

...And they shall go into the holes of the rocks,
and into the caves of the earth

Stuck. No place to go for hours, maybe days.

This had to be one of the worst storms David had ever seen. The noise of the thunder was tremendous. The sharp, frequent bolts of electricity seemed to come from high in the heavens, smashing down to the earth all around them, accompanied by the smell of ozone. Nature was putting on an amazing display. But these lightning bolts didn't seem natural. They didn't come from the clouds. They came from higher up in the sky. They came from the planet.

Manny rode in the back seat while Cynthia sat next to David in the front. They were both quiet, pensive, only jumping slightly when a bolt of lightning came too close. Looking in the mirror, David couldn't help but think of Elena, her seat in the back now empty. She was the one who had remembered this place, even though they had all been briefed with the same list of underground safe locations. Only Elena had paid attention and taken it seriously. They never thought this day would come. Now she was gone forever. David was just beginning to realize how much he would miss her.

They barely made it to the Springfield underground facility in time before the doors were closed and sealed. Not many people knew about this old place. There were three million square feet of limestone caves here in Missouri with a natural year-round temperature of fifty-eight degrees. Even with the temperature outside getting close to 120 degrees now, they would be cool and comfortable here for awhile. The volcanos were far enough away that the heat from the

magma had no effect. That's why it was on the list as a safe place. Someone had done their homework.

They should have never gone to the Taum Sauk Mountain. Elena said it would provide them with the best proof that volcanic activity was a direct result of the oncoming planet. Taum Sauk caldera hadn't been active for billions of years. Yet something had caused those mountains to bulge upward lately, as if being pulled by some unknown force. That force could only have been the planet. Elena, as the only volcanologist on the team, understood that. She said she had to get her equipment from the ledge to provide the proof, the evidence they needed...

David couldn't think about what had happened anymore. He would have to deal with it later. With their badges, Cynthia and David had no trouble getting admitted to the secure facility, but they had to convince the guards to let Manny in. It was Cynthia's charm that did the trick. Besides, there was no more time to argue. With the intensity of the storm it was obvious they couldn't turn Manny away. The wind and the lightening were now almost non-stop.

After unloading their gear and freshening up, they each met at the control room, where video feeds continued to tell the story. The destruction of the world had begun in earnest. The electromagnetic exchange between the two planets had started machining the earth now. Huge chunks of terrain came down miles away, blown sky-high with each new bolt of lightning. The volcanic activity was greatest on the Pacific Rim, especially along the coasts of Washington and Oregon. Even David didn't know that weather satellites could provide such detailed live feed.

Without his eyes leaving the screens, David asked Manny, "How many people did you say would survive?"

"I didn't," Manny said. I only know that at least a third part of the inhabitants of the earth will be killed by these three catastrophes."

“Did you say three disasters? I don’t remember you saying that.”

“Well, I didn’t want to alarm you. If you remember, you were already telling me to tone it down. Now do you see why I was so excited back in the airport?”

Cynthia moved closer to David and took his arm in hers.

“It looks like the earthquakes are non-stop now, especially close to the areas where the volcanoes are erupting,” she said. “It’s as if something is pulling the earth toward that planet.” Although not as strong there in the Missouri caves, another quake rattled the earth beneath them. They each jumped a bit. “I can’t imagine how many people are being affected by the earthquakes in California and Japan, to say nothing of the Philippines.”

“Millions, easily,” David said. “What are the other disasters, Manny?” Both he and Cynthia were now looking at Manny intently, the scenes on the video screens behind him. It was an eerie sight, as Manny waved his arms in front of the exploding volcanoes.

“If David had been more truthful, he would have told us about the moon and the swarms of meteors that are coming up beside the planet.” He looked at David closely. “Don’t tell me you didn’t see them.”

David looked past Manny at the destruction on the screens, said nothing.

“Dad, what moon do you mean?” Cynthia said. “I thought you said nothing was going to happen to our moon. You said it would only turn red because it couldn’t get rid of all the heat.”

“The planet has a small moon travelling beside it,” David said. “We didn’t see it at first because it was behind it and too far away. That’s why I wanted to get back to the observatory.”

“So what are you saying?” Cynthia said. “You said the planet wasn’t going to hit us.” She looked first at David, then at Manny. “What’s going to happen with that moon that’s travelling with the planet? Is it going to hit the earth?”

“According to the traditions,” Manny said, “the first disaster is the meteor shower that should start within the next few days. See, they’re smaller and with less mass. They won’t have as much electromagnetic repulsion to the earth.” He waited to see if she understood.

“You mean they won’t slow down like the planet,” Cynthia said. “They’ll keep coming and slam into the earth. Is that what you mean? Is that what’s going to happen next?”

“Yes,” Manny said, “but they will mainly be localized on one side of the earth.” He looked at David. “Tell her why.”

David looked startled, as if coming out of a dream. “As the planet gets closer,” he said, “the magnetic poles will align, just like your dad said back in the airport. The earth will stop rotating for a little while as they come into a magnetic embrace.”

“What? I thought you said dad was full of sh..”

