

VICKI and the others in the Dials' underground Wisconsin hideout gathered around the television. It was two in the afternoon, and the kids expected the worst about Zeke Sr. Vicki held the phone while Mark Eisman monitored e-mail, both hoping Natalie would find a way to contact them.

An earlier news report had said the first mark application had begun at a GC facility in Wheaton, formerly known as the DuPage County Jail. Other mark applications were scheduled that afternoon in various local jails and prisons.

The kids had rejoiced when Conrad called with the news of the escape of Ginny and Bo Shairton, Maggie Carlson, and a former gang member who was now a believer, Manny Aguilara. All four were now in the home of Jim Dekker, a GC satellite operator from Illinois who had helped the kids.

Vicki prayed for Natalie. As far as Vicki knew, Global Community Peacekeepers hadn't discovered that the four former inmates were actually free.

Mark fiddled with the TV antenna to pull in the Chicago station.

Finally, a reporter in Wheaton, Illinois, broke into the newscast. "As we've reported, the mark applications began here a little after noon today. With the new technology, Peacekeepers wondered if there would be any glitches in the system. We're told that everything went fine until the last prisoner was brought into the application room and refused to take the mark.

"That set in motion a series of events that local Peacekeepers say was regrettable, but necessary."

The broadcast cut to a video feed of an interview with Deputy Commander Darryl Henderson. The man pursed his lips and shook his head. "We brought this prisoner from Des Plaines and gave him every chance to comply with the simple requirement of taking the mark of loyalty. When he refused, we had no alternative."

"Is it true you didn't expect to need the guillotine?" the reporter said.

"It's a loyalty enforcement facilitator," Henderson corrected. "No, we assumed that our prison population would all take the mark. Everyone did except for this one man."

The scene switched to the reporter looking at his notes. "That one man is identified as fifty-four-year-old Gustaf Zuckerman, formerly of Des Plaines. He had been charged with black market trafficking of fuel oil, but

sources inside this facility tell me he was a follower of the dissident Tsion Ben-Judah. Officials say they hope this execution will serve as a warning to other Judah-ite followers that this kind of defiance of the Global Community will not be tolerated."

Mark turned off the television and the kids sat in silence. Vicki thought of Zeke Jr. and wondered if he knew about his father's death. There was no denying the clear facts. They had now entered a bloody season when believers in Christ would be hunted and if caught, executed. Vicki shuddered. If she and Darrion had been caught in Des Plaines, they would have been forced to choose Carpathia's mark or the blade. Would she have chosen to die for what she believed? Would she have to make that choice in the future?

The phone rang and Vicki answered it. Conrad wanted to know if the kids had heard about Zeke, and Vicki said they had.

"We're staying at Jim Dekker's farmhouse until things settle," Conrad said. "He wants us to take supplies with us when we go."

"What do you mean?"

"GC uniforms, ID cards—you name it, he's got it."

Mark talked with Conrad after Vicki was through, and then the kids met to discuss their next move.

"We can't slow down now," Melinda said. "We have to tell as many people as we can before they take the mark."

"Pretty soon there won't be anyone left who's undecided," Janie said. "Then we'll just have to try and survive."

"What's important right now is getting the message to

as many unbelievers as possible," Darrion said, "and our best tool is The Cube. It's high-tech and gets people's attention. We should send the file and look for any other ways to get the message out."

The phone rang again and Vicki jumped. Mark answered and handed it to her. "It's Natalie."

Lionel Washington hid in some bushes near the Global Community apartment building where Chang Wong and his parents stayed. Judd had given him Chang's description, but Lionel was nervous. What if someone who looked like Chang came out of the building? Lionel was glad Judd would be back early in the morning.

Nights in New Babylon felt eerie to Lionel. The blistering heat of the day gave way to cool air once the sun went down. A breeze blew through the bushes, and Lionel hunkered down in his hiding place.

Lionel had witnessed incredible things in the past few weeks. He had seen the deaths of the beloved prophets, Eli and Moishe, and a few days later had watched them ascend into heaven. That had been one of the high points of their trip to Israel. But soon after came Carpathia's murder and his eventual rise from the dead. Every time Lionel thought about it, he recalled the lightning of Leon Fortunato and the bodies of innocent victims lying in the palace courtyard.

The door opened at the front of the apartment building, and a guard strolled out front, lighting a cigarette. He walked to within a few feet of Lionel's hiding place and flicked cigarette ashes into the bushes.

Thanks for using our world as your ashtray, Lionel thought, recalling the words of his father. Lionel smiled as he remembered driving in the car with his dad. A motorist would pass, flicking ashes or a spent cigarette to the pavement, and Lionel's dad would shake his head. Once Lionel's father had stepped out of the car at a stoplight, picked up a smoldering butt off the ground, and handed it to the driver through the open window.

"I think you dropped this," Lionel's father had said, then returned to the car before the light changed. He buckled up and stifled a smile. "Don't tell this to your mother."

Lionel missed his dad more than he wanted to admit. They had missed so many things. With each birthday or holiday, Lionel ached for some kind of celebration, a cake, or some presents. But the truth was, the kids didn't have time for things like that. Life was a constant struggle.

At moments like these, when Lionel was alone, he thought about his family, his mother's smile, his father's strength. Most of the kids he knew from school had parents who were divorced. His mom and dad had stayed together through some rough times and Lionel was glad.

The guard flicked the spent cigarette into the bush where Lionel was hiding and walked away. The glowing ashes faded and finally went out. It was just like the world, Lionel thought, dying and almost dead.

He drew his knees to his chest, wrapped himself in the light jacket he was wearing, and leaned back. The night chill and lack of activity inside the building made his eyelids droop.

