

TERMINAL CRUISE

Chapter A

September 1862

A week before the big battle a deacon of the Root of Jesse Fellowship received the following most curious correspondence:

Edith Haivri % Congregation Bet Hannebim

44 Old Clifton Road,

Williamsport, Maryland

Mr. Joshua Lange

260 Smoketown Road,

Sharpsburg, Maryland

Dear Deacon Lange,

As fellow servants of the one Lord of Heaven and Earth, separated by historical circumstances to our most profound rue, it is known to we your B'nai Elohim neighbors that upon the 17th instant the Federal and secessionist armies will come to blows in the woods and fields nigh to your handsome meetinghouse .

For the peace of mind of our separated brethren among the Root of Jesse Fellowship we offer temporary lodging at our own house of prayer in Williamsport for any such members of your faith assembly who would seek safe haven during the upcoming battle. This hospitality we extend at no cost, with a mind especially to the safekeeping of your horses and mules and cattle. The secessionists do not customarily accost the people in the lands they trample, but any property going about on four hooves is considered by both armies to be ripe for the picking, and this you no doubt well know.

Here we take special pains to note that when artillery is heard upon the heights of South Mountain this following Sunday (that is, September the 14th) it shall be too late to use any of the roads without putting your animals at hazard of being stolen. Your meetinghouse will become most unsafe. Therefore we shall consider the arrival in Williamsport of folk and flock, at any time day or night, sufficient notice that you have accepted our humble offer of sanctuary.

Most Sincerely Yours,

Edith Haivri

1862-09-08

Edith's letter sharply divided the Brethren when it was read to the faithful during Wednesday night prayer meeting. Some didn't trust Miss Haivri on sectarian grounds. Going by the name of her organization, clearly she was not even a Christian. Perhaps she was even Romish. Others suspected a dark plot to steal their animals. There was also the matter of the portrait Edith had enclosed in the letter. She was adorned with a jewel-encrusted headdress

that seemed outlandish to the simple farmers and contrary to the instruction of both Peter and Paul in the sacred scriptures. Upon her head Edith wore two tapered white horns curved, it seemed, in mockery of an angel's halo. And her image was not hand-tinted but in full lifelike color, which thing none of the farmers had even heard rumor. Some thought Edith to be a witch.

Just half of the brethren took their families and animals to the proffered shelter, and alone among the diverse faith assemblies in the area only the Root of Jesse Fellowship, divided though they were, replied to Edith at all, though she had addressed a dozen congregations and more.

On the afternoon of the 17th muskets fell like dominoes along two stone walls and fired, burning the eyes of men with the smoke of spent powder. Downstream the walls became the rails of a sturdy stone bridge where shouting soldiers converged on foot. The federals had the greater momentum and nearly reached the other side of the creek before the rebels bounced them back.

Under fire the boys in blue trod in reverse over bodies now one layer deep. Some were dead, others writhed with broken bones or lead balls lodged in their innards. Some of the fallen men had survived the battle of Shiloh where the war first attained this level of savagery.

A tube loaded with canister shot lined up on the long axis of the bridge and mowed down rebels like grass to form a second layer of bodies. Some of these men escaped the artillery hell of Malvern Hill in Virginia.

Two guns on the west side of the creek upstream maimed the Union gunners with bursting shells and another tube fired solid shot. The Union gun became a pile of splinters and dented steel. Then followed a Rebel infantry counter-assault. Quickly the men in gray gained most of the bridge, which had become an abattoir.

A colonel on the Union side was shot, but to the wonderment of his men he stood up again with a lead ball wedged in his Bible. With this divine sanction

the officer led yet another attack. Union soldiers standing on the mounting pile of bodies swapped empty muskets for loaded ones handed up to them like water in a fire bucket brigade.

