

# Chapter 1

August 18, 998 ASR

Robert's pulse pounded as he scrolled through the transcript of the ancient book he'd found in the University of Midrib's archived databases. For quite some time he had suspected that history had been altered to shed a favorable light on The Sovereign Yehowshuwa, the one who ruled the world. He'd focused his entire summer studies on The Last Battle, when The Sovereign defeated Chancellor Ben-Shaachar about a thousand years ago, an event that reset the calendars to ASR, After Sovereign Returned. The more he read in this ancient tome, the more convinced he was that his theory was right.

He sat up on his bed, the scenes coming alive in his mind as he read about the battle that took place the day The Sovereign returned . . .



The Chancellor raised his periscope and surveyed his armies, all assembled in the broad parched plains to the north of The Sovereign's capital. From his armored command vehicle he could clearly see the capital mount only a hundred kilometers away. He had personally masterminded this complex military strategy, ensuring that each among his upper echelons knew his or her part.

Ben-Shaachar turned and perused the computer screens displaying the exact position of every man and woman who had come to defeat those who remained faithful to Yehowshuwa. Each combatant's vital signs were transmitted through satellite technology and microchips implanted in man and machine. Those flashes on the screen showed him they were all alive and ready for action. His generals were also controlling elaborate systems with their thoughts, eliminating cumbersome manual interfaces, which wasted precious time.

If any of his minions were too slow or stupid to compensate when certain forces were destroyed or disabled, The Chancellor could instantly update the computers with altered battle plans. The communication system was so sophisticated that he could send orders back to each soldier or vehicle with a single thought.

The Chancellor gave the mental command for his generals to prepare their troops for the attack. He watched the vital signs of his forces jump as the soldiers were pumped with adrenaline and other artificial stimulants that forced the recipients to obey orders unconditionally, ensuring their confidence and coordination. The monitors indicated that bombs, rockets, lasers, sonic cannons, and other offensive weapons were armed and ready.

He looked through the periscope again, squinting as the sun gleamed off the newly developed alloys, which could stop the best armor-piercing rockets. *There is no way this army can fail.*

He gave the attack signal to his generals. Each person, vehicle, and aircraft started precisely at the same time. Millions of feet stepped forward—left, right, left, right. Hundreds of thousands of armored vehicles advanced in unison. Aircraft broke their holding patterns to race toward their targets.

Suddenly the sky grew so dark Ben-Shaachar could only see a few meters ahead. Lightning flashed, illuminating the valley. The rumblings of thunder shook his command vehicle.

The earth trembled violently and swallowed many of the soldiers and vehicles. Thousands of vital signs disappeared from computer consoles.

The Chancellor bypassed his generals and redirected forces away from the crevices, cursing loudly.

He heard his pilots complaining that the clouds were so thick they couldn't see their targets. Lightning bolts pulled stratospheric bombers from their heights. Lower-flying attack aircraft collided with hailstones weighing as much as a hundred pounds. Dot after dot on the consoles blinked off.

Chancellor Ben-Shaachar pounded his fists on the arms of his command chair. His face grew hot, his stomach knotted, and his throat constricted with anger. *This can't be happening—*



“Robert! What are you doing up there?” his mother screeched in her usual annoying tone.

“Aw, Mom, I’m just reading.” *Here we go again!*

“When are you going to finish school and get a job? All you ever do is bury your nose in those musty old books. Who cares what happened way back when?”

Musty old books? Where does she get these clichés? I haven’t seen a book for over ten years.

She added her latest barb: “What makes you think anyone is ever going to want to read another book on The Last Battle anyway, much less one that a youngster like you would write nearly a thousand years later?”

Robert folded his twenty-four-by-thirty-centimeter Electronic Communication Device into a ten-by-eight-by-two-centimeter packet and slipped the ECD into his shirt pocket. Floods of self-doubt washed over him. Years of his mother’s belittling was wearing him down with even greater precision than any of the previous era’s mighty weapons of war.

He regretted sharing his latest dream with her. Each year added to the pattern, repeating itself over and over. He would leave for another year of school and return pumped up by a brilliant and gifted educator who inspired him to do his best and reach beyond his thoughts of mediocrity. In his enthusiasm, he would share with his family his latest goals and ambitions. His mother would ponder his assertions and slowly pick them apart until he returned to school with his head hung low, searching for new direction.

It started the first year, when he was positive he would become an artist. Back then, his mother was right. He didn’t have any artistic talent and wasn’t particularly creative by nature. Marilyn Maskil didn’t want her son to be hurt. So

she gently prodded him to think through the logic of his desires. In the end Robert appreciated what Mom had shown him about himself and the world around him. He was older now; this time, he knew exactly what he wanted to do with his life.

“Your father just got home,” Mom yelled up the stairs, “so put that book away and get ready for supper.”

