

LAST ROAD HOME

CHAPTER 1

He had been coming this way for years.

At first, it was only rumors—like yellow scraps of newspaper littering the gutter, or snatches of gossip over coffee growing cold. We resisted the tales; it was simply too horrid to believe. Thus, the rumors faded to legend, and the legends to myth. Surely—no human being could still be out there. In darkness.

The fateful day came. The watchman's cry sent icy shivers up and down every backbone and boulevard in the bright and busy city. The myth had put on flesh. From our tallest tower he could be felt more than seen; a shadowy figure, bent and furtive, like a panicked beetle caught in sudden light. He would stagger forward a few steps, freeze mid-stride, turn on his heel and dive behind a scraggly bush or a slab of stone. After dark, hearing him was worse than seeing him. The echoes of his wailing bent strangely among the hills, punching ragged holes in a landscape that had been so serene merely hours before, when the sun had set in a glorious festival of gold and violet. Wails of grief or pain they were, certainly . . . but much worse. The anguished cry of hope lost. Hope forsaken.

The last sinner was on the road home.

But he sure was taking his time.

The next-to-the-last sinner had arrived forty or fifty years earlier, depending on how one counts years in this glorious place. Her welcome had lasted nearly two decades. We shouted and sang till our voices failed. We told and retold her story, polishing it with each telling, until even she laughed at how monstrous her folly had been. Just last month we took down the last of the faded Welcome Home banners. We were confident we would never need them again.

Before her, there had been no one for a century or more.

We were convinced the stories of Adam's children were finished.

Then this one was found—hundreds of miles out, beyond a dozen folded boundaries most of us had forgotten existed. A soul stretched so paper-thin over wizened skin and twisted bones that the explorers debated long and hard over whether the creature could ever have been a descendant of Adam.

But the gates of the City are never closed. Except, of course, during the daily Opening of the Gates Ceremony. That's when they thunder shut for thirty or forty seconds—long enough to make our hearts race—just so we can cheer ourselves senseless when they open again.

Once, sinners came through those gates constantly. In a flood. Then a stream. Then a trickle. For ages now, only silence.

We had stopped watching the horizon altogether.
Which is why his halting steps fell heavier on our hearts than all the others combined.

We usually saw them coming long before they got to the gates of the City. Usually . . . but not always. One of the first sinners I witnessed repenting his way into the City took everyone by surprise. Nobody saw him coming until we heard him sprinting across the wide-open meadow just outside the Naphtali Gate. You don't normally hear somebody sprinting; they're too busy breathing. But this man somehow managed to sprint, breathe, scream, and yell all at the same time. And, of course, you don't hear many people scream in Heaven. Shrieks of delight are about as close as it gets. But this was a real scream. Birds and angels exploded into the sky as he pierced the air with his "*Ee-yah-yah-yah-yah-yah-YAHHH*." Heads jerked up in unison, most of us sipping afternoon drinks on the wide veranda under the yellow umbrellas just outside the gate. Drinks were spilled, their celestial contents dribbling through the slats of the table.

Yes, you can still spill things in Heaven.

I was fairly new to Heaven in those days, but even most of the old-timers had never seen anything like it. The only thing more surprising than his scream was his running. He ran like someone being chased by a ravenous beast . . . but he was clearly not a natural runner. Erratic limbs flopped all around his twitching torso.

When his feet finally hit the sandy-gold path, he made straight for the gate—people, carts, animals and angels jumping aside as he barreled toward them. As he neared the huge open gate, he raised both arms high over his head and let out another garbled scream. The gate, as always, was filled with people standing in line—travelers, officials, and sight-seers—they parted like the Red Sea and the crazed man passed through on dry ground alright, Pharaoh's army right on his tail. He dashed through the shadows and back into the sunshine of the street, where he collapsed to his knees and pressed his face hard into the cool white stone, gasping for air.

"Well, that's one way to do it," some smart aleck whispered as we all jostled to see what would happen next.

Half a dozen saints converged on him, mostly those who had been around a while and still remembered how to assist newcomers. They crouched down, caressed his back and whispered in his ear. His heaving sobs diminished little by little until he raised his wide, wet eyes to look into the faces of those clustered around him.

"Am . . . I . . . safe?" he muttered, one word per breath.

Comforting arms encircled his shoulders as a fresh wail rose from his tormented soul, this time the long, tremulous wail of relief.

He had darkish skin, long unkempt black hair, and wore nothing but a loin cloth and a few shells around his neck. *Amazonian*? I wondered silently.

No one who ever witnessed such a scene could question the horrors of hell.

When the man calmed down, he was raised to his feet, cheers and applause erupting from the onlookers now crowded into the sunlit square. An attendant stepped forward to put a soft robe over his shoulders and soft shoes over his bruised and bleeding feet. The crowd cheered again, and the man lifted his face toward us for the first time, raised one quivering hand as if to say thank you, then the attendants turned him around and began escorting him toward the Welcome House.

