

# Restoration's Journey

An Unseen Dominion Novel  
by  
Robert Roush

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*Special thanks to the many teachers, professors, and instructors throughout the years who shaped my skills and passion for science, writing, theology, and most importantly, my love for the Creator and the true source of creativity.*

## PROLOGUE

Saturday, May 9, 2020

Ophois released a blood-thirsty howl and leapt from the roof of the building. His ears rang from the crack of the rifle. He longed for the days of chariots and swords, instead of Humvees and armor-piercing ammunition.

He darted down the side of the castle-like building, known as CeSiR Tech.

“You best hurry,” Mael said. “Your prey shall soon be floating down the river.”

Ophois ignored the jab, or at least he tried to.

As the ground approached, he crouched into the power of his hind legs and sprang from the white-stone wall. His front claws sliced through the rain-soaked grass and propelled him onward.

Above him, Mael bellowed something about a battle. Losing battles held little attraction for Ophois. How many times had he battled the heavenly host? Too many to remember and too many scars not to realize a head-on attack seldom brought anything but pain. Better to hide in the shadows, and then strike with bitter ferocity.

“Prepare for war!” Mael’s proclamation thundered from atop the building. “Soon the banks of the Lamine will run red with the blood of humans, and the sky will turn dark with shreds of the heavenly host.”

Unlikely, yet the blood on the banks of the Lamine—that he intended to bring to pass.

As powerful paws drew him forward ever faster, he caught the scent of his prey.

Fear, and blood

Unlike so many of his fellow demons, Ophois savored taking physical form. The thrill of his senses. The feel of flesh tearing between his claws.

Soon, very soon.

A dense unseasonable fog rolled past the river's edge and into the lawn. As much as he despised the heavenly interference, the fog proved a gift. How unfortunate it would have been, to have lost his prey to a sniper's bullet. Now, the hunt was on.

Moments later the fog enveloped him. The scent of the old man's blood grew strong—fast.

Too fast.

He dropped to his hind quarters and extended his front legs. At first his razor sharp nails slid through the damp soil.

Just before reaching the river, his grip found a layer of rock. His forelegs jerked to a stop. His body did not. He flipped over his front paws and landed on his back. A whimper escaped his throat. Hundreds of demons echoing Mael's war cry overshadowed his pathetic expression.

It was close. He nearly charged right into the river. The surging storm-fed currents of water. Nothing in the physical realm posed a threat. But, he despised water.

A river—there had to be a river.

He rose to his hind legs and attempted to peer through the fog. The smell of death hid any scent of the girl.

The last they saw from the top of the building was the bullet ripping through the old man and the inflatable raft. With the recent rains, the current would surely have swept Ophois' prey down the river—if not sucking her under.

With luck, she would survive the currents and the rocks downstream. Many months had passed since he last had a good hunt.

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“You need to get up child,” Eitan said. He set his silver shield against a tree and approached the girl.

Plastered against her head, the young girl’s blond hair looked almost auburn. Shivers roiled through her body.

Only a hundred yards away sat the River of Life church. A short walk to safety. Yet, he sensed the Spirit had other plans for this helpless lamb.

Determination kindled within her bright blue eyes. She climbed to her feet and picked up two backpacks.

He longed to accompany her on this journey. So young, so innocent. A lump rose within Eitan’s throat. How much would she have to learn in the next months, perhaps even hours?

The two backpacks dwarfed her small frame. Yet she threw one on each shoulder.

From across the river, another howl pierced the humid air. The enemy was restless.

The girl took a few steps away from the river, barely able to walk under the weight. Not of the backpacks, but of a heavy heart.

She stumbled when her foot caught a tree root.

Eitan shot to her side, grabbed her elbow, and she stabilized.

She paused and glanced from side to side.

Such awareness would serve her well.

When she started north along the river, Eitan turned and retrieved his shield. War was coming to Arrow Springs and he was needed.

But if the girl were to survive, she would need someone to go with her.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Saturday, May 9, 2020

**D**espite the cold wind blowing across her river-dampened clothes, Ima felt a warmth permeate her left arm. It reminded her of sitting next to the heat register, alone in her room at CeSiR.

Alone.

She knew what it was like to be alone. She had no friends, except Uncle M.

Was he dead?

Why would someone at CeSiR shoot him? He was CeSiR Tech. He founded the company. He'd told her so.

It had to be Maiya's doing. The cold-hearted woman always sought to keep Ima away from Uncle M. He said they needed to leave. To get away from CeSiR—from Maiya. He said he would save her from them.

Now, he'd been shot.

It was Ima's fault. Realization of the truth chased away the last vestige of warmth she had felt. They'd shot Uncle M because of her. Cold tears streaked down her cheeks.

*No matter what happens to me, ya must flee.* The words had gurgled out of Uncle M's final breaths. Her heart wouldn't accept it, but her mind knew the truth—her friend was gone. *Cross the river,* he'd said, before disappearing into the water.

She'd barely made it across. The deflating raft had plunged her into the water. The tempest currents pulled her downstream until somehow the raft seemed to defy the water



and floated upstream, like an invisible hand had pulled her to shore.

*Follow the tracks west.* Uncle M's sputtering words bobbed through her mind.

The tracks.