“OK, I’m coming.” Robert sighed loudly enough for her to hear. He knew that agreeing with her was the only way to get some peaceful conversations in the next few days before he returned to school. Once she had made up her mind that one of his projects was lame, he wouldn’t hear the end of it until he acquiesced and gave it up. He wasn’t going to do that. Not this time.

He also knew that she had been working on his father to try to get him to be more in agreement with her. In the past, Dad had been supportive of Robert’s goals, but he was obviously getting tired of hearing new ones and never seeing any come to fruition.

Justin Maskil was an important man in the community. He served on the Board of Elders and managed the local hardware store, which provided a wide range of merchandise, including repair kits for automatic doors, kitchen cabinet knobs, plumbing fixtures, miniature power units for camping, and other sporting goods. His work and ministry kept him quite busy—too busy to be involved much with his youngest son. It wasn’t that he didn’t love Robert. He had already spent considerable time raising Robert’s five older siblings. Robert was the only one still technically living at home yet was away at school most of the time. Besides, being on the Board of Elders was an important responsibility.

The proof that Dad was doing a good enough job as a father was that no family Enforcers ever showed up at their home. The Enforcers had an uncanny knack for appearing just before things got out of hand, putting families back on track.

Robert thought again about the “musty old book” he had been reading. The nagging thought that had plagued him for the last couple of years kept torturing his mind. *What if that isn’t the way it really happened?* All the books, whether novels or documentaries, were in such complete agreement, it seemed as though there must be a conspiracy to hide the truth. Survivors of the battle, people who were loyal to The Sovereign, wrote all the initial reports. Most books written since then had been based on interviews with survivors or compilations of other writings. *Has anyone ever questioned these accounts? Would we continue to measure our years ASR, After Sovereign’s Return, if something scandalous was involved?*

Robert pulled the ECD out of his pocket. He had to get in just a bit more reading before heading downstairs for supper.



**June 23, 997 ASR**

Chancellor Ben-Shaachar stared into darkness so deep and thick it seemed as if it could be poured out like black paint. The silence was equally unbearable. If he had been a normal being, the sound of his heart and the blood rushing through his

veins would have been like the roar of a mighty river. However, The Chancellor was no ordinary person.

Ever since his defeat, he had been held prisoner in this detestable dungeon without sight or sound. He had been isolated from every living creature for 997 years, with only his own thoughts to keep him company.

Day and night (though it was impossible to tell one from the other), he had gone over his defeat, analyzing each step that he had carefully planned and orchestrated to liberate the masses of humanity from the clutches of The Sovereign. If only he had predicted the earthquake and the violent storm. If only he had moved a day earlier. The regrets resounded through his mind until he thought his head would explode.

He turned his thoughts to his backup plan. I wish I had put more time and attention into it. Had it been implemented sooner, perhaps I would be free now.

Ben-Shaachar hadn't risen to power based only on his charisma and natural charm. He had powers of the mind that went far beyond the realms of man. During his imprisonment these powers had enabled him to remain sane. They alone had kept him from falling completely into the downward spiral of self-incrimination. When the "if-onlies" came flooding in, he turned to meditation and attempts to contact his lieutenants.

He remembered experiments people had done on frogs to study muscle atrophy. They had tied a frog down so it couldn't move, with one leg restricted and one free to kick. Researchers had expected the restricted leg to atrophy because it couldn't move. Instead the muscles grew stronger as it tried to kick against the restraints. It became larger than the free leg, which had no resistance. Like that restricted leg, The Chancellor Ben-Shaachar's mind was growing more powerful every day that he was kept in the smothering darkness and silence.



### May 15, 998 ASR

Captain Chuck Andrews of His Sovereign's Star Ship Ramah strolled along the beach, gazing at the bleak landscape before him. Forty kilometers ahead, barren foothills gently rose from the plains and led up to rugged mountains capped with snow. The plains were covered by sand and littered with rocks. A small river flowed down the mountains, spilling into a great ocean within a hundred meters of his ship.

He'd expected to find mud in these flatlands, but had discovered only sand and rocks worn smooth by the waves. While some of the sand was fine enough to be considered dirt, there wasn't a trace of anything that could be classified as soil since there were no nutrients from the decomposition of animal or vegetable life. The crew's analysis of the samples taken before they landed didn't turn up one little microbe, not even a virus. *There's no evidence of any life here except for the crew.* He kicked over a small rock, disgusted that a bug didn't scurry out from under it.

He looked at his crewmembers, all either relaxing on the beach or splashing through the shallow waters. They were supposed to be supervising the pumping of water into the ship. They would need that water for fuel as well as for their consumption to supplement what they could recycle from the hydroponic crops.

“Get back on those pumps,” Chuck barked. The crew, unaccustomed to hearing their Captain bellow, scurried to follow his order.

