ignored it. “They are powerful, manlike,

reptilian creatures; minions of the Devil.” More looks of skepticism circulated. “I realize this sounds fantastic. I wouldn’t believe it either if I had not witnessed it myself.”

The boy, sitting to his right, spoke up. “And the knight’s costume? Is that to fight them with?”

Once again, as the boy drew John’s attention, for an instant he thought his appearance changed—to something hideous. For a split second John thought his eye saw, instead of a human face on the boy, something more resembling a wolf. Not a wolf in the sense of having fur, but the long snout and canine teeth of a man-sized wolf with human skin. Again when he looked directly at the boy, everything looked normal. A knot tied in his stomach. Something was very wrong and he needed to get out of there. Sitting up to the table, he was completely vulnerable, unable to draw his sword. He knew he dared not let on that he had seen the changed appearances. He had to avoid arousing suspicion until he could find an excuse to get to his feet.

“This armor?” he responded as casually as he could force it. “Why, yes, that is exactly its purpose.”

“Wouldn’t a pistol be more effective?” asked Lucius. Again John saw the change, only for a bit longer this time, he thought. He also noticed that the eating, or any pretense thereof, had ceased. They were all staring intently at him and their breathing was noticeably heavy. John could feel a cold sweat starting on his forehead. Still he kept up the charade.

“Ordinarily, perhaps, but this is very special armor.” Now that as his eyes were on the father, everyone else’s face had changed. As he shifted his eyes from person to person, those on the periphery were wolf-faces. And he felt sure that they knew he knew. He decided he had time for one last try at sounding innocent. Without taking his eyes away from them, he slowly reached down and picked up the shield he had leaned against his chair. “Yes, you see, it’s made of a very

special material,” he said slowly. “It was a gift...” Their faces were strictly wolf-like now, “...from God.” With that he leaped from his chair toward the girl who, along with the boy, sprang up at the same instant. He gave the girl a push with the shield. That kept him just far enough from the boy to buy him time to unsheathe the sword. As it came out of his belt, in the same motion he backhanded the blade across the “boy’s” abdomen. It slit him open and dropped him instantly as if dead. The push had gotten the “girl” overbalanced, but the father and mother both leaped over the table at once. They pounced on him simultaneously, knocking him over backwards. He had managed to come forward with the point of his sword enough that when they landed it thrust its point in the mother’s ribcage and out her back. She would move no more. The father, growling in animal fury, pinned John’s left shoulder to the ground. He savagely bit at his neck and shoulder. Fortunately the armor did its job. John writhed and twisted trying both to dislodge the father and to get his sword back from the mother’s corpse. Finally, with his right knee he pushed and freed the sword and instantly slashed it across his attacker’s back. With a lupine howl the father leaned away allowing John to push him off and back with the shield. He was still trying to regain his feet when the daughter resumed the attack. In mid-leap he swung the sword and the hellish creature was decapitated before it hit the ground. Immediately the father pounced upon John’s back. He growled, snapping, and shaking with the savagery of a mad dog, trying to sink his fangs into John anywhere he could. Though his helmet and breastplate protected him, John desperately sought some way to get him off so he could confront him face to face. John kept having to twist his head away from the clawed fingertips of the creature. He staggered toward the corridor that continued on beyond the chamber. He spotted the heavy timbers supporting the archway that served as its entrance. He decided to let the fact that he had a helmet, and the demonic wolf-face did not, work to his advantage. He charged as hard as he

could directly at the beam, smashing both their heads into it. They fell backward to the ground in a heap. John got back to his feet, but the creature rolled slowly from side to side on its back emitting unearthly moans. John considered killing it but, sick from the carnage, he turned and ran down the corridor instead.

The corridor shortly resumed its twists and turns, and soon he was back to walking. Finally he stopped to catch his breath. As he did he heard footsteps, which also came to a halt, in the tunnel behind him. He walked on a short distance, then stopped again with the same result. He proceeded on till he came to a short straightaway. After he had passed it, he turned back to see if he could catch a glimpse of his “shadow.” When he did so, however, he heard footsteps retreating, then stopping, but saw no one. He felt certain it was the wolf-face. *I knew I should’ve killed that thing*, he told himself. *So here's a lesson: never let one of the Devil's creatures live. Mercy is for people, no matter how wicked, but not for Satan.* He continued on, slipping into crevices and waiting, doubling-back, rushing ahead. Still his pursuer dogged him and remained unseen. At length he came to a very long straight section of tunnel. He decided this would be his opportunity to confront his adversary. He broke into a full sprint for the entire length of the straightaway. When he reached the sharp bend at its end he rounded it. Then he immediately ran back out into the straight section. There, halfway down it, the wolf-face came to a sudden halt, started to run back, then just stood there facing him. Something remotely resembling a grin came over the thing’s face.

“So, you fancy yourself clever, eh human?” it growled. “Not so clever, though. Your quest is pointless. You’re too late.” It gave a guttural laugh.

“Come closer,” commanded John, raising his sword. “Let’s have an end to this little game now. For as surely as the Lord God lives your fate will be the same as the others.”

The creature gave another low laugh. “No, Christian, I prefer to stalk. And wait. Soon. Soon you will grow lax, careless, weary. Eventually you will sleep. Then; then it is that I will have my way. I will savage the arm that holds your weapon. I will sink my teeth into the unprotected throat that dares to utter that blasphemous name. That name which must not be spoken in this place. Do not grow impatient. Your death will come soon enough.”

XVIII. RETREAT

“Blasphemous name? You mean the Almighty God, the Holy Father and His Blessed Son, Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, Whose Spirit increasingly transforms those who are His into His likeness?”

As John spoke, the creature stopped its ears and roared at him to cease. Instead he continued on louder and louder until the beast’s eyes glowed with fury and showed it could tolerate no more. John ran full tilt around the curve, then pressed himself into an indentation in the tunnel wall. The creature, driven beyond caution, came running in hot pursuit. He thrust his sword directly at the onrushing wolf-face and buried the point deep in its chest. John’s timing was so precise that he could only attribute it to Divine assistance. The impaled creature collapsed instantly. John removed the blood-soaked sword, staggered back and became sick to his stomach.

He walked a short distance and heard the trickle of water. He found it running down the cave wall into a tiny hand-sized pool and then spilling into a rivulet that ran a few feet and disappeared into a crack. He rinsed his mouth and drank from the puddle, then used the outlet water to rinse the blade. The words on it read:

SHEEP IN THE MIDST OF WOLVES.

“Hmph. I wonder how long that’s been there. Well, here’s another lesson. Consult the word of God first whenever possible. It can keep one from getting into some serious situations.” He removed his helmet and splashed some of the cool water onto his face and ran his wet hand through his sweat-soaked hair. Then he knelt and said a prayer of thanks for his deliverance. After replacing his helmet he continued down the tunnel.

The passageway wound on interminably. Had it not been for the regularly spaced torches, he would have thought no one inhabited the rest of the cave. His hand grew tired of gripping his sword. He put it back into his belt and let the shield swing casually with his arm. After trudging on for what seemed hours, the passage widened out to the left into a low room. There was a slightly raised slab with a thin layer of fresh straw over it. It appeared to be a bed for someone or some thing. At one end of the bed were a couple of bones, large hip joints of some creature, gnawed white. He decided this was not a good place to loiter, and turned to resume his journey.

There, at the point where the room rejoined the tunnel, stood an enormous male lion, poised to pounce. Though John’s pulse was racing he forced himself to move ever so slowly as he grabbed the sword hilt. He began inching the sword out, shield at the ready. His eyes stayed locked on the powerful-looking beast some fifteen feet away. It repositioned each paw slightly as cats do to gain the best foothold for their leap. To John’s surprise, it remained as it was, tail twitching, even after his sword was completely unsheathed. He was ready.

A voice spoke. It came from the lion, though its mouth made no movement. “Will you slay one who offers wisdom and guidance?” Though the voice was not exceptionally loud, it was deep and reverberating, bristling the hair on John’s neck. John remembered his most recent lesson. He raised the sword blade so that he could see both it and the lion in one field of vision. The words on the blade were:

THE DEVIL, AS A...LION, WALKETH SEEKING WHOM HE MAY DEVOUR.

As he lowered the blade, his immediate thought was to kill the beast, quickly. As if sensing his resolution, the lion sprang at him. It cleared the distance between them effortlessly. John's sword was a fraction of a second late and, instead of finding a vital spot, its point penetrated the lion's lower abdomen. The weight of the beast bowled John over backwards. He curled up his left leg and dug his boot into the lion's midsection. As he hit on his back, in the same motion he kicked outward forcing the beast's hindquarters to flip over its head. As it did, the sword continued to cut down the entire lower underside of the lion. By the time it landed it had been partially disembowled. It emitted a fearsome roar that shook John to the core. But it did not impede his leaping to his feet and thrusting the sword into his enemy. An instant later John was spun to the ground and separated from his sword by a swat from a huge forepaw. One of its claws ripped a cut on his thigh. When he got back to his feet, however, John saw that the beast was motionless. He walked over to it cautiously. The sword had gone deep into the base of the animal's neck and not come out. The lion was quite dead.

He removed the sword and walked over to the bed area, wiped the blade on the straw, and put it back in his belt. When he turned back around, the lion's body had vanished. The entire episode confused him. He could not help wondering what else the creature might have had to say. Did the words on the sword really mean he was to kill the beast? True, it did attack him, but only after he had decided to kill it. He had the nagging feeling that he might have been too hasty. *Too late to worry about that now*, he thought. He double-checked the cut on his leg. It had started to sting a bit, but was not deep nor did it bleed long. Once again he continued on his way down the long winding tunnel.

The distance he walked after his encounter with the lion was easily double that which he had already traveled. Though the boots were wonderfully comfortable, he was becoming leg-weary. For all the turns and loops he had rounded, the next bend could just as easily find him in Kentucky, in China, or right back where he had started. It was not long after, however, that the corridor changed again. The torches were no longer present, he was back to using his sword for light. The inky blackness outside the sphere of sword light reminded him how deeply into this cave he was. His only solace was that there had been no forks or crossing corridors to cause confusion. Getting back out would, at this point, be a straightforward proposition. Then again, the hours of walking it would require was something he chose not to think about. He glanced at the sword blade, which read:

TURN NOT TO THE RIGHT...NOR TO THE LEFT.

He continued on for a time, though time was becoming increasingly meaningless to him. The sameness was finally interrupted by an opening intersecting the left wall of the tunnel perpendicularly. It was no more than three feet high, little more than a hole. Immediately opposite it was a narrow crevice in the right tunnel wall. Whether it led to another corridor or chamber did not particularly interest him at this point. He went straight on another hundred or so feet and the tunnel grew light again. A short distance further showed why.

There in front of him the cave opened up into a magnificently huge chamber. It was over a hundred yards long and at least fifty yards wide. Its ceiling was forty feet high. In the light, which was somehow present though there were no torches, he could see something flying. A gargoyle. It flew to a ledge near the ceiling on the right-hand wall of the cavern. There, six or eight others were standing.

John wiped the sweat off his sword hand, took a deep breath, and said quietly, "So, this is it. This is where I convince these devils to return Holly to me. All right, you filthy lizards, I'm ready for you. Shall I discolor this lovely chamber with your blood? If that is your wish..." He strode into the cavern and began walking the length of it. He could just make out the exit corridor on the far end. For a time it appeared he would arrive there unmolested. He could tell that the narrow ledge where the creatures were did not hide Holly. He had begun to feel perhaps it would be just as well if he did make it to the other end without incident. That way his search for her could continue. Secretly, though, he thought it would be a shame not to have the chance to plunge his blade into the villainous monsters. Just retribution for the beating he had taken at Holly's house.

He had gone almost halfway across, with the creatures talking and laughing in those guttural, unearthly tones. They had seemingly taken no notice of him. Suddenly, and without any perceivable command or alert, the entire group of them took to wing. They flew directly at him, single file. He turned to face them and when they got within twenty yards of him, all but one pulled up and hovered. They would attack him one at a time.

As the first attacker came at him with incredible speed, John realized that he had not faced an airborne opponent before. That well might require skills he had not acquired. He felt his confidence level slip a notch. It obviously would require precise timing. He decided he would slash with his sword so that it caught the creature the instant it was within reach. He stood firm, his shield raised, as the gargoyle swooped directly at him. He had not, however, counted on a last second burst of speed put on by the creature. He was just starting his swing when it hit. Though the creature hit him flush on the shield, the blow literally lifted John off his feet sending him in a complete back flip. He landed sprawling facedown into the dirt on the cavern floor, a

considerable distance from where he had started. Though he was not badly hurt, he was disoriented. As a result he got back up too slowly to be fully prepared for the assault by the next gargoyle. It was a mistake he would not make again. He barely got his shield up before he was blasted backwards a good twenty feet. He landed in a clattering heap that sounded reminiscent of when his mother used to pull the bottom pot out of the cupboard. This time he landed on his back. Though still woozy, he rolled over and regained his feet as fast as possible. He forced himself to concentrate. He located the next oncoming attacker and formulated a quick battle plan. He would try waiting until the last instant and then thrust with the point of his sword while ducking aside. The idea was not a bad one except that he misjudged the gargoyle's ability to adjust quickly. Although it missed him, its hind foot caught him a glancing blow as it sped past. It may have been only glancing, but it hit him on the nose—having the effect of his being kicked in the face. He spun to the ground and rolled several times, nearly slitting his own throat as his sword flailed out of control. He sat up, wiped the snot that had erupted from his nose onto his sleeve, and tried to collect his wits.

One thing was clear: he was in big trouble. His body in general was protesting from a hundred places and would not last long under this bombardment. Yet the creatures seemed to be only trifling with him. Worse still, even if he managed to perfect his ducking technique to avoid their blows, he had not inflicted the slightest damage on any of them. He decided to give it one more try. If and when that failed (if he could still walk), he would get out of there as fast as he could. He decided to just stand-in against the next attacker, shield low so he could see his opponent the whole way, sword ready. He would try to decapitate the beast much as he had done against the wolf-face. He hoped seeing one of their number rendered headless at his hands would earn him renewed respect among his enemies. However, he was not at all confident. The timing

would need to be more perfect than he had managed to this point. A half-moon shaped chunk of the top of his shield was broken and hanging only by some strands of the shield material. It was also dented in several places and the handle and bindings had become loose. But there was no time to concern himself with that now, the next gargoyle was upon him. He saw the blade contact the beast's shoulder and the next thing he knew he was again on his face, without either sword or shield, with the room spinning around him. As he gathered his senses, he wiped the wet from his stinging nose—this time it was blood. The sword and shield were lying on opposite sides of him, each about five feet away. As he staggered over and picked up the sword, he saw there was no blood on the blade. The gargoyle had wheeled and was flying back to rejoin his comrades, without a mark on him.

He picked up the shield, which was now little more than a tattered piece of junk, and suddenly felt himself being lifted off the ground. One of the gargoyles had picked him up with its hind claws and appeared bent on transporting him to their landing ledge high above. By so easily having their way with him, the creatures had evidently decided he was no threat at all. He was about eight feet off the ground and rising. He thrust his sword up into the gargoyle's side as deeply as he could. The two of them dropped to the ground instantly, John landing on his left hip. The creature was stone dead. As John rose to retrieve his sword, he felt an excruciating pain in his hip. He hobbled over and pulled the sword out, only to see another attacker on its way. He began to run, if limping along as he was doing can be called running. Gone were thoughts of victory, revenge, or even continuing the battle. He was thoroughly beaten up and there were still six or seven of them left. Like a mouse released on an open floor, he was reduced to running for the nearest wall or corner to hide. He was "helped" on his way by a blow from behind. It sent him hurtling toward the wall of the cavern in a spectacular series of somersaults that would make

an acrobat proud. He landed on his back with his feet in front of him and heard several vertebrae pop in protest. As he crawled to his feet, he saw along the wall to his right a small boulder about four feet in diameter some five yards away. There, he hoped he might gain some respite from the merciless battering. First, he would have to endure one more assault, for the next attacker was upon him. He stood with his back to the wall and crouched for the hit. But when the beast arrived, there was a second's hesitation before it cuffed him off his feet over next to the boulder. It was a powerful blow, but significantly less so than the previous ones. Dragging his ailing leg, he scrambled behind the rock. There he found a hole in the chamber wall just large enough for him to crawl into. He backed down into it, not willing to turn his back on the gargoyles. He continued down into the hole another five or six feet where it widened enough for him to turn around. Several gargoyles landed and congregated around the boulder. He could hear their gruff voices, but they seemed unwilling, or perhaps too large, to follow him into the tiny tunnel.

