

Return of the Plagues

“Do you hear that?” Jason said.

Bryce strained his ears. He shook his head and scowled at his twelve year old brother. “I don’t hear anything.” He turned toward his dad. “You hear something?”

“You mean that humming noise?” Dad stopped hammering one of the stakes that held the tent in place. He brought Bryce and his younger brother, Jason to the High Uintas for a week every summer before school. It was something Bryce and Jason looked forward to all year.

This year as they celebrated Bryce’s sixteenth birthday, they camped on the southern slope of Kings Peak, the highest point in the wilderness area. It was usually a quiet, peaceful spot. Just not tonight.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It’s kind of like ... purring or ... rumbling.”

All three paused for a long moment, listening intently.

“Now I hear it,” Bryce said. “It comes and goes, kinda like a chant.”

“Was wondering when one of you would notice.” Dad pointed toward the spot where the North Star hung in the sky. “It’s coming from that bright star over there.”

“What?” Bryce put his pack on the ground. “We’ve been camping up here every summer for the past ten years. I’ve never seen that star before.” He gazed intently at the place where Dad pointed. “How do you know it’s coming from that star?”

“And besides,” Jason said, shaking his head. “I didn’t know you could hear stars.”

“Ordinarily you can’t.” Dad laid the hammer down on the ground, stood. “But this one’s different. I watched it last night for a long time while you boys were asleep. It feels like there’s something flowing from that star.”

“Oh, come on. You’re telling me you can *feel* something come out of a star?” Bryce snickered. “I’ve never heard that one before.”

Dad looked a little hurt, shrugged his shoulders. “Say what you want, but I can feel some sort of breeze when I look closely at it. It’s been growing on me all week, getting stronger each night.” He knelt and picked up his hammer once more. “Plus it’s been getting brighter.”

Bryce squinted at the star again. It was just after sunset. The more he thought about it the more he felt Dad was on to something. He wanted to say he was sorry, but Dad was pounding on a stake again. He admired how quickly Dad was able to get that tent set up each night.

Bryce assembled the camp stove. Jason unpacked some food, set it on the campsite table next to Bryce. Tonight, they would enjoy beans with sliced hot dogs and bacon.

After dinner, Dad reminded the boys to hang their backpacks high off the ground from a near-by tree. Bryce knew nothing attracts bears like the smell of bacon, no matter how well it’s wrapped up. He shuddered as he remembered the late-night bear encounter from two years ago, laughed at the mental image of Dad yelling and charging the bear with nothing but a flashlight.

Later, Jason snuggled in his sleeping bag. “Dad can we keep the upper flap open?”

“Sure, why not? It’s a beautiful night.”

“Seems warmer than this time last year,” Bryce said.

“That it does, son. That it does.”

After a few minutes Bryce heard both Jason and Dad snoring. They hiked ten to fifteen miles each day to get to their planned campsites. Tomorrow they hoped to make the summit of King's peak. Ordinarily this campsite would have been under a few feet of snow. Not this year.

Looking through the open roof flap of the tent, Bryce wondered how Dad figured out the vibrating noise he now heard clearly from the new star. Dad often tried to get them to think about things, ask questions, and learn new things. Dad's curiosity rubbed off on Bryce.

He must have dozed off because a strange glow in the sky caused him to open his eyes. He blinked at the brightness and gazed at his watch. Only two a.m. What the heck? He scrambled out of his sleeping bag, crawled through the tent flap, found Dad sitting at the campsite table.

"What's with the sky?" Bryce said, his hands quaking a bit from the sleep or maybe from the unusual sight before him. He sat next to Dad on the bench, shivered a little.

"You tell me, son. I've never seen anything like it."

They both watched sheets of multi-colored light dance across the northern horizon. It was awesome. He had never seen anything like it either. What an amazing birthday present.

"That can't be the Aurora Borealis," Bryce said, adrenaline sparking. "We're too far south. From what I've heard, they never come very far below the Canadian border."