As the fighting dragged on the rebel infantry ran low on gunpowder and the senior officer of their detachment realized the bridge was irretrievably lost. He pulled back his artillery under the cover of fresh troops firing in a rearguard action. The federal general crossed over the creek in the wake of the retreating gray backs. He ordered a major on his staff to secure a horse and ride to headquarters to report a bridgehead had finally been secured. But the officer saw how the bridge was stacked with bodies and refused to further desecrate the dead of either side. Instead he splashed across the stream on foot, bypassing all the carnage on the bridge.

In doing so the major suffered little hardship. After all, as the local farmers all well knew, the water in the creek wasn't even waist deep.

By dusk the Army of Northern Virginia was bottled up against a bend of the Potomac with the river presently running too swift to ford. All the next day General McClellan glared at the battlefield and refused to move, even with a two-to-one numerical advantage. Were the numbers ten-to-one in his favor he would yet wire Washington to object he didn't have enough men.

The meetinghouse of the Root of Jesse Fellowship became an impromptu field hospital. Blood stained the interior walls where daylight intruded in beams through bullet holes. One doctor sedated men with chloroform while another sawed off their limbs and threw them into a growing pile.

But the mercy of God prevailed even in this earthly hell. A courier arrived by horse with orders from McClellan to get the wounded out. The pile of amputated limbs was set ablaze as horse-drawn ambulances carted the maimed men away. Every bump in the road elicited agonized screams from inside. No one who witnessed the convoys of pain and the carnage left on

the field of battle would again say they craved the glories of war. Certainly none of the faithful of Joshua Lange's congregation ever did.

When both armies were entirely gone the Brethren timorously emerged from their homes to bury the dead. For this task the United States government promised a dollar for every man they laid to rest. There was a rumor going around that one fellow, not of the Root of Jesse, dropped sixty dead men into a dry well and took the money.

Their labor was a hateful thing, but more bitter was the sight of their chapel changed into a bullet-riddled slaughterhouse. Hundreds of bodies lay around their house of prayer. The altar was covered with gristle and blood. The east door, where the menfolk entered, and the south door, where the womenfolk arrived separately, had been removed from the hinges and used as operating tables. It almost went without saying the expensive Bible gifted to the congregation had gone missing.

Elder David Long said, "Do not grieve overmuch, my friends. We shall bury the dead and make our meetinghouse like new. If the Brethren have willing hands, soon all of this will be nothing more than a unhappy memory."

But Deacon Joshua Lange remained unmoved by Long's words of hope. He said, "Before our grief fades, Brother David, the same thing may happen once more, or perhaps, God forbid, more than once. Virginia lies just over yonder river. Last month there was a second battle of Manassas!"

"I can do nothing to remedy that misfortune, Brother Joshua. By chance our fertile shore is an easy place for the armies to cross."

"Some are of the mind to accept the help of our new friends of Congregation Beth Hannebim," said Lange, "and get out from underfoot of the crossing armies."

Deacon Jacob Reichard said, "We should let the Lord God make his will on this matter known to us . Let us pray on it, each one of us."

Long said, "Amen to that Brother Jacob! And there is no prayer better than work."

They needed their animals for the task. Half were stolen or slain, but as promised all the beasts entrusted to the care of the B'nai Hannebim were brought back to Sharpsburg. Many of the men of the congregation drove them north to Williamsport, but Edith Haivri accomplished their return entirely by herself. She seemed to have a way with God's creatures that was uncanny.

This power seemed to extend to menfolk. Edith's own horse was groomed far better than she was, yet in short order he fell stone in love with her.

When the Brethren had quite finished burying the fallen soldiers Elder Long declared he would stay in Sharpsburg, as would the Sherrich family, who first donated the land for the meetinghouse. They were intent on restoring their family farm demolished by the clash of the two armies. Five other families also chose to stay and swore to build the ruined meetinghouse anew. But Deacon Joshua Lange sold his inherited corn field for just pennies on the dollar, as it was now little more than a battlefield cemetery.