Chuck started back toward the ship—the only man-made object in view. It hovered a meter off the ground. Twenty-five stories high, one kilometer long, and one kilometer wide, it was the largest craft ever designed to fly among the stars. Each towering wall was covered with sensor antennas of various shapes and size, hatches leading to the inner corridors, powerful lights, and access panels for equipment maintenance. *Whatever possessed me to come this far in that ugly piece of junk?*

Chuck ascended the ship’s ramp. As he trudged to his office, he paged his science officer with his ECD.

He stared out the virtual porthole behind his desk. His crew had returned to their frolicking on the beach. We’ve been out here exploring the cosmos for twenty-five years, three months, six days, and thirteen hours. I guess a bit of free time on the first inhabitable planet out of the 120 we’ve visited isn’t out of order.

All of the planets had looked inhabitable according to long-range sensors. *I’m tired of this wild goose chase. I want to go home.*



Science Officer Commander Zophia Assir’s ECD chirped and she picked it up. *I wonder what Captain Andrews wants so urgently.* She rose from her station on the bridge, which consisted of a simple desk, fifty centimeters by forty centimeters, with an imbedded display panel and a keyboard she seldom used.

“Computer,” she said, “let me know when the water supply tanks are 99.9 percent full.”

The computer acknowledged her request both on screen and audibly in her earpiece. She removed the earpiece and placed it in its receptacle, closing the panel over the computer.

Zophia turned from the view screen that filled the forward wall and exited through the automatic door. She crossed the corridor and knocked at the Captain’s office door.

“Come in, Zophia,” she heard as the door opened.

The Captain stood with his back to her, staring out his porthole. Andrews was of medium height and build. The bald dome of his head was surrounded by rusty red hair that covered the tops of his ears, and then curled up at his collar. Few people lost their hair these days, and most restored it with simple medical treatments. Zophia had often wondered why Andrews didn’t, though she never felt comfortable asking him.

She walked past the five plush visitor chairs and approached his desk. “You wanted to see me, Captain?”

“How long would it take us to get home from here?”

Zophia quickly calculated the answer. “One year, five months, and eleven days, give or take a few hours, at our normal cruising speed.” She wondered why he wanted to know.

Andrews turned and spoke softly. “I’m 175 years old. That’s more than fifty years older than anyone else on this ship. Few people over a hundred had a desire to leave Earth to explore the universe. Did we make a mistake? Have we wasted the last twenty-five years?”

The Captain sat in his chair and adjusted its height up. Apparently, even after twenty-five years of working together, their height difference still made him uncomfortable. His eyebrows knit together and his brow wrinkled.

Zophia took her cue and sat in one of the visitor chairs quickly adjusting its height down. “If you keep scowling like that, your eyebrows will intertwine so badly it’ll take a barber to get a smile out of you.”

Andrews laughed lightly.

“So, what’s wrong?” she asked.

He leaned forward as if to take Zophia into his confidence. “I think our journey has been a waste. Every time we reach a new planet, we analyze the soil, air, water, and other liquids on the surface. When our detailed analysis proves that the planet is uninhabitable, we hop in the ship and do it all over again somewhere else. All with the same results.”

“Why is this bothering you now?”

“This place is different from any other planet we’ve visited. It’s almost a perfect match to Earth in size and temperature and composition, but it’s totally barren of life. I’d hoped we’d find a planet with plants and animals.”

“The Sovereign told us we wouldn’t find life out here,” Zophia reminded him. “That was never the goal.”

The Captain stood, clasped his hands behind his back, and paced behind his desk. “Right, but the way he phrased it, I thought he was referring to intelligent life. I got the feeling he was hinting that we’d find at least a tree someplace.”

“He only approved this voyage because we hounded the Administration until they got tired of saying no. The only thing that swayed them was the idea of finding a planet to colonize,” Zophia reminded him.

“I know. However, when he christened the ship H.S.S.S. Ramah, which means ‘to shoot,’ I took that to mean that he was shooting us out into space. It’s as if we had his explicit approval and sanction to find something. I’m beginning to think there isn’t anything out here after all.”

Andrews stopped pacing and looked at Zophia. “How much more time before we’re scheduled to return?”

“Five more years. Sir.”

“Maybe we don’t have to wait. After all, we did discover one place we could colonize.”

“So, now that we’ve found a planet on which a tree could grow if we supplied some fertilizer, you’re saying you want to head home and stop looking for a place where The Sovereign may have already planted a tree?” Zophia hoped he hadn’t decided to return early. *I like exploring.*

Captain Andrews raised his hands. “If he had planted a tree somewhere out there, why didn’t he at least give us a hint about where to look?”

Zophia stood quickly. “Maybe he did.” She stared into space as she tried to recall a past memory. “I vaguely remember something in The Sovereign’s launching speech that puzzled me at the time. I’d like to study the transcript in our database before you make a final decision.”

The tension in His face eased. “All right. Let me know what you find out.”

As she darted out the door, she heard him call, “Oh, and you’re dismissed, Commander.”