"The fool does not realize he is too late," he heard one of them say. There followed that eerie guttural noise which was supposedly laughter.

John crawled through the claustrophobic passage for a considerable distance. He went down for a ways then up, dragging the remains of his shield and grunting in pain each time he moved his injured hip. At last he came out into a larger perpendicular tunnel that allowed him to stand up. As he stretched out his cramped muscles he noticed a crevice directly opposite the hole he had just exited. He was back in the main corridor where he had been earlier, a short distance from the gargoyle chamber.

"And no way to get past it," he moaned aloud. He looked at the sword blade and read:

I CAN DO ALL THINGS...

“I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me,” he quoted. “Hmph,” he grumbled as he leaned against the cave wall. *Maybe Paul could, but not me, not against those things.* He shook his head slowly. *I went in full of confidence and ended up retreating through a hole like a rat.* His shoulders sagged and his arms hung limp. Again he spoke aloud, “It’s hopeless. I can’t beat those fiends. I just can’t.” He tossed the sword aside and slid down until he was sitting on the ground with his knees up in front of him. His hip complained with every movement. He removed his helmet and ran a grimy hand through his sweat-soaked hair. He felt for his handkerchief to wipe some of the blood from his face. Then he remembered that he had given it to Holly that day he had told her about his faith.

“Holly. My precious Holly, how I’ve failed you,” he groaned miserably. “I’ve let you down when you needed me most.” He was in deepest despair, and even though every cell in his body was in pain, the agony of his failure was the worst of all. “Forgive me, my love, please forgive me.” He was bruised in more places than he could count, exhausted, sweaty, dirty, bloody, lame, and generally more miserable than he had ever been in his life. His only prospects consisted of two options. One, turn retreat into surrender and make the long trek back out to Cliff Harbor. Or, two, go back in and be brutalized by the gargoyles until—until death.

He crossed his arms atop his knees. Still whispering pleas for Holly’s forgiveness, he laid his forehead on his arms as tears of frustration dripped from his weary eyes.

XIX. KAN

John looked up and saw that the tunnel had changed. It was lit and now had the appearance of a hallway, not unlike the one at the Inn he had been staying at in Cliff Harbor. There were several doors along its length. He rose to his feet and one of the doors nearby opened. A tall blond woman came through the door carrying a small drawstring bag. John stared in confused astonishment.

“Patricia? Wh—what are you doing here? I don’t understand.”

She walked up to him smiling, but with an unpleasant look on her face. It gradually began to change. She was turning into a wolf-face.

“No. Not that,” he raged and raised his sword, ready to strike furiously. To avoid the blow she doubled over to the ground. The sword clanged off her back as if hitting stone, and left no mark on her. John stepped back for an instant, then struck again with the same result. He raised the sword above his head with both hands, trembling with fury, for an all-out blow. Just before he swung she looked up. It was no longer a wolf-face, it was Holly.

“Don’t John, please,” she begged. He stared at her and stepped back.

“Oh my dear Lord,” he whispered, shocked. “No! It’s a trick. It’s not really you.”

“It is, John. Please help me, you don’t know what I’ve been through,” she cried. She stood up and held her arms out to him. “John, please just hold me,” she said with that little tremor in her voice that he knew so well. John could no longer think straight; he simply took her in his arms. It was not really a hug—his armor was in the way—but he was certain it was she.

Way down the hall he saw another door open and the corridor begin to fill with gargoyles. “Holly! Holly, we have to get out of here. Hurry. Gargoyles.”

She looked over her shoulder. “Don’t worry, I know a way out. It’s this door.” She ran over to the door opposite the one “Patricia” had come out of, and tugged on the knob. “Oh, of course, it’s locked,” she said nervously. The gargoyles were advancing down the hall toward them. “I have the key. It’s in here.” She opened her bag and dumped the contents onto the ground. It was a whole pile of assorted, rusty keys. “It’s one of these,” she said with a note of uncertainty in her voice. The gargoyles were quickly bearing down on them.

“Hurry Holly, hurry,” John implored. “They’re coming.”

She was attempting to use some of the keys, and discarding others as obviously unsuitable. “I’m trying, John,” she said with a note of panic in her voice, as she fumbled a key.

The gargoyles were almost upon them. John, his sword at the ready, stepped between Holly and their approach. He was determined to protect her as long as possible. “I love you, Holly,” he said in farewell. He was resigned to his death.

“This is the one,” she shouted, as a key slipped fully into the lock. There was, with luck, just enough time to get the door open before they got there. She turned the key.

There was a snapping sound. Holly stood before the locked door with the back end of a broken, rusty key in her hand.

John woke up with a start. He was still sitting against the tunnel wall, his forehead resting on his arms across his knees. There was no hallway, no doors, no gargoyles, and, painfully, no Holly.

The dream had left him disoriented and for a few seconds he was lost in fear and confusion. But the dried blood on his face and the dark tunnel quickly reintroduced him to the reality of where he was. It was such an unfortunate reality he almost preferred the dream, even with its tense, unhappy ending of assured doom. At least it allowed him to see his beloved again, to hold her. Oh how marvelous that brief embrace had been in the dream. He could feel it still. How noble to die standing between the powers of Hell and his true love. To fight them with his

last ounce of life, with her, his precious treasure, right there with him. Then he could literally protect her to his dying breath. In stark contrast stood his reality. His only prospect was to hobble back into that fearful chamber of horrors. There he would be battered to a senseless pulp by those diabolic nightmares without ever having seen Holly again.

Catherine was right, he thought in anguish. I brought this on Holly. I, myself alone, caused this gentle, innocent, angelic woman to be brought to this place of doom. It's all because of my selfish craving for her affection. She would be far better off never to have known me. Worst of all, now that I've done this to her, I have been proven incapable of helping her even the slightest bit.

John's self-flagellation was interrupted by the awareness of pain. Now fully awake, he was acutely aware that his posterior, the backs of both legs, the small of his back, both arms, and the spot on his forehead which had lain on his arms, were all sound asleep. The few body parts that were not completely numb were in mortal pain. That was either from the bruising battle or from cramping during his nap. He had no guess as to how long he had been asleep, only that it had neither strengthened nor refreshed him. Instead it added to his regrets the guilt that he had slept while his wife was somewhere enduring who-knew-what kind of torture.

He moaned and grunted to his feet and tried rubbing and stretching his stiff limbs back to usefulness. He again donned his helmet and readjusted the rest of the armor. He picked up his sword and the pathetic piece of junk that was the remains of his shield. He could not bring himself to abandon it completely. It was, after all, a gift from God.

There was only one thing to be done. He would reenter the chamber and this time aim straight for the opening at the far end. He would either make it or die in the effort. There would be no heroic stand-and-fight scenes, no crawling into holes this time. Nonetheless he would use any means at his disposal to get to that opening. He felt certain that through that opening lay his only chance to reach Holly.

He also felt certain that he would fail. Two things had become indelibly stamped into his mind. One was that the gargoyles had been merely toying with him. There was no doubt they

could have killed him at will had they become serious about it. The second was that it did not matter how fast he ran, how cleverly he dodged, or how savagely he fought. If they did not wish him to reach the other exit, he would never get there. Nevertheless, for Holly's sake—although she would probably never know of it—

“I most humbly beg your pardon,” said an accented voice from directly behind him. John jumped straight up then whirled around to face the intruder, sword ready. “Please, I mean you no harm,” added the accent. “You have no need to use your weapon of violence, I am unarmed.” The voice belonged to a short, dark-complected man of early middle age. His accent identified him as a native of somewhere in Asia, possibly India. While his English was quite good, one of its characteristics was the enunciation of the “O” in the word “violence.” Placing his palms together with his fingers pointing toward John, he kept bowing as he spoke. His speech was calm, and when John had turned on him he had not flinched.

John still held tight to his sword. He had been surprised too often in this place to relax his guard around a stranger. In deference to the man's quiet demeanor he did lower the sword a bit. “I am sorry if this sword bothers you, but I'm going to need it. There is a chamber full of gargoyles I need to confront. Who are you?”

“I am Kan.”

“Con? John Stander.” He gave a slight nod, still too suspicious to risk a handshake. “So, why are you in this place?”

“I perceive that in this cave are hindrances to those who wish to find God—however they conceive of him. There are barriers here to those who would find the oneness of God in all creatures. I have come to ask that these barriers be removed.”

John did not understand much of what Kan had said, but he seemed harmless enough. “Where are you going?” John asked. “Who are you planning to see?”

“I go to see the one who rules this place, whose influence inhibits those who are seekers of the truth of God.”

“You mean you’re going to see the Evil One? Just like that? Just walk up to him and say, ‘I’d like to have a word with you’? What makes you think you will survive such an encounter?”

“I am unconcerned. I come in peace. As to his being evil, I recognize no such distinctions as good and evil among what some would call the creation. All of the creation is God, and God is everything in creation. Are you also a seeker of the truth of God?”

The question somewhat confused John. “Well, yes, I guess I would say that I am.” Then he added, hoping it would explain, “I’m a Christian.”

“Ah. Yes. Jesus of Nazareth was a Teacher of much truth. A Man of great wisdom, and with a deep understanding of God. He who was called Prince of Peace, would He approve of your weapons of violence, my friend?”

“It is by His power that I have these weapons,” John shot back. “You too will soon discover their necessity once you start tangling with the gargoyles in the chamber ahead.”

“Ah. But I do not plan to enter that chamber. In any case, I do not fear them. They too are creatures of God.”

“They what?” John knew that no one who had encountered such demonic beasts could make such a statement. He concluded that Kan must not have seen them yet. “How long have you been in here?”

“I am uncertain. Perhaps three days.”

“You’ve been wandering around in this cave for three days?”

“Not wandering. I have been fasting and meditating most of that time in the cavern on the other side of this crevice. I know precisely where I am to go. I was provided with instructions from a lion I met shortly after I entered this cave. When he saw I had come in peace he spoke to me with great wisdom and assured me that I would be well received. He told me the path to take to my destination. Did you not meet him?”

John had a sinking feeling in his stomach and felt his face getting hot. “I...saw a lion.”

“Ah, and did he not instruct you in the paths you should follow?”

“He—I did not speak to him,” he replied nervously.

“Perhaps we could find him. He is a most noble creature, able to provide much insight to one seeking enlightenment, guidance, and the way to God. Come, let us look for him.”

“Uh, no,” John said hurriedly. “No, I have no time. My wife was abducted and brought to this place and I’m here to find and rescue her.”

“Then perhaps you should accompany me since both our needs may be served by following the way which the lion instructed me.”

John hesitated. What if this strange little man had truly found another way to get to where Holly was? After all, reaching her was the goal. Did it matter how? But, there was something strange about this man. The way he spoke about God, about not differentiating between good and evil. And all this talk about the lion John had killed, and his knowing the way to God—it was all so confusing. John decided to consult the sword:

JESUS SAITH...I AM THE WAY...

John wondered, *Does this mean I should go on to the gargoyle chamber? Or do I just need to emphasize to Kan that Jesus leads me?* He decided to try bringing it up to see how Kan would react. “You keep talking about ‘the way to God.’ Jesus said, ‘I am the way.’”

“...The truth and the life,” Kan added. “Yes, beautiful words. But there are many ways to God. Christ was one, but there are others. Whatever the way, they all lead to the same place eventually. Come, put your sword away, and let us begin our journey.”

“But I need it for light.”

“No, my friend, there will be light.” As John put his sword in his belt he saw that the cave around Kan was lit. Kan seemed to have so many answers, seemed to think so deeply about things, and now the light. Still he was uncertain. Something about that scripture... At length he began to feel embarrassed about just standing there, debating within himself. He decided to follow Kan, at least for a ways. It was better than the certain death that awaited him in the gargoyle chamber.

They squeezed through the crevice. After a brief walk through a narrow passage they entered a room with a bed of straw. It was not unlike the lion’s John had seen earlier.

“Is this where you have been staying?” John asked.

“Yes, I found it a most valuable place for quiet prayer and meditation. It is so quiet I was surprised to hear the noise of your moving about in the corridor. That is why I came to investigate.”

Remembering the gnawed bones he had seen on the lion’s bed prompted John to ask a question. “What have you been living on? Is there food here?”

“No,” Kan replied, with a tinge of pride in his voice. “I have fasted many times for weeks at a time. It is not difficult to control one’s bodily appetites when one spends one’s time in the presence of God. Food, you must grow to realize, is not so all-important. Come, our goal lies in this direction.”

John took offense at Kan’s implication that he was whining about wanting food. He had just been curious. He was never certain whether to be in awe of Kan’s seemingly superior intellect or irritated at his superior attitude cloaked in humility. Nevertheless, he just followed on and said nothing. It seemed there was nothing he could say that Kan did not already know more about than him anyway. Strangely, his shoes began to pinch his feet.

They traveled down a tunnel quite similar to the “main” corridor. The major difference was that this tunnel was a labyrinth of crossroads, forks, and confluences of as many as eight corridors. Kan seemed never to hesitate, taking the left fork here, turning right at a crossroad there. He even chose a tunnel that appeared to double-back another time. Each move was done without the slightest uncertainty or repeating any memorized directions to himself. What was disconcerting to John was that, try as he might, he could not remember all the turns and routes they had traveled. He despaired of any chance of finding his way in reverse should he wish to get back where he had started. Thus he was entirely dependent on Kan—something that made him very uneasy. He determined to try to discover what this strange man was really all about.

“So, tell me,” he said, breaking a long silence as they continued deeper and deeper into the maze of tunnels. “Are you a Christian?”

“I have read and heard much of Christ, it is true. But also of Buddha, Mohammed, Brahma, Confucious, and many others. They all lead, in their own way, to a further discovery of God. Unfortunately, many Christians take the narrow view that theirs is the only truth about God. They choose to ignore the wisdom of all these others who also sought to know Him. To hold this view is wrong and I do not believe Jesus himself would have been pleased at such an attitude.”

There was something about Kan’s statements that did not set right with John, but he could not form it into a cohesive thought. He wished Griz were here to size this man’s ideas up against God’s word. He was about to respond when they entered a cul-de-sac that dead-ended the tunnel. The only exit was an arched wooden door on their left, with a heavy iron latch.

“Through that door awaits our audience with the Wise One, the ruler of this underworld. I would learn much of God from him, as well as seek his acceptance of my proposals. So that our mission may not be hindered, I must ask you to remove those symbols of violence and mistrust you wear.”

John stood and thought for a moment. He looked at the useless wreck of a shield he was still carrying. He wiggled his toes in the once-comfortable shoes that now chafed and irritated his feet. Did he really need this stuff? It had not helped much against the gargoyles. He pulled out his sword, and looked at the blade. Its message was still the same. He repeated the words over softly to himself. “I am the way, the truth, and the life...”

“Come. Let us not delay,” Kan was saying. “Abandon your armaments which lead only to death for God’s creatures. Let us enter into the presence of him whom even Christ called ‘the Prince of this World.’”

XX. NO MAN COMETH

All at once John's mind was flooded with the thoughts that had been trying to take shape since Kan had first spoken to him. "Wait," he fairly shouted. "...No man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.' That's the rest of that scripture, the rest of Jesus' words. It is not narrow-minded Christians who proclaim him the exclusive way to God. He Himself says so. When you said Christ 'would have been' displeased at this attitude, something struck me as wrong. I've just realized what it is. You're speaking about Him as if he were dead. That's the exact problem with your concept. That is what separates Jesus from any other prophet or religious figure you can name. He lives! That, and the fact that only *He* has the power to forgive sins. In Him and Him alone are life and the power to be reconciled to God, the Father. You speak of wisdom and truth about God from other sources, even a lion that may well have been one of the guises of the Adversary himself. Why should I believe what anyone else says about God when I can read what His own Son has to say? God has provided His word to us, which He says is 'able to make [one] wise unto salvation.' If there be others with godly wisdom, what can they say that is not already in His word? If nothing, then they are unnecessary. If they add to or contradict His word then are they the vilest of false prophets, and he is a fool who heeds them. You decry those who proclaim Christ alone as Lord for their intolerance. Yet is not yours an equally judgmental statement when you say 'this view is wrong?' It is no truer that all paths lead to God than it is that you will learn of God from an audience with the Devil. The Lord is not 'everything in creation' but is the Creator, separate and distinct from that which He created. And there is,

indeed, evil in existence; evil against which we are warned repeatedly in scripture. Evil of such magnitude that it can only be overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit of God Himself. You call these demons ‘creatures of God.’ How ridiculous. They represent an intense hatred of both God and mankind. That hatred’s iron grip of misery on this world prompted our Lord to refer to its author as ‘prince of this world’ not out of admiration, but regret.