Which way were the tracks? She had never left CeSiR. But, she had seen them. Railroad tracks ran away from Arrow Springs to the north. Which way was north? She closed her eyes. Remember. Where had she seen the tracks?

From his office. Uncle M's office at the top of the building overlooked the river.

Her mind drifted back to her discussion with him, only days earlier. She'd stared out his large window, as she sipped on one of the few sodas she'd ever been permitted to drink. The view out the window had not included train tracks, only green grass, lush trees, and the river. But she remembered the tracks.

Yes. Months earlier she had visited his office. The trees had no leaves that time. Uncle M brought her to his office saying something about a white Christmas. He laughed and swirled her around in his arms. Seldom did she see such joy in his face. As he pointed to the white-powdered lawn, she could see the tracks through the trees.

Which way?

She stood on the other side of the river now, staring into the fog. The tracks were north of the river. Right. She needed to follow the river to the right.

She turned and began jogging under the weight of the two water-sogged backpacks. Through the fog, a warm glow reached out to her from a window.

*Speak to no one. Trust no one.* They were Uncle M's last pain-filled words.

This time warm tears crept down her cheeks.

She began to run. Away from CeSiR. Away from the window with the light, from which someone might see her. Away from everyone and everything she'd ever known.

Once again, she was alone.

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Ophois followed the scent of blood along the bank of the river to his right. The fog made it impossible to see the body. His only option was to assume the girl would stick with the body of her beloved doctor.

The scent of death slowed its movement downstream. With the direction of the currents they had to be closer to this bank than the other. Though the river didn't run deep, it had a significant breadth. Any moment she would step from the river.

Saliva dripped from green fangs, as he thought about slicing the girl to shreds. Ever since Mael introduced him to her, she had refused to submit to his control. The other demons called him a coward. They suggested it was because her body was made of water.

Ridiculous.

In his homeland he had acquired great respect and even the worship of the locals. They thought he was a god. He gave great power to those who followed him. They painted images of him—even on their crypts.

Now he was reduced to chasing a measly child like some kind of rabbit. Cursed Creator and that bumbling traitor Moses. Even the wind-swirled fog reminded Ophois of the tempestuous currents of the crashing walls of water in the Red Sea. The fog was God's attempt to protect the girl. More interference with *His* creations. The thought rekindled Ophois' desire to rip the rag doll to shreds.

He let out another howl.

Water sloshed no more than ten feet from where he stood. He swept his teeth with his tongue. He could leave physical form and float out over the water to have his prey. Even the thought of hovering above the flowing water brought flashes of his past defeats.

Always water!

No, he could wait. If she drown in the river, he would be disappointed, but the end would still be accomplished. Though, he would prefer to torment her before killing her.

The scent of death began to move once again, down the river. Perhaps she would try to get the body all the way to town before coming ashore. That made no sense. To his knowledge, the girl had never been allowed to leave CeSiR Tech. Mael was intent on using her as a surrogate. After dealing with her insolence for the past few days, Ophois understood this desire. But that was not his style. Fear, torment, and death were more to his liking.

He followed the movement to an old bridge embankment. Once again something sloshed in the water. He climbed onto the embankment and prepared to attack, as soon as the girl emerged.

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Ima dodged trees, as she ran along the river's edge. Her labored breathing accompanied strange noises in the fog. Low guttural croaks taunted her. Overhead, some kind of insect buzzed its displeasure at her presence. At least she assumed it came from an insect. Though the rain had stopped, someone forgot to tell the trees. Giant droplets of water splattered off her nose blending with equal sized tears.

To her left something moved in the rotting leaves from the previous year's fall. She didn't wait to see if it was a friend or foe.

Who was she kidding?

There were no friends, only foes.

Never friends.

Growing up at CeSiR, each childhood friend turned on her. Accused her of being different. Broken. An outcast.

Her feet sloshed against wet leaves and mud. Veiled silhouettes writhed in the dusky fog. She left CeSiR sometime after five o'clock. It shouldn't be this dark. Clouds, tree cover, and dense fog limited her vision to no more than a few feet.

Ignoring the weight of the backpacks, she picked up speed. She had to flee. But from what? In a sense, she fled from everything, at least all she knew.

She sidestepped a tree.

Wham!

Another tree awaited her just past the first.

Face first, she plowed into the rough bark and bounced to the ground.

Pain pierced her forehead. She was no stranger to pain—physical or emotional. She wiped a hand across her face. The large raindrops had turned red. She wiped her hand on her blouse and then checked her forehead. Less blood than before. Apparently, it wasn't as bad as it felt.

She struggled to her feet and breathed a sigh of relief. At least nothing was broken.

Her right shoulder felt lighter.

Where was Uncle M's backpack?

She searched the ground and found the pack on the other side of the tree, which had her face engraved in it. She walked to the pack and slung it over her shoulder. It fell back to the ground. Again, she picked up the pack.

Great.

The strap had broken. No wonder the pack landed past the tree. She set her own pack on the ground and put Uncle M's on her left shoulder. Then she hefted her own pack to her right shoulder. Shaking off the stiffness in her neck, she began to jog. Once again she followed the edge of the river.

Pain, despair, loss, and fear fought for control of her mind. She couldn't let herself go there, at least not yet. She needed to get as far away from whatever pursued her as possible.

Up ahead the river turned. If her memory of the view from CeSiR served her, she was nearing the railroad tracks.