“I was only trying to protect him,” David said. “You know how crazy he sounded.”

“Well, he sure doesn’t sound so crazy now, does he?” “Cynthia turned away, as if to hide tears. “So many people...no warning. Surely we could have done something...”

“No, there really wasn’t anything we could do,” David said. “If we had tried to announce anything the people would have panicked; mass hoarding, looting, murders, suicides...it would have been terrible if we had told the truth.”

“I don’t believe that,” Cynthia said. “People have a right to know.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell them for all these years,” Manny said, “but nobody would believe me. I’m just a crazy old man. You said so yourself.”

Cynthia whirled, “I didn’t want you to get hurt. There were no signs. There was no evidence until that comet, that planet showed up a few weeks ago.”

“Crazy or not, the records were obviously true,” Manny said. “They tried to tell us the only way they knew how - with pictures and stories. We turned them into myths and legends and pooh-poohed them as nothing more than the wild imaginations of less intelligent early man.”

I’m so sorry we didn’t listen to you, Cynthia said. “So what about that moon?”

“As far as we can tell, there is hopefully only one.”

“What do you mean? Why does that matter?”

“Well, the traditional stories call them the first set of three woes. The first woe is the hail mingled with fire – that’s the meteorite shower we’re about to see.”

“And the second one is the moon that comes with the planet?” Cynthia said.

Manny nodded his head up and down. “It’s supposed to hit in the ocean so it shouldn’t be so bad.”

“What?” David said. “A huge rock the size of Mt. Everest or larger lands in the ocean and you say it won’t be so bad?”

“No, not as bad as the third woe,” Manny said.

By this time they could each see on the screens behind Manny the meteors that were coming down. They started slowly at first and then with an intense frequency, all over the planet.

“I hate to ask,” Cynthia said, “but what is the third woe?”

“Well, of course the second woe is like a small moon that lands in the sea. It will do a lot of damage. It will cause terrible tsunamis and kill just about every living creature in the sea.”

“Dad...”

“The third woe we haven’t even seen yet. It should be here a few days after the one that lands in the ocean. It will be bright like a comet and it will either land or explode just above the earth. It will shatter all over the rivers and the lakes of North America, or is it Europe...”

“You mean you don’t know?” David sounded exasperated. Cynthia gave David a hard look. She left David’s side and took her father’s arm in hers. They had been standing. She led them to a small table and chairs where they each sat.

“I know you’re tired, Dad, but think. Where will this comet explode?”

“I really don’t know,” Manny said. “There are so many references in the legends to so many different things happening all at once that it’s hard to keep them straight. All I know is that the comet is poisonous. Anyone who drinks the water that comes from the area where the comet explodes will die. The legends have a name for the comet. They call it Wormwood.”

“Wormwood, ha!” Another look from Cynthia silenced David.

“The name means bitter in the ancient Egyptian legends, or is it the Babylonians....I forget. Never mind. It turns the rivers and lakes red with blood. It’s made up of the same dust that has been falling on us for the last few weeks, only this time, it’s a huge explosion of the stuff. It spreads out all over the continent – one or the other.”

“And that’s it, right?” David said. “Wormwood is the last of the bad stuff? After that has passed then we can all go home?”

“Oh no, there’s still more, and not everyone is killed so yeah, a lot of people will get to go home. I think there’s going to be some time between what we’re experiencing now and the stuff that’s going to come later. It’s been a long time since I made my notes. Sorry.”

“How much time?” Cynthia said.

“Probably a few years. But the world won’t be the same. We’ve going to have to do a lot of rebuilding, especially the electricity and water networks. Technology takes a big hit. Oh, and probably our political structure too. The legends say that the nations will break up into tribes. You know, stuff like that.”

Cynthia sighed. David looked at her. “What?” he said.

“I just can’t believe that something like this could happen and that our government or our scientists wouldn’t protect us from it or at least warn us about it.

David looked away. “So Manny...What else did the legends say the world would be like between this first wave of destruction and the next one?”

“Oh, it will be a wonderful sight to see the planet up there all the time. Sometimes it gets closer and there’s a lot of electromagnetic interaction between us. Other times, it moves further away and puts on fantastic light and sound shows. It will be awesome. It will change the world’s religions. People will fear and worship it. They’ll call it the beast because it has such power.”

Cynthia and David both looked at him incredulously.

“You’re kidding,” David said. “Are people that dumb?”

“Crazy, isn’t it?” Manny said. “It’s like we’re going to go backward in time. The world will be ruled by those who can gather the largest armies. No more technology, just horses, spears and swords. Just like it was when these early legends were first recorded.”

“Why is that?” Cynthia said.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? The planet disrupts the balance in our solar system. It causes the sun to release a huge EMP – Electromagnetic Pulse. It destroys all the electronics in the world. Cars won’t work. No more computers, electricity, transportation. Just about every modern convenience is destroyed.”

Just then the lights flickered. Cynthia gripped David’s arm.

“It’s OK. Places underground should be alright - At least for a little while,” David said.

The lights died. The video screens went dark.