“No, my misguided friend, I will not remove this, the whole armor of God to appease the Enemy. That is, assuming you were not lied to and he actually is behind that door. Something I am beginning to doubt.” John was amazed that such an oration had poured forth from his mouth.

“It is most unfortunate to hear you speak this way, Christian. It is all too clear that you lack enlightenment. I fear I must ask you not to accompany me further if you maintain your refusal to leave behind this armor of destruction.”

“You have enlightenment, Kan, it is true. But it is the enlightenment of wholesale knowledge without true wisdom—wisdom from God. Yours is a cold light, without power. It is learning without discernment, belief without saving faith, religion without reality.

“Now, you go in to face what you assume will be the Tempter. You take only a white flag and words of peace. Those have no meaning to him. I implore you, let me come with you, armor and all; it may be your only hope. Remember, he has already imprisoned my wife and I don’t know how many others.”

“Ah. So it is revenge, then. Tell me, if this Enemy of yours is so powerful, of what use will your armor be? How can you prevail?”

“Because, ‘greater is He that is in [me] than he that is in the world.’”

“No, my friend. I will not contribute to a confrontation of violence. Your weapons must not enter.”

“Then I insist that you not enter either; for your own good.”

“No, Christian. As I told you, I do not fear what awaits me here. Now, leave me. May God purge your heart of its anger and vengeance, and give you success.”

John was irritated and frustrated. Irritated that Kan kept trying to make him the bad guy for wanting to get his wife back from the clutches of Satan. Frustrated because Kan acted as if John could not possibly say anything worth considering. For someone who was supposed to be so open-minded, Kan was about the most bull-headed person he had ever run across. Now he regretted that he had come here at all. Had not the sword said to turn neither to the right or left? The chances of the Prince of Demons sitting down and chatting with Kan over tea without some dire consequences were nil. Still, he wondered if he should stay around to see if he could spot Holly in there somewhere. Kan waited until John was at the tunnel entrance ready to leave before lifting the latch. The thick wooden door creaked open. Through the doorway, even from across the room, John could see that it was a very large chamber with high ceilings. It was lit much as the gargoyle chamber had been. Kan had already entered and the door was creaking shut when a sudden flash of concern came over John. He rushed toward the door. At the same instant a cry of pain came from inside. John caught the door just in time and slipped through. It closed and latched behind him, and he saw no handle on this side. There would be no going back.

It was a gargoyle chamber, all right, about half the size of the other one. John could only see two of the creatures. Some twenty yards away, Kan was picking himself up out of the dirt. The result of his peaceful overtures to these fine “creatures of God” were a ripped shirt and bloody claw marks on his back. Kan absently brushed the dust out of scrapes on his hands, arms, and knees; oblivious that one of them was bearing down on him. John raced toward him shouting warnings and waving his sword. Kan only knelt down, palms together. A half-dozen steps before John got there, the gargoyle scooped Kan up and lifted him away. John watched as Kan was slowly lifted ever higher, much as had happened to him. Kan made no cry, though being in grip of the beast’s hind claws was most unpleasant.

John next realized that the other gargoyle was on a collision course with *him*. He saw that not far from the door he had entered was a narrow archway with a tunnel beyond. He gave it his best flat-out sprint and entered the archway just soon enough that his pursuer had to pull up. To John’s surprise, it followed him on foot into the narrow tunnel.

XXI. ASK, SEEK, KNOCK

John was shocked when he saw that the gargoyle was pursuing him into the narrow passage. He ran as hard as the poor light and cramped quarters would allow. Each time he glanced back, however, the beast had gained on him. All at once John stopped and whirled around to face the hunter. “Greater is He that is in me,” he reminded himself. “If I really believe that, it’s time for me to go on the attack.” He raised his shield. He was pleasantly surprised to see that it was in nearly as good shape as at first. He felt that, in these confined spaces, the gargoyle’s bag of tricks would be severely limited. That would work to John’s advantage. “That’s enough running and being beaten, Lord,” he prayed. “It’s time for the power of Your Spirit to manifest itself.”

The gargoyle ran up to him and seemed a little taken aback that his victim was now advancing. John knew there was insufficient room to slash with the sword, and so stood with it out front. He stood ready to thrust and skewer the grounded gargoyle in the ensuing battle. But not until he had a few words with the hobgoblin.

“Stand and prepare to die, in the name of Jesus Christ, Lord of heaven and earth,” he challenged. “You’ll find there’s no place to fly for cover, demon. Your only hope of leaving this passage alive is to tell me where the young woman has been taken.”

The creature glared at him with the vertical-slit pupils in its reptilian yellow eyes for a second. Then it hissed, “Human, you are too late. You should never have entered this place. It will be your tomb, for the woman you seek is no more.” With that, he began to pummel John

with his clawed forepaws. The blows, though staggeringly powerful, landed on John's shield and were each answered by a thrust of his sword.

The gargoyle's hampered effectiveness combined with John's recently gained knowledge of what to expect helped his confidence. With every blow he was able to fend off it grew stronger. Soon it was the creature backing up to avoid the deadly sword point. John varied his thrusts: now high, now left, now right, and managed to pierce the beast's left bicep. The creature, howling as much in fury and indignation as from pain, launched a ferocious attack. It battered John's shield with all its strength. John recoiled and waited, watching for the opening. The creature's rage was bound to induce carelessness, if he could just be patient. John crouched and backed-up, slowly, waiting, waiting, waiting. His only offense was to probe and worry the beast with his sword point. That forced it to keep interrupting its attack to paw and grab at John's weapon. Still John waited.

Suddenly, like the strike of a viper, the sword shot upward. It entered the gargoyle's neck at the throat and exited at the base of its skull. There was a gurgling sound as the gargoyle slumped down and fell backwards. John plunged the sword in at another point to ensure that it was dead. He then turned away and paused to give thanks for his victory.

By the light of his sword John continued down the small passage. After a long while he came out at a junction of several corridors. It was torch-lit, though none of the tunnels leading from it were. John thought Kan and he had passed through here on their way. As to which tunnel to take, he had no idea. He removed his helmet and rubbed his hand over the back of his neck and tried to think. Suddenly he stopped. *Almost forgot one of the rules I learned*, he said to himself. He pulled out his sword and read the blade:

ASK...SEEK...KNOCK.

He grinned wryly and shook his head. "Humph. Wonder if I'll ever learn to ask first when I have a problem instead of after all else fails." He prayed for wisdom, guidance and, as always, for Holly's safety and rescue. As he did so, the various words of discouragement he had heard from the creatures he had encountered came back to him. Each had haunting implications

of Holly's— No! He would not even think it. She was down here, somewhere in this hellish place, praying and waiting for him to come to her. “And by the grace of the Lord in Whom I trust, I will,” he declared. With that he donned his helmet and began pacing the circumference of the room. *Well, let's see. I've asked, so what do I do next? Seek? Seek for what? What would tell me which passageway to take?* He looked down and saw the little puffs of dust kicked up by his shoes as he walked. Then he stopped. “Footprints. Of course. Just find the passageway with my footprints coming from it—other than the one I just came out of. That will be the one Kan and I came from when we came through here before.” Using the narrow passage as a marker, he looked a few yards up each of the five remaining corridors for footprints matching his rather unique shoes. Surprisingly, the first three had no footprints whatever. The fourth, however, did and they were shaped and marked just like his. Since the footprints led into the junction room, backtracking them should eventually get him back to the “main” tunnel. From there he could find the huge gargoyle chamber, beyond which, he assumed, Holly was being held.

He started up the passage, but noticed that something was not quite right. It was that the footprints were solitary. If these were his, where were Kan's? He could not remember what type of shoes Kan had worn, or even if he wore any. Regardless, there would have to be another set of prints of some kind. Nevertheless, it seemed to be the only possibility so he started to continue on. However, with each step he seemed to have more and more trouble seeing in the unlit tunnel. The sword was becoming dim. He headed back to the junction room. As he went, the sword brightened. “I think this is called ‘knocking on a closed door,’” he said aloud.

The only passage left untried was the one into which the footprints led. “All right, let's knock on this door then.” The sword provided its normal brilliant light as he proceeded down the passage. He could now see that the footprints, though definitely from the same type of shoe, were too small to be his. John was curious as to whose these footprints might be. Most intriguing of all was the fact that, whoever it was, he was wearing The Armor.

Once again he embarked on a long walk, carefully following the footprints at every fork and junction. His injuries, including his hip, had all settled into a generalized soreness.

Surprisingly, none was causing him any severe pain. His biggest problems now were that he was feeling somewhat weakened by hunger and thirst. The worst though, was that his legs were bone-weary—dead tired from the ceaseless walking. Still, he drove himself on. There could be no rest until Holly was safe.

Eventually he spotted a glow of torchlight in the corridor ahead, but it was from an indirect source. When he reached the spot he saw that there was a shaft of light shining into an intersecting passage. Its evident source was an adjoining room from which voices were emanating. He silently crept up to the crack through which the light came, and looked in. Inside was a young man, perhaps in his late teens, with dark brown hair and brown eyes. He was smallish in size, though stockily built. With him was a lean, bony-armed older man with long salt-and-pepper hair and a scraggly white beard. He could literally have been anywhere from his late forties to his seventies; John could not decide. His piercing gray eyes and demonstrable spryness suggested that prematurely gray hair belied his relative youth. Both men were clad in armor like John's. It was not dented, scratched, or tarnished, but it had a worn look as from years of polishing.

The room was obviously a living quarters. There were two straw-beds at one end and a crude dining table at the other. The sight reminded John that it must have been a long while since he had eaten last. The two men—John guessed father and son—sat facing each other on stools in the middle of the room. Each was sharpening a sword with a whetstone. The swords were identical to his except that neither gave off any light, and the blades were narrower. That was evidently from continual sharpening. John listened for a moment to their conversation.

“...And so we understand how important it is to keep ourselves unspotted from the world,” the old man was saying. “Now, how would you describe ‘unspotted?’”

“It means to avoid that which is evil and to concentrate on being holy as God is holy,” recited the young man.

“Very good.”

John moved down the small passage a little farther and found a heavy door. He knocked, but it was of such solid wood it made very little sound. He called out, not too loudly, "Excuse me. I wonder if I might speak with you."

His words were immediately followed by the sound of clanking swords. This would not be a hospitable welcome.

XXII. THE OVERSHARPENED SWORD

“I’m a friend, and fellow servant of our Lord Jesus,” John added. There was a moment of complete silence followed by a muffled conversation between the room’s inhabitants. After another long moment the door’s iron bolt slid back. The door was flung open as both of them stepped back several paces and stood with their swords pointing at John.

The young man spoke first. “Look, Father, armor just like ours; and the sword glows.”

“Mmph,” said his skeptical parent. “But could it be one of the Devil's tricks?”

“I can’t say I blame you for saying that,” replied John. “I’ve been tricked a time or two myself since I’ve been in this evil hole. But I assure you I am a Christian. Would I speak the name of Christ our Savior in this place if I were one of Satan’s minions? I nearly drove one of the wolf-faces mad by the mere mention of the Lord.”

“It is true, is it not, Father? Those who are of Lucifer will not speak the Lord’s name here.”

The old man lowered his sword. “Yes. But do not forget that, in order to deceive, Satan himself can be transformed into an angel of light.” He lowered his eyes and spoke more quietly. “However, I do not believe you to be evil. Come in. What is it you want from us?”

As he sat on the one spare stool present, he felt like saying “supper.” Instead he decided to get right to the point. “Are you two experienced at fighting the satanic creatures in this place?”

“We have studied every facet of battling with the Adversary’s forces,” said the old man. “I myself have spent twenty-five years in this cave. My son Caleb has been here all his life.

Together we seek to gain an understanding of the tactics involved in warring against these diabolical enemies.”

“Good,” said John excitedly. But there was something—he started to let it pass as being too obvious to ask, but— “And you have battled gargoyles and won, I assume?”

The old man sat back and, with an air of self-satisfaction, exchanged glances with his son. “We have, most assuredly, been victorious over the demonic beings you call ‘gargoyles.’”

John leaned forward excitedly. “Then, can you help me?” He sat back a bit. “I beg your pardon, first I should introduce myself. John Stander.” He reached out with his hand, and the old man took it briefly with a limp excuse for a handshake.

“Eli Crane,” he nodded. “This is my son, Caleb.” The son said nothing.

John nodded a greeting and continued on. “My story is a rather long one. The upshot of it is that I have a desperate need to get through the huge gargoyle chamber on the main passage coming from the cave’s cliff entrance. Do you know the one I mean?”

“Indeed, it is one of their ‘nests.’ But why the urgency to pass through such a place; to consort with such vile and wicked creatures?”

“Tell me, is beyond that chamber the way to the Evil One?”

Eli sat up, his eyes wide. “The dragon? Why, yes. In fact, it is the only way, but what possible reason could you have for going there?”

“My bride was abducted by gargoyles. I feel certain that she is being held captive there, or at least, that he knows where she is.”

There was silence while Eli and Caleb looked at one another, then Eli looked down at his feet. He seemed to be struggling to put something into words. He spoke without looking up. “Young man—John—I think it highly unlikely that she is being held captive. The serpent,” he cleared his throat and swallowed, “rarely lets his victims live.”

“But there *is* a chance, right? As long as there is any possibility, I must try to reach her. You can understand that, can’t you?”

After another pause Eli stared off at the wall for a moment, remembering. “Of course. It has not been so many years since I felt as you do toward someone.” He looked back at John. “But how can we help?”

“Tell me how to defeat the gargoyles. You’ve done it. Tell me their weaknesses, the strategy I should use. I managed to overcome one in a narrow passage where he couldn’t fly. But in that open chamber I was lucky to escape with my life. How do I fight them?”

Eli thought for a while. “First, you must know your enemy. These ‘gargoyles’ as you call them have some formidable assets. Most of those you no doubt have discovered the hard way: incredible speed and maneuverability when flying, tremendous strength, and amazingly tough hide. However, they are as witless as they are powerful. You may have noticed they take turns, attack one at a time.”

“Yes, I did. I thought they were just toying with me and could have killed me easily if they had wanted. I assumed that if they had decided to get serious they would have ganged up on me.”

Eli shook his head. “Coordinating an attack by several at once taxes their limited brainpower. Therefore they resort to it only rarely, when there seems to be no other way. Even then, it takes them so long to plot their strategy that their opponent may escape in the meantime. What’s more, they are so inept they are as like to fly head-on into one another as to launch an effective mass attack. Still, never assume them to be buffoons. They are among the most deadly of creatures. Your belief that they could have killed you had they needed to do so is probably quite accurate. Even a poorly executed attack by several of them at once would almost certainly spell doom to a solitary opponent such as yourself.”

“So how do I fight them?” John asked somewhat impatiently. “Tell me step by step how I should proceed once I arrive at the chamber.” John realized this sounded more like an order than a request for a favor, but Eli seemed not to notice.

“All right. First, of course, is the obvious: saturate your endeavor with prayer and always attack in the name of the Lord Jesus. I’m sure you must have done this; I mean, being a Christian, right?”

“I—well, yes naturally.” As John spoke his belt buckle gave way and the belt and sword fell to the floor. Red-faced, he picked them up and, mumbling about how he had never had that happen before, fumbled to put it back on. Eli paused a moment then continued.

“In battling them there are two things you must know. One is, as I mentioned earlier, their skin. It’s too tough to cut through by slashing even with the edge of the Sword of the Spirit. You must puncture their flesh with the sword’s point. They do have a couple of vulnerable places where the edge of the sword would work. Unfortunately they’re too difficult to hit with the speed at which they come upon you.” John nodded his understanding; this certainly squared with his experiences.

“The second is that, as much as they hate you personally, it is your shield they attack. The cross upon it drives them to a mad frenzy.”

“Aha. So as long as I stay behind the shield—”

“No. Quite the opposite. Hold your shield very loosely, and away from your body. That way, when they hit it, it will do little or no damage to you. Still, if they knock it away from you, you must retrieve it quickly. They are not so feeble-minded as to attack the shield lying by itself. They will simply turn their attention to you at that point.”

“All right, I understand. That will keep them from doing me damage. So how do I hurt them?”

“The gargoyles are at their best when they’re able to fly at you at full speed. It is somewhat unusual that one fought you in a confined passageway. That nullifies their most potent weapon. Although they are slow of wit, they are not altogether stupid. They do have a basic instinct for self-preservation. They realize, for example, that flying full-force into a wall can be very detrimental to them. So if their target is against a wall, they pull up and just cuff at it instead of flying into it.”