When he fell asleep, he was thinking of his father.

Vicki tried to comfort Natalie, but the girl was nearly hysterical. When she finally calmed down, Vicki discovered that Natalie was at her apartment, having told her boss she wasn't feeling well.

Natalie told Vicki about her experience at the old DuPage County Jail. She had heard Zeke protest about the mark of loyalty. She had followed the man and had watched from an observation room when the Global Community ended Zeke's life.

"You actually saw the beheading?"

"I couldn't watch, but I heard the blade come down. One guy in the room raised his fist and said Zeke got what he had coming to him. How can people be that cruel?"

"I don't know. Are you all right now?"

Natalie sighed. "I just feel so alone. The GC are all saying everything went exactly as planned, but I know the truth. All those prisoners who took the mark can *never* become believers now, and they killed the only one who had the sense to not take it."

"Does Henderson suspect anything about the four who escaped?"

"Not that I can tell. He's been too busy with the mark applications to notice much, but I heard they're still looking for you."

"We're safe. Any idea how long before employees get the mark?"

"Henderson's sending a report to other facilities throughout the country. Jails and reeducation facilities will apply the mark for the next couple of days. Then

employees are eligible. We have two weeks to comply after it's up and running."

"Then you have to come here."

"Believe me, I can't stop thinking about it. But I'm so mad. After what I saw Zeke go through, why does God let this happen?"

"I understand how you feel. I felt the same thing when my friend Ryan died."

"Why couldn't somebody have told us about God before all this happened?"

"They tried, at least they did with me," Vicki said. "I wouldn't listen."

"So we just have to sit back and watch all of these good people get their heads chopped off? Is that what God wants?"

Natalie broke down and sobbed. Vicki listened and tried to calm her. Suddenly, Natalie put her hand over the phone and said, "Hi, Claudia. Yeah, you should have been there." When Natalie uncovered the phone, she whispered, "My roommate's here. I'll call you later and we can talk."

Vicki gathered the other kids to pray for Natalie. She knew the girl's time was running out.

Judd Thompson Jr. crept through the darkened streets of New Babylon. A few cabs sat parked by the street, drivers slouched and snoring in their seats. A strip of yellow and white shone on the horizon as Judd looked at his watch. 6:30 A.M. *I should have relieved Lionel an hour ago!*

Judd located the shrubs and found Lionel sleeping.

Lionel awoke with a start, and Judd put a hand over his mouth. "How long have you been asleep?"

Lionel rubbed his neck and yawned. "I don't know. It was so cold and I just couldn't keep my eyes open."

"I can't blame you. I'm late myself."

"No word from Chang?"

"Nothing," Judd said. "But Z-Van came in late last night jazzed up."

"About his recording?"

Judd shook his head. "He was crowing about getting to take the mark today. They're taking pictures for the album cover, and he wants to make sure he has Carpathia's mark. And get this. He's supposed to have a picture taken with Carpathia."

"If they're letting Z-Van take the mark, that means—"

Judd pointed toward the front door of the apartment building. A man with a briefcase walked inside. The guard checked the man's credentials and waved him through.

"I saw that guy at Carpathia's funeral," Judd said. "Moon, I think. He's in Carpathia's inner circle."

"Maybe he lives there."

Judd shook his head. "I wish we had some binoculars."

Lionel reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a tiny telescope. "Westin gave it to me before we left last night. Works pretty well."

Judd set the digital meter for the distance and zoomed in on the scene. The scope was so powerful he could see the badge of the guard at the front door. He focused on the elevators and saw one had stopped on the fourth floor.

"That's Chang's floor," Judd said.

Vicki had trouble falling asleep, a thousand thoughts swirling through her mind. It had been some time since they had heard from Judd and Lionel, and she was worried they might be in trouble. And she thought of Zeke. She couldn't shake the image of the razor-sharp blade falling.

She had just gotten to sleep when Shelly shook her. "You need to come see something."

Vicki dressed quickly and walked into the meeting area of the underground hideout. Mark had the kids' Web site up on the large screen at the front of the room.

"You'll want to sit down for this," Shelly said.

"What's wrong?"

Mark showed Vicki the number of messages from people who had received The Cube. Many of them had prayed to become believers because of the 3-D tool. Mark scrolled to the bottom and pulled up a message whose subject line simply said *Help!*

Vicki or anyone else working with the Young Tribulation Force,

I'm typing this fast, so if I make mistakes forgive me. I'm Kelly Bradshaw from Iowa. You came to our meeting place at an abandoned college. I hope you remember us.

"I remember Kelly," Vicki said. "She was the first to meet us when we got there."

We've had incredible growth since you came and taught us. Word spread and people came from all over to

meet other believers and read the notes we'd taken. Then, when you sent The Cube, we almost doubled in size. People brought friends who hadn't seen it to the locker room under the gym where we meet.

Someone must have tipped off the Global Community because several Peacekeepers burst into one of our smaller meetings tonight and arrested everyone. I was on my way back to our farm when I heard them coming, but there was nothing I could do. They raided the house where some of us live, too, and took computers and supplies. We had printed copies of Buck Williams's The Truth to hand out to people who were interested.

We had a computer hidden in a secluded room. That's where I am now, but I'm so afraid for my friends. Can you help? I'm hearing they are forcing prisoners to take the mark, so we don't have much time. Please, if there's anything you can do, let me know quickly.

"Have you written her back?" Vicki said.

Mark nodded. "I told her we'd be back to her within the hour. What do we want to say?"

Vicki looked around the room. "I say these are our brothers and sisters. We have to try."

Mark smiled. "That's what I thought you'd say."