### **August 18, 998 ASR**

Robert put a large bowl of mashed potatoes on the dining room table. Mom always put just the right amount of butter, garlic, and parsley to tantalize his taste buds. His father arrived home from work just in time for dinner. Mom had fixed Dad’s favorite: broiled steelhead so juicy and rich that it practically melted in his mouth. She served fresh long green beans which would also add color to the plate along with the lettuce, red onions, tomatoes, olives, and peppers in the salad. *Mom only prepares a spread like this when she wants to make points with Dad.*

If he played his cards right, Robert would be able to escape to his room without having any meaningful discussion about his continuing school or his desire to write a book about The Last Battle.

Robert sat at the table as his father pulled a chair away from the table for his mother. After they were all seated Dad bowed his head and prayed, “Thank you, Sovereign, for all you provide, amen.” He reached for the steelhead and glanced at Robert. “Well, Robert, how was your day?”

“If we had sautéed mushrooms, I think the setup would be complete,” Robert replied. Over the years he had developed the art of dodging issues by distraction.

“What do you mean?” asked Dad sharply.

Robert reached for the salad bowl. “This is the first night you’ve been home on time for dinner in almost two weeks. Not only that, but you’ve got that look on your face that says, ‘It is a father’s noble role to discuss his son’s future, guiding him and helping him make important decisions so that all will be well with him because he has had the best counsel available.’” Robert lifted his chin, turned his head, and gave just a hint of knitted eyebrows, hoping to provide an accurate imitation.

His dad’s face turned bright red, as if he had a fish bone stuck in his throat. He almost tipped over the water glasses as he lunged forward in his chair. “Why, you ungrateful brat! How dare you speak to me that way? I’ve worked hard to provide for this family.” He pointed a boney finger at Robert. “I’ve helped each of my kids get the best education and find significant positions in the Empire. What have you contributed to the family except discord?”

Robert waited a second or two to get the right timing. Then he scooted back in his chair. “Discord? You’re the one who always flies off the handle and can’t have a decent conversation with his own son.”

Dad stood; his hands in the air. “Why, I’ve half a mind to—” He stopped suddenly and sat without completing his sentence.

“Justin, are you all right?” Mom asked.

He wobbled his head left and right then up and down slowly. “No, uh, yes. Yes, I am. I’m . . . I’m sorry. I was out of line, Robert. Please forgive me.”

Robert’s jaw dropped and he stared at his father. *How can I storm out now?*

“You’re right. I haven’t had a decent conversation with you for years. I’ve done many things *for* you, but not *with* you. I’ve done what I thought you needed without talking things over with you. I even intervened with the Board of Elders, without consulting you, so you can continue your studies.” Dad hung his head and didn’t look directly at Robert.

“You what? Are you saying I’ve been allowed to study, not because of the merit of my work, abilities, and potential to contribute to society, but only because you intervened?”

“Son, I think it’s time I started over.” His voice was calm and compassionate. His eyes met Robert’s with a steady gaze.

Robert couldn’t remember the last time his father had called him Son.

“You have every right to be angry with me. I haven’t been honest with you, and I need to clear the air. I hope you’ll hear me out.”

Robert felt all hope of escape melt away.

“Last week your mother and I had a long talk about your future and where we thought you should go. For a long time I’ve been in favor of keeping you in school. Perhaps we’ve been afraid that you would fail if you got a job. However, we believed a full education was best for you, so we were determined to make sure you got it. I’ve been trying to protect you. At least that’s what I thought I was doing. We haven’t really been listening to you.”

“You were . . . protecting me?” Robert swallowed hard. “From what?”

“I’ve been shielding you from the Board of Elders and using my influence to convince them to keep you in school.” Dad paused, looking down at his plate. “Today I had a consultation with the Board and they’ve asked you to come by tomorrow at two o’clock for an interview. I won’t be participating as a Board member this time, so their decision will not be influenced by me.”

Mom inhaled sharply.

“Tomorrow?” Something between fear and panic churned in Robert’s stomach. His mind raced, trying to imagine what the Board was going to ask or say or do. *How can I be ready in such a short time?*

What would his life be like if he were forced to stop his education and get a job? He felt unprepared to transition from studies to eight hours a day behind a desk—or worse, in a factory assembly line. *How could this be happening to me? What did I do to deserve this?* “I need more than one day to prepare.”

“I apologize for not talking to you sooner about this or including you in our thoughts. However, the meeting is already scheduled. You know that can’t be changed without some kind of disaster.”

Dad was right. The Board of Elders didn’t look kindly on anyone who missed an appointment.

How did this happen?

“Thanks a lot, Dad . . . for messing up my whole life.” Robert threw his napkin on his plate, left the table and headed for his room.

“Where are you going?” Mom shrieked after him. “You can’t talk to your father like that and walk out. Come back here this—”

“Let him go, Marilyn,” Robert heard his father say as he stormed up the stairs. “He’s got a lot to think about.”