“Wait. I remember, one of them came at me while I was near the wall of the chamber, and the blow was not as hard as the others.”

“And there was a hesitation just before it hit you?”

“Yes. I was pretty ravaged at the time but, yes, I recall it now. It was just a second or so delay.”

“Precisely what I mean. And that is the way you defeat them. Get your back against a wall as quickly as possible and watch your attacker. Hold your shield loosely and slightly to one side, just in case you do get hit. Just as it looks like it’s going to hit you, it will stop about a foot short and prepare to deliver a blow. It is at that exact instant you must thrust your sword into it.”

“Of course, I see it now,” declared John. “I can not thank you enough, Eli. Now, I know this is asking a lot, but I wonder if you and Caleb would be willing to come with me.” He stood up. “I’ll need someone to show me how to get back to the chamber anyway.”

“Whoa! Patience, boy. You’re not ready, not nearly. You need to train, to study, to plan, strategize, sharpen that sword, reinforce your shield. You are in need of much polish before you take on a whole nest of these fearsome beasts. Perhaps, if you train diligently, in a few months you may—”

“A few months? I have to leave now, immediately. I realize I’m ‘green’ but I have no choice. That’s why I was hoping for your assistance. You’ve experienced God’s victory against them.”

Eli sat back and ran a hand over his beard thoughtfully. “Though it’s been—how long Caleb? Six years? Still the memory of it is vivid. Caleb was only a youth. We were passing through a cavern some distance from here when three of them surprised us. Ah, but we worked our plan to perfection. Caleb wounded the beast that attacked him, and I was able to overcome the other two.” He sat back and smiled, still stroking his long white whiskers. “Yes, it was a glorious victory.”

“Excuse me,” John interjected, a concerned look on his face. “Do I understand you to say that you’ve lived here twenty-five years, and have fought one battle—six years ago?”

Eli missed the point of the question. “That’s right, young man. Twenty-five years dedicated to preparing for fighting the evil of Satan that exists in this place.”

John decided to be tactful. “Would not this be a perfect opportunity to score another victory for Christ, to put your preparations to use? How about it, Caleb? You’d like to have another crack at those beasts, right?” He gave an excited grin to Caleb, who had been completely emotionless throughout John’s visit. Despite John’s enthusiasm, he remained so. He did speak up, however.

He turned to Eli. “Yes, Father, I believe we are ready to test our skills,” he said stoically.

Eli’s eyes flared. “I believe you’re right, son. All right, sir, we will join you in your battle, to the glory of God.”

As they stood up and collected their shields and helmets, John repeated, “To the glory of God.”

The Crane’s led John on down the small passage that was at their front door. After a surprisingly short distance they merged into a corridor that came to a room with a straw bed: Kan’s. Soon they were through the crevice and in the main tunnel near the entrance to the gargoyle chamber. John was the first to remove his helmet and kneel in prayer, joined immediately by his comrades.

Unlike the last time, upon entering the chamber the gargoyles attacked almost immediately. It scarcely gave the three time enough to get against a wall and get set. Caleb, in fact, was a bit late with his stab attempt and was slammed back against the wall. The gargoyles attacked in two waves of three, one per defender. John shouted, “By the power of the name of Jesus Christ, victory is ours.” In textbook fashion he was shortly removing his sword from the lungs of his dead opponent. Eli likewise had success against his first attacker. The second wave, predictably, learned nothing from the first. They were dispatched just as easily. Even Caleb, though shaken and in pain, succeeded as well this time. The lone remaining gargoyle made no indication it was even considering retreat. It attacked immediately. Evidently wanting to

capitalize on the success had earlier at Caleb's expense, it chose him. John and Eli joined in the counterattack and the gargoyle's blood was quickly mingled with the others' on the cavern floor.

Eli was exhilarated and raised his sword with a shout of celebration. John clapped both he and Caleb on the shoulders and thanked them profusely for their aid.

The three knelt in thanksgiving, and then John addressed them. "God has given us a great victory, and proven that he is with our cause. Will you come with me now, on the rest of the way to help rescue my wife?"

Eli stared as if John were insane. "Surely you cannot mean what you are saying. The techniques we have discussed for fighting these creatures are useless for the other evils you will face. You must come back with us, train, learn, study, and prepare. You are in no way ready to battle the forces that await you. Indeed, even we are not prepared for such a war. No, you would be a fool to continue on, and we will not support you should you do so."

"Training? Preparing?" said John incredulously. "I can't fool around with such things while my wife's peril increases every minute I delay. You spent twenty-five years sitting around polishing and sharpening. In all that time you fought only one battle. Of what value is that?"

"Of what value is studying the Word of God?" said Eli indignantly. "Of what value praying and meditating? How can a Christian ask such a question?"

"You sharpen swords that don't get used, polish armor that hides from battle. How can you claim to be fighting Satan and yet never enter the fight? Serving God is more than prayer and study. It's letting the light of Christ shine before—and for the good of—people. People. That's whom Jesus died for. That's whom we're to disciple, to teach, to share the gift of salvation with, to help in need: people. Who are you helping with all your training and preparation? We are to be imitators of Christ. How would He respond to this need? Wouldn't He be the first to rescue my beloved from the clutches of the Evil One? The scriptures themselves bear out what I'm saying, 'be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only.' What gets done on God's behalf while you sit and sharpen your sword?"

“How long have you been a Christian, boy?” roared the old man angrily. “Answer me. How long?”

John lowered his head, and spoke quietly. “About six months, I guess.”

“Humph. Six months, and you would teach me? I was dedicating my life to the Lord before you were born. And how long in this cave? A day? Two? I’ve been here twenty-five years. I need make no defense or excuse to the likes of you. We simply will not be coerced or shamed into joining you in this errand of folly. Even if you manage to make it to the door of the chamber of the serpent’s pit, how will you open it? What hope do you have against the dragon if you could get in? We have no intention of participating in such foolhardiness. As for you, you may leave us or return with us, the choice is yours.”

It was clear that the old man was adamant. John turned to Caleb and grabbed his sleeve. “Caleb, can’t you reason with him? Or come with me anyway. You’re old enough to make some decisions of your own. Help me, please. You saw how tremendously effective we were as a team. Think of the great victories for the Lord we could achieve together.”

Caleb looked at him, still as unemotional as ever. Then, slowly, he looked down at John’s hand on his arm. Then he looked at Eli. “Father, he has hold of my arm. I do not wish it.” John let his hand drop. It was obvious he was wasting his time.

“No wonder your swords give off no light,” John said, half under his breath. “Nevertheless, you have risked your lives to help me past this obstacle, and for that I am grateful. May the Lord bless you with good success in whatever you do. I must be going.” He offered no handshake, but headed toward the exit at the far end of the chamber.

“Young man—John,” called Eli. John had walked halfway to the doorway. “We could attack other nests of gargoyles. Think how much better the world would be without them.” John did not even turn around, but merely shook his head and kept walking. “You’ll not find her,” Eli called. “It is too late. Abandon this senseless endeavor. You will end up just like her. ‘Thou, O man of God, flee these things.’”

There was silence after that for a moment, and when John reached the exit he turned back around. Eli and Caleb had gone. *Gone back to sharpen their oversharpened swords, no doubt,* he thought. He left the chamber and started down a large passageway. He hoped he had surmounted the last obstacle to his finding Holly. His knees were getting wobbly from hunger and fatigue. “Dear God, I think I’d better find her soon,” he prayed aloud.

XXIII. RESISTANCE

Though he was tired, the rush of adrenaline from battling the gargoyles and the anticipation of resuming the hunt for Holly sustained John for a long while. He proceeded quickly down the unlit passageway. His mind played-out dozens of possible scenarios he would encounter when at last he confronted the dragon. In his favorite fantasy, the serpent cowers in a corner at the sight of his sword. He then plunges it into its heart. Triumphant, sweeping Holly into his arms, he climbs a stairway to the trap door into her house.

As the hours of winding through the dark tunnel dragged on, however, neither emotion nor fantasies could deter his mind from his physical discomforts. He was rapidly approaching a crisis state. Foremost was his utter exhaustion. Every muscle, bone, and joint in his body seemed to be pleading for rest, but he dared not rest. The fatigue, in turn, reemphasized the injuries he had suffered earlier. His hip was causing him to limp noticeably. In addition, his empty stomach had recently begun vying for first place among his physical problems. To top it all off, he had a raging thirst.

He had reached the point of plodding along, his weary feet slapping the ground with each step. All at once he stumbled over something across his path. A short distance further he again tripped. This time he noticed that it seemed to be a root or vine of some kind; something he had not seen until now. He slowed his pace to check more carefully for obstacles and found the ground covered with them. They were vines, pale yellow-white in color, with sickly-looking leaves and tough woody stems. They somehow entangled themselves around his ankles such that

he could hardly get loose from them. Soon the walls and ceiling of the tunnel were also covered with them. They narrowed-down the passageway more and more every few yards until his method of stepping high to avoid tripping only solved part of the problem. Now the vines clung to his arms and head as well. Shortly the passage was completely clogged and he had to use his sword as a machete to hack his way through the dense foliage. The vines grabbed and clawed at his every movement. They scratched and tore at his hands, clothes, and any unarmored part of his body. He kept up the effort for what seemed an eternity, grunting and sweating. His arm began to get so tired from chopping at the vines that he switched hands with his sword to rest his right arm. He stood quietly in the midst of the vines for a moment to catch his breath. There should have been the same oppressive silence that had existed in all the previous tunnels. Instead there was a rustling, as if the plants were moving. In the subdued sword light, he saw that the path he had so laboriously cut for himself had re-closed, sealing him in. It would mean a lot of hard work even if he decided to give up, go back, and rest—something for which his tired body was screaming. Worse yet, the vines were encircling him, around his legs, waist, and neck. He was not claustrophobic, but near panic gripped him as he envisioned being suffocated by the grasping, clinging plants. As he hacked frantically to free himself, a second fear crept into his thoughts: that there might be miles of these vines to get through. He knew that he did not have enough stamina for even twenty more feet. Anything farther than that and his endurance would fail. He hacked with his left hand until it could no longer hold the blade straight. Then he switched hands again back to his sore and fatigued right. He was pushing and dragging with his feet to break through all those that the sword failed to cut. It was a whole body effort and he was rapidly approaching complete exhaustion. As he thought for the hundredth time about how near he was to the limit of his endurance, something tried to force its way into his mind. While he gasped and panted, he tried to recall a scripture, something about endurance. Finally it came back to him. *But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.*

“But where is the end, Lord?” he rasped. “I can’t go on. I can’t.”

He was still swinging the sword but was merely pawing at the vines. He leaned into them, digging his feet into the same spot as he pushed. There was no longer any objective, merely reflex. His arms were numb, but whenever he stopped to give them even a second's rest he became more entangled. Now the vines were wrapping around his sword arm itself, and very soon he would be unable to move at all. His eyes were beginning to water from the frustration of failure and hopelessness. He had asked God for help, he had pleaded for help, he had begged for help, but there was no relief.

It was over. He had lost. Perhaps something had happened to Holly and this was the Lord's way of getting them back together—for them both to be in Heaven where He was.

He hacked and pushed once more into the solid wall of vines with what he was sure was his last ounce of strength. With his light-giving sword buried in the vines, a few tiny dots of dim light came into the blackness. Curiosity gave him renewed strength for two more slashes with the sword. The light became identifiable as a torch lit area beyond a few more feet of vines. His groans and grunts turned into the half-screams one hears from a weightlifter attempting a maximum lift. Pushing his body beyond all limits, he at last struggled through. He fell facedown onto the floor of a tiny chamber, little more than a wide spot in the tunnel, lit by a single torch. He lay there a long while, not moving. His chest heaved in a desperate straining for air, accompanied by little groans and gasps. When finally his breathing was somewhat restored, the tears came. Although no one could hear him, he felt humiliated by the crying he was unable to prevent. The embarrassing tears served only to add to his misery.

He lay in the silent torchlight for a long while fighting an almost irresistible urge to simply lie where he was, forget everything else, and sleep. Instead he eventually mustered the entirety of what strength he had left, and stood upright. He grunted and wobbled as his ailing legs struggled to support him. Then he slowly staggered on down the tunnel simply because that was "The Goal." He had no idea how, in his present condition, he could expect to accomplish anything if and when he actually reached the dragon. Quite honestly he no longer gave it any thought. It was, to his state of mind, totally irrelevant. Just getting there now served as his sole objective, his

cause for continued existence. There was, he supposed, some reason behind it; some meaning that it held for him. He knew, vaguely, it was somehow associated with Holly. But his exhausted mind could no longer pull up the details nor piece them together in any coherent fashion. As for Holly, she had become an ephemeral abstract. She was no longer a real, tangible person but a theoretical concept. An ideal, that had once held significance to him but was now far too complex for him to comprehend. He told himself it would all make sense, as he felt sure it once had, when he reached The Goal. He could not think more about it. It demanded energy he simply did not have. Besides, the three all-absorbing needs held complete sway in his mind: water, food, and rest. He was, by some extraordinary means, denying himself the latter. His primary cause for living, The Goal, saw to that. But all three now crowded out any other mental functions he might otherwise call upon. Stumbling and staggering along, his mouth hung open and his eyes stared blankly ahead (except when they attempted to cross and roll up into his head). He was little more than a zombie—walking, breathing, but for all useful human endeavors, dead.

The corridor beyond the little chamber was unlit. Through some rote, mechanical process he pulled out his sword and held it before him in a weak, trembling hand.

He had plodded his way along, his legs functioning automatically for about a hundred yards when he heard the sound of water. It had become quite loud by the time his brain was able to sort out what the sound was. Once it did, though, he had no trouble understanding its significance. The sound was of a small stream gurgling over a fall. Even though he was completely absorbed by the hope of satisfying his thirst, his legs could not be made to quicken their pace.

Finally he came to a good-sized unlit cavern. The sound told him the water source was running somewhere off to his left. As he turned toward it and peered into the darkness, he saw dozens of red glowing spots, in pairs. He drew nearer and could hear an eerie set of voices, as if spoken into a rain barrel. He could not make out the words. His sword's glow scarcely penetrated the darkness. In its dim light he could see the blue-violet outlines of translucent

humanlike forms. Each had a pair of glowing scarlet eyes. The demons, floating and swirling in continuous motion, quickly surrounded John and began to close in on him.

“Surrender,” said a voice.

“Sleep,” said another.

“Give in to us, and drink deeply of the water.”

“No,” he rasped fearfully, and they began to wrap themselves around him. He swung his sword wildly at them, but to no effect. He felt his feet and legs being bound together, wrapped with some kind of unbreakable bonds. They continued to press him to capitulate, offering relief and assuring him of the futility of struggling. That was certainly believable as the paralysis of his body spread upward to his arms, back, and neck. Panic swept over him as the horrid demons began to infiltrate his mind, take control of his limbs, and render him more and more helpless. “No,” he cried as he felt his jaws tighten and his ability to speak drain away. “I...must...save...Holly.” To this came a response of demonic laughter.

“He is a fool.”

“He does not know.”

“She lives no more.”

“She is beyond his help.”

A voice was crowding into his mind, shrieking at him to give up. The demons were penetrating his very being. His vision was going and his hearing had stopped. With one last monumental effort he bent his eyes to the blade of the sword in his now-rigid hand. With his fading vision he could just make out the words:

RESIST THE DEVIL, AND HE WILL FLEE FROM YOU.

“Resist?” his mind screamed. “I can’t even move. How can I resist? How Lord? Oh, dear Jesus, help me resist.” Then it hit him. He was able only to pant, shallow and quick, as he surrendered ownership of his body to the demons in order to focus all his effort on regaining total control of his mind. “In...the name...of...Jesus of...Nazareth,” he thought with all his might, “...the Christ...the Son...of the living God...I command...you evil spirits...to leave my mind.” His

thoughts immediately became clear—and his own. He repeated the process and ordered the dumb spirit restraining his speech to leave him. There was an anxious moment when he had to repeat it twice before his power of speech returned. Once his hearing returned, he could hear the frantic, demonic shrieks and wails in response to every reference he made to the Lord. The demons seemed to be in agony, flying throughout the room in all directions.

The instant he was completely freed, John ran from the room. Or at least it was as close an approximation of running as his unwilling legs would allow. The demons' nightmarish wailing gripped him in an uncontrollable fear. It drove him on down the corridor until a long gradual bend took the sound from his hearing.