Ithuriel Haivri, the elder brother of Edith, vowed to aid Joshua and his fellow parishioners to seek a quiet new life out west, far from the continuing threat of war. A number of families were willing to consider making the move but it would take some time to put their land up for sale and make all the necessary preparations. And the seemingly boundless generosity of the B'nei Hannebim still engendered suspicion there was a secret underlying motive. To allay their concerns Joshua accepted Mr. Haivri's offer to become his guest in Williamsport that he might learn more.

On the road to Edith's home Joshua spent much time riding a little behind her and appraising his new love. When the Root of Jesse Fellowship first saw her color portrait many of the parishioners had mistaken her for a young man or a boy, and Joshua had to admit that at the time he did as well. She sat in her saddle a head taller than he did. Her breasts were smallish, her hips were not well-padded. Joshua remained smitten, as ever, but during the ride he idly remarked that Edith might do well for herself to let her dark reddish hair grow out a bit, as it presently made her look like nothing so much as an abnormally tall wood elf.

"No shears come near my head," she pronounced. "The strands grow only so long, no more, and then they fall out one-by-one. I can do nothing about it. My hair has always looked this way."

On the ride the weather took a sudden and unexpected turn for the worse. To Joshua's great astonishment Edith let her horse have the tent while she stood outside in the face of the brief downpour.

At the Hairvri farm near Williamsport Edith spent more time cleaning her horse than helping her brother Ithuriel keep the house clean. Ithuriel wore the same head dress of halo-horns that her sister wore. Joshua had thought them solely a female head adornment.

In the early going he asked the more obvious question, which was whether the B'nei Hannebim were Jewish. Joshua felt it was a sensitive topic. Animosity had long existed between Christians and Jews. It could be traced to the aftermath of the war between the Jews and the Roman empire, when it suited Christians to clearly distinguish themselves from those who violently opposed emperors Vespasian and Titus and subsequently suffered defeat.

Ithuriel was not offended by Joshua's question by any means, and in fact it seemed to offer him some amusement. "Bet Hannebim existed before the first temple," he said, "let alone the cult the rabbis cobbled together these last nineteen centuries with no temple. You can think of us as close cousins

of the Jews. But we were closer relations of the ones who lived in Shomrom but exist now only as a tiny remnant known as the Samaritans. My surname, Ha-lvri, means 'The Stranger' or 'The Immigrant'. The word Hebrew comes directly from that. And by Hannebim we call ourselves the Heralds of God, or the Annunciators of God. But rarely does anyone listen to what we have to say."

"Ah, but Mr. Haivri, some of my own people have already benefited very greatly from what you have had to say."

Joshua thought the Haivri house was a pigsty but the barn was neat as a pin. Yet if the house was disorderly it was from a surfeit of goods that spoke of a deep but casual wealth. The Haivri family, and in fact, every member of Congregation Bet Hannebim Joshua encountered in and around Williamsport, clearly enjoyed ample worldly means. All thought of grubbing a little more from the Sharpsburg farmers seemed very far from their minds. No one was idle, but it seemed Edith attended to her horses for the sheer joy of it rather than for the transportation they offered.

Lange was permitted to dwell in a little unused cottage set apart from Edith's house. Similar arrangements were made by her kin and acquaintances for each of the couples and families from Sharpsburg who came to join Lange on his pilgrimage. Daily they were plied with much food at no cost, but that alone cut deeply across the grain of their upbringing. More than once Joshua entertained the notion that his little uprooted flock had become the personal pastime of Edith's brother.

Ithuriel made the physical structure of Temple Bet Hannebim available for Lange and his people to use on Sundays as their new chapel. Curiously, the B'nei Hannebim had their own week that was just five days long, not seven. Every two months or so their days of worship were in collision, but on those occasions Ithuriel humbly gave way to Lange and allowed his people to use

the meeting house. They were grateful, but one time Lange asked Edith why her brother was willing to make the accommodation.