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At the turn of the river, Ophois sat crouched, ready to spring at the movement on the river's edge. Water splashed higher and higher against the banks of the river. The rains were swelling the river.

Then he saw it.

A body.

Not the girl, but the doctor. Surely the girl would not be far behind.

The water spit the man's body onto the gravel of the riverbank. It lay face down. Though the girl could not see Ophois, unless he so chose, she always seemed to sense his presence. So he waited. Waited on his perch overlooking the body. The girl would soon emerge.

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The trees around Ima swayed in the dusky fog—monsters waiting to reach down and grab her as she ran past. Silence surrounded her. No, not silence. She still heard the buzzing above her and the occasional croak. But something had changed.

She slowed to a stop. What was it?

The water. She no longer heard the rushing of the water. She hadn't changed direction. The river had. She expected the bend in the river to come gradually. She turned in circles. Which way was which? Had she run past the tracks? She'd never seen a railroad up close, at least not in real life. But she loved to read. Surely something referred to as an iron-horse needed a more substantial path to drive on than the roads for cars.

She bent down to the ground to see if she could tell which direction her footprints came from. All she saw were leaves and grass. Hopelessness invaded her mind. How could she possibly get away? She couldn't even find the railroad tracks. She'd already failed Uncle M's dying instructions.

She fought to listen, to hear the river. As her breathing slowed, the faint sound of water returned. But which way? It seemed to come from everywhere. The trees reflected the sound all around her. She wanted to collapse, to give up.

Small beams of sunlight drilled into the fog, but she still couldn't see the river.

Gradually, her eyes adjusted to the brighter lighting. Once more, she turned in a complete circle. She stopped. There. A brighter patch of light shone through the fog. If breaks in the

trees let small streams of light through, it made sense that the river would be more illuminated.

She walked toward the brightness.

No river.

Instead, she saw four straight dark lines on the ground. The lines disappeared into the fog in both directions. She walked up to the tracks. A giggle rose to her throat. How would she have run past these? She reached down and touched the cold rounded steel. She'd found the tracks. Uncle M would have been so proud.

She missed him already.

She turned left and began to walk between the first two tracks. She walked in relief for a few minutes. But, the tracks weren't her destination. They were the beginning of her journey.

Where would she go? How long could she follow the tracks? Her accomplishment felt so short lived.

She began to jog, but nearly tripped on the wood slats that separated the metal rails. She jumped to her right, between the sets of rails. The gravel proved much easier terrain.

Ima jogged for what seemed like half the day, though she knew it was probably less than an hour.

The fog had thinned as she continued, though to her left, where she assumed the river ran, a cloud seemed to hug the ground.

The angst within her began to ebb. But as it withdrew, her legs began to scream at her. How long could she keep this up? Ahead, a small grass clearing sat beside the tracks. Surely she could rest for a few minutes. She couldn't continue to carry two backpacks. She needed to consolidate them.

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Eitan stood in the yard at Marilyn's house, as her white sedan pulled into the drive. The corners of his lips pulled up at the sight of two mighty warriors crammed into the back seat of the car. Alex and Adiya both wore huge smiles as they exited the car.

“My, you look joyous,” Eitan said. “I take it the discussion between Sarah and Marilyn proved productive?”

“Years of broken relationships being restored,” Alex said, “with both God and man.”

“Very good,” Eitan said.

Adiya approached and knelt on one knee. “Captain Eitan, it is always good to see you, sir. Though from your look, your experience this evening has brought more pain than restoration.”

“Ever perceptive, Adiya. That is precisely why I have come.” He went on to tell them of the events by the river and who he feared tracked the girl.

“Ophois can be ruthless,” Adiya said. “She needs someone to protect her.”

“I fear this assignment will require diligent attention to the Spirit’s guidance. I believe this child holds great significance. And yet, she is coming of age and will need to make her own decisions.” Eitan put his hand on Adiya’s shoulder. “This will not be an easy assignment. I know not when you will again receive the Spirit’s regeneration. Protect her life, but beyond that, remain unnoticed.”

“Understood.” Adiya rose and turned to Alex. “Take care of Marilyn, my friend. She is finally finding the strength of forgiveness.”

Alex embraced Adiya. “I will, my friend. Go in the strength and peace of God.”

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Ima set the two backpacks in the grass. Already the sun worked to dry the grass. She stared for a couple minutes at the backpacks Uncle M had packed. This was supposed to be a joyous occasion. He’d said they were going out for the evening. Then the car wouldn’t start. If only the car had started, perhaps he’d still be alive. Why did he insist on using the raft? What had he said?

His words ground into her mind. *Ima ya bafita trust me! We've gotta leave this place. It's no longer safe here—for me, and more importantly for you. Do ya trust me?*

She had.

And it got him killed.

She got him killed.

She unfastened her backpack and flipped it open. He'd packed them both, but somehow going through his seemed disrespectful. As she pulled open the largest compartment, she wept. It contained clothes. The prettiest things she'd ever seen.

At the facility everyone wore the same thing, at least as children. Dark-blue cotton pants and white tops. One time, she'd asked one of the nurses about having something more colorful. The nurse scolded her for her pride. "Do you think you are something special? What is good enough for everyone else is not good enough for you?"