Shortly thereafter he saw light ahead. It was a straight torch lit passageway honeycombed with small side passages. He looked into a couple of them only to find that they went a few feet and stopped. The main tunnel looked interminable in length, with an endless series of small side passages. He continued on, but the sight dissipated the energy brought on by his fear. It was replaced by all his fatigue, thirst, and hunger multiplied tenfold.

He was without knowledge of what happened over the next span of time. His next conscious awareness was of standing in a small cul-de-sac with a solid wooden door in front of him. To his right was an entrance to another passage. He stood reeling for several minutes trying to recollect the meaning of where he was. Slowly, painfully, he pieced it together. Beyond this door was the serpent...The Goal.

XXIV. TEMPTATION

There was no handle on the door. John's pushing, pounding, and slapping his hand on it served only to prove how thick and solid it was. The absence of visible hinges indicated that it opened inward, so he threw himself against it. This had absolutely no effect on the door but in his debilitated state it rattled his loosely connected bones and knocked him flat. He stood back up and, throwing his shield aside, drew his sword. Both his hands and knees trembled with the "weak shakes" as he slashed his sword helplessly across the door. He screamed for someone to let him in, and using his sword dagger-style he stabbed at it maniacally. It scarcely even scarred the strong, heavy wood. There was no way to dig around the door; the floor and walls were of solid rock. The realization that it was hopeless was too much for him to bear. His physically spent condition left him barely able to stand. Now, having endured such misery only to be stopped literally at the threshold of his objective drained his last pretense of energy. He let his sword drop and fell to his knees, then sat on the ground, his arms limp. He put his chin on his chest and rocked gently back and forth.

A female voice spoke from behind him. "Is there some way I can help you?"

John spun around, his eyes wild with fear and mistrust. He backed himself up against the door and fumbled to pick up his sword.

"It's all right, really," she said softly. "I just want to know if I can help."

It was difficult for him to speak with his parched throat and thick tongue. Sounding for all the world like a lost little boy he whimpered, "Can you open the door? I can't get it open. Can

you help me?” He was practically begging. Having gotten a good look at her, his fears had vanished. She was a lovely young woman with honey blond hair and creamy white skin. She wore, of all things, a strapless ball-gown of deep royal blue matching her eyes. John strongly considered the possibility that she might be an angel. His limited mental faculties disregarded how improbable that was, given his location.

She responded using precisely the tone one would with a lost child. “You look so— would you like some food? Water? I can show you where some is.”

At the mention of those words he became quite agitated and began crawling toward her, trying to get up. “Yes,” he said in a raspy whisper. “Please.”

Her smooth white hands helped him to his feet. “Here, just down this way a bit. This is someone else’s room, but I get food and water in here when I need it. There’s plenty, I’m sure it’s all right.” She led him through the adjoining passageway a short distance and into a room. Half of it was taken up by an enormous bed, at least nine feet square and covered with a quilted bedspread colored gold, purple, and scarlet. Near the foot of the bed was a tall table holding a platter containing a large roasted fowl, one leg of which was gone. Next to the platter were a pile of pan biscuits, a bowl of apples, and a ceramic pitcher with a large metal goblet nearby. John stared at the table as if in shock. The young woman poured water from the pitcher into the goblet. When he heard the gurgling of it, he rushed over and pulled the goblet from her hand before she had finished. He put it to his mouth and tipped his head back, slurping and sucking the water furiously. A good percentage of it ran down his face. With the first squeak of his slurping at an empty cup he immediately held it out to her. His hands shook so that she had to steady them to pour him more water. The scene was repeated twice more, with explosive gasps for air accompanying each draining of the cup. She refilled it from the now half-empty pitcher and he sat it on the table and turned to the food. He tore into it like one possessed. Grasping it in trembling hands, he crammed his mouth so that significant quantities fell back out uneaten. No hog at the trough ever showed more disdain for table etiquette than John at this hasty meal. Yet for all her daintiness, the young woman expressed no disapproval. She merely looked on with a slightly

amused smile as if she were pleased she could be of help. She assisted with more water whenever his cup ran low and handed him a large cloth napkin which he ignored until he calmed down. Then, as he wiped the mess from his face, he seemed to really see her for the first time. He felt embarrassed for his behavior. She carried the pitcher to a basin and poured the remaining water into it.

“Here, you can wash up a bit if you’d like.”

After he had done so, she took him by the hand and led him over to the huge bed. She sat him down next to her.

“Thank you for your kindness,” he said. “Who are you?”

She smiled prettily. “Someone who wants to become your friend.”

“My—” He shook his head, puzzled; he was still very tired. “Why?”

“Can’t a lady just want to do something nice for a handsome young man? To be his friend and want to get better acquainted with him? To want to become a very, very close and intimate friend? One who helps him whenever and however he needs it? And brings him food. Granted, it’s someone else’s food but I take it all the time. I mean, it’s all right if I need it to survive, right? You don’t think I’m doing anything wrong. Do you?” She began removing his shoes.

“No. No, not at all,” he said, as she massaged his weary feet and calves. “Do you live here?”

“I stay in the little side passages just up the tunnel a ways. So far I’ve escaped detection. Now, let’s get this armor off of you,” she said as she unbuckled the belt. “We can’t very well get comfortable with this sword in the way, can we?” He began to protest weakly about needing his armor, but she quickly overrode him. “What you need now is rest, not armor, right?” Like a patient after a nurse’s scolding, he meekly agreed with her. His sword clattered to the floor. The writing on it was changed, but he did not, and now could not, look at it. “After all, it’s time for you to enjoy a little comfort and pleasure and relaxation after all you’ve gone through. Now isn’t that true?” she asked as she unfastened his breastplate. He again acceded to her. “This old

breastplate must have been chafing you something awful,” she went on. He nodded. Funny, only just now had he noticed how much it was chafing him. She tossed it aside.

“I’ve been kind to you, haven’t I John?” she asked as she got up. She reached down and lifted his feet onto the bed so that he was now lying on his back. He wondered how it was that she knew his name but he did not know hers. “Now I need a favor from you. Would you be willing to help me? Please?” She sat next to him and took his hand. “After all I’ve done—and will do—for you, you won’t refuse me. I know you won’t.” She kissed his fingers and the palm of his hand. She leaned over him and lowered her voice. “You have the power to take me away from here. Both of us, within minutes. Just say that you’re willing to take me, to leave with me. That’s all. And I will be devoted to you for the rest of my life. I’ll do anything you ask, be anything you want. I’ll make it my duty to please you and fulfill your every wish as best I can.” She unfastened the buttons on his shirt and slowly rubbed her hand across his chest. He looked deeply into her lovely eyes. He put his arm around her slender waist to pull her closer to him, but she tapped his helmet. “You’ll have to remove that yourself,” she half-whispered. As his helmet dropped to the floor, the words on the sword changed again, but they were visible to no one.

After so much misery, her gentleness, her tenderness, her loveliness were irresistible to him. The wonderful comfort of the bed was overwhelming, as was the inviting willingness of the temptress. As she bent and kissed his right cheek, he caught the delicate aroma of her perfume. Her hair was attractively “done up” exposing her graceful neck and smooth white shoulders above her strapless gown. She leaned down to him. As he kissed her soft neck and bare shoulder she closed her eyes and whispered, “We’ll be so happy together, I promise we will. Just say it now, that you’ll quit this place and leave with me. Say it. Say it and take me now.” She kissed him, and as he felt the soft moistness of her lips, an alarm sounded in his head. He pushed her away and began struggling to get up.

“No! No, I have—” He was fighting the protestations of every cell in his body to remain on the soft bed where he was. “I have to get to Holly...my armor...I have to save her...I...I love

her...have to get up.” His protestations were interrupted by the woman grabbing him by his shoulders.

“Did you say Holly?”

“Yes. I...have to rescue her.”

“A pretty young woman, about my age, reddish-brown hair and brown eyes?”

A lightning-like jolt forced its way through his muddled cloud of fatigue. “Yes. Yes, that’s her. You’ve seen her?”

She lowered her head, turned away, and began to quiver slightly. She sniffed a time or two, indicating she was either weeping or on the verge. John had no capacity left for tact. “Where is she? Answer me. Where is she? I have to know. I have to reach her.”

The young woman looked up with tears welling in her eyes. “You can’t,” she whined. “You can’t see her and you can’t rescue her.”

“Why? What are you talking about? Where is she?”

She shook her head slowly for a moment and then looked down at the floor. “She’s dead.”

“What? No! No, I won’t believe it.”

“She is,” the woman cried. “I saw it. I watched her die with my own eyes.” She lowered her head and cried some more while John sat in stunned silence. The woman collected herself somewhat and continued. “She was so...noble. They—they tried to make her give in, to deny her beliefs, but she wouldn’t budge, not an inch. She kept saying that somehow her faith would win out, and that you’d come.”

With those last words, John jammed the heels of his hands up to his eyes and let out an agonized moan, then hunched over and was silent. The woman knelt beside him, and began talking in a stage whisper. “Look. I know a quick way out of here. It’s a side passage not far away. There’s only two sentries you have to get past, and we’ll be free. I’ll take you there, only please take me out of this place. Please.”

“No.” He turned and looked straight at her. “No,” he yelled, then struggled to his feet and began trying to collect pieces of his armor.

“What are you doing? I told you, you can’t help her. Where are you planning to go?”

“The dragon.”

“The—but why? For what purpose? Revenge?”

He stopped and looked at her. “Yes, if that’s all that’s left, yes, revenge.”

“You’re throwing away my chance—our chance—to live, for revenge?”

He was staggering around trying to pick his helmet up from under a small night table next to the bed. He no longer seemed to be paying any attention to her.

“All right then,” she snapped. “If it’s to be revenge, at least have a fighting chance.” She took a small flask that had been sitting on the night table. “Here, drink this. It will give you power, stamina, and wisdom to defeat the serpent. Drink it,” she commanded. “In your condition, it’s your only hope.” With that she pulled him back onto the bed and handed it to him. “Without it you’ll be powerless. Drink it.”

He looked from her to the flask for a moment then grabbed it and took several quick swallows. The liquid went from sweet to bitter in his mouth and burned like fire in his throat. Though it was not alcohol, the sensation was similar. Enough so that it triggered the rule of abstinence from alcohol he had established shortly after becoming a Christian. He stopped. Coughing and sputtering he tried to set it back on the table while she insisted he must drink it all. The result was that it fell and spilled the remainder on the floor.

Almost immediately his head began swimming and he fell onto the bed where he was out in no time. The young woman picked up the flask, smoothed and adjusted her gown and looked down at the spilled drug. Then, sadly, at him.

“Even, if that was insufficient, when this room’s occupant arrives, one way or the other you’ll be dead soon enough.” Then, dropping her head down and covering her eyes with her hand she said haltingly, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Miserably, she walked from the room; her shoulders slumped as in defeat, the little flask dangling from her fingertips.

XXV. RIESENHAFT

A loud crash caused John to begin the struggle to come fully awake and to remember where he was. He had no guess as to how long he had been out. The light, though not bright, hurt his eyes as he tried to open them. There were more crashing sounds and an angry voice. Though he could not make out the words, it sounded threatening enough that he forced himself awake. It was still difficult for him to think clearly through the drug-induced fog. Somehow, deep from within himself came an urgency to get up, the anxious feeling that it was crucial to do so immediately. As he bolted upright, two things commanded his immediate attention. One was that the top of his head felt as if it weighed a hundred pounds and was trying to slide off. The other was the person in the room who had been making the noise.

It was a huge man of well over eight feet in height and nearly five in girth. He had course, thick features including pendulous ears, a bulbous nose, and eyebrows that met above the bridge of his nose. He had no beard and his unkempt sandy-colored hair sticking out in all directions gave him a moronic look.

The table that had held the food was overturned, thus explaining the crashing noises. The huge man turned and looked right at John. Continuing to grumble to himself, he said in a husky voice, "But now I have the food thief right here where I can make an end to his stealing at last." His speech was slow and deliberate and his overall manner gave the impression that he was a lumbering dimwit. Still, the massive sword at his side suggested him worthy of at least some respect.

John presumed the giant to be as slow of movement, and brain, as he was of speech. He quickly reached over the side of the bed and grabbed his sword. While the feet of the giant moved as slowly as John anticipated, his hands moved with unbelievable swiftness. Before John could sit back upright, his opponent's sword was out. Before he could lift his own sword in defense, the giant's whizzed by his head, slicing part way across his right cheek. John scrambled back across the bed away from the next lightning-quick sweep of the deadly weapon. It missed him by less than an inch. He rolled off the foot of the bed to his feet. His head was still throbbing. When he wiped his cheek with the back of his hand he found it smeared with blood. He stood prepared to duel the giant, though after seeing the speed of that huge sword he was not at all confident.

As the enormous man strode toward him, John decided to attempt diplomacy. "Please, I mean you no harm. Just let me go and I'll not trouble you again."

"No harm? You do not consider starving me harm? The food left here for me is all I get to live on, and day after day I arrive to find much or all of it gone. You have stolen my food for months and now you will die as a thief should."

"But I'm not the thief, I only took food today," John countered. "There was a young woman in a blue gown, she said she took food from here all the time. I only did it this once."

"How many times must you steal to be a thief? Are you not a thief even if you only steal once?"

"But I was starving. And I didn't know whose it was."

"You knew it was not yours. Is a thief not a thief if he has a reason when he steals? Cannot all thieves give reason for their crime?"

"But you had so much, I—"

"Then you are not a thief if you steal from one who has much? Are those not the very ones from whom thieves steal?"

John could see he was making no headway in pleading his case, so he tried stalling for time.

“Look, my name is John. I’m your friend. And you are?”

“I am called Riesenhaft. I am your executioner.”

Riesenhaft had made it all too clear that he not only wasn’t the dullard he appeared to be, he was not easily distracted from his deadly purpose. Nevertheless, John tried again. “Why are you in this cave?”

“I am a lighter of torches in the tunnels,” he answered. “But that is enough talk. Defend yourself.”

John was by no means a swordsman but intended to give as valiant an effort as he could. However, Riesenhaft’s sword was nothing but a blur. The swords clanged only for a few seconds before John’s was clattering on the other side of the room and he stood before his opponent unarmed. Riesenhaft raised his sword for the finishing blow. John backed up against the wall and held up his hand. “Wait. Please, I’m defenseless and completely at your mercy. You can take my life whenever you wish, and I cannot deny that I have wronged you. I only ask that you grant me two favors.”

“What right have you to ask favors?”

“None. But what I ask requires nothing of you except that you postpone my death for a couple of minutes.”

Riesenhaft lowered his sword and frowned in thought for a second or two. Curiosity had gotten the better of him. “What are the favors?”

“To die with my helmet on, and to ask forgiveness for my wrongdoings in this room first.”

Riesenhaft was mystified by the unusual nature of the requests, and was anxious to see what they were all about. His brow still furrowed, he picked up the helmet on the end of his sword and deftly flipped it into John’s hands. John knelt where he was and prayed. “Dear merciful Father, though I am unworthy of it, I ask your loving forgiveness for the wrongs I’ve done,” he began. His mind had cleared. Although it seemed like a dream, his earlier behavior in the room was a fresh and vivid memory. A memory that brought him shame. Though it certainly could have been far worse, that was of little solace. He had stolen, lied, agreed that something he

knew was wrong was right, discarded the armor of God, and turned to an elixir instead of to God for strength and victory. Most painful of all was the mental picture of his kissing and caressing an unknown woman while not ever having reached his destination in his quest for his precious Holly. Was she truly dead? Even if she was, he had thought her alive when he had done this, and that made him without excuse. To be sure, his mind tried to formulate excuses. *They were only kisses* was one. But to be so easily enticed by another woman when his new bride faced untold peril was inexcusable. *You were in a weakened state* was another. But, while he had no idea how long he had been in the cave, Jesus had gone forty days without food and yet had withstood temptation. No, there was nothing to be said except to seek forgiveness. As he prayed about these things, Riesenhaft listened in amazement. John prayed about him last. “And also, Father, forgive me for stealing from Riesenhaft. He already has enough misery in that he is enslaved by the Evil One. Help him to hear the beautiful truth of the gospel of Your Son Jesus Christ. Truth which can set him free from his bondage here in this place where he is imprisoned, body and soul, and is fed and watered like—like a pet dog. Lord, as he prepares to take my life, forgive him this. You know he is unaware that his doing so is evil. For in this place his mind is not allowed to discern good from evil. Thank You for Your gift of eternal life and, please, if it’s not too late, protect Holly from harm and the evil that surrounds her. In the Name of the Lord Jesus, Amen.”