She said, "Ithuriel is aware of the deep differences between our two groups and he is taking pains to avoid hurting you too much. Some damage is unavoidable."

"What do you mean by hurting us?"

"There is a thing you must know about us," she said. "It goes part and parcel with being the heralds of God. We never lie. Oh, we can remain silent, some of us can hold our silence even to the point of death if needs be. And we are fully capable of speaking falsely. But, well, call it a family tradition: we simply do not lie. And, Joshua, many of the things we know as basic facts are entirely at odds with many of the things you believe."

"That is only to be expected," Joshua said. "Otherwise you would be Christian, or we heralds of God."

"No, Joshua, it goes deeper than that. You lead a faith assembly, so you have a basic orientation toward the future. You live in anticipation of good things to come. So it is important that you gather together in one place with your group to encourage one another in this. But we have a much more direct line to the same things you hope for."

"Eternal life?"

Edith chewed on that for a moment before giving Joshua an answer. "There is so much I could tell you. We live here and now, in this place, with no thought for tomorrow. We have our own house of prayer, but no matter where we are or what we are doing, we offer El constant thankfulness for what is already given to us."

Joshua nodded. "Your brother thinks putting the Root of Jesse Fellowship together with the House of Herald's is like mixing oil and water."

"Yes he does, but for now it is unavoidable. This is the time when you and your people must almost entirely rely on the charity of outsiders."

That dependence soon grew unbearable for one of the nine families who had thrown in with Lange's pilgrimage. The Savitts, after much prayer and with great reluctance, took their leave of Joshua Lange and rejoined the Root of Jesse mother church back down in Sharpsburg.

Around that time Joshua threw a fit of jealousy at finding a strange hair on Edith's coat but he was easily able to produce a horse to match.

One evening over supper Leliel casually told Edith she needed a male companion to quiet some of the rumors that were going around. The next morning Edith got a stallion. Ithuriel looked askance when Joshua formally began courting Edith a week later but Leliel was clearly overjoyed.

Around that time Ithuriel took Joshua off in a quiet aside and asked his views on divorce. Joshua told him, "The Root of Jesse Fellowship has always taken the New Testament to be normative for every facet of our lives."

"That is precisely why I asked," said Ithuriel. "In the gospel according to Mark, Rabbi Yeshua was quoted as saying divorce is entirely forbidden, while the gospel attributed to Mattiyahu has him permitting divorce 'for the cause of fornication'. And Paul insisted the bonds of marriage may be dissolved in the case of a spouse who remains in unbelief. On the issue of divorce you must see your scripture says yea and nay and maybe."

"Be that entirely as you say, sir, it is completely irrelevant, as I do truly love your sister, and I swear to you most solemnly the subject of divorce and the ordinances in my scripture governing the same will never come up between us."

"You are much to be commended for that view, Joshua, but even with the blinders of love you must have noticed that Edith has a curious talent. She

has a certain way with beasts. And we human beings, despite our conceit that we are set entirely apart from the animals, are in fact not immune to hez talent in the smallest degree."

"Ithuriel, am I to believe you take the view of some of the less charitable members of my congregation, and hold that I have somehow been bewitched by your sister?"

"No, there's nothing supernatural about it, Joshua, but if you have the opportunity, give hez halo a little tug and see if you still imagine it is ethnic head jewelry that we like to wear. That should turn into quite an interesting conversation about Haivri family secrets.

Joshua stood up in sudden horror, aghast at what Ithuriel was implying. "Sir, I will ask of Edith no such thing! That is not how a gentleman courts a lady in this country!"

"Forgive me for being so blunt, but we B'nei Hannebim speak only the truth, and very often the truth cannot be softened to the point of acceptability without becoming an untruth."

"Ithuriel, if I interrogate Edith in the way you suggest, she would have every right to give me only silence in return." He seemed miserable at the mere thought of it.

