

A
SHEPHERD'S
DILEMMA

ALIENATION SERIES VOL. 5

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A Shepherd's Dilemma - *Vol. 5*

A Shepherd's Reason - *Vol. 6*

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The Alienation Series consists of 7 Volumes

A SHEPHERD'S DILEMMA

I Am Not 007

I held my breath and peeked around the corner. No one was there...I hoped.

I slide around the corner with my back to the stainless steel wall. The world's loudest ID badge around my neck clicked against a shirt button. "Ugh," I muttered under my breath, the slightest noise threatening to unravel me. I felt a drop of sweat tease its way down my spine, which was not a big deal since I always wore an undershirt with my business suit, except it was itchy. Also, the clacking of my dress shoes on the charcoal grey tile made me wish I had been brave enough to attempt sneakers with business casual instead of my usual conservative navy blue suit. However, casual dress would make me stand out from the crowd, defeating the purpose of operating incognito.

I had never done this type of sneaking before. Actually, I hadn't sneaked around since I was in high school; after football practice, I used to hide behind the bleachers and drink a few room-temperature beers. Being so inexperienced, I prepped for my caper. I did what any learned academic would do. I read online books and watched videos about the subject. The quick answer: Keep things simple and if you get caught, have a way to play innocent. So, as far as security was concerned, I was an ignorant and tipsy guest, lost and looking for the bathroom. Now, if I could just find what I was looking for without being caught, I might just get out of this alive.

These VIP things always annoyed me. Some folks loved playing politics. In my book, politics meant using the right people at the right time and throwing others under the bus when convenient. Personally, I just like people, proven by my chosen profession: Shepherding. Not tending sheep, mind you; that job had been given to automated machines fifteen years earlier, primarily due to advancements in A.I. tech from Irobots, Rockland INC, and FanCorp.

After the 2020 computer chip processing revolution caught up with storage size and wifi capability, the first fully automated A.I. system, complete with human brain capability, was built and housed in an undisclosed location in the Midwest. Soon, the program's success in administering automated farm equipment and unmanned long-haul big-rigs traveling through Wisconsin and Nebraska was enough to expand the entire program to the whole country, with one such A.I. administration center in almost every state. Three in California and two in Texas and New York. After A.I. success, speed was limitless, as was our

ability to program anything.

The need for health care workers, delivery drivers, and teachers all sliced down the middle. Universities transitioned into trade schools, focusing on science theory, electronics, or mechanical physics (a fancy way to say technicians for giant computer robots.) Nope, we no longer had shepherds, cowboys, or farmers; we built them and then handed the responsibility of management over to M.O.T.H.E.R: Management Operations, Technical-Help, Emergent Robotics.

But one thing they could not automate was my job - Shepherding people, which was actually protecting them from dangerous spiritual doctrine.

Once upon a time, I would have been called *pastor*, which was just an old word for *shepherd* or *reverend*. But, those old religious terms had been cast aside in the new world order of peace and prosperity for all. Shepherd was much clearer and denoted a benevolent way of guiding people's thoughts towards the correct path of faith in peace, with a minimal chance to stray.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the clapping of heavy boots down the corridor. I pasted myself against the wall of an adjacent hallway, sucked in my gut, and held my breath as I waited for the guards to pass. I was thankful I had escaped their notice without a heart attack. I'm a good counselor and a great speaker, but Agent Ethan Hunt, I am not!

I slid from my spot and continued down the hall. Besides the obvious challenges with my situation, the most difficult part of my mission was that I had only a faint idea of what I was looking for and where I would find it. The only information gleaned was that during these VIP receptions, everyone was kept to one small section of what most nicknamed "The Yacht," to which our Liberators usually chuckled and tipped a glass.

Voices down the hall squawked at one another, back and forth, in a strange foreign tongue I could not make out. That didn't matter; I had a recording device hidden in a pen, tucked into my breast coat pocket. I had activated it as soon as I slipped out of the cocktail lounge four minutes earlier.

I drifted down the hall towards the ensuing conversation, treading with soft feet. Well, as soft as a pot-belly, forty-five-year-old shepherd from Alabama could step. The unintelligible conversation was a strange back and forth of clicks and hisses. The clicks I knew came from one of our reception hosts, the Liberators. But the hissing sound? It was familiar and chilling, yet I had no idea what it meant.

I drifted just to the edge of the meeting room doorway as the intensity of foreign tongues escalated. I pulled the digital recording device out of my pocket and aimed it toward the room. We had decided I would use something old that could not be connected online. I found this classic recording device in an antique shop: a second-generation digital recording device. The device only recorded six

hours of audio, but it came disguised as a pen, just like the old spy movies, so I took that as a sign.

I could hopefully get some decent audio from what was being said behind locked doors, or I guess I should say closed bulkheads. I hoped that one of my cohorts - partners in crime, maybe? Nah, maybe just associates? Yes, that sounded more professional - my associates would be able to translate the conversation and... oh, no! A swirling annoyance grew in the back of my left nostril. I pressed and rubbed it gently with my left ring finger coaxing the sneeze away. However, as I exhaled a sigh of relief, the conversation suddenly stopped. Apparently, my exhale was a little too loud.

I turned and awkwardly scurried back down the hall, eager to get back to the party. I just hoped I didn't look like I was scurrying. Heavy booted steps and voices converged in my direction. So with nowhere else to go, I ducked behind a dark red satin curtain. The decorative covering hid an older section of the ship. Grease stains streaked the walls, and various nuts and bolts jutted out. I searched high and low for a place to hide. Faint footsteps grew louder behind me, forcing me deeper and deeper down the passageway.

As I made my way farther into the old section of the "Yacht," I became more and more intrigued. As I understood it, our Liberators first arrived in force only a few years ago to save us. However, now that I was looking closely at this hidden section of the ship, familiar technology stared back at me. When I reached the end of the corridor, a porthole allowed minimal light into the room. It was just enough light to pique my curiosity about something to the right side of the window. It was a door. It was not very ominous in and of itself, but the familiar shape and size was unexpected. I knew I was still in danger of being discovered, but I had to know if what I was looking at was indeed what I thought it was.

I pulled my coat and shirt sleeve back, pressed my left index and middle fingers on my right forearm at the elbow, and slid them towards my wrist. My subdermal communicator emitted a holographic keypad and menu screen from the tiny lens implanted at the base of my thumb. I tapped the holographic image with fingers from my left hand. Then, with a quick swiping motion, I searched through the menu. If I had enough sense to upgrade to the newer model, this would be much quicker. Unfortunately, I had to settle with my old SubCell, only the third-best rated subdermal, or 'Sub-Phone,' on the market. I found what I was looking for, a night vision recording app, which I had only used on camping trips.

I also clicked the headcam option, switching the optics to be routed through the microlens embedded into my cranium, directly onto the 'third eye' - the New World's Dictionary of Peace's declared word of the year. - Also included in this software package, albeit a three-year-old package, was a single optic hologram. Only I could see targeting sensors guiding my microlens as it recorded

footage. The feed ran directly into my optic nerve.

The recording device also acted as a flashlight, so I could better examine the heavy metal door. I searched for any clue from top to bottom until I saw what I thought was etched writing. At the bottom of the heavy metal door, I hit pay dirt. Written in English were the words *Scorpion, SSN-589 7/29/1960 General Dynamics*. “Wait, what? That almost looks American.” I muttered to myself in disbelief. I went back to my SubCell. I snapped a few pics, then went back to the menu and hit the icon for search.

Search results scrolled right in front of my face, again fed through my right optic nerve so only I could see them. “This can’t be right,” I spoke aloud to no one in particular. General Dynamics had been contracted for the navy, building submarines! As a matter of fact, *Scorpion* was the name of one of only two U.S. nuclear subs ever to sink. If this information was accurate, they never discovered why, nor did they recover it.

If the Liberators only arrived here five and a half years ago, and they were so much further advanced than we were in technology, how in the universe did a piece of a Cold War-era submarine end up as a part of their spaceship from 75 light-years away, and why would they want it?

I turned and stared out of the porthole, trying to think. The bright blue brilliance of the earth’s shape slid into view as the yacht continued its controlled spin through space. As I stared down at the planet, the only answer I could come up with was, the Liberators are lying! But why?

Menacing, stomping footsteps stole my attention. Before I knew it, beams of light were upon me, pinning me down. “Hey, don’t you move!”

It was official; I never had a shot at working for the IMF as an agent. “Oh, poop-scoop!” I muttered under my breath. “Now what?”

A Wrinkle of Mine

Ten months and three days earlier, I was awakened by an irritated wife, “Jim, where is my cell phone?”

“Probably where you left it last night, Noreen!”

“No, it’s not, I’m staring at my charger, and it’s nowhere to be seen. I’ll be late taking the kids to school.”

I plopped out of bed. My head felt much heavier than it should, and my red striped boxers were a bit crooked, exposing a rather large crescent moon. I was groggy and didn’t care. I snatched my bathrobe from the door and wrapped it around myself as I trudged down the stairs to fix my wife’s problems. This happened every other day, locating her antique cell phone so that she could get

the kids to school. But, I could not let them be late; it was Liberator's Appreciation Day. My kids and wife needed to make a good showing. "If you'd join the rest of the decade and get a subdermal cell phone installed, like the rest of us, none of this would happen," I shouted down the stairs as I approached the noisy search.

Noreen continued flipping through papers and kitchen drawers, searching for the device while she rehashed the same argument we had for the past two years. "Oh, you mean to have it implanted like an alien parasite? Stuff it into my right palm and an antenna and body-cam to my forehead, in my..." She switched to air quotes and a voice dripping with sarcasm, "Third-Eye? What could go wrong with that!"