Riesenhaft was totally baffled by what he had just heard. John donned the helmet and looked up, fully expecting to see the huge sword plunging toward him. Except for the sadness that his quest remained unfinished, he was at peace. Instead he saw the huge face contorted in confusion and, as near as he could read it, fear.

“You have dared to speak the words which cannot be uttered here,” Riesenhaft said breathlessly. “You have spoken the unspeakable names.”

“I have spoken to the One Whom I serve; He Whose power is beyond all power, even above that of your master.”

“You said that I am a slave, treated like a dog. This is so. But what is this truth and freedom you mentioned?”

With that question, John told the gospel story as concisely as he could. It was still a lot for one steeped in the evil of this outpost of Hell to comprehend so quickly. Although the gospel itself is not hard to understand, the prospect of life outside the all too familiar prison of sin can be inconceivable.

“These things are so new to my hearing,” said Riesenhaft. “I must think about them, and talk with you again. There is one thing I wish to know now. How can the salvation you speak of help me leave this cave?”

“That is a different subject, although the Lord will play quite a large role in getting that accomplished as well. I’m going to leave this miserable place just as soon as I’ve completed the mission for which I came here.”

“Which is?”

“To rescue my wife from the dragon’s clutches. Or, if he has harmed her, to kill him—or perhaps both. If you wish to join me, we may all escape from this wretched cave and leave it forever.”

“Kill the dragon? Are you mad?”

“No. Not mad, confident. Not of my own abilities, but of the power of the Lord. Will you come with me, Riesenhaft?”

“I do not yet believe as you do, or have the confidence you do.”

John placed his hand on the giant’s huge right arm. “Then let mine suffice. One thing is certain my friend. You will never leave here, physically or spiritually, if you do not come with me now.” Already John was comfortable that he would leave the room alive. The power of the gospel, even if not yet fully believed or understood, had accomplished that. The only question was whether his former enemy would accompany him.

Riesenhaft rubbed his chin thoughtfully while John donned the rest of his armor. When he had finished, he turned to the giant man who was still deep in thought. “Well?” said John. “What is your decision?”

“I have suffered much cruelty at the hands of the serpent, and have witnessed even worse inflicted upon others. I will not allow the wife of the first man ever to call me ‘friend’ to be abandoned to his evil. I am with you, friend John.”

John grinned widely and attempted to shake his hand but could only hold two of his gigantic fingers. “Thank you, Riesenhaft. I am already indebted to you. Now, let us be going.”

They came out to the locked door where John picked up his shield, still laying where he had left it. He began to explain how the door could not be opened except perhaps if one pried with one’s sword at this point or that. He turned just in time to see Riesenhaft charging from across the room at the door. He barely got out of the way as the giant threw his whole weight against the door. It immediately abandoned its hinges and fell flat. He ran in to help Riesenhaft, who seemed none the worse for it, to his feet.

Surveying the scene, John gave a low whistle and smiled. As the giant dusted himself off, John patted him on the shoulder. “Riesenhaft, my good friend, I just knew I was going to be glad to have you along.” Riesenhaft smiled back and then both men looked down the long passageway and their smiles disappeared. The last hurdle had been surmounted. At the end of that tunnel waited the dragon himself.

XXVI. WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED

“Tell me,” John said as they walked, “have you actually seen the dragon?”

“Oh, many times,” Riesenhaft said.

“Is he really an actual dragon? I know Revelation 20:2 refers to him that way, but I had assumed it to be figurative language. And is this Satan himself, or only some manifestation of him?”

“As to such questions, I have no knowledge. But I can say for fact that the master of this cave has indeed the appearance of a dragon, as you will soon see.”

John was wondering how his companion’s determination would bear up under the subtleties—or perhaps threats—of his master. “Do you fear him?” he asked.

“Everything that breathes fears him, but courage means pushing beyond one’s fears. Do not be concerned, I have courage.” He spoke with such conviction that John really did feel more relaxed.

The passage ended at a small anteroom with a huge marbled hallway leading at a right angle from it. John paused to kneel and pray for God’s help before going on. In the hall they found that the floor was polished so that it was like walking on a mirror. A crimson curtain, slightly parted, hung near the end of the hallway, with a set of large double doors beyond. As the two approached, suddenly from behind each curtain leapt a wolf-face at them. John jumped back with a start then drew his sword, but it was scarcely out of his belt when the two assailants lay dead on the floor, nearly sliced in half by Riesenhaft’s enormous blade. They had evidently

misjudged the length of the giant's reach—as well as his speed, no doubt—and paid for it with their lives.

“So much for the doormen,” John mumbled, his eyes wide with wonder. Riesenhaft said nothing, but continued on to the doors and barged through them with John right behind.

He found himself in a gigantic room, which glowed a crimson red. It was circular with an opening in the floor about sixty feet across. It was the opening that was the source of the red glow in the room, and something like steam rose from it. John thought he saw the tips of flames once or twice, and the room was uncomfortably hot. There was a foul smell emanating from the opening. John looked at Riesenhaft, who merely said, “The pit.”

Surrounding the pit was a broad marbled walkway that led up a series of terraced platforms or long steps running a quarter of the circumference on each side. The final quarter, opposite where John and Riesenhaft stood, was thereby elevated. On it was an ornate throne wherein sat the dragon. There were two plain, wooden poles on the right side of the throne, as John viewed it. A small heavy-looking arched door was across the walkway behind each, but what lay behind the doors, he had no guess. To the left of the throne were four large openings—smaller caves—in the back wall, two above and two below. They seemed to be quarters for the fiends he had encountered. The lower left housed wolf-faces, the lower right a den of lions. The upper left contained the wispy outlines of demons and the upper right was a nest of gargoyles. *The serpent's attendants, no doubt*, thought John.

“If and when the fighting starts, go over to the left and keep that menagerie of nightmares off of me,” John whispered. “I’ll worry about the dragon.” Riesenhaft moved to his left in acknowledgement.

The dragon himself was much larger than John had expected. His head alone appeared to be more than four feet long. He had yellow, reptilian eyes and a forked tongue. His teeth, neck, and tail were quite long, and he had large membranous wings that were folded along his back at the present. He was greener in color than the gargoyles and his underbelly was pale whitish yellow. Though his appearance was reptilian, his mannerisms were decidedly human, down to the

way in which he slouched on the immense throne, leaning on one arm. The entourage in the wall-chambers behind him became instantly agitated at the presence of John and Riesenhaft. The dragon, on the other hand, seemed to take no notice for at least a full minute. Then a humorless chuckle arose from him. Evidently due to exceptional acoustics, it was clearly audible to the two despite his being almost forty yards away.

“Well, what is this that comes arrayed against me? A sailor boy and his oversized, torch-lighting, simpleton sidekick?” He laughed loudly, then turning to the excited goblin zoo behind him said, “Relax, loyal subjects, relax. These fools will do you no harm; they’re no threat to you.” Then, looking at John, he said more ominously, “No threat at all.

“I would suppose you feel great pride in having reached this my throne room,” the beast continued. “What you hope to accomplish here—other than your deaths, of course—is difficult to fathom. If it is suicide you wish, why not just leap into the pit now and have done with it? Although you could certainly have had yourselves dispensed with earlier. I feel sure there would have been ample opportunities—”

“I have come for my wife,” John cut in loudly. But the serpent went on as if he had not heard.

“—There are many ways of dying here in my little domain—”

“I have come in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,” John shouted. “And by the power of the Holy Spirit I will take her with me, even if it means your death.”

The demons went into a frenzy, and the dragon at last seemed to have heard him. “Ah. Yes. A Christian. Tell me, are not Christians supposed to readily sacrifice their lives for the benefit of others? You are most fortunate, boy, for you have found me in one of my rare generous moods. Rather than just kill you outright, which since you are an intruder I should already have done, how about if we put your Christian principles to a little test, hmm? I offer an exchange: the life of a prisoner of mine for your complete surrender.”

John’s heart double-pumped when he heard about a prisoner. While he had not come here with the intention of surrendering, if it could save Holly...

“Let me see this prisoner of yours. I’m not fool enough to buy a pig in a poke.”

“Such mistrust, and in a Christian lad, yet. I am appalled. Is it not written, ‘Charity believeth all things?’ Oh well, nevertheless. Bring out our peaceful friend,” he called out to his stooges. A gargoyle flew to the door nearest the throne, slid back the bolt and went in. He returned a few seconds later with a smallish dark-complected man. It was Kan. He was stood in front of the post nearest the throne. While he stood there docile, with his eyes never lifting from the ground, the gargoyle bound his wrists behind it. John’s heart sank, and he began to grow impatient with the dragon’s tactics.

“Now that you have seen the prisoner, let us get on with the details of our bargain.”

“I make no bargains with you, lizard, bring out the girl. My patience wears thin.”

The dragon chuckled softly. “Ah, so it is only for a woman you will bargain. Such lascivious behavior for a paragon of virtue. I doubt that the One to Whom you proclaim allegiance would approve.”

“I am uninterested in your opinions of my behavior,” John shot back. “Just bring her out. Now.”

“Very well,” the monster said slyly. “Bring the woman out.” The gargoyle repeated the process as with Kan. Through the same door came a honey-blond in a royal blue gown—the temptress who had drugged John. She was bound to the remaining post, but far from being docile she writhed and struggled the entire time.

When she saw John she began yelling, “Help me, please. I’m sorry I—”

“Silence,” roared the dragon as he stood up. John thought he saw a wisp of flame come from the creature’s mouth. He turned back to John. “Now, in a stroke of generosity unprecedented, I offer both these humans the opportunity to not only live but leave this cave of their own free will in exchange for your surrender. But I warn you to act quickly. Such impulses do not last long. Bear in mind that your alternative is to watch me char them to cinders, and then die yourself anyway. Surely no true Christian would stand by and allow this to occur when it was in his power to stop it. And lest you think me incapable of making good my threat...” With that

he reared back and inhaled deeply. He held it for a split second while some internal process was occurring. Then he let out a blast of searing flame that reached clear across the pit and backed John and Riesenhaft up from where they stood. He laughed long and hard at them, then turned back to Kan and the woman. “Now, make your decision, for I will wait no longer.”

“You know what I’m here for,” shouted John. “I have no interest in these two deceivers you have put on display to trick me. There is no bargain to be made unless I see Holly. I demand that you let me see her this instant.”

“You? You *demand*?” He let out peals of laughter that echoed off every wall. He turned to his minions, “He...demands.” He continued to guffaw, joined by a chorus of eerie noises, presumably laughter, from the fiend gallery. “I am sorry, dear boy, but your ‘demand’ is literally impossible to fulfill. You see, your lovely blushing bride is dead. I was sure someone would have told you by now—pity. It seems she ended up falling into this pit you see before you. It was a most unfortunate incident, but I can assure you, she is indeed quite dead.”

Anger, frustration, hatred—a plethora of emotions boiled inside John as he, almost accidentally, looked down at his sword. What he saw made his heart leap:

HE IS A LIAR AND THE FATHER OF IT.

“After all,” the dragon was saying smugly, “certainly no one has ever accused me of resurrecting the dead.” Then he launched into another fit of raucous laughter, cut short by John’s voice of rage.

“Then it will be your carcass hurtling down into the pit next, you bat-winged snake.”

“By whose hand?” the dragon mocked. “You and that traitorous buffoon?”

“By the power of the Spirit of the Living God and the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth His Holy Son, in Whom is all authority in Heaven in Earth and under the Earth.”

“Think not that your incantations can bother me, boy,” he roared. His words to the contrary notwithstanding, he immediately took to the air with his huge outstretched wings. Flanked on either side by a squadron of gargoyles, he flew directly at John to engage in battle.

“Riesenhaft, to the left,” instructed John. The entire gallery of fiends had left their quarters. All those incapable of flight headed toward them around the left side of the circular walkway. Riesenhaft met them halfway and immediately commenced cutting a swath, as a reaper with his scythe, through the mob of wolf-faces and lions. The gargoyles had joined the dragon. Evidently intimidated by the purportedly ineffectual mention of the Lord, the demons headed for Riesenhaft instead.

The hovering gargoyles arrayed themselves on either side of John while the dragon landed directly in front of him and reared back. Taking a lesson from his prior encounter with the gargoyles, John backed completely up against the wall. He quickly recognized the error of his ways when the blast of fire came out of the dragon’s mouth. While his shield protected him perfectly in front, the backwash off the wall nearly baked him where he stood. He quickly rushed forward, but as soon as he finished his fire-breath, the dragon took to wing leaving John with nothing to fight. He reared again, landed, and blew another long blast of flame. For the duration of the blast John crouched behind his shield. Again the dragon took to flight immediately afterward.

Now, away from the wall, John was vulnerable to gargoyle attack. Somewhat surprisingly, they were fairly well coordinated. One at a time, from one squadron at a time, they flew at him between breaths of fire from their master. Eli had been right, they did at least have some self-preservation instinct. They avoided flying into the path of that searing flame which could only have meant instant death. With each respite between flame attacks, a gargoyle would swoop at him. John would hold his shield out from himself loosely enough that the creature would not knock him off his feet. He would immediately crouch behind the shield to weather the next onslaught of flame.

And so the cycle repeated, over and over. Although he was holding his own, John knew that sooner or later one of the gargoyle hits would catch him solidly. Enough so to put him on the ground, or knock his shield away. In either case, he would be broiled in his own armor. He was completely unable to even endanger the elusive dragon. The beast was no fool. Soon he

would likely try a new wrinkle in his attack strategy, one that could prove deadly. John knew he was, quite simply, running out of time. As another long blast of flame had him hunkered down behind his shield, John whispered a quick prayer for wisdom. He glanced down at his sword. It read:

WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED

TOGETHER IN MY NAME, THERE AM I

Two or three? John wondered. Who could it be? Riesenhaft is too uncertain in his beliefs to be truly 'gathered in His name.' So where will my rescue come from?

John had no more time to ponder the issue for the fire had ended and a gargoyle bore down upon him. This time it dislodged his shield from him and sent it sliding several feet across the floor. Eagerly the dragon landed and reared back for a finishing blast as John dived across the floor for the life-preserving shield.

At that moment, the other of the two doors to the right of the dragon's throne burst open amid a hail of splinters. A gargoyle, whose head had evidently been the tool used to open the heavy door lay still as death on the ground. He was followed an instant later by a figure clad, except for a sword, in the whole armor of God.

XXVII. BACK-TO-BACK

It was a smallish person, though behind the armor John could not make out who it was. The distraction had caused enough hesitation in the dragon for John to retrieve his shield. The monster therefore turned his attention to the newly arrived Christian soldier instead. He turned toward the newcomer and began rearing his head.

“Look out!” John yelled. “Get behind your shield.”

“John,” came the answer, called out in a high, melodic voice with a slight tremor in it.

“Holly!” John ran to the dragon who had taken his preparatory breath prior to exhaling fire. The closest thing to John was the creature’s flapping wing. John caught it on a down stroke and hacked a slice into it. Like a ship’s sail once torn, it immediately ripped clear up to the dragon’s back. This had the effect of not only rendering him flightless, but surprised him into swallowing when he intended to breathe his fire out. The result was somewhat akin to one who sneezes while in the midst of a hiccup. As one might suspect, however, with the extra factor of fire involved it was exponentially worse.

While the dragon belched and coughed smoke, Holly ran down and joined her husband. To their amazement, the instant her hand touched his sword she had one as well. The turn of events had proven too much for the underpowered brains of the gargoyles to comprehend. So they had formed a hovering war council. This also provided an opportunity for John and Holly to set their strategy. What both of them wanted most in all the world was to stop time, just for a few minutes, and hold one another tight. But if it was to happen at all, it would have to wait.

“We’ll stand back-to-back,” instructed John. “Try to keep the gargoyles occupied while I strike at the dragon. When I yell for you to duck, get down quick so my shield can protect us against his fire. Let me see your shield.”

“I don’t know how to hold it,” she said. She had the arm strap held in her hand.

“No, sweetheart, you—” He stopped and thought for a second. “Actually, that’s perfect. That’s what they’ll attack so hold it away from you.”

The dragon was coming toward them on foot, seething with rage. His throat down near his chest was glowing red and pulsating. It was a type of heartburn no human could relate to. As he prepared to engage once again in battle, he noticed the extended discussion among his minions huddling above the battleground.

“Dimwitted fools! Stop dawdling and attack.” He breathed a column of fire at them. Had not his flaming abilities been so diminished by his earlier inadvertent inhalation of his own fire, he would certainly have roasted the entire contingent of them on the spot. Luckily for them all he could manage was a thin line of flame. It was still enough to scatter them in all directions. They quickly regrouped into their original squadrons. True to their boss’s bidding, one went on the attack immediately. This time it approached from behind John, directly at Holly.