Justin folded his napkin carefully and laid it down beside his plate while he thought about his own character. He was beginning to realize how much he had become like his own father. Now he may have passed his faults on to another generation. Justin felt sorry for his youngest son.

As soon as Robert’s door closed, Marilyn’s compassionate gaze turned to a glare. “We need to talk. Now!”

Justin looked at her, knowing full well what was coming.

“I can’t believe you took yourself off the Board for this interview. Don’t you care what happens to our son? He’s never going to make anything of himself if he doesn’t get away from that school where they keep putting crazy ideas into his head. What were you thinking?”

Justin half listened to his wife while his thoughts drifted back to a comment an Enforcer had made when checking up on his family. He had quoted an old Scripture—something about the sins of the parents being visited on the children for several generations. He hadn’t known what it meant at the time. Now, he was beginning to realize how much Marilyn was like his mother—a matriarch in every sense of the word. His mother had taken control of the family while his father devoted himself to work. Justin had rebelled and forced conflicts between his parents. Truth be told, the men in his family for several generations followed the same pattern: neglecting their families to attend to business and abdicating the responsibility for raising the children to their wives.

I never wanted to be like my dad. I hated him for letting Mom walk all over him. Now here I am with a rebellious son and a wife who wants to control his destiny.

Justin turned his attention to Marilyn, stopping her in mid-sentence. “I know how disappointed you must be. We did agree that I would be on the Board for Robert’s review. I’m sorry I didn’t discuss the change of plans with you. In a way the decision was taken out of my hands.”

“What do you mean?” Marilyn looked ready to explode.

He proceeded with caution. “Most of the time I can get the Board to see things my way. Yesterday, I brought them up to date regarding Robert’s educational accomplishments and started talking about his future; Henry interrupted me.”

“The senior Elder?”

“Yes. He said he had already been considering Robert’s case. Apparently Markus, the statistician, had a private conversation with him recently about Robert’s education being way outside the norm. He felt it was time for Robert to quit school and become a contributing member of society. The other ten agreed.”

Marilyn exhaled and relaxed. “That’s wonderful. It’s exactly what we wanted. Why aren’t you going to be on the Board when the decision is given?”

“It was Henry’s idea. He thought there might be some suspicion that I had unduly influenced the Board. Besides, Robert knows how we think. He’ll have to make a case for what he wants to do with his life—continue to go to school or write that book of his.”

“Did you warn them about that?”

“I mentioned that he had some ideas about writing a history book about The Last Battle. They said it was the most ridiculous thing he could come up with. That would only help them justify their decision.”

“Sounds like they’ve already made up their minds.” Marilyn’s demeanor relaxed.

“They still have to consider what Robert has to say. They’ll probably give him a few days to come up with a plan for the next few years of his life. Then he’ll have no choice but to go along with the Board’s decision.”

## Chapter 2

September 1, 997 ASR

The Chancellor felt a surge of power flowing over him as he meditated, sharpening his mind. Something was happening. He couldn't tell for sure, but it appeared that his backup plan was starting to kick in. While he relied mostly on his own powers, he knew that other forces in the universe were beneficial, too, and he had groomed others to aid his cause when the time came. *Perhaps my increased strength is enabling me to contact the others.*

"Abathar, can you hear me?" Ben-Shaachar forced every fiber of his mind to focus on transmitting the message into the darkness.

"Excellency. Is that you?" came the immediate and startled reply.

The Chancellor Ben-Shaachar's heart pounded. He had not only successfully sent the message, but had transmitted the means to reply and contact others, in spite of the gloom that had imprisoned him for so many years.

"It is good to hear your thoughts again, Abathar." Abathar was the brightest and most loyal of all his forces. His admiration for The Chancellor would have taken him almost as far in his position in Chancellor Ben-Shaachar's government as his abilities.

"I had almost given up hope of ever hearing from you again, Chancellor. This isolation has been so severe, I thought I would die. If it hadn't been for your excellent training, I'm sure I would have given up."

If Ben-Shaachar hadn't felt such a sense of urgency, he might have let Abathar continue his praises for a while. "Time is short. We must contact the others, one by one. We must make sure the enemy does not detect our communications. I focused on you alone for this first contact. You now know how to penetrate the enemy's interference. Do so carefully. We can't risk global communication until we have assessed the strength of the enemy and his current abilities. Much time has passed and we can't assume that he hasn't been strengthening himself, as I have."

"Oh, Excellency, why would he be concerned? He thinks he has us in prison, isolated from one another. He has made grandiose claims about his strength. Wouldn't he think he has been completely successful?"

"You are right, Abathar, but he is a deceiver. He holds back information about himself and reveals aspects of his capabilities at the most unprofitable of times for us. It is better to overestimate rather than underestimate him."