I yawned and scratched my belly while replying, "Ah, come on, it's safe. You have to admit it. Nobody we know has had any problems adapting to the new technology."

"It's only been used by humans for a couple of years; how are we to even know what will happen in the future?" She stopped what she was doing and looked over at me, "Besides, as a man who teaches the Bible for a living, you should be fighting this, not talking me into it!"

I dismissed her with a wave of an unconcerned hand, "Psst...The OCGR, Overseeing Council of Global Religion, deemed the book of Revelation unsubstantiated; that's why it was removed."

Noreen smirked, "I know who those pushover sons of politicians are... and yes, that was meant to sound like an insult." Noreen went back to work but wasn't done reminding me of her opinion, "Oh yeah, and they threw out the book of Daniel, parts of Isaiah and so many others which had been 'okay' for almost two thousand years, but as soon as they become inconvenient, they suddenly become 'unsubstantiated?' I call bull!"

"Noreen, watch the language; we never know who might be tuned in?" I winced and nodded my head towards a black plastic orb three inches wide, installed in our ceiling near the dining room entrance: another piece of tech managed by M.O.T.H.E.R. for the in Home Global Security Peace Device."

Noreen didn't miss a beat, she was now going through her handbag for the third time, but her mouth continued to move just as fast. I was the preacher, but she had the sharp mouth. "Oh, don't get me started on that thing! These 'Liberators,'" her sarcastic air quotes popped up again. "Fly in like the pointy-eared aliens from Star Trek, and within a couple of years, we are implanting ourselves with their surveillance equipment disguised as cell phones and installing monitoring systems in our own homes for 'OUR' protection."

As soon as I realized my wife was about to rant, I quickly slid across the kitchen to calm her and do my best to minimize the damage. She had already done community service six months earlier for referring to the liberators as

bug-eyed cockroaches. Then her second bout with community service was for calling the president a moron with a beta complex and that he was addicted to the leash the roaches had him tied to. Although the comment made me spit out my coffee and burst into laughter, the arbitrator was not amused. That comment was considered to be subversive toward the peace of the community, punishable by up to three months in jail! Since our standing in the community and her other charitable endeavors with the orphans and widows center, the judge opted for twelve weeks of community service. Her third strike would probably result in a hefty fine and jail time.

I wrapped my arms around Noreen's short, stout frame, "My love, it's ok. We don't have to agree on all of this, but let's just focus on finding your phone, ok?"

"Ok, fine." She smiled.

I released her and went back to the search, "Besides, we want to make sure the kids are seen giving their best for Liberator's Day at school!" I cheerfully added. After all, we both wanted our kids to succeed, right? Well, in retrospect, I might have misread my wife's thoughts on school as well, or maybe completely.

"Didn't you listen to anything I said at dinner last night? The school has canceled Memorial Day, Washington, and Lincoln's birthday and refused to teach about World World 2 or Soviet Russia. But suddenly, within a few years, we are celebrating these..." Noreen stuttered to find the words. As she did, I instantly recognized the volcanic release of frustration and distrust making its way from her brain to her throat. I knew whatever she said would be taken the wrong way, and we'd be in big trouble. We'd be in trouble, not just from Community Peace Patrol, but possibly placed on the subversive list of Global Peace Keeper, GPK was the replacement for the FBI and CIA.

Noreen formatted the words in her mind enough to blurt out, "...Godless s-" Just as my hand clasped her mouth.

I graciously finished Noreen's thought for her aloud to anyone who might be listening, "Godless raccoons, always getting into the trash. Gotta call Animal PeaceMakers to relocate those suckers!" I chuckled more than I usually would at my joke, then glanced back at Noreen's eyes. Her raging angry eyes communicated one thing, "Get your hand off my mouth, or I will bite it off." I quickly did. But then Noreen surprised me.

She grabbed my wrist and yanked me into the washing room.

I grinned, "Angry lovey-dovey time?"

She punched my shoulder, held a finger to her lips, and started the washing machine, dryer, auto-ironer, and Fanny-Bot 3; our folding robot. I winced when Noreen switched Fanny onto ready mode; her joints were squeaky, maintenance didn't seem to be enough, we needed an upgrade, which MOTHER

had recommended three times, but I kept pushing off the payment.

Noreen grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me in close. This was usually her move if she wanted some quick loving or was ready to kill me. From the expression, I guessed the latter. She pulled my ear down to her lips. "I'm scared, Jimmy, real scared!"

I held her in real tight, "Ah, baby. Why? The world's never been safer or richer. The kids are basically on a one-way track to New World Harvard or Stanford Peace University..."

"No, no, no. You don't get it, do you?" She clasped both hands onto my face and stared hard into my eyes. A tear streamed down her right cheek.

"What? What don't I get? Oh, you mean the rumors about the poorest being hidden away in China or the Outback of Australia? Or the other one about the WPC hiding and even experimenting on orphans and other unfortunates in the jungles or deserts around the world. Pish-posh, it's all nonsense."

She rolled her eyes, "Well yeah, of course, that bothers me; if I don't trust their robot eyes in my home, why on earth would I trust them to care for God's babies."

"Honey, you can't use those terms anymore!" I pleaded with her. "'On earth' denotes there's something extra special about OUR planet."

"Lord have mercy! I never thought I'd miss the P.C. culture of the 2010's!" She shook her head, "Can't you even think for yourself anymore? Don't you see what those oversized talking bugs are doing to you - to our world?"

"Yeah, I do," I retorted, "Endless food production, no wars, unending energy and technology for every person on the planet, plus we'll be exploring outside of our solar system within a decade! If they were here to conquer us, wouldn't it have happened already?"

Noreen blew air out of her lips at me in a mocking fashion.

"By the way," I quickly added before she could respond, "They've eradicated the need for abortion. That has to make you happy!"

"Jimmy, a super pregnancy pill every girl is required to take from age 13 only means we are teaching our children that they don't have a God-given right to choose when they get pregnant, only when the WCP permits them to get pregnant. And, who makes that decision, and who will ensure it's not abused? I call it sterilization. Those bug-eyed monsters think we're cattle or something."

"I don't believe this," I rubbed my mostly bald head vigorously, a long-time nervous habit. "The House and Senate of the New World Order voted it in, and the President signed it into law!" I was getting a little wild-eyed with disbelief, "AND...you'd rather have teenage moms and kids being raised without healthy parenting cause a couple of teenagers make a mistake?"

"I'd rather we have the chance to teach our children how to make choices

and take responsibility for their actions, like every other generation in the history of OUR WORLD.”

“Noreen, if anyone else hears you talk like this, you could be fined or have most of your special privileges revoked, maybe even go to jail! You need to stop! Please?” I clasped my hands together, pleading with her.

She shot me a look of derision mixed with a lot of disappointment, “What happened to you, Jimmy? You used to believe in something. Don’t you remember when you would challenge people to think for themselves and try to be better, no matter what the world said? Now, all you do is defend the status quo and play it safe.”

Before I could jump in to defend myself, she continued.

“I’m not scared about the craziness in the world. I’m scared that the kids and I are losing you. The only time I hear you saying anything about the Lord is behind the pulpit.”

“Come on, you know...” But she cut me off again.

“Yesterday, the twins wanted to know if you liked Jesus or if you’re only on the Liberator’s team. Jimmy, they’re four, and they both can see it.”

I rolled my eyes, “I’m the shepherd of the largest peace gathering in the state. I provide food and a home, and I’m faithful to you and the boys. What more do you want?”

My wife’s brows furrowed with frustration, “I never needed this big house or the nice cars. I married an honest man who loved Jesus and wasn’t afraid to speak the truth, even if it hurt. That’s what I always wanted!”

I opened my mouth to speak, but words wouldn’t come out. Instead, a long-forgotten discomfort twisted its way into my guts. The discomfort rendered me speechless.

Noreen pulled me towards her lips and kissed me on the cheek. “I need you to figure this out before it’s too late.” She turned and stepped back into the quiet of the kitchen.

After she’d gone, I shut off all the machines giving us privacy. The discomfort in my gut would not go away. Finally, I identified the twisting pain: conviction. As if the pain were on a timer, waiting for me to recognize it, the twinge in my guts exploded, releasing heat up my spine, through my scalp, and into my face. I glanced right and caught myself in the reflection of Fanny the Folding Robot. I was beet red. “What are you looking at!” I snapped at the robot, or maybe I snapped at myself.

I stepped back into the kitchen and poured myself a cuppa joe. I leaned onto the granite countertop and stared out the window; I watched as my wife slid out of the driveway into our cul-de-sac. As our eyes met briefly, she blew me a quick kiss, and I winked at her as I slugged down some black tar I called coffee.

I later wished to the Universal Maker I would have known that was the last time I'd ever see Noreen and my children.

Phil and Jim's Bogus Journey

An hour later, I jumped into my quad-powered $\frac{3}{4}$ ton self-driving pickup with my usual sixteen-ounce travel mug in hand, battery operated cup temperature of 160F, exactly. The thermostated mug was filled with thick coffee, an inch of cream, and four sugars. It would have only been two sugars, but Noreen was not there to keep an eye on me. As I sat down, a holographic screen emerged from the middle console. I pressed the start button on the pick-up.

"Morning, Jim. Are we headed to the office?" My self-drive pickup's personal A.I. asked the same question every morning. The vehicle's default setting was a very attractive female voice. Much too awkward for me. So I found a male setting with a southern drawl, more like talking to one of my old redneck friends from my small town roots of middle Georgia. Of course, I am a city boy now, in Birmingham, but I felt at home with a country twang. My grandpa would call my car's voice Hal from that old-time sci-fi movie 2001, and my pops would call him Siri from his old smartphone. I liked Phil cause he could always "fill" the gaps for me when I wasn't thinking. Lame, I know. But I'm a dad now; lame jokes were not only expected - but required.