Ima pulled bright red, green, and blue tops out of the backpack. Some even had flowers on them. Seven total. She had enough tops to wear a different one each day for a whole week. Excitement wrestled with her recent loss for control of her body. Her legs wiggled. She pulled out two pair of blue jeans and a pair of tan slacks. She carefully set the clothes on top of Uncle M's backpack so they wouldn't get dirty or stained by the grass. In the bottom of the compartment, she saw the necessary undergarments to go with a week's worth of outfits. Uncle M had intended more than an evening out.

The front compartment of the backpack proved much less exciting. Toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, and something called antiperspirant. At least they all smelled pretty.

She carefully put the clothes back in her pack. No one was as nice as Uncle M. She lifted her gaze to the trees that surrounded her small place of solace. Leaves rustled in the wind. A hypnotic lullaby. Warmth from the sun called her to lay back in the grass and give in to her fatigue.

No. The danger lurked too close.

She had to press on.



She shook her head and looked at uncle M's pack. Should she just leave it? She couldn't bring herself to open it. It didn't belong to her.

She stood and picked up her pack. She had all the clothes she would need. As she reached the tracks, her stomach let out a loud growl. They hadn't eaten. That is where they were headed. She looked back at the large backpack, still sitting in the opening.

Had he packed anything to eat? If she left his pack there with food in it, an animal would rip it to shreds. She couldn't let that happen.

She walked back to his pack and sat down. She unzipped the front pouch. More toiletries. His bag had more compartments than hers, including a zipper inside the front pouch. She unzipped it and a wad of money pushed the compartment open.

She knew about money from her classes at CeSiR. She'd never had a need for it, so she had no clue whether this was a lot or a little. She grabbed what was there and stuffed it into her front pouch. Money would be good for food at some point, but she was hungry now.

She unzipped the main compartment of his bag and stopped cold. She buried her face in her hands.

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The doctor's body had lain on the rocky riverbank for at least half an hour. The water's edge retreated a few feet from the body, leaving bloody trails in the gravel. Ophois remained perched, waiting for any sign of the girl.

The fog hung over the river, but he sensed he had made a dire mistake, unless the girl had drown in the torrent of water. A fitting end for the obstinate mim. CeSiR's other creations were so easy to control. Mael told him that this one would be a challenge, and Ophois savored the opportunity. Hopefully, she had not drown in the river. That would be quite disappointing.

He approached the body of Doctor M'Gregor. It lay face down in the river stone. He sniffed the body and found only a trace of the girl's scent. The raft was missing. Had she floated down stream? Could she have plugged the hole quick enough to keep it from sinking? Doubtful.

He had lost her. At least for the moment.

He looked at the bridge a quarter mile downstream. Had she made it to town?

Wait.

He could see the bridge. How fortunate. The fog was thinning. With keen sight and an even better sense of smell, he would find her.

He rose to his hind feet and unfurled his black wings. Now that he could see across the river, the search would progress quicker from the air. He followed the river downstream. In a little over an hour, she could not be far. If his search downstream proved unproductive, he would circle back and hunt upstream.

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Ima sat frozen. She stared at an envelope in Uncle M's backpack. *Happy Birthday, Ima!*

It was supposed to be a day of celebration. Her first trip outside CeSiR, for her twelfth birthday. She cautiously reached toward the envelope, as if expecting it to bite her, or maybe disappear. She'd never received a birthday card. She picked up the envelope and examined it. The flap was sealed with some kind of glue. There was a slight opening in the corner. She slid her shaking finger into the slit and carefully separated the flap from the rest of the envelope. About half way through, it did bite her. Just a paper cut. She grabbed the flap with one hand and the rest of the envelope with the other and pulled.

The card fell into her lap.

She picked up the card. An animated squirrel smiled at her under the words, *It's Your Birthday*. She had watched squirrels playing in the yard at CeSiR.

She opened the card.

The inside had the same squirrel pointing at her. *Go Nuts!* She giggled and then drew in a quivering breath.

She closed the card and slid it back into the envelope. She stuffed the card in her backpack.

She returned to Uncle M's backpack and found water bottles and a bag full of peanuts, raisins, chocolate chips, pretzels, and almonds. She stuffed some other snacks into her bag along with a couple bottles of water. She kept out the mix and one bottle of water for the walk. She looked through his clothes, but didn't have any room in her bag. She did decide to keep a sweater that might prove useful if she got cold.

One item remained in the bottom of his pack—a box with shiny paper wrapped around it. A present? She pulled off the paper and stared at a white dress with blue flowers and a cute pair of white shoes. Sobs racked her chest. She'd never had anything so beautiful. She removed the sweater and pressed these last two items into her pack. Hopefully, the zipper would hold.

She quickly stuffed the rest of the items, including the sweater, back into Uncle M's backpack. She tossed it into the brush, so no one would find it.

Once again, she started down the tracks. Joy and sorrow swirled through her at the thoughtfulness of her now deceased friend.

Her only friend.

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Adiya sat in the clearing north of the river and watched as the young girl started her journey down the railroad tracks. According to the birthday card from Doctor M'Gregor, the girl's name was Ima. Such a sweet name, and such a vulnerable child.

Where could she possibly hope to run?

Eitan appeared correct in his assessment that whoever tracked her from the enemy camp headed downstream. Of course, Adiya could probably count on one hand the number of times the captain had been incorrect. This would give them

a head start, but a head start to where. If Ophois tracked the girl, it would not matter how much of a lead she possessed. He would find her.