We knew we would see him outside the Welcome House in four or five days gawking at the splendor around him, then he would be transferred to Training and Recovery. He would be there a long time—months or years, to use earth terms—catching up on all he missed in his earthly life, where he could have walked with his Creator but had not done so, and catching up with much that he had missed so far in heavenly life.

Different sinners require different degrees of processing, and they all require different kinds. All of them have traveled a painful path, some more painful than others.

This man has been safely home for ages now. I recall his entrance because it was unusual, and because it was one of the first I witnessed first-hand.

Scenes like this—so I have been told—have played out millions of times over the ages. But the Latter Ones came in like final drops falling off leaves hours after a summer rain.

The mindset of the Sons of God shifted from: Stay-Home-and-Welcome—to—Go-Out-and-Find. This new strategy led to the discovery of many “Last Sinners”, each one supplanted when a new “Last” was found.

The first time most of us thought *Certainly, this must be the last one* was several hundred years ago. That Last Sinner was a man from China. He had been hiding in caves for eons because anytime the light of the City hit his eyes or skin he felt like he was on fire. He had dug miles and miles of tunnels and trenches to avoid the light. One of the members of a Rescue Team fell into such a trench while pushing through thick underbrush. The Team fanned out and uncovered an entire mountainside of abandoned digs before figuring out that the digger had long-since moved his operation to an adjacent valley. There they discovered fresher piles of dirt, and not long after, the digger himself. As is usually the case, the man was deathly afraid of the Rescue Team, and they had to entice him into conversation through months and months of gift-giving and gentle coaxing.

Once communication had been established, weeks of careful conversation followed, all of it in the dim light of the man's cave, during which they found out much about his earthly history and his mental evolution here in the eternal Realms.

Yichen Wu was his name. He had been brought by the Redeemer to the spot Yichen had chosen for his eternal—or so he thought—resting place. Jesus escorts every person as close as possible to the Light, but the escort-ee always resists at some point, often claiming the Glory burns his eyes and skin. The fire of Hell, as you probably know, is nothing other than the Glory of the Lord resisted. The only gospel some human beings ever see is when the Son—holy wounds still visible in brow, wrists, and feet—escorts them to their outer darkness domicile. And although at the time they can only see him as a terrifying specter, as the eons drag by, their memory of those wounds grows, softening their hearts like rainwater dissolving limestone, creating echoing caverns in the bedrock of their rebellion. Every Latter One I have ever talked to eventually developed a longing to see the man with the wounds in his hands and feet.

The job of the missionaries—the old term is still used—is the same as ever: To describe to the sinner the never-ending love of God; the Man with the wounds. Sometimes this is surprisingly easy. At other times, infuriatingly difficult. No two sinners are the same. Yichen Wu, the man in the cave—once persuaded to stop eating dried leaves and tree bark, and once convinced that the light of Glory no longer burned his eyes and skin—came out quite easily. He was escorted up and out of his trench, his helpers careful to guard his eyes from the light of glorious day. When he stood at the top of his last pile of dirt, he wept, tears splashing onto his bare feet and running down in muddy rivulets. The rescuers had a hunch what might happen next, and they were not disappointed. As the man stood there sobbing, a newcomer walked up

and began washing Yichen's feet with a white towel and tears of his own. The rescue team stood transfixed.

A minute later the man with the towel stood up in front of Yichen Wu, and pulled back his sleeve. Yichen gaped at the wrist, gawked at the face, then collapsed into the man's arms, wailing at the top of his lungs.

It takes a long time for a millennium of folly to work itself out. The rescue missionaries took their time escorting Yichen toward the City of Light. It took many weeks of walking, and just as many weeks of talking. News of his rescue reached the City long before he did. This gave saints and angels lots of time to prepare for his arrival. The central stadium was modified, cantatas were written, statues were carved, streets were festooned with banners of purple and gold—the colors of mercy—and word went out into far-flung galaxies: The Last Sinner—so everyone thought—was coming home.

We all thought it was the party to end all parties. It lasted for weeks. Or months. Maybe a year or two. Yichen Wu was the most famous sinner in the cosmos, and his restoration and training process went on long after the party was over. He was invited to give his testimony in hundreds of clubs, associations and gatherings. He would tell how he had grown up in a traditional Buddhist home, and how a Christian missionary had come to his town when he was a young married man. His wife had received the missionary's message with joy, but Yichen refused to change, and persecuted his wife mercilessly. Now in the heavens, Yichen's wife would often participate in telling their story. Each of them was a trophy of God's grace. Together they were a whole cabinet full of trophies. Yichen had been a very stubborn man. He carried his stubbornness into the Eternal Realm. Whenever he told his story, his audiences marveled that he could persist in his unrepentant state for so long.

Human beings can resist the goodness of God precisely because they contain within themselves the goodness of God. Their free will is the most powerful evidence of their God-likeness, and it is this very will that is used to resist the God who gave it to them. In Yichen's case, this resulted in eons of torment, digging endless miles of trenches and tunnels to escape the searing light of God's goodness.

And for a long, long time we all thought he was the last one. How could anyone possibly hold out longer than he? How little we knew.

He was just the first of the last.