Ben-Shaachar knew the dungeon didn't exist on a purely physical plane. It didn't have walls and bars or corridors between cells. He had always imagined it as a three-dimensional honeycomb, with each of his subordinates in cells surrounding his. As he expanded his powers and successfully contacted Abathar, he confirmed his position in this alternate realm.

"I'm sending you my coordinates. You are only a few meters away from me. As you contact the others, map out their locations. I will search out the enemy's

vulnerabilities. My success in contacting you has opened other doors that I must now explore. We will soon escape and reassemble our forces.”

Chancellor Ben-Shaachar abruptly closed communications with Abathar and immediately started probing and pushing his psychic abilities against metaphysical barriers and obstructions, looking for tiny cracks. As soon as he found one he would prod deeper and expand his energy to force a larger opening until he could wiggle his spirit through and continue the process of searching out his enemy’s weaknesses.



### **August 18, 998 ASR**

Kevin leaned against a broad weeping willow tree trunk. He watched his favorite mare kicking up her heels in the lush green pasture as his son ran beside her. His delight at this scene was tempered as he mulled over the communiqué from his superior, J’Bar Mohamed. It had been several weeks since Kevin had an assignment. Now, the Matthews were at it again. He knew without reviewing the details the cause of the problem with this family and how long they had been fighting. He also knew how each family member had blown things out of proportion.

He didn’t need a watch to tell time even though timing was critical. He must step in when his intervention would have the most impact. He took a deep breath, waiting patiently until the optimal moment arrived.

He used his wait to reflect on how he came to be an Enforcer in service to The Sovereign Yehowshuwa. He was a successful corporate executive before The Last Battle, dedicated to his career and to the company. He’d been amply rewarded for his achievements. He owned a huge estate with a twenty-two-room mansion, riding stables, guesthouse, and Olympic-size swimming pool. However, he spent most of his time at the office, leaving little time to enjoy the benefits of his position.

He hadn’t spent much time with his wife and three children, either. However, he was more fortunate than many. His wife, Rachel, was a patient and tolerant soul. That hadn’t stopped them from fighting. Her dedication to The Sovereign had prevented her from leaving him, although she had threatened it many times.

Several years before The Last Battle, The Sovereign had made a dramatic retreat and pulled all his subjects out of The Chancellor’s territory. The move had taken Kevin off-guard. His loyalty to Yehowshuwa had been barely evident because his job had always taken precedence over his sense of duty for The Sovereign’s Administration. Many even thought he was working for Ben-Shaachar.

Assigning him as an Enforcer for family intervention seemed fitting in the eyes of The Sovereign. In retrospect, Kevin saw the wisdom of the decision. He now had to excel in areas he had earlier neglected. In truth, he was thankful that he had been considered for this job. He felt honored to be in this position in the Administration. Now he could help others in areas where he himself had failed.

It was time. Kevin raised his hands in front of his chest, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and popped in at the Matthews' modest home in the older part of what had once been a large manufacturing city.

*Whump!* Kevin caught the vase that had been aimed at Clyde Matthew's head. If he had appeared a second later Clyde would have been on his way to the hospital with multiple lacerations on his face. Kevin set the vase on a nearby table. "What is it this time, folks?"

Clyde and Charlotte stood frozen. Their jaws hung wide open. These instantaneous entrances always unnerved the families, but were an effective way to get their attention and stop hostilities. Not every entrance was as dramatic as this one; however, many broken bones, stabbings, scaldings, and other abuses had been averted when Enforcers used this technique.

Family intervention Enforcers never showed up without an invitation unless there was an imminent threat of serious bodily injury to a member of the family or a severe violation of Administration laws. Kevin had visited this family several times and had been invited back for extensive counseling, which apparently had minimal long-term impact on the family dynamics. Since their behavior had mushroomed into violence, their future counseling would not be by invitation, but was required by law.

He led them to the couch and had them sit together. "Clyde, you're the head of the household, so you start."

Kevin listened, comparing Clyde and Charlotte's stories with his mental notes of what had actually happened. At various times he interrupted one of them to clarify a point and help them get back to the situation. They both knew from previous interventions that Kevin had a better understanding of what had happened than either of them, yet they always tried to shade the truth in their favor. A major breakthrough would occur if they could put their own interests and defensiveness aside.

This young couple accepted the Administration and the rule of Sovereign Yehowshuwa over their lives. They had no choice; otherwise, an Enforcer would compel them to comply. However, only if they yielded their will to The Sovereign would they be able to overcome their problems and get their family straightened out.

At times Kevin wanted to grab them and shake them until they came to their senses, to see the benefits of yielding their lives. Yet, he couldn't force them to change their wills. All he could do was enforce outward compliance with the rules and demonstrate a better way to live.

Unfortunately the Matthews were becoming more the norm than the exception in society. People were less diligent in teaching their children about The Sovereign, instead concentrating on following regulations in order to avoid intervention from an Enforcer.