"Yes, sir, Phil, onward and outward to the office."

"Sure thing, Jim."

The car started, my seat adjusted to its presetting, including lumbar support for my achy back, and away we went. I sucked down some of my candied coffee and then asked, "Phil, calendar, please?"

"Your first appointment is at 9:30 a.m. with the Music Director, Sammy. At 10 a.m., the finance committee will conference in for an update on the construction of your new satellite site in Montgomery. 11 a.m. will be...."

I tried to focus on the rest of Phil's reminders, but my heart was not in it. Noreen's words still stung. Part of it was pride; I knew that. The fighting didn't bother me. After sixteen years of marriage, that was just a part of a healthy relationship. It was that look of frustration and disappointment in Noreen's eyes I could not shake from my mind. What did she expect? I was the most successful shepherd in three states. I had spoken at the governor's inauguration and had been present as the current president was sworn into office. However, there was always a price to pay for anything, right? And, with all the success came responsibility.

"At 3 p.m., you'll be visited by the office of the OCGR Inspector General."

Phil continued. If anyone was to blame, it was them, the Overseeing Office of Global Religion. Every Sunday, the inspirational message had to be checked and rechecked. We no longer used the terms “sermons” or “teachings” as they were seen to be too “arrogant” or “presumptive.”

Inspirations had to be submitted by Wednesday at noon, “advice” was then given to me on what to change or revise within twenty-four hours, then I could submit the final draft by Saturday. If I had a gathering of no more than 250 people, most of this would be unnecessary, but in order to maintain my certified OCGR Peace Center with more than 250 attendees, these were the requirements. With MOTHER capable facilities, finance, production meetings, and so much more, *plus* the continual “advising” of the OCGR, most everything had changed. Visits to people’s homes, the hospital to pray with the sick, or direct involvement with the poor had long ago taken a back seat. Now, a sixty-hour workweek was a win. A day off was a luxury I had given up on. Last year, I had a head cold, which I ignored, and it turned into pneumonia. I ended up in the hospital for three days and on bed rest at home for another week: best week I had had all year.

Even so, the work I did was crucial, wasn’t it? Last weekend, our numbers reached an all-time high, 36,045 spread amongst twelve campuses across the state. Many shepherds with Peace Centers half our numbers were having affairs with their secretaries and indulging in silly luxuries such as classic fighter jet collections: a new fad since they had been made obsolete by drone technology and world peace. Others went on vacation to the Caribbean, near Naples, or on private yachts. Yet, I didn’t want or need any of that. I get a healthy but not extravagant salary. I have a large but sensible house and work hard to pay off our church debts while ensuring our drop-in centers and Noreen’s home for orphans and widows stays open.

Ten years ago, I was a pretty ordinary southern preacher. I had a congregation of 200, which was more than enough to keep us busy. Besides our inability to get pregnant, I did have to admit that we were very happy. Probably happier than we were now. But now, I was so much more effective, wasn’t I? I have the privilege to speak into the lives of tens of thousands of people every week, and hundreds of thousands watched my inspirational messages online - millions on Peacetube.com.

After decades of dominance, YouTube changed its name. “You” was far too egotistical. All these peaceful changes began on the “Last Christmas.” In what was once the United States, we remember three modern events of devastation. Pearl Harbor, 9-11 and the Last Christmas.

The event of LAST CHRISTMAS happened Eight years ago. The devastation coincided with discovering that man was not alone, and we

learned it the hard way. Aliens from the planet Kepler-442b invaded Earth, bent on domination. Later, we discovered that the reptilian giants were after our resources and a slave labor force. Their species was known for their raw aggression and desire to dominate anything not reptilian. This we learned from our great Liberators. It was said that the little grey alien's proper name was impossible for any human to pronounce.

In actual fact, the world's armies took a massive beating in the first days of the attack. The reptilian scum crippled most major cities with massive Electro-Magnetic Pulse weapons through decoy ships disguised as envoys of peace. However, one insightful air force captain working at the White House foresaw the attack. The President ordered every piece of military hardware they could away from the danger, just in time. A quarter of the world's military was disabled and made useless in the first attack, but that wasn't enough. If there was one thing the green monsters underestimated, it was humans' willingness to fight when backed into a corner. Well, that and numbers.

Even today, new stories were emerging of locals banding together to push back the invasion. One such saga that had grown to epic popularity was from New York City. A group of five cops were pinned down by twelve Reptilian soldiers. Outnumbered and outgunned, the officers refused to back down. Out of nowhere, a local Asian street gang joined in the fight, firing AK-47s and machine-gun pistols from an adjacent apartment building. As if that was not crazy enough, a local Afro-American crew snuck around behind the invaders and launched molotov cocktails (firebombs) while simultaneously firing their weapons into the backs of the reptiles.

Also, there was the incredible story of a couple of homeless drug addicts from L.A. who spent weeks hunting the creatures throughout the streets of L.A. They were said to have killed at least 100 of them on their own.

Then there was an urban militia from Philly, led by a brother and sister who never allowed the city to stop resisting.

Even a midwest mom and her family from Ohio managed to organize and protect their neighborhood so well, that it was reported that the children within their safe zone never knew they were in danger.

All these stories were amazing and heartfelt, but it was the military that made the biggest difference. The aliens overestimated their plan to overwhelm Earth's defenses with a Blitzkrieg-type strike. Nazi Germany's "lightning war." Even though they didn't have the numbers, they felt their technological advancement would be enough to force humans into submission. They misjudged us, underestimated us, and let's face it, we also got lucky.

Earth gained the upper hand after three months of ferocious fighting, strategic retreats, and counterattacks.

Of course, when discussing V-day of the Last Christmas invasion, this is when the debating begins, sometimes ending in fistfights. The official GWP narrative states that our Liberators arrived at the 11th hour, at the point in which defeat was imminent. They joined in on the fight, and their superior technology and firepower, combined with Earth's conventional warfare, made quick work of the reptilian invaders.

However, if you shared this narrative with any of the veterans of the Last Great War, militia, or military, you would at least get an ear full, if not punched square in the nose.

Of course, no one denied how much the Liberators helped, nor how many lives they saved. But the most cynical wondered how long they were up in space, watching to see which way the wind would blow before they stepped in to help. Especially since it seemed they were pretty well organized and at full strength when they finally did jump in.

This was all speculation and had little to do with myself or Noreen. During the war, we found ourselves filling in at a local hospital as nurse's aides and chaplains. We cleaned up after the staff and prayed with friends and family as folks passed from this life to the next.

The second fact that no one could deny was the impact the Liberators had on the earth in the months after the last reptilian ship had been driven from the solar system. As a matter of fact...

My thoughts were disrupted when Phil slammed on the brakes to avoid crashing into the Mercedes in front of us. As if someone just flipped an off switch, highway traffic in both directions had suddenly died. "Phil, what's going on? Accident or construction?"

"Unclear, there, partner," my pick-up responded with automated concern, "There's no road works planned in this area today, and I ain't heard tell of any roadway accidents."

Unexplained traffic jams were done away with years ago due to automated A.I traffic cams lining every city street in the country. Every automobile was tied into the network of the local Peaceful Traffic Regulators and Roadway Software Engineers and operated by MOTHER. "This is strange."

"Sure is, bud." Phil agreed.

"Well, keep scanning, please," I asked as I searched the cars around me.

"10-4, Jim," Phil replied.

My eyes rested on the navy blue minivan next to me. It had very lightly tinted windows, so it wasn't too hard to see inside. As I stared at the vehicle, it seemed to be missing something. "Wait a minute, what?" I turned to the car on my left. It was on the other side of a concrete barrier and facing the opposite way to me. The auto was lower than my big 3/4 ton pickup. I could see clearly inside.

A silver-haired woman was in the passenger's seat, but no one was driving. This was illegal, of course, but it did sometimes happen. However, all the new models of self-driving cars had safety mechanisms that wouldn't allow the vehicle to be driven without an authorized driver's rear end on the front seat cushion. The middle-aged woman was frantically searching and screaming for what I could only assume was her husband.

The frightened woman spotted me staring at her and rolled down her window. I did the same. She cleared her throat, composing herself, "Pardon, but did you see a bald man, about six feet tall, walk past you? My husband seems to have gone missing, in the middle of the highway, no less."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I sure haven't. Are you sure he was with you in the car?"

Wrong question. Her politeness was immediately replaced by defensiveness as she lashed out, "Of course I am, bub, I ain't senile, I'm not that old! Besides, we can't drive this new fangled monstrosity from anywhere but the driver's seat!"

"I'm sorry, I'm just not understanding how this could happen." I stopped and thought for a minute, allowing my shepherding skills to take over, "Since it looks like we aren't going anywhere for a while, why don't we get out of our cars carefully and look for him together?"

Her eyes fluttered from one way to the other, scanning the immediate area, but nodded in agreement.

We both exited our vehicles and looked around. We weren't the only ones with this idea. One by one, everyone emerged from their cars, some faster than others.

A hand gripped my shoulder and spun me around. It was a handsome brunette, probably in her thirties; she was terrified. "Have you seen my daughter? She's only six years old, and I can't find her?" She pleaded with me.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but if I..."

Desperate, the mom didn't wait, but she took off to the next car screaming her daughter's name, "Marcy!"

After looking around dumbfounded for a few more minutes, I decided to be more constructive. I walked around back and spoke to my tailgate, "Stairs down, Phil." My tailgate slid open, and an alloyed aluminum step lowered to the ground. I climbed up into the bed of my pickup, hoping for a better vantage point. I got more than I bargained for.