After glancing around the clearing to ensure there were no prying eyes, Adiya walked to the large backpack, which Ima had thrown into the brush. Perhaps it held some insight to the precarious predicament in which this child found herself.

Ima had pulled several items from the bag, but Adiya noticed a side pouch that Ima never checked. Opening the zipper, it became clear that Ima's flight down the railroad was an improvisation.

Two airline tickets stared out from the zippered pouch. Adiya removed the first ticket—Ima Fredericks. The second ticket was the doctor's. The original plan had been to fly to LAX in Los Angeles. Was the girl trying to make her way to Los Angeles on foot? It would take her weeks. She would never survive that long, whether Ophois found her or not.

Whatever her plans, Adiya needed to give her more time. Time to create more distance between her and Ophois.

Perhaps the ticket could help. Adiya left Ima's ticket in the bag, but pulled out the doctor's.

If someone found the backpack they would know she had come this way. There was no time to walk the pack somewhere else. And though angels could fly unseen in the physical realm, a flying backpack might raise suspicion. Instead, Adiya grabbed two large rocks from the railway and stuffed them into the pack. The center of the river would do nicely.

The bag sank toward the bottom, as large bubbles of air floated to the surface. Even if someone found the pack, they might assume Ima had crossed back to the other side of the river, instead of following the tracks.

Now for the ticket.

Adiya flew between buildings across the north side of town, careful to stay out of sight of the enemy. This plan would only work if unseen. At the east edge of town, Adiya spotted Ophois flying along the eastern bank of the river.

Time was short.

Adiya turned toward the tracks and managed to stay out of sight for a few more minutes. Near the bend where the river turned east, another grass clearing came into view. Adiya quickly patted down the grass and set the doctor's ticket in a strategic spot on the downwind edge of the clearing.

Now to test the astuteness of the demon tracking Ima.

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## CHAPTER TWO

**F**or the last twenty minutes, Ima could see the structure looming up ahead. Now in the dim of twilight, it towered overhead, taunting her to enter. The surface of the river before her ran calm, almost glassy. If only it were glass, then she could slide down the hill and walk across its surface. A surface that bore the deep gray shadow of the structure some thirty feet above it.

She returned to the center of the tracks. The steel skeleton before her groaned in expectation.

As far as she could see, there were no other options. But was this really an option?

Twenty yards before the massive bridge, the tracks merged into a single pair. No walking on the more stable gravel here. She could walk between the two rails and hope not to stumble on the wood slats, or she could walk beside the tracks, with nothing but sixteen inches of slats between the metal track and a straight-down thirty-foot drop to the river below.

She stood and stared.

Unless her fear deceived her, the slats became harder to see by the minute. Twilight would soon fade to blackness.

The sky contained no moon. She didn't even know if there would be one. She'd read about solar eclipses. Sometimes the moon was out during the day, and not at night.

She couldn't wait for the moon.

But she could wait for the sun—lay down beside the track, put her head on the backpack, and sleep until morning. Her clothes were dry. It probably wouldn't get much colder than it

was already. She could handle the temperature. If only she had Uncle M's sweater.

*Ima, ya must flee.* The words of Uncle M bounced in her brain, as if echoing off all the steel beams supporting the bridge.

No. She wasn't far enough from CeSiR. Maiya's minions would find her. What if a train passed by during the night and spotted her? They'd tell the authorities. Maiya controlled the authorities. The nurses constantly reminded Ima of that.

She had to cross.

She had to cross now, before blackness completely engulfed the bridge.

What if a train came while she was *on* the bridge? Chills shuddered through her body. Tears formed in the corner of her eyes. Why? Why did Uncle M have to leave her?

Did trains even use these tracks anymore?

He'd know. If they didn't why was the bridge still there? Why would the tracks still be clear? So many questions. And no one to ask.

*Ya must flee!*

She took her first step out onto the bridge. The wooden crossbeams didn't seem to notice her. What once appeared thin and weak, she could now see were several inches thick.

She could do this. She took a few more steps, before turning to see that she now stood several feet from the gravel-edged embankment. Thick wood beams supported her without motion.

Quick steps carried her ten, twenty, thirty yards toward the center of the bridge. The smell of oil and rust rode a slight breeze.

She paused and looked at the thick beams supporting the track. Beneath them sat—nothing. Nothing but air. With more light, would she see the water sweeping beneath her?

The tracks began to creak and groan. Surely, her weight wasn't enough to cause the motion.

She pressed forward.

Steps became more difficult.

She stopped and steadied herself. This was a bad idea. She never should have walked onto the bridge. A roaring whirl drowned out the increased groans and creaks.

She should go back. She turned. She was more than half way across the seventy-five yard span.

The secure wooden slats, so thick and unmovable only moments before, now swayed and lurched.

She had to get across, now.

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Ophois finished scanning the river to the northeast of town. It seemed impossible that the raft had survived this far. Ima had to be traveling on foot, but where? He could double back to the point where the doctor was shot. If he picked up her scent, he could pursue her wherever she chose to go—or hide. He banked to his left and headed toward the west side of town.