"Joshua, I don't mean to diminish what you feel, but there will come an evening, and it is quickly approaching, when you will think back on this conversation and more fully understand what I was trying to say. But by then, if you are still of a mind that matrimony should be lasting, and you have not taken my advice, it will be far too late."

That evening Joshua certainly did uncover what Ithuriel had been alluding to, to his absolute delight. Even so, Joshua had already sworn to Ithuriel, and he would vow again more solemnly before God and all the nuptial witnesses,

the Christian doctrines governing divorce would never become relevant for so long as he and Edith should live.

At her bridal shower Edith received a large number of gifts. Most of these were actual bridles. When the happy day finally arrived and it was time to actually show up for the wedding Edith came in late because she took too long cleaning the stalls. Joshua married her anyway.

After Lee's Maryland campaign President Lincoln sacked McClellan and put General Burnside in command of the Army of the Potomac, he of the bridge debacle at Sharpsburg. The new commander handed Lee one outright victory at Fredericksburg and ordered another campaign during stormy weather that the President himself, acting on the alarmed telegrams of Burnside's own subordinates, decided to quell before it became a second disaster.

Lincoln then swapped Joe Hooker in to replace Burnside. Hooker had led I Corps on the Federal right while Burnside was bogged down at his bridge. But the delusion of Lee's invincibility had entered Hooker's mind and found purchase. A gross failure of nerve at Chancellorsville allowed Lee to divide his army in the face of greater opposing forces and carve out yet another victory that only reinforced his reputation as invincible.

Rolling the dice yet again Lincoln picked General George Meade for the top slot and for once he chose wisely. Meade had taken command of I Corps when Hooker was wounded in the Maryland battle. He was much more aggressive than McClellan, but not to the point of being foolish like Burnside. And he absolutely was not intimidated by Lee as Hooker had been.

When Lee crossed the Potomac River to invade the North a second time, the raw logic of the road network led the armies to converge in Gettysburg. After a day of confused fighting where Lee was not present for most of the battle and Meade for none of it at all, the battered Union forces ended up behind a

low ridge. It was just forty feet high but two miles long and Lee, facing him from the west, could see only the most forward elements. His cavalry was occupied elsewhere, joyriding, so Lee did not know the disposition of the Federal guns and infantry held in reserve, nor could he track how his opponent shifted assets around to meet developing threats.

Two attempts Lee made against Meade's right only proved the Federal position was impregnable there, and the second day's worse fight on the Federal left had done nothing but wear both armies down to nubbins. Lee's available gambits narrowed to just a single one, a desperate assault on the center. This he launched in grandiose style after the largest artillery bombardment ever seen in North America. But it was doomed to fail. Only a single company reached the stone wall held by the Union army, where they could do little more than let themselves be captured.

After that Lee pulled the shattered remnants of his army back behind South Mountain and raced home with Meade following on a parallel track down the eastern slopes of the long ridge. The armies came together at Williamsport, Maryland. Once again the Potomac River was at flood stage, with Lee unable to cross. Lincoln urged Meade to finish off Bobby Lee forever.

Joshua Lange walked to Temple Beth Hannebim and found all the pews lay scattered outside. Union officers were seated upon them idly smoking cigars and playing tic tac toe on them with pocket knives. Inside the meetinghouse the Union commander poured over maps of the town. When he spotted Lange the short-tempered general angrily demanded who he was. Lange said, "I'm the the pastor of this church!"

Meade replied, "The hell you say, sir! This is the headquarters of the Army! Now get out of my sight, parson, or I'll put a musket in your hand and stand you up---"

His tirade was interrupted by a crash as the chapel filled with flying wood splinters. Confederate artillery had opened a furious barrage from behind their works to cover Lee's escape.