What I saw was confusing, yet it felt significant for some reason, although I could not yet piece it together. It was like seeing a face after many years and not remembering where you knew it from.

As far as the eye could see, all different types of folks, either stood next

to their cars with a look of bewilderment, or scampered about in desperation, searching for loved ones.

“What in the name of all the Universal Makers’ wisdom just happened?”

Back to the Past

It took me almost thirty minutes to reach my office. Fortunately for everyone, the Peaceful Traffic Regulators had universal override keys, so any unmanned self-driving vehicle was sent home; a handful of classics, driven by the less fortunate or sentimental of an age gone by, had to be towed the old fashion way.

Still slightly disturbed by the events on the highway, I put on my “shepherd’s” face and forced a grin as I entered my office space. “Morning, everyone. Sorry, I’m late; massive traffic on the highway.”

I was met by a weak response from a handful of hellos. Not even half the desks were occupied. That was unusual, but with the traffic I had just experienced, I was sure the rest of the staff would be along shortly. I looked over to my personal assistant’s desk. It belonged to Sandy, a sixty-something grandmother and friend who’d been helping Noreen and I from the beginning of our ministry. “Strange,” I mumbled aloud. I turned to my number two P.A, “Hey Judy, can you have Sandy come see me when she’s in?”

Judy, a very competent administrator in her early thirties, hesitated before answering, “Not a problem, Shepherd.”

“Come on, call me Jim, like all the other grown-ups. Now, what’s going on? Why’d you hesitate just now?”

Judy was a cute redhead with a classic southern drawl. She and her husband were both huge Peace-Tide fans, as evidenced by the “Bama” football merchandise all over her desk. When the name change came, the school tried Roll-Peace, and promptly lost half its sponsors and had a riot in downtown Tuscaloosa. So it was decided to go with Roll Peace-Tide. Which calmed most folks down, made the school happy, and fulfilled its GWP “advice suggestion.” The word “regulations” are no longer used, as it does not *feel* peaceful. Also, by “encouraging or inspiring” folks to do the right thing, avoiding “regulations” gave everyone a chance to choose peace on their own.

Judy grinned awkwardly, “Um, I think maybe Sandy didn’t feel too well, cause she was here when I arrived, but then went home, I guess, maybe an hour ago.”

“Ok...And?” I prodded, wondering if Judy would ever get to the point.

“I just don’t know, and don’t wanna stick my nose in anything I shouldn’t,

but she did not actually tell me she was leaving. I went to powder my nose, and when I got back, she was gone.”

I shrugged my shoulders, “Well, I’m sure I’ll hear from her in about...”

Judy leaned in and cut me off, “That’s not all, Shepherd.”

I reciprocated and leaned in, feeling a bit silly but trying to take Judy seriously and not demean her concern. “What’s that?”

“She left her purse, key F.O.B., and Smartphone. She never goes anywhere without that old phone, Shep! Honestly, it has all her kids’ childhood photos and her grandkids, ain’t no way!”

“Uh...wait!” Distant recognition, realization, maybe? I can’t really put a clear picture on it, but my brain started working. “Call the Peace Patrol, right now! I’m going to check the parking lot. After You call PP, have security sweep every inch of this place.”

Judy picked up the phone and started dialing the Peace Patrol but then called out after me, “Ok, boss, but security says they’re short-handed; a couple of guards didn’t show up for their shift!”

“Ugh, no!” I swallowed hard and pushed my chubby out-of-shape legs to the max. “Come on, come on,” I moaned at myself. As I hit the parking lot, my fear was realized; her old Tesla Model S was still in the driveway.

I engaged my third eye auto-switch by tapping between my eyes twice. This woke Phil from a “digital nap,” ready to get back to work.

His personality programming even came complete with a yawn as he answered my call, “Yeah, buddy, wazzup?”

I turned and stormed back into the building as I demanded, “Call Tommy. Now.”

The ocular implant rang up Phil’s voice in .023 seconds, “Sir!” Phil complied with the command. When referencing anything in a hurry, all A.I.s had an Emergency mode, which meant they would cut down the time it takes to call someone. An open line for emergency services was always available and could even interrupt an ongoing phone conversation. However, if any of these features were abused, heavy fines and restrictions would be placed on your ability to communicate through all devices, so crying wolf was not recommended.

Fortunately, Tommy picked up the first try, “Shep! What is up, my brotherman! You watching the game Friday night?”

My mind was on Tom’s missing wife, so the thought of the local high school football game threw me for a loop, “Huh? Oh, yeah, sure...but listen, Tommy, um? Is Sandy home, do you know?”

“Nah, course not, Jim. You know she’s there most days, helping you run those monster services, y’all got going.”

“Right, well...I don’t wanna alarm you, Tommy,” I braced myself; after all,

I was the boss, so everyone's safety was my responsibility, right? "But, we can't find her, and her phone, purse, and car are here on the property. We're calling the Peace Patrol right now, but if you have..."

"What in the heck....You lost my wife?"

"I'm not sure she's gone, just..."

"Shep, I'm messing with you. You know Sandy, she's always stepping away to one of her little prayer walks or whatever. I know that type of stuff is from the *old* faith, but Universal Maker blesses her; I love her still. I'm sure she'll turn up, Jim."

I nodded as I turned the corner to head back to the office. "Ok, Tommy, thanks for letting me know."

I was walking past Judy's desk as I hung up with Tommy by again tapping my third eye connector twice.

"Tommy?" Judy queried.

"Yeah," I replied, with a slightly worried grin, "He thinks she's probably just on a bit of a walk; sometimes, she takes one to clear her mind."

Judy was not convinced, "I've been working with her for four years, and every time she went for a walk, she told me and took her phone, cause she said she'd wanna read the Old Book or write things down, she'd claimed to hear from...well, you know who."

"Yeah...I know" I rolled my eyes a bit, both at what Sandy was like and the fact that we could not just say it aloud comfortably. Instead, we had to worry about one of the three commercial grade Global Security Peace Devices jutting out from the ceiling, always ready and eager to narc.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to think. Judy took it as a sign.

"Hey shepherd, go and sit down, take a breath; I'll bring you some coffee, ok?"

Still, the nagging feeling that something was going on, something I should be aware of or remember, was just out of reach. "Yeah, thanks. Coffee would be great, Judy."

I stepped into my office and headed for my old leather office chair. But, as I circled my desk, I looked down at the electronic faxes, voice messages, and emails flashing their various holographic alerts from my desk. After being satisfied that none of them came from anyone I was too concerned about at the moment, I stated, "Snooze all." They all switched from "alert-mode" to "reminder-mode" and were sucked down into my mahogany desk holo-emitters. Then I plopped into my chair.

"Hmm, wish I could also shut off for a while." I mused while sliding my finger down my arm, popping up my sub-phone from my hand. Dang it, Noreen still hadn't called me back.

While still stuck in traffic as the highway was being cleared, I had sent several messages to my wife, but she didn't answer, which wasn't too unusual. However, with Sandy's recent disappearance or walkabout, whatever it was, I was feeling a bit uneasy. After Noreen, I relied on Sandy for sanity more than anyone else.

A young intern, Judy's assistant, and a go-fer stuck his head into my door. "Boss, there's a Global Peacekeeping agent here to see you."

A smiling elderly bald man with a long dark coat and a fedora in one hand stepped into the doorway behind the young lady and let himself into my office, "Just call me Samuels; we don't like those old world, authoritarian labels." His smile was big and exciting, but something in his eyes gave me pause. They did not match the joy he pushed on me.

I stood, "Please, Mr. Samuels, come in."

"Oh, Shepherd, please, a peace-loving man like yourself only needs to call an old soul like mine by his name."

Yeah, he was laying it on thick. The GPK wasn't even a decade old, so most of the senior agents were recruited from the FBI, CIA, MI-6, Israeli Mossad, Russian FSB, etc. Although the rules had changed, I wondered if they were truly enforced. Fortunately, they all answered to the GWP. The World Peace Commission would keep them in check - right?

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Judy popped in with my coffee and a bagel.

I looked up and smiled at Judy, "Thanks so much," then over at the agent. "Sam, can we bring you tea, coffee, a bagel?"

"No, sir, that won't be necessary." He smiled, then winced, "I just need ten minutes of your time, unabated, sir." He smiled again, with a hint of a smirk, "And it's Samuels."

I too returned the smile, then nodded towards Judy, who recused herself and closed the door on the way out.

"Ok, Samuels," I said with some skepticism, "What's this all about?"

The Global Peace agent held up an index finger, then tapped his right ear twice, "Silent-mode, Agent 562b2, password hotel-tango-yankee-768."

What I can only describe as zipping noises came from all four of my office walls, floor, and ceiling.

"What in tarnation?" I popped out of my chair, splashing much of my coffee into my lap, "How'd you do that? What'd you do?"

"Don't worry, Shepherd, that was only your silent mode. We have supplied an automatic faraday cage and soundproofing to all VIPs around the new world of Global Peace."

"But when did you do that? I don't remember giving anyone permission to install that type of equipment in my office?" I sat back down, but very warily.

The agent grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "Doesn't matter; after you signed the partnership agreement, when was that?" He stopped talking and stared into space. That meant the question had probably triggered an automatic query which was then downloaded into his optic nerve so that he could read it with no one else seeing the info. I was jealous as I had wanted that upgrade for almost a year, but Noreen wouldn't have it. Apparently, what I had was 'intrusive enough.' Blaa, blaa, blaa.

After a second, he said, "Ah yes, five years and four months ago. This allows us to take necessary steps to ensure your safety and the safety of your flock."