A flash of whitish-gray flickered beneath him. Probably just trash. Humanity took no pride in the incredible creation that surrounded them. Then again, most rejected the existence of their own Creator. Which suited Ophois just fine. With the exception of his prey, the one called Ima, the mims were a perfect creation. Manufactured in the image of man. Certainly superior to *His* creations.

Perhaps Ophois had been hasty when he accepted Mael's challenge to control this spirited little one.

No. The others could have their blind obedience. Ophois savored forcing himself on the will of others.

He banked and moved in closer to the item in the clearing below. Just a piece of paper. Like he thought—someone's trash. Yet he felt compelled to investigate. He landed in the opening and looked around him. Was someone watching him? He saw no one. He bent down and took the paper in his claws.

Yes. He knew to trust his instincts. He held an airline ticket for one Wilhelm M'Gregor for a flight from COU, Columbia Regional Airport, to LAX. The flight time listed was nine o'clock. It would be impossible for her to catch that flight on foot. But if she had help. At least he knew where she was



headed. He would need to hurry to reach the airport before the flight left. If she showed, he would kill her there. If not, then he would backtrack and find her.

Either way, he *would* have his prey.

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Ima heard no whistle and saw no light.

Did trains even use their whistle unless they approached a road? She hadn't seen any roads since leaving Arrow Springs.

She ran for the end of the steel death-trap.

As she drew closer, the surface under her feet seemed to stabilize. She glanced over her shoulder. Nothing. No train.

The wind gusted and the bridge swayed.

Of course, the wind. She had panicked for nothing.

If only that were true.

Uncle M was gone. She was on her own, in an unknown world.

Her footsteps slowed and she leapt to her left, anything to get off the bridge. The backpack dragged her to the ground. Rough gravel from the embankment dug into her hands. She'd made it across. Still no train in sight.

After a few minutes rest, she pushed herself up off the gravel and continued down the tracks. The occasional animal scurrying from the tracks caused her pounding heart to screech to a stop.

For the next hour, she pressed on with a new determination. Uncle M always told her she was special—that she could accomplish anything she put her mind to. This journey, wherever it took her, would need to prove him correct.

Ahead she saw lights in the darkness. It was the first town she'd encountered since leaving Arrow Springs. The tracks skirted the edge of town. With luck, no one would see her. She jogged past a building built right next to the tracks. Big round storage buildings lined the far side of the building. Probably, some form of granary. It made sense that the local farmers would bring their grain to the tracks to be shipped off to other parts of the country.

Past the granary, she approached an intersection with a road. She stepped onto the pavement of the road. Walking on the solid ground soothed her throbbing calves. She stood for a moment. Should she continue down the tracks? The road was smooth and easier to walk on than the gravel.

No. Uncle M told her to follow the tracks. She needed to do what he said. He'd never given her a reason to mistrust him. He was the only one. Everyone else she'd ever met seemed to hate her.

Brakes squealed behind her and a loud horn snapped her out of her ponderings.

She turned and two bright headlights blinded her. She put her hand up to protect her eyes from the intense bluish light.

"Hey, get out of the road!" A man's voice yelled at her. With her eyes shielded from the blaring light, she saw the driver's door open. "Are you deaf? What are you doing out here?" A foot appeared beneath the car door and his shoulder popped out of the car. "Hey, I'm talking to you, stupid."

No, walking along the road was not a good idea.

Ima ran. As fast as her feet would carry her, she sprinted down the tracks.

"Hey, get back here! Where do you think you're going?" The man's speech slurred slightly.

She didn't turn to see, but crunching gravel told her he was jogging after her.

A loud deep horn cut through the night air. Definitely *not* a car horn. Apparently, the tracks were used after all.

"Oh . . ." The man swore a couple times, before the sound of a door slamming cut off the barrage.

Tires squawked against pavement.

She turned to see the car shoot forward from the intersection.

None too soon.

A bright yellowish beam illuminated the tracks beside her. She jogged to some trees at the side of the tracks.

Her stomach vibrated in resonance with the rumble of the train as it roared past her. The sharp smell of burnt diesel assailed her.

Bright red lights flashed against the train from the road. In the flashing light, she watched the steel of the railroad tracks bounce up and down. She could hardly fathom anything bending the metal beams she had spent so much of the past hours walking on.

Apparently, everything gives, at least a little, when submitted to enough pressure. Is that what Uncle M meant when he said they had to leave? Perhaps, even the founder of a company like CeSiR Tech had to give when under enough pressure.

After the train passed, she gradually made her way back to the tracks. She needed to get as much distance between herself and CeSiR as she could before morning.

Twenty minutes later, she approached a large clearing with another intersection. She pulled up at the edge of the tree line. The moon she had wished for earlier, now hung big and bright behind her. It illuminated the intersection ahead. A car sat beside the road, perhaps thirty feet from a red light. The light faced the tracks. It wasn't telling the car to stop. More likely, it was a caution for other trains.

It was dark, but the car looked a lot like the one she had stared down only a little earlier.

She sat down next to a large tree and waited.

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Adiya stood next to Ima as she crouched in the underbrush next to the tree. So unfair. The poor child knew so little of the real world. How would she ever survive on her own? Yet she seemed responsive, even to the slightest of suggestions. She needed a place to stay. Somewhere that would care for her. But Eitan was clear. Ima needed to make her own choices.