Meade ran out of the chapel picking splinters out of his skin and barking orders. The officers sitting idly on the pews began to scatter as shells burst nearby and solid shot felled trees at the level of their trunks. Union artillery was brought up to answer the Confederate guns but Lange remained inside the building. Perhaps he thought his presence would move God to spare the temple, but solid shot made gaping holes in the walls. Two shells from Lee's main battery burst directly over the roof of Temple Beth Hannebim.

In the sudden dusty dark Joshua coughed exactly once, and was wracked with enormous pain. But the sound of shelling had ceased. As he suffered in the quiet gloom he heard a male voice say, "Remiel, take great care. Joshua is still alive under this fallen timber but he is severely injured."

Joshua marveled that B'nei Hannebim were present. He had spoken to no one when he ventured out to check the temple in the wake of Lee's passing army. Certainly he did not wish to share the risk with Edith or anyone else he knew.

The light seemed to increase. A huge pine beam was shifted and Joshua saw a husky teenaged boy who moved the wood as though it weighed nothing. After that he saw what he took to be a man with a horn-halo much like Edith's, but black. Dark eyes glittered in shifting light filtering through trees that surrounded him. And the walls of Temple Beth Hannebim seemed to be gone now, as though the building had been silently disassembled around Joshua.

The figure said, "You have done very well, Remiel. You weren't here last time so I had to cut a path to him with the Shahar Haruach. Some loose timber collapsed, and on that pass Joshua suffered immeasurably more."

Last time? Joshua did not understand the lan's remarks and in his agony he imagined his sanity was leaving him. The lan seemed to sense that. He said, "Do not be afraid, Joshua. A splinter of wood has pierced your kidney. You also have a broken leg you cannot feel because a large beam is pinching it even now. But Remiel must lift the wood to get you free, and you will most certainly feel that, much worse than the kidney I'm afraid."

Joshua could only manage to gasp for help. The lan ordered Remiel to lift the timber, which he did entirely without effort. To Joshua, everything seemed to turn red. His face froze in astonishment at the pain, greater than any he had ever felt, and he fainted from the overbrimming flow of it.

When he regained consciousness Joshua found he lay in a bed indoors. He received careful attention from strangers who bade him to remain in repose long after he felt sufficiently revived to stand. Joshua humbly obeyed, but he was unable to put aside thoughts of his spouse and how Edith must be fretting over his absence. After all, he had gone missing in the middle of a battle. He frequently voiced these concerns but his caretakers persisted in assuring him Edith was thoroughly aware of what had befallen him.

At length a familiar face came to him: Edith's sister Leliel, with her halo now bereft of the gold lattice. In the days before his wedding Joshua came to know Edith's halo was far more than just an elaborate adornment. The horns sprang from the back of her skull and pierced the skin of her scalp, curving and narrowing to nearly touch. Joshua guessed that in this place Leliel felt no need to disguise her own similar structure.

"Are you well, Joshua?"

"Yes, I am quite recovered now, Leliel, thank you, but I would feel even better if you would allow me to get out of bed."

"Please do! My father is waiting outside. I'd like to introduce you to him and another guest of ours who arrived very much the same way you did, through a fire that nearly took his life."

Leliel's father and a young man were waiting in chairs next to a large irregular natural pool framed by a dark wooden deck. Joshua thought the boy had the appearance of the people who had long preceded the Europeans to North America. As he drew near to where they were both seated Joshua felt only a small residue of pain in his back and his leg.

"Joshua Lange," said Leliel, "please greet my father, Michael. He is the oldest and greatest among us."

Joshua was unsure how to greet Michael as Leliel would have him to do. He decided not to extend his hands, but inclined his head and gazed down. It seemed to be enough. Leliel grinned at Joshua and sat next to the stranger. Michael invited Joshua to sit next to him, but he did so reluctantly. After several days lying in bed he actually would have preferred to stand.

Michael said, "Well, Joshua! You already know Leliel, of course. The quiet young man seated next to him is called Shy Bear by his people, but Jashen is the new name he will carry away from here. He knows very little English but I think my daughter will remedy that soon enough."