Meanwhile, seeing that the serpent’s attention was elsewhere, John lunged forward and stabbed the dragon in the knee. He then retreated to his back-to-back position. The dragon roared in pain, reared back, and emitted as much flame as he could muster at his assailant. It was less than half the fire of the earlier part of the battle but John still recognized it as lethal.

“Duck, Holly,” he yelled, and they both crouched down. Unbeknownst to John, his command coincided perfectly with the attack of the gargoyle. It flew harmlessly over the top of them and directly into the dragon’s flame. Feeble or not, the fire was sufficient to turn the gargoyle into a fireball which glided off into the abyss, increasing its glow for a moment. The dragon’s “hot spot” was now glowing bright scarlet. His rasping voice and smoking nostrils indicated that all was not well with him internally.

“Blithering morons!” he shrieked. “Can you do nothing right? Attack!”

So moved to action was one of the gargoyles that he went to the attack out of turn, simultaneous to his counterpart in the opposite squadron, whose turn it was. Seeing them attack her from both sides at once, Holly in confusion kept twisting from one side to the other. She was unsure which way to point the shield. In actuality she could not have done better. In moving their target back and forth, she confused the two attackers such that they flew head-on into each other. One dropped a few feet from Holly, clearly dead. The other spun and spiraled, finally hitting the ground a few feet from the pit. He stood up woozy from the collision, staggered around for a couple of steps, then stepped off into the abyss. This again caused the flames to leap above the rim and the glow in the chamber to brighten momentarily.

Try as he might, the dragon could no longer emit flame, and decided to resort to physical combat. Seeing that the fire was out, the next gargoyle decided to employ the same fateful tactic that had flame-broiled his companion earlier. As he swooped in directly at Holly, the dragon was taking a swipe at John with his huge forepaw. John did not see it coming in time to yell for Holly to duck. The attacking gargoyle got enough of Holly's shield to knock both her and John over. The timing was such that the dragon's blow missed them and instead caught the onrushing airborne attacker just as he was pulling up. The force of the enraged dragon's blow knocked the gargoyle on a line drive against the far right wall. He hit and never moved again.

Now worked into a blind fury, the dragon began chomping at John with sharp six-inch teeth. John moved away from Holly for fear that the dragon might catch her from behind. He used his quickness to duck and sidestep each attempt, once, twice, three times. The dragon's anger and frustration grew with each try.

Holly, meanwhile, had one of the few remaining gargoyles heading toward her at full speed, the right height, unswerving, and without concern for any collision or miscalculation. Holly held her shield out, and her sword up. An instant later she found herself finishing the last of three backward somersaults without her sword or shield. The latter was sliding some twenty feet away across the smooth floor. The former was found to have its hilt sticking out of the now-deceased gargoyle's upper chest and its point out his lower back.

As the dragon reared for another try at biting his opponent in half, John tightened his arm for a mighty blow. “In the name of Jesus,” he grunted, stepped up underneath the dragon’s head and swung his sword upward with all his strength. The headless torso of the dragon, the neck stem spouting black blood, convulsed. As the heavy tail slid over the side of the pit, the rest of the body followed it in. From deep below them came a rumble. The ground began to quake as blue and red fire spewed straight upward out of the abyss, reaching the ceiling. The gargoyles, stunned momentarily, all power-dived, joining their master’s body in the pit. The few surviving wolf-faces plus the one lion that had managed to escape Riesenhaft’s sword did likewise. The fire increased even more.

John ran past the dragon’s head, which lay, eyes closed, in a pool of black blood. He helped Holly to her feet. “Are you all right?” he asked.

She gave no answer but threw her arms around him as their helmets and breastplates clanged together. They backed away and removed their helmets in unison, then shared an enraptured kiss.

“You’re hurt,” she said, touching the cut on his cheek.

“It’s nothing.” As they hugged, John caught a glimpse of Riesenhaft. Demons, apparently not the suicidal type, still swarmed all over him like ants on a sugar cube. Riesenhaft stood paralyzed.

“In the name of the Eternal Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord, I command you demons to leave him, and be cast into the pit,” John called out boldly. An unearthly moan rose up, so eerie that Holly clung to John’s arm. Then the entire host of demons threw themselves into the pit causing the rumbling, quaking, and the force of the fire to increase again. Riesenhaft collapsed and from across the huge room came a cry for help. It was the blue-gowned temptress, still tied to the post.

“Amanda!” cried Holly. “John, you’ve got to go help her.”

“Amanda? You mean that’s—”

“Yes. Hurry and cut her loose.”

“Fine, but we’ve got to get out of here. It’s boiling hot and this place acts like it’s going to blow up any minute.” He ran up the terraced steps on the right side toward where the two were tied. He called to Holly, “See if you can help Riesenhaft; the giant.” Holly hurried over to him and found he had managed to get to his hands and knees and was shaking his large head in an effort to clear it.

“Here, let me help you up,” she said, grabbing his huge arm in both of hers.

He looked perplexed and asked, “Who are you? Are you a friend of John’s?”

She smiled and said proudly, “I’m his wife, Holly Stander.”

He got to his feet without truly making use of her assistance, though he thanked her anyway. “Then, we have succeeded?” he said incredulously. Having been so preoccupied, and later possessed, he had not known of John’s victory. Upon seeing the dragon’s severed head, he stared in amazement. “He has done it; the impossible.”

“The power of God did it; nothing is impossible,” she corrected.

On the opposite side of the circle, Amanda was begging John’s forgiveness. “They made me do it. I couldn’t help it. Please.”

“There’s no time to go into that now,” he said as he sliced her bonds with his sword. “Were you at least telling the truth about there being a quick way out of here?”

“Oh yes,” she answered eagerly as she removed the ropes from her wrists. “I can take you there right now.”

“Good. Go on down with Holly. I’ll be right there.” As she hurried around the circle, John turned to Kan. “What about you? Do you want to come with us?” Kan, who had yet to speak, remained silent giving only a quick, short nod. John slashed the ropes with one swing of his sword and took off to join the others. He called to Kan, “Come on then, let’s get going.” Kan hurried along behind him.

Just as John reached the others, the head of the dragon moved slightly. Its eyes opened and eerily glowed deep amber, and then it spoke. “Think not that you have defeated me,” it bellowed.

XXVIII. LIKE A THOUSAND CANNONS

At these words by the disembodied head, everyone recoiled in horror. Everyone, that is, except Riesenhaft. With an uncanny calm he picked it up on his big sword blade and flung it, much as he had flipped John his helmet, out into the pit where it dropped out of sight. In an instant the quaking became violent and the rush of fire threatened to overwhelm the group.

“Let’s go,” ordered John above the roar. They rushed out into the marbled hall, through the anteroom, and down the corridor. Before long they reached the door Riesenhaft had broken down. In the small room beyond, they paused to let the slow-footed Riesenhaft catch up. As he arrived they felt a rush of wind from the tunnel they had just left. A roiling ball of flame was rushing after them.

“Hurry Amanda, where next?” shouted John as the rumbling and quaking intensified.

“This way,” she called and headed off down the corridor containing all the little dead-end passages. She counted down a few, then led them into one which looked no different than the rest. It curved around slightly, however, and in the dark recess was a narrow opening leading into another long, rising passageway. At the end of it they could see a small shaft of light. It took a concerted effort to pull Riesenhaft through the opening. As they did so, Amanda reminded John about the sentries who guarded the exit.

“All right,” said John. “Riesenhaft, you and I will take the lead. Kan, while we occupy the sentries, you get the women out at your first opportunity.” He half hoped that the sentries

had abandoned their post with the demise of the serpent just as the gargoyles had done. *There isn't going to be much time, the way this cave is acting*, he thought.

As they neared the opening to the outside world, Holly called out, "John, I left my sword and shield in the lair of the dragon."

"Don't worry, Holly, God will get us through."

When they reached the end of the passage, John was surprised to see only one sentry, and even more surprised at its appearance. It had the body of a man, but the head of a huge hawk—exactly like the Egyptian depictions of the pagan god Ra. It stood in their path with an outstretched sword. Behind the sentry, at the very opening to the outside world, a shriveled corpse leaned against the left side. Its hair and nails were grown out, its skin shrunk back from the bone. It was presumably one of the sentry's latest victims. The passage they were in widened out as it approached the opening, then, a few feet from the opening itself, it bottlenecked down to only six or seven feet across. The Ra-sentry stood at the entrance to the bottleneck.

Riesenhaft set to work on the sentry immediately. Having seen the giant's swordplay, John expected a swift conclusion. To his surprise and disappointment, in the Ra he had met his match. For a moment or two there was nothing but a blur of swords and a staccato clanging as the two battled. The Ra moved almost no other part of its body except the arm that held the sword. The rumble and shaking grew with each passing second and John wanted to get Holly and Amanda past if nothing else.

"Riesenhaft, give some ground," John said. "Draw him in so we can get the women out of here." Somehow he assumed that a creature with a bird's head would not be able to understand him.

The big man was reluctant to back up; he had his pride. Knowing the need, though, he did so. According to plan, the sentry followed.

"Kan, I'm going to try and force the battle to the right," John instructed. "See if you can get the women by on the left while we've got this thing preoccupied." Kan nodded, and John joined in the battle with the Ra. With an eye on each side of its head, the creature was able to

keep both attackers at bay. Inexperienced as he was, John almost had his arm amputated by the skillful enemy. Nevertheless, he was able to help back the sentry toward the right wall.

“Hurry up, Kan. I can’t keep this up all day.”

Kan motioned for them to follow and they rushed past the combatants to the opening. Gentlemanly, Kan let Amanda and then Holly exit first. As he started to step out, the corpse leaped upon Kan’s back and sank its teeth deep into his left shoulder. It held on parasitically, while Kan cried out in agony.

Some combination of Kan’s sudden scream, the bright daylight on her unaccustomed eyes, and the short ledge saw Amanda get overbalanced and go over the edge. She managed to catch hold of a hardy leafless bush and found herself dangling some seventy-five feet up on the cliff.

“Holly!” she screamed. “Help me. I’ve barely got a hold.” Though she was only about three feet below the ledge, it was too far for Holly to reach down and grab her hands.

John had worked his way around so that he was fighting the Ra with his back to the cave opening while Riesenhaft continued to fight from within. Unfortunately John was unable to pose much of a threat even having himself and Riesenhaft on opposite sides of the enemy. With Kan’s screams, John abandoned the battle with the Ra and turned to see if he could help Kan. By the time he understood what he was seeing, Kan’s entire left side was already shriveling like the corpse’s. He was sinking to his knees in agony. John slashed viciously at the monster, cutting it in half at the waist. To his horror, not only did this not cause the corpse to let go of Kan, but its severed lower torso simply reattached itself.

“John,” called Holly in panicked tones. “Give me your belt.” Though such a request could certainly have led to questions given the circumstances, John had no time to ask them. He simply pulled it off and tossed it to her, and returned to Kan who was either dead or very nearly so.

Disgusted with the hideous corpse, John sliced right down its face and arms, separating all but the teeth themselves from Kan’s body. Then in revulsion he hacked the murderous corpse

into pieces. They immediately began to quiver and try to rejoin with each other. He felt a rush of wind from the tunnel. *All the tunnels must be filling with fireballs*, he thought.

Holly, meanwhile, had removed her belt and slipped the free end of John's belt through the buckle of hers. That made a strap the length of the two combined, held in the middle by the one buckle being inside the other. There was a ledge to the left of and a couple of feet below the one Holly was on, but Amanda couldn't reach it on her own. It led up a short gentle slope to a large rock outcropping overshadowed by another about four feet above it.

"Amanda, grab this belt. I'm going to try and swing you over to that ledge to your right. Here it comes."

Amanda had her doubts that her tired arms could hold out long enough to be swung anywhere or that Holly was strong enough to swing her. She tried it in desperation anyway—as desperate people do. Holly, hard-working farm girl, was equal to the task. Amanda was able to grab the ledge and get a foothold despite the gown she wore. Seeing Amanda safely on the ledge, Holly jumped over to it as well. The two of them scrambled up under the overhanging rock.

John scattered the quivering corpse pieces farther apart with his sword to avoid their reconnecting. He felt the rush of air increase and could see at the far end of the tunnel a tsunami of fire closing rapidly on them. The sentry was still battling Riesenhaft to a draw and stood between the giant and the opening where John was. Trying to fence with the sentry from behind had proven fruitless for John. There were only seconds left before the blast of fire hit.

The ground was shaking so that he could hardly stand, and John was desperate to get his immense friend out. Standing some ten feet away, he tried the only thing left he could think of. He held his sword javelin-style by the hilt and threw it point-first at the hawk-headed sentry. The odds of such a throw landing point-first in the middle of its target are not good even without an earthquake. But to everyone's surprise, especially the Ra, the sword buried itself deep in the creature's back. The sentry arched its back and screeched in pain. Its cry was cut short—literally—by the removal of its hawklike head at the hands of Riesenhaft and his unsympathetic blade.

John had only time to shout, “Hurry,” and head out the exit, as the raging tide of fire bore down upon them. Riesenhaft was right behind him, just passing by Kan, who was collapsed dead on the ground. He, now, had the same appearance as the original corpse.

John stepped out into the light and heard Holly call out to him from his left. Stumbling on the quaking ledge, he managed to leap down to the one the women were on. He clambered over to them amid a hail of falling dirt and pebbles, precursors to the inevitable landslide to come. He turned to see if Riesenhaft was coming. Though what he saw lasted only a fraction of a second, it remained indelibly stamped on his memory. It was the giant trying to dislodge the corpse of Kan, which had attached itself leechlike to his back, biting deeply into his neck.

At that instant the blast hit, sounding like a thousand cannons and obliterating them in volcanic fire. The cliff shook and rocked like a toy boat in a typhoon. The hail of falling rocks and dirt became an avalanche of earth and boulders. John had scurried to join the women under the outcrop. The three huddled tightly together throughout the eternal minutes of the conflagration. They clung to the shelter of the rock, and the rock protected them.

Finally the shaking subsided and the noise of the blast ceased. Dirt and rubble continued falling for several minutes before it, too, calmed to a trickle. In the silence that followed, they were enveloped in an opaque cloud of dust that left them coughing and sputtering until it slowly dissipated.

XXIX. THE REPENTANT

“Everybody all right?” John asked. Amanda nodded and Holly embraced him. It was then, as he felt her softness against him, they both realized that the armor was gone. Amid frantic kisses and hugs they both babbled uncontrollably of love, gratefulness, and joy at seeing one another. They exhausted their vocabularies of phrases of endearment and pet names. The words were unnecessary to the hearer, but the speaker could not hold them in.

After carrying on in this fashion for an embarrassingly, but forgivably, long time, Holly took notice of Amanda fidgeting uneasily. “Oh. Excuse us, Amanda. Amanda Marsh, this is my husband, John Stander.”

John thought of saying that they had already met, but remained silent. Amanda looked from John to Holly and back again several times, her face a mask of worry and guilt. She grimaced in pain and shielded her eyes with her hand, as her lower lip began to tremble.

“Oh, Holly,” she cried. “I’m so ashamed. I don’t deserve to be alive. I can’t ever be forgiven. I tried to kill John.”

“What?” Holly exchanged glances with John, who looked back at Amanda.

“In the cave, while you were imprisoned, I tried to seduce him and then I tried to kill him.” Tears left stains in the dust that lingered on her face. “I even told him you were dead. I’m so sorry.

“But,” she added, “he was so honorable, he pushed me away and said he only loved you. And I’m sure he didn’t believe me when I said you’d died.” John hated that she was making him

sound so noble; he felt his own guilt. “They made me do it,” she continued amid her sobs as Holly took her in her arms and held her. “They said I could go free if I did.” She cried into Holly’s shoulder.

“Shh,” Holly whispered. “It’s all right. It’s over now and God has taken care of us—and you *can* be forgiven.”

John took Amanda’s hand and consoled her. “You were in that horrid place for three years. No one could be held responsible for their actions in that asylum, especially for so long.”

“Of course they couldn’t,” agreed Holly sympathetically. She held Amanda by the shoulders and looked into her tear-filled eyes.

“See, after I was there for a while I escaped,” said Amanda between sniffs. “I mean, I didn’t get out of the cave but I hid out. At least I wasn’t around those horrible creatures. For a long time I stayed in those little passages and lived off the food left for that huge man who...gave his life to save us. Then they recaptured me. It must have been after you were already in the cave. They offered me my freedom if I could turn John from God or kill him or, preferably, both. But I didn’t know he was your husband, Holly, honest. I feel so wicked. What am I going to do?”