On ahead, the man from the intersection leaned against the fender of his car. His arms rested across his chest with his

hands curled into fists. His tongue swiped his upper lip. He waited—for Ima.

Adiya scanned the car and then the surrounding fields. No sign of the enemy. That meant nothing. Since their fall from grace, they craved the night. Sometimes they took the form of people, other times they chose some malformed image of animals or creatures of myth and fear. But more than all, they chose darkness.

“Holy Spirit, help me see the evil ones,” whispered Adiya. “Father, give me strength to protect this young one.”

*My grace is sufficient.*

Adiya knelt to one knee for a moment then stood and approached the man. Even from five feet away, the scent of alcohol radiated from him.

“Ah-deeee-yah.” The screechy voice came from the right, near the back bumper of the car. “How nice of you to join the party.” A demon of lust stood and approached.

“It would appear you have me at a disadvantage.” Adiya said. “You obviously know of me, but you, I do not recall.”

“My friend,” the demon said, “you do not remember me? I am hurt. Truly.” The lizard-like face flashed to that of a brown haired angel and then back.

So many millennia had passed, yet Adiya did remember. They had worshiped together at the throne of the Creator, before the great rebellion.

The demon smiled. “Ah yes, you remember.” The demon took a couple steps toward Adiya and then rested his hand gently on the hilt of his saber. “For old times’ sake, we will let you leave now. Without messing up that pretty little face of yours.”

Though neither angels nor demons possess gender as humans do, it always fell to the demons of lust to draw attention to Adiya’s feminine form. “For too long you have hung out with this human, if you believe my appearance makes me any less of a warrior.” More memories of worshiping next to this former angel of heaven flooded her mind. How could

anyone who experienced the loving presence of the Creator ever rebel against Him?

The demon slowly circled Adiya drawing her gaze away from the car. As if answering her unspoken question, the one every angel had asked a thousand times, he said, “Did I abandon Him? Or did He abandon me?”

Adiya knew the arguments. She had even struggled to reconcile them herself. But she never doubted the Creator’s love—even for those He cast out of Heaven. “You followed the deceiver. He desired to elevate himself to a place of equality with his own Creator and you followed him in his arrogance.” This was a useless distraction.

Yes, he had said, “*we* will let you leave.” There were others. This *was* a distraction. She reached for her sword. “You know you cannot best me.”

“Are we not having a friendly conversation for old times’ sak?” the demon asked. “Calm yourself Ah-deeee-yah. There is no need for violence. Sweetheart, I am a lover, not a fighter.”

Adiya unsheathed her sword. She was no sweetheart. She was a warrior. “Leave now, snake, and take your drunken pervert with you or I will remove *your* sweet heart.” Her instincts were correct. Motion flickered in the corner of her vision. The demon had not drawn her attention as much as he intended.

Adiya dropped to one knee and raised her shield over her neck.

Strength equal to her own crashed down on the shield. Without the shield, that single blow would have returned her to the throne room. As much as she always longed to sit at His feet, she demonstrated her love for Him through obedience, not selfishness.

She spun with the impact on the shield and struck her sword against a massive black leg.

The stench of sulfur swirled about her.

The attacker cursed and toppled to the ground. Not destroyed, but injured. He rolled, cursed again, and rose to a knee to glare at her.

She looked down the blade of her sword at the assailant. The bull-like face of a demon of rage stared at her. The strike had him thinking twice about his next move.

“Hey, hey, come on. She is not worth it.” This voice came from a third demon somewhere near the car.

The demon of lust stared at her and shook his head. “Ah-deeee-yah, how long will you blindly follow Him?” He tapped the bull and motioned toward the car. The demon snorted, cursed, and limped to the car. “He does not care about you, Adiya. He only cares about His precious humans. They reject Him at every turn.” He pointed in the direction of the trees where Ima hid. “Yet he still offers them hope. Such forgiveness—He will never show you.”

Adiya drilled the demon with a stare. He was correct. She worshiped at the throne of the Creator. She would never turn her loyalty, and thus would never need His forgiveness.

“It is you who are blind,” Adiya said. “Now, leave!”

He smiled, as if he had proved his point. “Until next time, Ah-deeeee-yah.”

The car drove off.

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Ima shivered as she huddled next to a large tree. The man, who’d sat against the hood of his car, tossed a glowing red ember to the ground and stepped on it. He opened the door of his car and climbed in. Cussing streamed from his open window as he spun the car around in the middle of the road. As headlights swept toward her, Ima pulled close to the tree. The headlights continued back to the road and the car squawked as it accelerated down the road back toward town.

After waiting several minutes, Ima stood and headed down the lonely tracks.

The remainder of the night proved relatively uneventful. An occasional animal would move in the weeds or shriek some unearthly noise. Despite crossing several more intersections, she hadn’t encountered another person.

Exhausted from hours of hiking with senses on ultra-high alert, reality began to settle in. She couldn't keep up this pace all day. She needed a place to rest. The risk of being spotted would rise with the morning sun. Better to travel during the night and rest during the day.

Still well before sunrise, the sky already began to brighten. Everything became easier to see, including her.

She came to a Y in the tracks.

*Follow the tracks west.*

The words of Uncle M echoed through her memory. The horrific gurgling of his voice wrapped her mind in ice. A shiver passed from her neck to her toes. She stopped and stared at the decision before her. Which way was west?