"To quell some of the rumors going around?" asked Joshua with a grin.

Leliel alone understood his joke and chuckled in reply. She said, "Did you know Jashen watched you come here? And my father asked him to be present today so you might come to know him by sight. One day you will meet again."

Joshua stared at the youth for a moment to impress Jashen's face upon his memory, but then his gaze was drawn to the sky beyond him. There were clouds that changed, but they changed over a background of green and blue and gray that never changed. There was land in the sky! The sun was directly overhead, waxing in brightness, but it never moved. Joshua said, "Jashen watched me come here, but what is this place? Where are we?"

"It is impossible to say where we are. There is no way to put it in relation with anywhere you do know."

"Does this place have a name?"

Michael nodded to haz daughter. Leliel reached under har seat to retrieve a clay pot. From this sha withdrew a scroll in the form of a very white cylinder of parchment.

THERE WAS WAR IN HELL. QUEEN SARAH AND HAR FALLEN ANGELS FOUGHT THE RED DRAGON, THAT OLD SERPENT CALLED DEMONSTROKE. SARAH BORE SHAHAR HARVACH, MADE BY THE VERY HAND OF EL. WITH WINDGATE SARAH STRUCK OFF THE HEAD OF THE FIRE Drake AND IT WAS CAST DOWN.

THEN A HERALD OF THE B'NEI ELOHIM SAID IN A LOUD VOICE, "NOW IS COME STRENGTH AND SALVATION TO THE THREE KINGDOMS OF HELL, AND THE FREE PEOPLES WHO DWELL THEREIN, FOR THE DEATH-DEALING AVATAR OF BELIAL IS CAST DOWN."

BUT EMPEROR RIMMON STOOD BEFORE SARAH AND SAID, "TAKE NOW YOUR SON YISHAK, WHOM YOU LOVE, TO THE LAND OF MORIAH IN THE OTHER WORLD, AND BE PARTED FROM HIM FOREVER, FOR LONG AFORETIME MICHAEL YOUR SPOUSE MADE COVENANT WITH BELIAL THAT A NOBLEMAN OF ADAN SHOULD

REMOVE TO EARTH AND MAKE OF THE INHABITANTS THEREOF A PEOPLE PECULIAR TO EL."

"NOBLEMAN YOU NAME HIM," REPLIED SARAH, "YET BY YOUR OWN CONTRIVANCE I AM DISPOSSESSED OF SHALEM, AND YISHAK IS YET IN SWADDLING CLOTHES. HE WOULD FARE BETTER TO BE EXPOSED HIGH UPON ICEGATE AFTER THE HEARTLESS CUSTOM OF THE DWELLERS OF YOUR CAPITAL."

"TAKE WHAT SERVANTS BESEEM GOOD TO YOU FROM ELENDAL AND MAGODON AND SASTROM, BE THEY WARRIORS OR WETNURSES, BUT OF THE EMPIRE TAKE NONE, AND TARRY YE NOT IN MORIAH, LEST I HOLD THE COVENANT TO BE IN BREACH."

AND SARAH BEGGED HIL HUSBAND LORD MICHAEL TO SPARE THEM BOTH FROM A LIFETIME OF DESPAIR, BUT HAH COULD DO NOTHING TO GAINSAY THE EMPEROR. HAH SAID. "THUS BELIAL AND SHEMHAZAI RETRIEVE A PETTY VICTORY FROM THEIR FINAL DEFEAT, YET THE SECOND COVENANT WAS CHRONICLED BY THE ELDEST AT ITS MAKING, AND THE ELOHIM HAVE NOTHING IF WE HAVE NOT THE SURETY OF OUR WORD."

Then Joshua knew where he was, and suddenly he grew perfectly miserable. By his scriptures and tradition he was the place of final divine retribution.