After two hours of counseling, Clyde and Charlotte had made enough progress to hold them over until follow-up sessions could be started.

Kevin returned to his abode as quickly and silently as he had left.



### September 2, 997 ASR

Ben-Shaachar continued to explore the enemy's vulnerabilities. His mind had finally broken through the prison wall and he was able to gather information. As he had suspected, while the population of Earth grew, the enemy's control had diminished. *There's no way he can maintain constant surveillance over billions of people.* This was to The Chancellor's advantage, of course, because the enemy's efforts were taking resources away from the dungeon. *That must be why I was able to reach Abathar sooner than I expected.*

"Chancellor," Abathar thoughts interrupted his search with a report, "I have some astounding news. Some of our people have already escaped. I'm relaying their coordinates to you now."

"Excellent, my friend. That verifies what I suspected." He would soon enable Abathar to hack into the enemy's systems and plant data so the backup plan could be implemented.



### August 19, 998 ASR

Daylight chased the moonbeam away that Robert had watched slowly inch its way across his bedroom floor. All night long, he tossed and turned, imagining every possible scenario before the Board. His mind had been in an endless loop of questions and answers that always led back to the initial question: *What can I say to convince them that continuing school and writing this book are of any benefit to society and the Administration?*

He could hear their questions. "What have you contributed so far? What kind of job have you been preparing for? Have you considered getting married and raising a family?"

Robert couldn't figure out how being married was such a great contribution to society. He hadn't met any ladies he would want to live with for the rest of his life. Sure, he'd had a few romances, and they were wonderful. Sooner or later, the women all started sounding like Mom. *"What are your plans for the future? When are you going to finish school?"*

*Can't I just be myself and do what I want? Why does the Board have so much control over my life?*

He knew why. The Board members represented The Sovereign Yehowshuwa. Their authority had been established by the Administration to guide the community in an orderly and peaceful manner for the benefit of society. Or so the basic civics classes taught. In reality, they held the purse strings and the connection with other Boards in other communities around the world.

*I need to convince them that my education and my book are important to society.* Robert feared they would badger him until he became so frustrated he couldn't communicate clearly. If he'd read his father correctly last night, they'd already made up their minds. All the questions would be for show and Robert would be stuck looking for some dumb job behind a desk.

He finally gave up on sleep and rose early, took a convy out of the suburbs so he could take a long run in the country to clear his head. There was something about a 10K that had a cleansing effect on his mind.

He started out at a good pace, but he was concentrating too much on his breathing to be able to focus on what he was going to say to the Board. Then the usual pains cropped up. The knees started complaining first. *Just keep running*, he told himself. *They'll get used to it*. Before he knew it, 2K had passed and his body was complying with his will.

Robert liked getting out and enjoying the beauty of the countryside. The Administration insisted that everyone kept things well maintained, and people took pride in integrating their homes and businesses with nature. Most streets were lined with trees and shrubs that bloomed throughout the year; in addition, some blossomed at a different time to provide a never-ending display of color. All roads were paved except in remote wilderness areas. Every country road had a separate paved bike path that made it safe and enjoyable to ride, run, or walk.

Robert liked looking at the farms with their cottage-like houses. This particular community had built their homes based on ancient Dutch patterns, each one even sporting a functioning windmill. The houses all stood about a hundred meters apart. The buildings were octagon shaped with a white stucco exterior. The roofs were round and sloped upward sharply to a round brick chimney in the center. The chimney was used only for venting since it had been hundreds of years since burning fuels had satisfied heating needs. Above each of the eight walls was a dormer window that revealed more rooms and an upper floor.

Parallel to the road and the running trail were rows of brilliant tulips, highlighted by a short white picket fence. Crisply cut dark green lawns were lined by petunias, pansies, hollyhocks, and other assorted flowers. All bloomed throughout the year.

Robert ran past the historical marker that explained the origins of this community. Having read it before, he knew that the designer had chosen a theme that reflected the long-extinct Dutch nation. He had chosen the theme because of the functional nature of the houses that fit in the farming community but mostly because he liked the style. Some of Robert's friends had grown up here, but few of them could trace their ancestry back to that nation.

The church in the middle of the village, which also served as a community hall, was the center of the town's social activities. Robert's two o'clock appointment was at his own community hall.

As he approached the building, Robert felt refreshed and alert in spite of his restless night. He still hadn't figured out the best argument to achieve his goals.

*Keep it straight and to the point. My goal is to write a book.* However, he also needed to finish this last quarter of school first. One class was essential. Professor Robison's sub-ancient philosophy class analyzed the prevailing thoughts and motivations of those who opposed The Sovereign before The Last Battle. The professor was the leading authority on the way people thought before the war. Robert had read his books, but that wasn't the same as sitting under his tutelage and searching his mind.