“Look,” said Holly sternly. “We’re alive, and God must have arranged that for a reason. You’re not the only one with cause to feel guilty. When my sister had those disgusting creatures kidnap me I was eaten-up with hatred for her. It was a seething, vile hate, and it wasn’t until I realized that I couldn’t keep feeding it and letting it fester that my rescue came about. But you can’t dwell on those mistakes. God forgives you, and so does John. Don’t you John?”

“Of course I do. And we all fell short at some point in there. I certainly let the Lord down a lot of times.” Then he looked at Holly. “And I really was tempted by Amanda while you were...I’m so sorry Holly, please forgive—”

Holly put her fingers over his mouth and shook her head. “It’s not necessary. You have been true to me and saved my life, I need know nothing more.”

“I love you,” said John, meaning it with all his heart. Then he added with a playful chuckle, “Mrs. Stander.” She smiled in return and, even covered with dirt, as they all were, it had the beauty of a sunrise. Amanda was feeling better, and seeing the joy of love between the two, she felt glad for Holly’s happiness.

“Well let’s get our feet back on level ground,” announced John slapping his legs and standing.

“Yes, please,” agreed Amanda.

The ledge they were on fronted the pass between the cliffs. John looked over to where the cave opening had been to see if, by some miracle, Riesenhaft had survived. There was no longer an opening, but only a collapsed mass of rubble. The giant was nowhere to be seen, nor was any trace of him ever found.

The combination of earthquake and slide had greatly improved the lay of the pass. Several impassable rocks and boulders had rolled away or resettled into wider areas that would now enable a wagon to pass. Also a thick layer of dirt had settled over the rubble. With a little tamping and smoothing, it looked as though it would once again become a usable trail.

They climbed down in the bright sunlight of what the slightly moist freshness of the air suggested was mid-morning. As they walked toward town, Holly, at John’s insistence, explained how she had come to be wearing the Armor and how she had gotten out of the prison. She had been in a cell praying, not so much for her rescue, but that John, whom she was sure would be seeking her, would be safe. She had asked that she might be used of God, however He saw fit, to help her beloved. With that, a blinding light filled the cell. When it abated she was clad in the Armor, and the inner cell door was open. She had gone to the wooden door leading into the lair of the dragon to see if it would open, but it was locked from the outside. As she turned and walked away a few steps to begin looking for an alternate exit, the gargoyle who served as jailer arrived. He was driven to a frenzy by the shield. Not knowing the correct way, she held it in her hand by the arm strap. When he flew at her she held it away from herself defensively. The beast hit it, it swiveled in her hand, and the gargoyle sailed past head first into the thick wooden door.

The crash banged it open and caved-in his skull at the same time. She stepped out to find someone clad in identical armor doing battle with the dragon. She discovered it was John only when she heard his warning.

As the three—dirty, ragged, and disheveled—reached the first group of houses, they found a mob awaiting them. It consisted of almost the entire population of Cliff Harbor. The crowd stood in a silence of either fear or awe. When the three had come within a few yards of them, a woman cried out, “It is; it’s Holly Young.” Then, after a brief pause, she shouted, even more incredulous, “And Amanda Marsh.” The crowd gasped and buzzed, forming a semicircle around them. Another woman stepped forward from the crowd and asked, “Is—is it over?”

“It’s over,” John replied. “The Evil One has been beaten.”

“How can we be sure?” a man asked. “How do you know he isn’t still present?”

“I know,” said another man stepping up to John and offering his hand. “John Stander, I’m Harold Byington.” John recognized the man who had shaken his fist at the wedding. “And I know you have succeeded because,” he turned to the crowd, “because I can feel it. And so do all of you. You’re not out here just because the earthquake stopped. You can feel that the dark, heavy weight of oppression and evil has been removed and replaced with the sweet freshness of life.”

“He’s right, I feel it too,” came a voice from the back. Several others chimed in with agreement and soon there were huzzas of joy and exultation throughout the entire crowd.

“We all owe a lot of apologies. And none more so than to you, dear Holly. I—we—treated you so shamefully. We humbly beg your forgiveness.”

Holly, completely unaccustomed to kindness from Cliff Harbor’s townspeople, was at a loss for words and could only smile and nod her answer.

“And you, Amanda, forgive us for not being courageous enough to do what this heroic young man has done: battle evil to rescue one so deserving.” Harold then turned to the crowd again. “Now, if you’ll bear with me, I need to ask the most important forgiveness of all.” He dropped to his knees, bowed his head, and prayed a soul-rending outpouring of pent-up guilt that

left not a dry eye in the group. Nor was there any doubt that he was leaving blacksmithing for his former occupation.

As he was finishing, but still on his knees, a murmur went up and the crowd parted. Into the midst of the group strode Catherine. She stared at the kneeling preacher for a moment, then looking at Holly. As she walked slowly toward her she burst into tears.

“Holly. I’m sorry. Please—” She broke into loud tormented wailing as she sank to her knees. Holly rushed over, threw her arms around her and wept with her. In the same way that John had discerned the evil that characterized Catherine, he now perceived that a distinct change had come over her. She was not trying to get the upper hand on Holly. This was genuine. But from the crowd came a more ominous reaction.

“Stay away from her.”

“She belongs to the Devil.”

“She’s a witch. She should be burned.”

The mood of the crowd indicated their readiness to find someone to pay for their years of misery. “Get away from her Holly. She’s the reason you were in that place.”

“Don’t you think I know that? But she’s come to ask my forgiveness, and I won’t deny it to her. She’s my sister.” Somehow those final three words gave Catherine more comfort than any others she might have heard. She stood up and faced the mob.

“It’s true, I was a witch. I did belong to Satan. But no more. The evil that overshadowed Cliff Harbor is gone. I’m sure it will reappear somewhere, but not here, not anymore. And I’m free of it. In fact, I want to learn about Jesus, if someone will teach me.” Silence. She appealed with more urgency, “Doesn’t anyone believe me?”

“I do.” It was Tom Byington. “I believe you. And I would be honored to study with you,” he looked around at the crowd, “and anyone else who wishes it.”

His father spoke up, “In fact, this being Sunday, I think it’s time for all of us to learn about our Lord. So I’m announcing that by noon I’m going to ring the bells of that old church building. And I’m inviting every one of you to come and hear the first gospel preaching we’ve had since—

well it's been too long." A cheer of approval went up, and he added, "Also, we're going to set aside some time for something very special. We're going to give Holly and John a real wedding—not one with threats and gunshots, but a genuine church wedding. So you two better get yourselves fancied-up in a hurry."

"Oh," said Catherine, "and Auntie Muriel's worried sick about you—literally. You'd better hurry home and let her know you're all right."

XXX. THE FAREWELL

The wedding later that day was no less hastily put together than the last one. However, the joyous atmosphere was a thousand times better. It was made even more special by Catherine providing Holly with a beautiful white wedding gown from her shop. Besides the wedding, John and Holly were asked to recount their adventures to the standing-room-only crowd in the church building. They only took time to hit the highlights, but enough to glorify God. This set the stage for Harold Byington's rousing sermon. The congregation at Cliff Harbor grew from zero to over one hundred fifty that very day. The first two to make known their desire to seek God's forgiveness were Catherine and Amanda, greeted by Holly's tears of joy.

That evening Holly, John, and a joyous Auntie Muriel were served supper by none other than Catherine. Afterward she conducted a brief but spirited debate over who should have the main house. The issue was settled when John, maintaining as much propriety as possible, got the message across that the contents of the bungalow, namely a bed, was really all the newlywed couple needed at this point. It gave Catherine the opportunity to inform Auntie Muriel that the main house was hers for as long as she lived. "I have some important apologies to make to this wonderful lady," Catherine said, embracing her aunt. John was pleased to see the same look of love for Catherine in the old woman's rheumy eyes as she always had for Holly.

That night John and Holly shared that special joy of intimacy. The knowing and becoming one with the only person to whom you are totally, uniquely, and irrevocably committed for life. They meant every word of their vows, "forsaking all others, till death do us part." Their

inexperience, far from detracting, instead made their efforts to please each other that much more precious. Their exclusive commitment to each other made their love a glorious treasure. The greatest mystery to them was that so many others fail to realize this simple truth, so clearly supported by the Word of God.

It was late in the morning before the smiling and cuddling newlyweds made an appearance at the main house. Immediately Catherine and Auntie Muriel dropped everything to see that they were treated like royalty. Catherine pampered and hovered over them all during their breakfast. It was as if she were trying to rectify years of antagonism all in one morning. John was moved by the earnestness of his sister-in-law's efforts, and by how eagerly Holly responded.

The two had a lot of wounds to heal. It was a pity to interrupt it by leaving. But before coming for breakfast, John and Holly had decided to go to Lexington right away. They would make a return visit as soon as possible after they were settled. Holly especially, needed to get away from Cliff Harbor for a while. Besides, John's parents needed the chance to meet his new bride. When John asked Holly if she wanted to reconsider, she insisted they go on with their original plans.

During breakfast John inquired about Lila and Burton Gilbert. They rejoiced to hear that they had left on the sloop as he had told Burton they should. It was the first Holly had heard of his giving them money for passage to New York. It merited him the reward of his new bride jumping into his lap, throwing her arms around his neck and smothering him with kisses.

"Honeymooners, honestly," teased Auntie Muriel. "How long's it going to be till you two start acting like normal married folks?"

John gave Holly a squeeze. "I hope we're newlyweds just like this for the rest of our lives." As much as it can be true of any couple, that hope was fulfilled.

When it came time for them to leave, they were surprised to find that the wagon was already loaded with as many gifts from the townspeople as it could hold. There were enough household items to ensure that their little cottage in Lexington would be off to a good start. As if that were not sufficiently overwhelming, practically the whole town escorted them to the pass.

There were choruses of congratulations, gratitude, good wishes, and demands that they return quickly. Holly and John were deeply moved by this heartfelt farewell, and assured everyone of their intentions to come back soon.

They offered to send some money to help support Auntie Muriel, but Catherine would not hear of it. She assured them that she would see to all of her needs. “You’ve given more than enough. Now it’s my turn for awhile.”

With the obligatory hugs and well-wishing they headed off as the first wagon through the newly opened pass. It was not smooth going, but they made it through and eventually to Lexington without incident.

From the time she arrived—that is, once over the initial shock of finding out about their son’s marriage—John’s parents regarded Holly as the daughter they’d never had and spoiled her shamelessly.

Getting settled took more time than John and Holly had anticipated. It was not until three years later when they, along with two-year-old Patrick and four-month-old Tabitha, finally returned to Cliff Harbor. In this instance it was an occasion they absolutely had to attend: the wedding of Catherine to Tom Byington. As if that were not joy enough for Auntie Muriel, watching her hold Holly’s two babies left one the impression that her life had reached its pinnacle. Like Simeon looking upon the infant Jesus, she could go to meet her Maker in peace. Every good thing that could possibly happen to her had now occurred. She pampered and fussed with the children as if their chances to attain normal adulthood were directly proportional to the number of continuous minutes spent in her arms. John certainly had no inclination to protest this spoiling of his children. If the proverb “Pride goeth before destruction” were to hold true in regard to one’s family, he would already have been annihilated long since. One would have been hard-pressed to find a father prouder of his family than John Stander.

Amanda, who had left Cliff Harbor the day after Holly and John, also made an appearance, along with her husband of six months. He was a farmer from Pennsylvania where they now lived,

and where Amanda had finally succeeded in getting past dwelling on the ugly memories of the cave.

As for Cliff Harbor, religious revival and fervor had not taken hold so completely that it had become a bastion of holiness. It had its share of brawlers, swindlers, gossips and such like as is true of any town with people in it. However, there was a special attitude among the townspeople. They had a joy and appreciation of how precious life is, what a miracle birth is, and how good God is. It went even beyond the external evidences such as the baby boom, which had ensued during the intervening years, or the high percentage of faithful Christians among the population. In no circumstance was this attitude more visibly evidenced than in the regal welcome given John and Holly. They were not only still fondly remembered; their exploits had become legendary in their absence. A considerable turnover in population had occurred. Still, enough remained that the two were lauded to the point of embarrassment. They both quickly made a conscious effort to refocus attention on Tom and Catherine, whose celebration this was. It ended up being everything such an event is meant to be.

Just over a month later, the Stander's found themselves back in Cliff Harbor, this time for a much more solemn occasion. It was to attend the funeral of their beloved Auntie Muriel, who had left no doubt that she was "going home" a happy woman. Thus the self-recriminations that might otherwise have occurred, especially for Catherine, were forestalled.

Not long after, Tom, following in his father's footsteps, became the minister of a small congregation. Coincidentally, it was not far from John and Holly and their families grew up together. John often teased Catherine about how her vow to become as holy as a preacher's wife was now fulfilled. Her response was always the same. "I'm definitely a preacher's wife, but the Lord and I are still working on the holiness." The sisters, who were now sisters spiritually as well as physically, became more than sisters. They, along with their families, became best friends as well.

Some five years after the birth of their sixth and last child, the Stander's received a letter. It was written—or rather, printed—in a very deliberate though completely legible style. When Holly opened it, several bills of currency fluttered to the floor, twenty-five dollars in all. She picked them up and then, making a few grammatical corrections here and there, began reading the letter aloud:

August 11, 1867

Dearest Holly and John,

I pray that this letter finds you, as I have wanted for many years to get your address. I visited Cliff Harbor in June and that elderly preacher there was able to give it to me. Some years ago, right after I first learned how, I wrote to your aunt to ask what happened to you. My letter was returned saying she had passed away, may God rest her soul, and that you had both moved away. There was no address given where you were but at least I knew you were both safe. I praised the Lord for that. I don't know if you heard, but my husband, Walter, was waiting for us at the station when we arrived in New York. He had been waiting there every day for a week. He later got a job as janitor there at the station where he still works. Funny how the Lord works ain't it? I don't know who was the happiest to see the other, Walter or Burton, but it sure brought joy to my soul. About Burton, I guess you wouldn't know. He joined the Union army late in 1864 to "help free his people" as he used to say. He came down with the fever after only two months and my dear Burton went to meet the Lord without ever going into battle. He sure looked proud in that fine uniform, though, his own self.

Here Holly broke down in tears to the point where even though she tried several times to continue, John had to read the rest:

He used to talk about you all the time and ask if we could go see you somehow. I wish we could have. I guess we will all get to see him again one day. I hope you will forgive me for taking so long to repay this money. It's nowhere near enough for all your kindness. I know God will bless you, and you will always be close to my heart. Even though we only knew each other such a short time, I still think of you as my dearest friends. May the Lord keep you and your family.

Your loving friends,
Lila and Walter Gilbert

P.S. I heard the Lord has blessed you with six children. Walter and I have four.
Glory to Jesus.

XXXI. EPILOGUE

John and Holly lived to see twenty-three grandchildren, twelve great-grandchildren, and two great great grandchildren. The ever-growing Stander population developed in them a fondness for family reunions. They gathered as much of the clan as they could together whenever possible. There soon developed a tradition that at some point in the festivities, all the children would come to hear “Grandpa John” tell his amazing tale of Cliff Harbor and the cave. It was a tale so strange that it needed no exaggeration, and the children would sit spellbound throughout its telling. As some of them became older, however, they would sometimes evidence a certain skepticism at the oft-told story. Holly would always sit silently by, next to John, and do needlework as the tale was told. She would appear to be scarcely paying attention but actually kept an eagle eye out for signs of doubt among those who felt they had outgrown believing in such things. Then, at the story’s conclusion, Holly, the quintessential kindly, sweet little grandmother, would stand solemnly. She would stare icily at the audience and, pointing a finger at them fiercely, declare, “Every word of that story is the absolute truth, and don’t any of you ever forget it.” Any doubts that had existed prior to that warning quickly vanished, and it would be safe to say that none of them ever did forget it. As a final dramatic flair, John would point to the small scar on his cheek and explain how he got it. Then, after the buzzing died down, Holly would send the children out to play. For several hours after, every stick found on the ground would become a “Sword of the Spirit.”

On the occasion of the last telling of the tale, John and Holly were so enfeebled from age that it had to be told from their bed. At its conclusion, Sara, one of the younger great-grandchildren, came over and tugged on the old man's sleeve.

"But Grandpa John, where's the Armor now?" the child asked.

Holly and John looked knowingly at each other and took one another's trembling hand. John turned back to the little girl and gently laid a hand on her head. He smiled and answered cryptically, "We're still wearing it, sweetheart. We're still wearing it."

THE END