"Sure looks like they've come for a visit here in Utah tonight, doesn't it?"

Jason joined them, rubbing his eyes. "Why are you guys up?" He looked at the peak just as a filament of green light shot skyward. "Did you see that?" He shouted.

"Wow," Bryce said. "That looked like lightning, only it was going up instead of down."

Both boys stood. Dad didn't move from the table. "There goes another one," he said, his eyes widening. Bruce turned at the excitement in Dad's voice. This was electrifying.

Another strand surged skyward, and then another, until a steady stream of green filaments flowed from the peak, reaching upward into the night sky. They seemed to go in the direction of the new star. Most of the streamers had a green cast, but there was an occasional blue or red one.

“I don’t think we should go up there tomorrow.” Bryce saw Jason’s face went white. He put his hands on Dad’s shoulders, stood behind his father. It looked like he was trying to hide.

“I think you’re right, son.” Dad clutched Jason’s hand. “Do you feel the ionization?”

The air tasted thick and heavy, bringing a strange sensation of anxiety and foreboding. Night owls screeched. Wolves howled. Bryce caught a whiff of ozone, like electric sparks.

“Maybe we should pack up now.” Bryce jammed his hands under his arm pits. “I don’t feel good about staying so close to the peak tonight.

They spent the next half hour packing up in a rush, and then started down the trail back toward home as fast as they could in the half light.

Mom didn’t ask questions when he, Dad and Jason returned home a day early from their hike. Abby told them she and Mom had seen the strange display and felt the weird electric ionization even down in the valley. She said Mom had worried about them getting home.

* * * * *

Adam Mitchell watched the star increase in brightness over the next few weeks after he and the boys returned from the mountains. The red dust returned with greater frequency. The weather remained warm. In fact, it got hotter as they moved into late September. Some nights, the highest peaks seemed to glow. Other evenings, it looked like the mountains were on fire.

It was tough having to live in a house with plastic sheeting on all the windows, but Janet appreciated not having the red dust in her home, or breathing it. They tried to keep the news of the strange events from the kids. But Mitchell kids are smart. They'd figure things out anyway.

"I'm sure glad you insisted we store so many of those fifty-gallon drums of water," Janet said one day after dinner. Adam and Janet were standing in their dark kitchen in front of the sink, trying to rinse dishes without using a lot of water. "Sandy told me there are so many frogs in the reservoir they have to clear them out every day to keep the water flowing."

"Don't know why people didn't listen to me. I told them they could get as many of the water drums as they needed from the cola bottling plant," Adam said turning to fiddle with an old short-wave radio they kept on the kitchen counter.

"It's tough serving as the Emergency Preparedness person when nobody listens to me." He shrugged his shoulders. All he could find on the radio was static and lots of it.

"I'll bet they're sorry they didn't listen to you now." Janet half-smiled.

"Right. Anybody who thinks they can boil that red stuff away is going to end up to killing their own family." The frustration Adam felt turned to sympathy for his neighbors.

Janet looked pensive. "The swarms of gnats are getting worse down by the lake." She handed him a plate to sponge off. "And Jared's mom told Bryce and Jason to stay away from Jared because he's got lice real bad."

"Can you believe that?" Adam said, his stomach knotting. "I've heard it's especially bad down past Point of the Mountain. Not just lice, but flies and all kinds of vermin like crazy."

Adam wiped off the last piece of silverware and put it in the drawer. Janet dried her hands. "Randy told me most of the cows are bloated. They keep drinking the infected water and

dying,” he said. “And George said the crickets and locusts this year are the worst he’s ever seen. They’re eating everything green from Tooele down to Delta.”

Janet hunched her shoulders. “Alice told me they can’t work in the fields any more. Anybody who gets too much of the red dust in their clothes ends up with boils.” Janet sat down at the kitchen table, gripped her hands together in front of her. “Pretty soon we won’t be able to go outside for more than a few minutes.”