Certainly the Board would ask why he wanted to write the book. As Robert thought about his reasons, those nagging thoughts returned. *What if that isn't the way it really happened?*

The younger generation, those who were furthest removed from The Last Battle, had been taught how beneficial The Sovereign was to society and what great bounty he had provided. A few young people, like Robert, harbored doubts about the truth of those claims. *Would we still have these things even if he weren't ruling us? What price have we paid for the bounty?*

When he got together with others of like mind and talked through the night, they discussed many things that his elders seemed to take for granted. At the heart of it all was what happened before, during, and immediately after The Last Battle. Those things had shaped their society and who they had become as a people. *Somehow, I have to convey the need of our generation to be assured that our history is correct . . . or if it's not, determine what really happened.* How could he do that without offending the Board Elders by insinuating that he didn't trust or believe them?

Robert stopped running as a new thought occurred to him. What if he shared with the Board his knowledge about other students who were questioning history and The Sovereign Yehowshuwa? If he presented himself as someone who could put the record straight for them, the Board just might let him do it. That sounded like a job with a positive contribution to society. *I'll file a motion to become a historian!*

Robert reached the conveyance stop. He pushed the call button and started his post-run stretches while he waited for the convy. Less than two minutes later, the cab appeared out of the underground ramp and stopped before him. The doors opened quietly. As he stepped inside he spoke his home address so the computer would process his destination.

The small convy had only four seats, all of which were empty. Robert chose one, and the cab plunged deep underground, picking up speed as it raced down the conveyance tubes. Commuter traffic was taking most people into the city from the suburbs, so the cab linked up with a train, which took Robert close to the city. From there the computer found a vacant tube going to his house. Robert's home was only thirty kilometers from the end of his run, but it took nearly ten minutes to get home.

He jumped out of the convy a block from his house. He jogged home and rushed to his room to see if he could find a boilerplate for a motion that he could adjust to file with his arguments.



### **November 29, 997 ASR**

Gloria was the first of Chancellor Ben-Shaachar's operatives to escape from the dungeon nearly 75 years ago. Her break out occurred just as The Chancellor had planned. When other troops gained their freedom, they reported to her for their

assignments. All operations outside of the dungeon were in her domain. She relished her position.

Shortly after her escape her forces were too small for the task of recruiting the human population without direct involvement. Gloria took on the form of a forty-five-year-old woman with pale skin and long black hair. The body was attractive enough to catch the attention of the males she recruited, but not so much as to lose the respect of the women. She grew accustomed to the body and kept it even though she seldom contacted humans.

Deciding to focus mostly on university students, she took a small office near the Scottsdale University campus as a base of operations. She needed nothing more than her plain wooden desk painted black and her comfortable but modest chair. Two hard wooden chairs were provided for appearance. They were seldom used.

As she sat behind her desk and looked over the recruitment statistics for the fall quarter, a ghostly wisp appeared before her desk. *A new escapee.*

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Jonathan.”

She looked through her ECD for an assignment for this newcomer. “Let’s see what I can find for you to do.”

“I already have an assignment,” he said. “I am to be the line of communication between you and The Chancellor, Ben-Shaachar.” The wisp pulsed. “What news do you have that I can pass on to him?” His voice dripped with arrogance.

Gloria’s stomach knotted up immediately. It felt as if her heart had done a flip and dropped to her gut. “So, Ben-Shaachar is finally able to communicate with us? Well, it’s about time. And you are the go-between.” She snorted in disgust. “Well, I’ve got some instructions for you, and you’d better follow them. When you show up around here you belong to me. You will take the form of a human and act like a human. We don’t want anyone reporting ghosts to the Administration.”

The wisp immediately became a young, athletic Asian man dressed in running shorts and a Scottsdale University T-shirt.

Gloria smiled. “Good choice.” She stood. “You can tell Ben-Shaachar that everything is proceeding as planned. Recruitment on the campuses is almost complete, and we will meet his goals in the next year and a half. The general population’s psychological state is exactly as he predicted, so recruitment outside the campuses will not be a problem when the time comes.”

Jonathan bowed slightly. “The Chancellor will be pleased to hear this.”

She was pleased at Jonathan’s attitude adjustment but maintained her scowl to make sure he knew who was in charge. “Tell Ben-Shaachar that his planning and wisdom in keeping our current leaders and me in the background before The Last Battle have proven most effective. I have been able to operate without any apparent detection from the enemy, as have the others who have escaped. Everyone is eager for action. They have all gone to work with a zeal that surpasses anything we knew before our imprisonment.” She was pleased with her accomplishments.

Jonathan stood motionless at attention. “Yes Ma’am.”

Gloria’s snapped, “You can go, now!”

He quickly turned, opened the door and left.

She sat back down and noticed her hand shaking. It was not Jonathan's attitude that bothered her. If Ben-Shaachar had allowed me to do my best instead of remaining in obscurity we could have won The Last Battle. Then I wouldn't have to be doing this all over again.