I wanted to argue but knew that would get me nowhere. Instead, I tried to hurry the discussion along. "Ok then, why do we need to be so secretive?" I chuckled a bit; this was a bit too cloak and dagger for me since I couldn't remember the last meeting that had not been interrupted three or four times due to church "emergencies."

Agent Samuels slowly began speaking, choosing his words carefully, "We have a global situation which may cause considerable unrest, threatening to undo a lot of the hard work the GWP leadership committee and our liberators have put into achieving world peace." The agent leaned forward, "I'm sure, as a faithful shepherd, you understand how incredibly sensitive a topic like this could be?"

I nodded my head, "Yes, sir, of course." I noticed that with my compliance, the look behind his eyes began to match the grin on his face for the first time.

He leaned back into his chair, "This is only for your ears until you receive proper talking points for your next Inspirational message on Sunday, but..." He paused, looked down, smiled, then looked me in the eyes and shrugged his shoulders in dismay, "We made a mistake. The GWP and our Liberators, that is. We admit it. We falsely believed that we had neutralized all of the Reptilian threat. Unfortunately, at approximately 8:30 a.m., a massive weapon was detonated, instantly vaporizing many individuals worldwide."

"Wait a minute, is that what happened while I was on my way to work this morning?"

"Yes, shepherd, most likely. We don't have a proper estimate of the number of missing individuals yet, but we estimate it could be as high as twenty."

He paused nervously, so I insisted, "Twenty what? Thousand? Million?"

Samuels took a deep breath but continued, "Now, keep in mind, this is only an estimate, but no, I am afraid, 20%."

"Of the world!" I exclaimed. "What...how?"

"Yes, I know, horrific. But what's important is that major public figures like yourself maintain calm and wait to inform your flock when the time is right. As for

now, we just don't have all the facts.”

Agent Samuels, whoever this guy was, only wanted to spin facts and be calm, but I was busy doing simple calculations in my mind. “Two billion people, gone! Dead? But didn't the Liberators know the Reptilians could do that? Why...I mean...Wh...” I abruptly lost the words in my mouth as my sugar-laden coffee turned on me. Jerking to my feet, I dove for the trash can but had to force the liquid back down my throat as the auto trash took its time opening the lid. With time running out, I reached down, tore the lid open, picked up the plastic pail, and let my insides go, hurling all I had against the pink plastic insert.

I looked over at Samuels, who did not seem to mind. In fact, he was smiling. “Yeah, I also had a similar reaction to the news. Please, don't be embarrassed. Do you need some gum?” I shook my head, pulled out a bottle of water from my desk, swished some around my mouth, and spit it into the trash. “Ok, so, what do we do? Strike back? What are the Liberators saying?”

“We are considering all military and diplomatic options.”

I stood and leaned over my desk. “Like hell, diplomatic options? We need to strike back, or who knows how many more folks those snake-heads will take next time!”

The agent smiled and spoke calmly, almost patronizingly, “Yes, yes, of course, but we have to be smart about this.”

I sat back down in my chair, “Yes, of course, we do.”

“Now, to manage the situation, a plan is in the works to expand MOTHER's responsibilities.”

“Huh?” I asked trying to focus

“You know, M.O.T.H.E.R: Management Operations, Technical-Help, Emergent Robotics.” Samuels clarified. “Are you ok, shepherd?”

“Um, yeah - yeah, I'll be fine.” If there was one thing I could do, it was delay processing harsh news till later. I got the feeling that looking weak or out of control was not an option this *peace* agent would allow.

Samuels continued, “This means we will need help from shepherds like you at large Peace Centers to teach everyday folks how to access MOTHERs management systems for home utilities, wifi connections, grocery delivery, and vehicles.” Samuels leaned back and grinned graciously, “Of course, all personal use of MOTHER's latest management system will be made free of charge due to the generosity of our Liberators and the GWP governing body.”

“Good,” I replied, still a bit numb.

“So, are there any other questions you need to ask or comments to speak aloud? After leaving this room, I'm afraid you must keep this information to yourself until a public announcement has been released, most likely within 48 hours.”

I exhaled but kept quiet and shook my head.

Agent Samuels stood, stuffing his head into his fedora, "Very well then." He tapped his right ear twice, "Release VIP room," he commanded.

The same zipping sound repeated itself and my office door automatically unlocked.

Samuels tipped his hat as he stood but paused as he spotted my despondent face, "We'll get through this, with the Universal Maker's help, of course. If you need help or have further questions, I have already emailed you. Use that address to contact me."

I looked up and smiled as best I could. "Thank you for your help; I'll be in touch."

I stood and followed the agent to the front door, waved goodbye, then headed back to the office bullpen. I looked around; Sandy's desk was empty. Tim's desk, our online marketing director: empty. I peered into a side office suite full of disorganized papers and musical instruments, empty. If all missing staff were gone-gone, then that's 40%!

40% of my closest friends - my responsibility - all gone!

I began muttering under my breath, but a horrifying thought interrupted my ramblings, "...Noreen and the kids!" I checked my phone. No texts, no voicemails!

I ran downstairs, told Phil to meet me in front of the offices, and texted Judy to say I would be out for a while.

I pushed Phil the entire fifteen minutes across town, flying through traffic. "Come on, Phil, come on! Faster!"

"Any faster there, partner, and we might accidentally find ourselves back in 1955!" I usually appreciate the reference to one of my favorite classic movies, but at the moment, I just wanted to see my wife and children. No, I needed to see my wife and kids!

I jumped from the moving vehicle at the school parking lot and breathed a massive sigh of relief. The mahogany minivan was parked and looked perfectly safe. "Phil, go ahead and park; it looks like everything is ok."

"Good to hear, partner. I'll try to find some shade."

I headed across the parking lot to the school. Noreen was a volunteer teacher two days a week. This was one of her days to help in the kid's preschool class. I snuck around back and peeked into the window but could not see anything, just empty carpet space. They must be having snacks or nap time. I made my way around to the front of the class and opened the door softly.

"Shepherd, what a wonderful surprise!" It was the kid's teacher, Susan. She was a tall older woman with more energy than most people half her age. The hyper elderly lady annoyed most adults, yet her hyper personality made her an

incredible preschool teacher. She must have been coming from the principal's office.

"Ah, yes, Susan, how are you?" I asked distractedly, peering over her shoulder into the classroom, searching for any sign of my family. "I just need to see Noreen and the kids for a minute to say 'hi.'"

"Didn't you hear, Shepherd?" She looked at me inquisitively but then snapped her fingers in irritation, "Shoot, you wouldn't have, deary," She loved calling folks 'deary.' "Your boys are with their mom, so we would not have notified you." The busy teacher stepped into her class and began puttering around her classroom, cleaning and setting up.

I stood in the doorway and looked around. The miniature tables, chairs, ABC posters, and art supplies were immaculate and felt welcoming. It was a perfect classroom for four to five-year-olds. There was only one problem: No four to five-year-olds - it was empty! "Wait, what happened? What aren't you telling me? Where is everybody?"

Susan winced a little bit but shrugged her shoulders. "I thought Noreen must have told you, but no one showed up for my class today, including your wife and children."

"No!" I turned and ran, screaming into my subphone for Phil to get me going back home A.S.A.P. Within sixty seconds, I was in my pickup, once again screaming down city streets towards home. I barely gave Phil a chance to slow down in the drive before I hopped out, ran around the vehicle, tripped on a decorative plant, and face-planted into the lawn. I didn't care; I heaved my fat belly off the grass and dove for my front door. I slammed into it, almost snapping off the lock. "Noreen, boys?" I called out. No answer, "Noreen, kids?" I screamed with more desperation. "No, Maker, no! Noreen..." I screamed as I ran up the stairs and searched every room. "No, no, no!" I lost it, staring at the tiny empty beds covered in Goofy and spaceman sheets. I fell forward to my knees and buried my face into a duvet painted with stars and solar systems. I cried, screamed, and begged, but it was no use, my family was gone, and there was nothing I could do about it.

More Than Meets The Mind

"Ding-dong, ding-dong"

"Go away! Don't want any!"

"Ding-dong, ding-dong"

"I said, I don't want any....Go sell something to someone else!" I felt around the ground with my left hand for a bottle with any booze left, but they

were all empties. "All the roboters and automotions, and still we can't get rid of door-to-door salesman!" I slurred aloud to myself and giggled. "Salesman...now that's funny!"

"Ding, ding, ding, ding....Dong"

"Ah! I hate the world," I blurted aloud as I peeled myself from the sofa.

It had been months since 4-11, the incredible tragedy which robbed the world of 30% of its people, including all its children, ages seven and under. For me, most notably, my children and wife! After my visit from Peace Agent Samuels, I received my talking points the following day. Actually, I now receive talking points every week from the Global Peacekeepers, not the OCGR, as was customary. Why the Peacekeepers told me what to say and not the Global Religion Council was strange. However, I was way too messed up to care and the new system set up through M.O.T.H.E.R. made it effortless. Without my wife and children, I felt no more reason to live, to go on. Helping and teaching others no longer held any flavor.

After the attack, I first stopped off at a liquor store in week four. I donned a hat and sunglasses and bought myself 18 beers. A slab, so I heard it called. After I got home, I dropped them on the couch next to me, turned on my holographic TV, and pressed the resume button.

Noreen was running from the camera and turned on me with a giggle, "Knock it off; we have to be at the church in thirty minutes!" She warned.

"Ah, come on, being a little late won't kill 'em. It's not like they can start without me."

We kissed a bit and giggled, then the recording cut to our "gender reveal" party a few months later. That was when we discovered she was pregnant with twin boys! Tears dripped down my cheeks as I sucked down a third beer.