Her science books told her the sun would rise in the east. But she couldn't see the sun. How long would she need to wait? Every minute she waited, someone might see her. She needed to make a decision. The sky to her right glowed brighter. That had to be east. She took the tracks to the left.

After following the tracks a couple minutes, another pair of tracks merged into the ones she followed. They formed a single path, which she continued to tread. Perhaps it was the security she'd found in the wooded slats on the bridge or the way the looser gravel next to the track made her legs scream, but she preferred walking between the metal tracks. Before darkness set in, she had even tried walking on the smooth metal rails. Though fun at first, the slippery surface and the onset of darkness made it too risky.

As she walked, something tickled her ankles. In the growing onset of the morning sky, she saw weeds reaching up from between the wooden slats.

She walked for another half hour before the tracks suddenly ended, giving way to grass-laden gravel.

Trains couldn't drive without tracks. Could they? The fork in the tracks—she'd made a wrong turn. Apparently the tracks she'd taken were no longer used.

Should she go back?

Uncle M was very clear that she should follow the tracks.

Something told her to keep going.

Morning would be on her soon and with it many prying eyes.

She pressed onward.

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“That a girl,” Adiya said. She placed her wing over the shoulder of the exhausted child. She had just returned from scouting out the area ahead. It was still early enough to avoid being seen, but soon someone would see the girl. Adiya needed to be sure that person would help Ima and not inflict harm.

When Adiya returned and found Ima had wandered off the primary tracks, she was pleased. The girl’s instincts had led her to the best option. It would not be without challenge. She would pass through a populated area before getting back into the cover of the tracks. Thankfully, Adiya knew many faithful warriors in the small town ahead. And most of the enemy’s charges would still be in bed, after a late Saturday night of partying.

“Just keep on the straight and narrow, dear one.”

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## CHAPTER THREE

Sunday, May 10, 2020

The light of early morning chased darkness from Patricia Sherwood's bedroom. Her knees ached, though not from the hour she had spent in prayer. No, at eighty years of age, she knew better than to get down on her knees. She might not get back up. She prayed seated in her white rocking chair. Charles had painted it a year before the Alzheimer's set in.

She glanced at Charles sleeping peacefully in bed. It seemed the only time he was peaceful anymore. A *blessing*, everyone told her, given his advanced state. She loved him. Loved his presence, even if he typically didn't know who she was. Yet she had to wonder, was it selfish to want for him to stay with her? She couldn't help feeling that his anxiousness resulted from a desire deep within his soul to be somewhere else. Somewhere so many of their friends, loved ones, and even one of their children had already gone. She would never be able to bring herself to ask God to take him home. But when the day came, she knew it would be for the best.

She closed her eyes and listened to the nasally breathing of the dearest person she'd ever met. It was Sunday. Soon she would begin preparing him for the arduous trip to church. Charles seldom created a scene at church. He had gone there his entire life. No matter what stage of life his brain found itself in, the church was the one constant—the one thing that always belonged.

Patricia laid her head back against the floral padding and began to pray one-by-one for each person ministering at their church. Then she moved on to her three remaining children, eight grandchildren, and twenty-three great-grandchildren. Though she prayed every morning, it never became a ritual. In fact, it didn't even come easy. She simply understood the need.

*Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart.*

The passage from Colossians chapter four had become her daily call to prayer. Until Charles' illness, she had never fully appreciated the concept of an alert mind and how thankful that alone made her heart. But this morning, the alertness of her mind concerned her. Something hung just beyond her perception—a feeling. Good or bad, she couldn't quite tell.

She wrapped up her time with the Lord and made her way to the kitchen. She needed to tidy up the house before Charles awoke, more a force of habit than necessity. No one ever came to the house. Most of the family had moved away and those that remained in central Missouri had their own lives. Lives that seldom included old people—except for Silvia. She was quite faithful about visiting, until the dementia. Silvia loved her grandpa. It shredded her heart every time she visited and Charles didn't know her.

Though Patricia moved slowly, the cleanup didn't take long. The house never really got dirty. Dusty perhaps, but the invention of the Swiffer made good old fashioned dusting a thing of the past.

A noise came from the bedroom. She needed to get to Charles before he got himself worked up.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert lives in Holland, Michigan with his wife and five children. He has a B.S. in Electrical Engineering, and has taken several Master level classes in religion, including theology.

God has blessed him with the spiritual gift of teaching and a creative personality type. For over twenty years, he has brought this creativity to his professional career as a manager of software developers, and a creator of leading-edge technologies for a global high-tech electronics company in the automotive and aerospace industries.

For nearly five years, he wove creativity and a passion for teaching together as a pastor of worship, adult discipleship, and outreach. In this role, he designed and scripted several outreach events and dramas, created unique video presentations, developed discipleship curriculum, and led corporate musical worship. Since then, he has developed his public speaking skills and has had the privilege to preach at multiple churches.

Several years ago, he turned his creativity and writing toward the pursuit of teaching through story. Since then, he has refined his fiction writing craft through conference sessions, critique group involvement, online and book study, writing, and plenty of rewriting.

Robert is the founder of Hearts of Compassion Publishing ([www.heartspublishing.com](http://www.heartspublishing.com)), a company devoted to providing readers with quality stories and the comfort of knowing that the proceeds from those stories go to support compassion-based ministries.