"Do not be afraid," said Michael. "You are completely safe here, and your spouse is also safe at home. Both armies are in Virginia once more. General Lee escaped at the cost of just two thousand prisoners and the death of one of his generals but he will never again come marching north."

Joshua had so many other questions he could hardly gather them together in his mind to begin. The first thing he managed to ask was, "Why do you have that halo made of horns like Edith and Ithuriel do?"

"Actually, Joshua, I was the first to have them. When God created the B'nei Elohim he insisted on a visible mark that would set us apart from the elyonim and human stock."

"How long has it been?"

Michael touched haz halo. "Let us say the year 1204. Before Christ."

Joshua's mouth gaped open. "Are you deathless, sir?"

"No, Joshua, I'm as mortal as you, but Belial doesn't know. He thinks El solved the engineering problem that defeated him when he first tried to breed immortal slaves. Regeneration makes pen grow sexless. Pen are never begotten, only made. Some still exist, in Heaven, Hell, and one somewhere on Earth, but no more are made. Belial abandoned his diversion long ago."

"Mr. Haivri, if you are as mortal as I am, and also three thousand years old, I must have missed something important in your explanation."

Michael said, "When you return home Edith will help you translate this scroll into English. All your answers are here. But I caution you that some in your flock will think you to be fallen from God's grace by reason of your book."

"Sir, I beg you, choose servants more worthy to make God's will be done!"

"Not so," said Leliel. "The pilgrims of the Root of Jesse Fellowship are most like they who first loved Rabbi Yeshua when he was in your world."

Michael nodded to support what his daughter claimed. "I would have your flock go west as far as possible by river and rail, then even farther on foot. Congregation Bet Hannebim owns a little farm in Missouri. I propose to outfit your people there for a final leg west through the wilderness. You will go to a

certain place in the Nebraska Territory, a source of new water where before there was none, because the water comes from here! That is the place appointed for you to dwell together in peace with Jashen and the Kuwapi."

When Jashen heard Michael utter the name of his people he raised his head in recognition and smiled at Joshua.

"Early on," said Joshua, "Edith told me Beth Hannebim means House of the Heralds. Are you telling me all this from your role as a herald of God?"

"My father is much more than a mere herald of God," said Leliel. "Avram was his name before he was changed by El. Avram means the father is exalted."

"My father named me that to exalt himself," said Michael. "But to the descendants of Yishak, I became Avraham - the father of many."

Joshua remembered how Edith claimed all the B'nei Elohim spoke only the truth. Still, he found all of this rough going. "And Haivri?"

"My brother Yishak was born here in Hell, even as I was. When he began to live in the other world men there called him Yishak Ha-Ivri. They called him Yishak the Stranger. He embraced it and made it his family's name. But my Father's true surname is Michael. And before you ask, Joshua, my father is that Michael. The original"

"Avram Mikha'el," he said. "Avram Who Is Like God. Of course the rabbis are allergic to any hint of blasphemy so they appended a question mark to the name. The name Michael became a rhetorical question: 'Who Is Like God?' All this is written in the White Scroll of course. You will learn it soon enough."

Joshua finally penetrated to the heart of what father and daughter were trying to say. He slid out of his chair and dropped to his knees before the one who had taken him out of the world and saved his life.

"Please take your seat again, Joshua" Michael gently told him. "After all, we are family now. And soon your followers will be witness to a real miracle! But the land I have chosen will bring slow starvation if the water is nothing just a mirage. I'm inviting you to make a leap of faith, at the pace of oxen and wagons, with your spouse and any others from your congregation who freely choose to go. But do you, Joshua, freely choose to go?"

"I certainly do! It will be as my Lord has said."

Michael smiled and rose from his own seat. Therefore, as a matter of course, so too did everyone else. Then Jashen, a beautiful young man among the dwellers of the American Great Plains, drew near to Lange with his hands held open peacefully, and he said in farewell, "Joshua Lange, hello."