The buzz didn't take the emptiness or pain away. But, it conked me out. Finally, I slept, and sleep meant not thinking. That was a win. After several more months of pounding beers, it wasn't enough to get me to sleep. I upped the ante with some whiskey and finally, to its eventual conclusion: vodka. I kept a flask in the car, several bottles hidden around the house, and even one in my desk at work, in case of emergencies, "emergencies" which came every couple of hours.

If I was less of a coward, I might have gone all the way to some sort of narcotic. Actually, with a few visits to the local doctor, heroin, cocaine, and whatever type of pain reliever you could want had been made legal. Just as long as it was under the watchful eye of a trained medical professional.

But I couldn't bring myself to do it. I just couldn't pump myself full of pills. The booze was bad enough. Fortunately, now that I live alone and have a self-driving car, I got away with drinking, for now. Eventually, my liver would quit, and I'd pay the piper; until then, I just didn't care.

“Ding, ding, ding...”

“I’m coming; just stop ringing that stupid doorbell; I have a headache!” I screamed as I reached the doorknob and practically ripped the wooden slab from its hinges, “What?” I snapped as I stuck my head outside. But there was no one. I looked left and right, up and down the street, but no one. I rolled my eyes, “If you kids don’t leave me alone, I will report you to the local regulators!” I slurred out, then slammed the door and stumbled back to the sofa. Before I could get back to my solitude, the power in my house went out.

“That’s odd,” I thought aloud, “With the liberators’ perpetual power generators, losing power was supposed to be impossible.” I stepped over to the closest light switches; they didn’t work.

“Phil, are you there?” But Phil was offline, too. I grabbed at my forearm, but my subphone wouldn’t work. “What the heck is going on?” I went back to the lounge to find a vodka bottle. I needed a top-up, but I stopped short as I rounded the corner. A massive figure in a black ski mask appeared out of nowhere. Possibly even more shockingly, he waved and spoke rather kindly, “Hello, shep, how are you?” Then something hit me around the lower part of my back, and I went down like a sack of potatoes.

Faint voices woke me from a very uncomfortable nap.

“Ah man, he pissed himself, disgusting!”

“Grow up, prancing boy.”

“Don’t talk to my brother like that, Gigantor...That’s my job. Stew, shut up, and be helpful.”

“Fine, fine...”

Echoing voices swirled around my head but were coming into focus a bit more.

“Shepherd, shepherd, you hear me? Hello?” A big Afro-American man snapped his fingers in my face.

“Who are you...where am I...?” I had a vague sense of sitting on an uncomfortable chair. Making sense of the words drifting in and out of my ear-drum was bad enough; speaking was horrible.

“Ugh,” A woman’s voice moaned from behind me, “We don’t have time for this.” Icy cold water slammed a numbing shock into my scalp and down my spine. “AAhhhh!” I squealed and popped up from the chair, dancing around, trying to run from an icy cold tee-shirt.

“Who are you, people?” I demanded as I retreated and thought about tearing off my wet shirt. But noticing the three strangers facing me looked like the paragon of health, my insecurity got the best of me. Actually, they were all unusually athletic. There was the Afro-American who was a mountain of muscle in a grey sweatsuit, and a lean younger man with broad shoulders and bleached

blonde hair. Then standing next to the fake blondie was a young woman with very short-cropped hair, holding a bucket with some very muscular arms. "Who are you, people? What do you want? And why are we inside an old swimming pool?"

My eyes drifted around as I asked the question. If I were to guess, we were in one of the old YMCA buildings, none of which survived the Last Christmas war. The ceiling was an atrium design, with recessed windows designed to swing open for ventilating the moisture caused by the pool. The pool's edges were smooth concrete, boarded by blue and white tile.

"Don't worry, shepherd, we will not hurt you; we just need to talk." I looked up; two more members joined the party from outside the pool. One was a small-framed, sharply dressed gent. The other man trailing him was tallish and lean, with long hair, an open flannel top, and a t-shirt sporting the words, "Dukie," whatever that meant.

The smaller of the two stepped up and extended his hand, "Sorry for the theatrics, shepherd. I'm JT, this here next to me is Jason, the big one over there," he pointed at the pile of muscles, "Agent James."

"Formerly an agent, after this. It's safe to say that I am no longer an agent of this farce of a government."

"Over there," JT continued, "Are the Philly twins, Connie and Stew."

"We ain't twins," Connie sneered.

"But we wish we were," Stewart wrapped an unwanted arm around his sister and grinned.

"Right now, I wish I had no brother." Connie snorted out. I was slowly coming down from the shock of adrenaline, and some realization of what was happening hit me. A light went off in my head, "I know those names; Connie and Stew, the Philadelphia resistance," I turned to JT, "and you're a colonel in the U.S Air Force, the guy who pulled our forces away from the EMPs before they blew!"

JT nodded at James, "Agent James did most of the heavy lifting."

"Like hell, JT. You were the pain in the president's butt enough for him to listen. There were a few times I thought for sure he was going to have you thrown into a cell just for pissing him off." James leaned back and let off a belly laugh.

"Yes, intimidation by Secret Service personnel twice my size while under threat of an unknown alien invasion...good times..." JT wrung his hands to sell his wry retort and rolled his eyes, which only made James laugh all the more.

"Wait a minute; I don't get it. Why am I here?" I motioned around me, "And will someone please tell me why the heck we're sitting in the middle of an empty swimming pool?"

"You're missing the link, Shep!" Another voice joined the party. A tall long figure wearing a dark suit and pushing a wheelchair emerged at the pool's edge. He wore a charcoal suit with a white, open-collar dress shirt. In the wheelchair

was an Afro-American man with big arms and a US army T-shirt, sporting an undersized beany atop his head. He was missing his right leg.

After looking them both over, I followed up the newcomer's question. "Which link?"

"None of the disappeared had subcell phones."

Red Pilled Rabbit Hole from Hell

As I surveyed the odd group, I noticed that almost everyone was partnered up, except the long-haired punk rocker type in the Green Day shirt. He was sipping a coffee. Coffee from a large disposable thermos called a traveler he had kindly brought for everyone. "Of course I bought coffee for everyone! Kidnapping, yes. But, I draw the line at not sharing coffee; I'm not a monster." He chided with an awkward chuckle.

As I peered around at the different faces, the group struck me as less of an interrogation as seen in the movies and more of the good old days when I'd host Alcoholics Anonymous. Not that I needed sobriety then like I do now, but much of Noreen and I's earliest work was on the streets. A lot of folks needed help to get sober, get into housing, or some food. Really, we just helped poor people. There was no big staff to plan for, no large buildings to look after. We met inside another church's building on a Saturday, and after the service served hot dogs and fake orange juice. It was cringy and a bit rough at times. Some of our regulars could stink out the building all on their own. There was more than one fistfight that I had to break up, from both men and women. The cops were called one time to pick up a drug dealer who thought meeting clientele after church wasn't a big deal. It was a madhouse! But man, oh man, did Noreen and I go to bed happy in those days, not that I knew it. It's the age-old problem of not knowing what you have until it's gone.

You see, after Bible school, I had friends who took jobs as associate pastors with big-name preachers or scored replacement pastor roles with medium-sized churches, but Noreen and I said no. We wanted to love the unloved and start our own thing and focus on doing what Jesus did. We wanted to be the best at loving the worst. And it worked! Right? We exploded in numbers.

At first, it was a revolving door of 50 homeless drug addicts and poor single moms. Then we added about 30 volunteers with their families, then another 20, then 50. In one month, we had 150 new visitors, more than our entire membership. That year, the little baptist church we were renting from sold us the property. Little did I know that I was about to go for a ride.

Two years later, we had a membership of 250 adults and a budget of

\$750,000. Noreen and I were doing everything we had dreamt of, except having children. We had just grieved the loss of our third miscarriage when all hell broke loose.

Christmas evening, after services, we had just left our house, heading for Georgia, to see my parents and have Christmas dinner when reports of explosions and fighting erupted over the radio waves. We had heard rumors about UFOs touching down, but I was still half-convinced it was a joke or gimmick like the infamous radio show of 1938 "The War of the Worlds." The difference being that this time, all the major networks were in on the gag. But when the city lights went out, radio stations began to fail, and all cell signals were either lost or intermittent at best, I knew something wasn't right. We turned around and headed for home.

At first, nothing happened. It was three days before we discovered for sure that the world was at war...with flipping E.T. no less. We were scared, angry, and confused, but I had to "act the part" with so many folks looking to me for hope and answers. So, Noreen and I led what church members we could to the hospital and asked to volunteer. That began our three-month crash course into triage and EMT training. The most skilled action I took was CPR a few times, and twice I hooked up soldiers to an IV line due to nurse shortages. But, Noreen and I mostly cleaned, delivered food, and comforted the dying.

It was the news crew during the waning days of the Last Christmas war which turned our lives upside down. A camera crew showed up at the hospital attached to the 2nd battalion of the 506, one of the country's most storied regiments. One of the soldiers had been hit badly, losing a leg. He was not going to make it.

So, Noreen, being a saint as she always was, held him like a mother, praying with him as he passed from this life to the next. The news crew captured this on camera and caught up with me in another wing of the hospital cleaning bathrooms. During the interview, I simply stated we are doing our part to fight the enemy and would start-up services again to pray for our fighting men and women that Sunday, and invited anyone to come and join us.

The crew thanked me and went on with their business, as did I. When Noreen and I arrived an hour early to open the church building, more than thirty newcomers were already waiting. By the time the service started an hour later, 300 more newcomers were trying to fit inside our little church, and by the end of my message and our time of prayer, more than 500 had shown up! I thought it would only be a one-time thing. The following week, twice as many showed. I was aghast at the crowds, but excited by the prospects, however Noreen was wisely wary of the ramifications.