“It sounds like the plagues of Egypt have returned.” Adam sat down next to his wife, covered her stiff hands with his. “Be thankful the only thing we haven’t seen yet is the plague of darkness.”

Janet kept busy with knitting, something she had learned from her grandmother Snow.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to the boys play a video game down in the basement. Adam wondered how long they would have electricity this time. Even with the solar panels he put up last year, when the grid went down, their power also went out. He cursed that stupid law again. No home could go off-grid within the city limits.

Half the power plants were hydro-electric. The rest were coal or natural gas. Dead fish and tons of frogs were plugging up the intake pipes. The workers for Rocky Mountain Power were having a devil of a time keeping them clear. Blackouts were a daily occurrence now.

“I think you spoke too soon,” Janet said, looking out the front window with a worried look on her face. Even with the plastic sheeting he and the boys had put into place last week, Adam could see the light fade until the afternoon sun disappeared.

“Oh. My. Heck.” Janet clenched Adam’s hands until he thought he’d lose circulation.

The boys came up from the basement at the same time. “What’s going on?” Bryce said, his eyes wild. “It got so dark we had to turn the light on to see.”

Adam slipped away from his clinging wife, carefully opened the front door.

Janet, along with Abby, who had come from her room, stood behind him with the boys. A rolling fog mixed with smoke moved through the valley. Steamy mist rose from the ground. The muggy vapor stifled all sound, made the air thick and heavy, hard to breathe.

Jason gripped Dad's hand. "I think it's coming from the fires in Yellowstone."

"Why is it coming up from the ground?" Bryce said, peering over Dad's shoulder.

"Close the door." Abby cried, her little arms trembling. "It feels awful."

"I can't even see across the street," Janet said.

Adam stared at the thick mixture. "Nobody is going anywhere in this soup."

Abby looked smug. "I'll bet it lasts three days."

Jason rubbed his chin. "How do you know that?"

"According to Exodus, that's how long it lasted," Abby said.

Bryce raised an eyebrow. Jason blinked several times.

Abby smiled. "I've been reading all about the plagues."

"Let's keep the door shut," Janet said backing away. "We'll just have to last it out."

Adam closed the door, adjusted the plastic sheeting. He picked up the family bible from the table, opened to Exodus chapter ten. Everyone found chairs in the front room.

"And the Lord said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt. And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven;"

"That's what we've got," Abby said her voice quivering. "I can feel the darkness, can't you?" Bryce pondered, nodded his head up and down, noticed everyone else do the same.

“... and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days: They saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days: but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.”

“Well, now I’ve seen it all.” Adam looked at his family one at a time, trying to think of something reassuring to say. Nothing came. “I think we’ve had just about every one of the ten plagues over the past few weeks, haven’t we?”

“And all from the red dust,” Bryce said in a quiet voice.

“Water turned to blood, frogs, gnats, lice and flies.” Janet shook her head.

Adam closed the scriptures. “Animals getting sick, dying from the poisoned water.”

“Boils, fiery hailstones, locusts, and now darkness.” Jason frowned, his watery eyes still locked on his dad’s.

Abby’s lower lip quivered. “Wait, there’s one more,”

Everyone looked at her, turned to stare at Bryce. Adam felt his heart stop.

Janet put her hand over her mouth, stifled a whimper, shot Adam a frenzied look.

Bryce stood, shook his head back and forth. “Oh, come on. You don’t believe that stuff, do you? That happened thousands of years ago – in Egypt.”

Janet rushed to her son, took him in her arms and cried softly against his shoulder.

Adam stood too, not knowing what to do or think, clutched his arms around his middle.

Abby and Jason looked like they wanted to run or hide, swiped at tears spilling down their faces.

Bryce patted his mother’s back. “This is nonsense. It’s impossible. We’re not slaves in Egypt. We’re free citizens in America. All these plagues are just a coincidence.”

Sweat popped out on his upper lip. He clenched his fists behind her back. “Besides, where the hell are we gonna find any lamb’s blood to paint on our doorposts?”