In two months we had hired a dozen more staff, added 800 new

members to our church, and three new services a weekend. We broke ground for a new building two months after that...and the rest, as they say, is history. We never stopped growing.

The expansion was not without its casualties. Our growth, our big sponsors, and the most talented volunteers were all tied to an expectation of a nice, clean and safe environment. Unfortunately, most of our original members couldn't fit into those expectations. But, I couldn't just abandon them. So, we brought in another pastor at the old building, just for them. Now, I had bigger fish to fry and much more fish to fry, for that matter. Alas, most of the original members did not survive the transition. Noreen was furious. She constantly pushed against the growth, arguing that if new members joined, they joined our ministry, but we didn't change it for them. Always the diplomat, I did my best to bring everyone together, making all parties happy. That had worked, hadn't it? Ours had become the biggest peace center in the state. How could having such big numbers be a bad thing?

Surrounded by strange people, in the bottom of an empty swimming pool, hungover and scared, I had to admit; it was a long way to fall for such a well-respected religious leader.

It was the little well-spoken ex-colonel in the suit who spoke first. "We have formed a...how should we put this..."

"A resistance," The tall guy with neck tattoos offered.

"Nope, not a resistance, not yet, anyway." The giant former Secret Serviceman corrected.

"For now, let's just call it an independent investigation."

"An investigation into what? My secret drinking habits?" I snorted.

The one-legged man in the wheelchair scoffed, as he was wheeled down into the pool, "That ain't a drink'n problem, Shep, that's a slow suicide!"

"And trust us, we know our alcoholics," Neck tattoo added with a chuckle.

"No..." JT held up a hand, reining in the conversation, "That's not what we are here to discuss, gentlemen!"

"That faint red hue on the shepherd's nose begs to differ." The one-legged man prodded me with a finger pointing to my slightly bulbous nose.

"That may be true, Dev, but right now, we need to convince him that we are not crazy."

"Oh, we're crazy, all right." The handsome young man piped up, "I'm Stewart, by the way, shepherd. Nice to meet you."

I grinned awkwardly, still not sure what I'd been kidnapped into, "Ya'll can just call me Jim. Please, shepherd's a bit formal."

"Fine, Jim. But the truth is, we are all crazy, or we wouldn't have kidnapped a public figure and started chatting with him at the bottom of a

disgusting pool if we weren't."

"It's below ground level; I told you that already." The middle-aged man in a *Dukie T-shirt* added, "I'm Jason, and I told these guys that we had to speak below ground level, so the GPKs topological recording devices can't see or hear us."

"And we said that a 3D map of the entire world, listening in on every moment of every day is just a paranoid nerd myth!" Connie, the fighter from Philly, scoffed.

"Please, people, please," JT pulled the conversation back on track, "No matter, we are here now and need to focus."

"You all are nuts." My mind finally began to focus, and the reality of the situation stabbed at my thoughts. "Let me go now, or you are going to be in huge trouble. So far, no one's been hurt, but keep me much longer and..."

Sam, the guy with all the scars and neck tattoos, cut me off, "Do you wanna know what happened to your wife and kids, or not?"

My mouth fell slightly open as I sat back defensively, "They were killed by the reptile weapon on 4-11."

"Yeah, that's what we all thought," It was Dukie shirt guy again, "I assumed that when my mom and my sister disappeared, that it was retaliation from the snakeheads. But then, I talked to other survivors with loved ones..."

I winced even harder, slammed my hands over my ears, "I can't listen to this; I won't listen to this. They were killed!" My voice echoed in my head.

A faint voice made its way through my childish ear blocking, "Were they, Jim? Did you see it happen? Did you see them die?"

"No!" I screamed again, "They died, there was nothing, okay! Nothing I could do - nothing I could do."

Devon held up a hand to shush everyone and rolled his wheelchair closer to me. He leaned into view of my face but said nothing. He stared soft, understanding brown eyes into mine. My heart melted, and I had to listen. I took my hands off my ears and whined, "What?"

"Take it from a one-legged ex-bum who spent 12 years hiding in pills and a bottle; what you're doing will only kill you slowly and painfully. The only reason for a man to drink himself to death is because he blames himself."

"Are we having a serious meeting here or an intervention, Dev? Let's get on with it." Neck Tattoo rolled his eyes.

"Sam, you shut your mouth, or I'll shut it for you," Devon snapped back, "You are the last person on earth that should ever be impatient with another human being."

The tattooed Sam threw up massive hands attached to long arms up in surrender, "Sorry, sorry. Do your thing, brother."

“Now, why is your family’s disappearance your fault?”

A lump fought its way up my throat, but I choked it back down and said nothing.

“Why are you killing yourself the hard way? You’re a shepherd, so suicide is a sin, but so is being drunk every night,” Dev leaned back and crossed his arms as I refused eye contact, “Yeah, Jim, we have been watching you for weeks, and not one day of those three weeks, have you gone to bed sober.” Devon jerked a thumb at the tall tattooed Sam, “Even when we were running around skid row down in the City of Angels, we would never get plastered like you, every night. You’re living in a constant state of alcohol poison. Me and this guy just wanted to have fun and expected to live life as losers. Your bottle is an entirely different animal. We were into being high; you’re into being taken out with a sheet over your head, feet first.”

I stared at the sky blue pool lining, or what was left of it, but Devon was relentless. He wheeled in closer.

“What are you hiding, Shepherd? What won’t you say? If you were just sad and angry about the attack, you would be in DC, rubbing elbows with representatives pushing to retaliate against the snakeheads. Or, at least, railing against them from behind your pulpit, which we know the Global World Peace board would love. But no, you don’t go to the office; plus, you read your sermons verbatim from the notes given to you by the Council of Global Religion.”

I whipped my head around and looked in the other direction. I must have looked like a five-year-old avoiding a spanking, but I didn’t care. I was filled with much more desperation than what little pride I had left.

“How did you fail your family?”

I bit my lower lip.

“What makes you so scared or ashamed that you won’t admit the truth to yourself?”

Finally, I broke. Tears spurted from my eye sockets, “Both! I’m scared and ashamed!”

“Of what?”

Someone’s hand dropped a handkerchief over my right shoulder; I took it dabbed at my eyes. “That they weren’t killed, they were taken!”

“And...” Devon prodded me on.

“Oh no, Maker’s Universe, no!” I completely fell apart, dropping my face into my hands. I balled, not a clean, respectful cry you’d expect at funerals. This was an unabashed, pent-up, frustrated, and sad explosion of emotions that was months overdue. If my guts were held together by velcro, I’d be leaving my liver and kidneys on the floor.

I don’t know how long I cried for, but it was a good while. When I finally

sat up, both James, the big ex-agent, and Devon, still sitting with his wheelchair next to me, had a hand on my shoulder. Stewart, the well-built young man, squatted next to me, a hand on my knee. All three men made eye contact with me to show their support and concern. The rest of the group reacted to my tears the same way you might respond to a streaker in the supermarket. At least we all knew who the sensitive ones of the group were.

"I'm sorry." I wiped at my nose and eyes, "I have been known to cry, but never like that."

Devon patted my shoulder, "The only way to move forward is to confront what's staring us in the face."

"Ok, ok, there, Mother Teresa, since you did your thing, can the man explain what he means, 'They were taken?'"

"I mean just that!" I exclaimed after blowing my nose into the handkerchief. I winced and looked up, "Sorry, I wasn't thinking, I'll wash it or buy you a new hankie, whoever this belongs to." JT grinned, "It's all yours, Jim. Now, please explain; how do you know they were taken?"

I sighed and closed my eyes in concentration, desperately trying to remember, "Ah, let's see, John 14:3, Revelation 3:10, 1 Thessalonians 4, and especially Luke 17:34, oh and also..."

"What in hells-bells is he ranting on about?" Neck tattoos snorted.

"Those are all Bible verses. Aren't they?" The colonel asked.

My shoulders slumped in resignation, "Yeah, all passages the OCGR took out of the Bible several years back." I shook my head in disgust, "After the Liberators showed up, and I supported it!"

"So, you're saying the old Bible....said this would happen?" Devon asked with one raised eyebrow.

I shrugged my shoulders, "My wife warned me when the Liberators showed up and introduced the Sub-Cell technology, installing electronics into the hand and the forehead...It was all looking pretty 'mark of the beast-like.' I thought she was just paranoid, and it was no different than going from horses to automobiles." I shook my head and stared at the ground in disbelief, "But if she was right, then what happened on 4-11 isn't scary because a weapon did that." I looked up at the group. They returned my gaze intensely, "It's scary because WE missed *IT*."

"What? Missed what?" Stewart leaned in closer.

I turned to the young man and smiled weakly, "Heaven, son, we missed Heaven!"

The Day Science, History, and Religion all Met

The group sat back on their heels. Half of them rolled their eyes, the other half smiled politely, but no one bought it. However, I wasn't done. "Listen, a combination of laws, stories, poetry and history, compiled in the 4th century, some of it being written well over 3,000 years ago, have spoken of an impossible occurrence. An event preceded by very specific signs, signs never seen before or since! Many of these omens or foretellings..."

"Prophecies." James offered, "My grandma called 'em prophecies."

"Yes, exactly!"

JT shot me a patronizing grin, "I understand the religious world's affinity for the Bible. It's a very fascinating book, but one point of source material is not enough to offer a viable theory!"

I shrugged, "Usually, that would be true, but this is THE Bible we are talking about. Literally the only book, historical, ancient, or religious of its kind. Think of this: it has a central theme and similar descriptions of God throughout the entire book."

"So, anyone could make that up." Connie crossed her arms and smirked.

Jason winced and added, "Yeah, but what about 40 anybodies? The Bible is made up of 40 authors, who lived over a span of 1,500 years!"

"Excuse me?" Connie didn't follow.

Jason stepped in to explain, "In my religious studies class at college, we had to do a paper on the origins of religious text. I wanted to do the Tao of Jeet Kune Do. Bruce Lee, his philosophy of fighting; I was a nerd.... Anyways, my mom talked me into the Bible. I remember it so well because it turned out to be so fascinating. I was surprised to discover the number of original documents. The dead sea scrolls, the Codex, and more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts exist of new testament writings."

"Yes, you are the king of nerds, Jason, but what does this have to do with what JT and the shepherd are saying?"

"Listen," Jason started off slowly, "The Bible was written thousands of years ago."

"Speak to me like an idiot, and I'll choke you to death, so hurry it up!" Connie growled.

"I'm trying, ok? Jeez." Jason retorted defensively.

"Calm down, Sis. Let him finish talking about these fairy-tales." Stewart rolled his eyes.

Jason ignored the peanut gallery, "Shakspeare published his work roughly 500 years ago, yet there is more evidence to support the Bible than there is to support that Shakspeare authored his plays."

Stewart laughed, "So, you're an Anti-Stratfordian?"

Jason shrugged his shoulders, "I think it's a fascinating theory, also a theory believed by Hellen Keller, the Great Houdini, and several former Supreme court justices..."

"Jason!" JT snapped.

"Sorry, not the point." He looked at Stewart, "The point is that there is more consistency and evidence of the 1,700-year-old Bible from the middle-east than there is of the 500 year series of plays from England."

"Ok, fine," Devon interrupted and waved his hand impatiently. "Let's assume, for the moment, what you are saying is true. Why should we care?"

Jason grinned nervously, "Because it could confirm what we already suspect. No one was taken, just separated!"

From The Earth To The...Earth?

"Ok, fine, Jason, you explain it..." JT crossed his arms and sat back dejected.

"I get it, Colonel," Sam mused, "They want your leadership until it's inconvenient."

Dev elbowed him in the guts, "As if anyone ever followed you? You two-bit hustler."

"Would you two mind!" James cut them off with a glare.

"Thanks, James," Jason continued, "To catch the shepherd up, I work at a research lab. After the invasion, I went back to MIT to finish my degree and..."

"And he can infer the rest, Doctor...Now you're a scientist and work in the field of particle physics..." JT cut in.

Stewart leaned forward and whispered at me, "We've been at this little investigation for six months, and some of us are getting a little eager to see some results."

"So...like I was saying...After finishing my PhD a couple of years back, I began some work with Firm-lab..."

"Which is..." JT prodded along.

"It's a particle physics laboratory, dedicated to detection and understanding of particle physics and proving dark matter and dark energy."

"I'm with you so far, but where does all that come in, Doctor? And what does it have to do with me?"

He leaned forward and became very excited, "Well, we had just finished a successful test on a new way to detect extra-dimensional activity. As you know, we only proved the existence of a 5th and 6th dimension ten years ago, and I

was on the team tasked with theorizing a probe to go into the 5th dimension.” He shook his head and leaned back, lost in his thoughts.

“And?” I looked around the group with a bewildered look.

Jason snapped out of it and snapped back at me defensively, “And nothing, I was shut down, we all were.” He leaned forward again, “Listen, I have never, in my life, prescribed to any conspiracy theories or plots to take over the world, until now. Within 48 hours of 4-11, anything to do with particle research and exploration was shut down. I mean, we supposedly lost 30% of the world population, but the Global Peace guys and grey bugs manage to shut down the hottest research in decades...within a few hours?”

Sam and his neck tattoos jumped in, “Yep, sounds like a bunch of bull....”

I cut him off, “You mean to tell me, the little grey tech geniuses from another planet, who *want* humanity to explore the stars, are suppressing science? For what reason? Even if we understand half their technology, it will take us decades to catch up to where they are now. We are no threat to them.”

“Exactly,” JT added, “So, why on earth would a race of highly evolved aliens, with nothing but good intentions, from half a million light-years away care if we continue to explore particle physics?” The colonel shifted in his seat, “See, I was recruited to the White House on the lookout for unidentifiable phenomenon and threats because my Ph.D. dissertation was on the probability of Extraterrestrials or Extra Dimensionals. If we are dealing with E.T., then there is a good chance that we will at least meet a new trading partner, if not a friend. But if we are talking ExtraDimensional.”

“Like the old video game Doom...I loved that game.” Agent James pipped in.

“Yes, Jamie, yes...We all know and love that you came up with that all on your own.”

“Call me Jamie again and see what happens, pipsqueak.”

“Extra Dimensions, Colonel,” I noted that the Colonel wasn’t so quick to shed his prior title. Either he still held out hope that he could salvage his career, or his title meant a lot more to him than he would most likely admit.

“Oh, right...” JT continued after flashing a grin at James, “Um, so, with extra-dimensional beings, we were mostly looking at the possibility of a hostile invasion force. Within the first few weeks of the war, a few scientists from Firmalab determined that the reptilian forces were in fact from a different dimension, not a far off planet. Then these same scientists were all suddenly targeted by a reptilian death squad and all killed.”

“Yeah, I happened upon the paperwork for that research. However, anything digitized had been erased.” Jason reached into a satchel and handed me a stack of photocopies. “A friend of mine happened upon a backup hardcopy

that they missed. According to what he told me before he died, the rest of the evidence was destroyed only a week after the "Liberators" showed up."

"Now that's convenient...Wait, your friend who happened on this and looked into it died?"

Jason's eyes went wide, and his voice raised an octave, "Yeah, imagine that! The day after he shares this with me, and gives me this evidence. One sunny afternoon, he decided to down an entire bottle of whiskey, and turned off his car's A.I. off, so he could drive manual, plow through a guard rail and into the river. Keep in mind, he rarely drank and had never been arrested for anything, much less a DUI."

"The cops?"

James shrugged his shoulders, "A buddy of mine looked into it. All he would tell me is that it's a 'no-fly zone.' Even if I touched it with a ten-foot pole, my entire family would get infected."

"Who are these people?" I mused aloud as I perused the evidence in my hands.

"Well, I saw JT's signature on the paperwork, so I contacted him for help."

"Where was the White House during all this? Why didn't the president step in?"

JT chuckled to himself cynically, "He tried, but even he was stonewalled. The FBI launched an investigation that went nowhere. The NSA just ignored us, like the White House didn't matter anymore. The CIA was decimated during the war; somehow, the Reptilians infiltrated the CIA and knew the name of every operator and station chief around the world. 80% were dead within the first two weeks."

I was shocked, "Are you sure? I never heard anything about this."

"Of course not, shep. Propaganda is meant to feel good, not depress and share the truth. The truth is that the USA lost half its international power and influence during the Last Christmas invasion. Yeah, no nation on earth can touch us, but we were decimated by only one alien attack. Imagine another one or a more powerful enemy."

"Like the bug-eyed greys." Added Connie, who had stayed very silent, taking in the "old" guy's conversation.

"Yes, like the greys. When they asked for a treaty, the president and remaining congressional reps didn't feel there was much choice."

"Ok, ok, back up." My head was swimming, and the one cup of coffee and a fist full of aspirin wasn't enough to starve off the effects of my nasty hangover. "How does this connect with 4-11 and all of our missing loved ones?"

Jason smiled, "Well, after JT and I got nowhere, the president signed a secret order on his last day of office. It gave us just enough authority to scrounge

up a few of my particle physicist friends and equipment and launch our own underground research project.”

“What did you find?”

“Well, you see....”

Sam cut him off, “Here we go again; I’ve heard this spiel so many times, I could say it in my sleep....” His voice turned robotic and slightly mocking, reminiscent of a classic science fiction movie. “Gravitational Waves were first meant to detect and prove the 5th dimension back in 2017 through two far-off stars going supernova. That failure led many to believe that a 5th physical dimension was not real....”

Very unimpressed, Jason crossed his arms and leaned back into his chair, glaring at the tattooed comic relief. The others choked back giggles, all except for JT, who buried his face into his hands and moaned, “Children! I’m trying to expose a worldwide conspiracy with children.”

Sam obviously loved the attention. “...However, three years later, a Doctor Ellen Derschewitz proposed a different theory, that to accurately pinpoint something unknown, the source of light must be controlled. This led to....”

“Enough, I can’t take it,” Connie and Stewart held their bellies, bursting into laughter.

“I know I’m the group nerd; you don’t have to point it out all the time, you guys.” Jason shook his head in disapproval. “Anyways, the point is that Ellen created a gravitational radar system that detected what we first thought were tears in the space-time continuum.”

“You thought they were holes in the universe?”

“Yeah, well...when we explored further, we noticed two things. First, there was a symmetry to the tears.”

“They were round; that’s what that means, Shep.” Dev had obviously been confused by most of this.

“Yeah, I got it, thanks, buddy.” I patted Dev on the arm.

“What was the other thing?”

“Every time we detected a new tear in the space-time continuum, there was activity from one of our ‘Liberators’ ships.” Jason leaned in close.

“Wait. What you’re saying is...,” my hungover brain was working slow, but I knew it was catching up to a very uncomfortable solution.

“Yeah,” JT stated, “The reptilians aren’t the only ones from a different dimension....”

End of Part One of the Shepherd's Volume Trilogy
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A Shepherd's Reason *Alienation Series Vol. 6*

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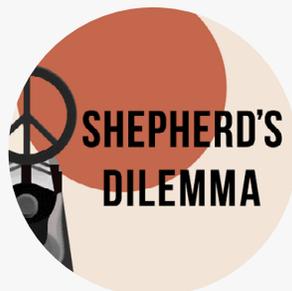
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