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What's Gone On Before

JUDD Thompson Jr. and the rest of the Young Tribulation Force are living the adventure of a lifetime. Judd and Lionel Washington travel to Petra and hear miraculous stories of God's power from Sam Goldberg and Mr. Stein.

Vicki Byrne and the others at Colin Dial's home are warned to leave the area. They hurry to the new hideout in Avery, Wisconsin, narrowly eluding Global Community forces. Vicki is glad to be back with the others but still worries about Judd.

With the help of Chang Wong in New Babylon and Chloe Williams in San Diego, Judd and Lionel find a Co-op flight to South Carolina and hurry to meet believers, Luke and Tom Gowin. Judd and Lionel notice two men with strange weapons walking along a trail. While escaping from their notice, Judd and Lionel discover Tom Gowin handcuffed in the back of a pickup truck. After a long

THE RISE OF FALSE MESSIAHS

chase, the bounty hunters catch Judd, Lionel, and Tom.

Join the Young Trib Force as they struggle to reunite with each other and survive the Great Tribulation.

Heading for the Blade

JUDD Thompson Jr. said a quick prayer and wondered if it would be his last. He glanced at Tom Gowin, the young believer from South Carolina who lay on the dusty floor, his head turned, a trickle of blood running from his mouth.

Lionel Washington was beside Judd, his hands also cuffed behind him. Lionel was near tears, his head down, sweat pouring from his forehead.

Judd wondered where they had made their mistake. Were they wrong to come to South Carolina? Chang Wong kept up with developments around the world. Surely he knew the danger they faced.

"Keep your head up," Judd whispered to Lionel.

Someone slapped Judd on the back of the

head. "Shut up!" Albert yelled, pushing Judd hard. "Get in the next room."

The bounty hunters herded Judd and Lionel into the living room of the tiny house and shoved them onto a shabby couch by the front door. The man with the long scar on his face, Max, took out a cigarette and lit it. Judd noticed Nicks littering the kitchen table, payment for bringing in two bodies without the mark of Carpathia.

Max threw a leather pouch at Albert. "Put the money in there. We don't want anybody wiping us out while we're gone."

"You know there's nobody out here—," Albert began.

"Just do it," Max said, opening the door.

"Where you going?"

"The truck needs fuel." He glanced at Judd and Lionel. "And make sure the other one's still alive. If he isn't, we'll load them all up and take them to the GC."

The door slammed behind Max, and the truck chugged to a small outbuilding. Judd watched through a side window as Max unlocked a creaky door. Empty metal cans crashed until the man found one with gasoline.

Albert grabbed Nicks from the table and floor and stuffed them into the pouch. He jammed a few bills into his pockets, and

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Judd gave Lionel a look. Albert smiled as he flitted about the room gathering money, humming an off-key version of a country song.

"We're going to do a little celebratin' tonight! After we turn you in and find that other nest of Judah-ites, we'll have enough money to move out of here and get a place near the city where the real money is."

Judd bit his lip. The pain from being shot by the weird weapon and having his hands cuffed tightly behind him had dulled his senses. It was difficult to breathe, let alone think clearly. His shoulder muscles ached as he shifted on the rickety couch.

"Too bad you and your friend are settling for chicken feed," Lionel said.

"Shut up," Albert said.

"Up in Atlanta, there's probably thousands of people without the mark. We could lead you to them."

The man grinned. "You ain't from Atlanta. I can tell you're from up north somewhere."

"I didn't know it mattered where we're from," Lionel said. "Isn't an unmarked Northerner worth just as much?"

Albert rolled his eyes. "Max says the GC is real interested in you two. They might pay us more than the regular rate."

Lionel glanced at Judd and leaned toward him, then whispered, "You think Tom's still alive? His head hit pretty hard on the floor."

Judd shrugged and the truck started up again, a plume of blue smoke rising from the tailpipe. Max pulled up to the house and ran inside. Albert handed him the bulging pouch of money.

"He kept some of it," Judd said.

Albert backhanded Judd's face. Judd tasted blood in his mouth.

"Judah-ites," Albert sneered. "He's just trying to get us to turn against each other."

"Look in his pockets," Judd said.

Another hard blow, a kick this time, sent Judd reeling. The couch crackled, and if Lionel hadn't been sitting beside him, Judd was sure they would have toppled.

"He took some of the money!" Judd yelled.

Max glared at his partner. "It had better all be here."

"I might have picked up a few Nicks by mistake . . ."

Max frowned at Albert who held out his hand. "I swear it was a mistake." He dug into his pockets, emptying the contents on the table.

Max grabbed the Nicks and shoved them

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into the pouch. "I'm going to count this. If it's short—"

"Lemme look," Albert said, fishing in his pockets.

Judd saw movement to his right. Someone peered through the crack in the door where Tom was being held. Judd studied the face—a young man, a little older than Judd. Brown hair. *Luke?*

The man made a signal Judd couldn't understand, then mouthed, "Stay there."

Judd nodded and whispered to Lionel. When Judd glanced back, the door was closed.

The veins in Max's neck were sticking out. "Check on the other kid and make sure he's alive."

"Wait," Judd said, trying to stand.

"You shut up," Albert said, kicking Judd in the stomach and sending him back onto the couch. Judd tried to stall the man, but he went straight for the door. He jiggled the handle several times. "How did this get locked?"

Max squinted. "Out of the way!"

With one kick, the door cracked and flew open. Max and Albert disappeared into the room, and both let out a string of curses.

"The window!" Albert yelled. "He got out through the window!"



Vicki Byrne closed her eyes and tried to calm herself. The e-mail from Chang Wong in New Babylon was the worst news she could imagine. Bounty hunters in the South were looking for anyone without the mark of Carpathia. Judd and Lionel had walked into a trap.

Mark turned the speakerphone on so everyone could hear Carl Meninger's voice. Carl had worked for the Global Community in Florida and now lived in South Carolina.

"Tom and Luke headed for the fort hours ago," Carl said. "That's where they were supposed to meet Judd and Lionel."

"Have you had any contact with Tom and Luke?" Vicki said.

"We talked by radio several times. They saw Judd and Lionel's plane and even spotted them rowing across the river. They were going to meet them when we lost contact. I thought they had just gone out of range, but maybe they were caught."

"How far from the meeting place are you right now?" Mark said.

"It's a hike. We're a long way up the river on an old plantation."

"Those bounty hunters could be coming to you next," Vicki said.

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"We don't see many people up here," Carl said. "We've taken a lot of precautions since our other hideout was discovered."

Carl said he would check back when he heard any news, and Mark hung up. An eerie silence fell over the group.

Finally, Zeke said, "I think we ought to pray."

The kids prayed for Judd, Lionel, Tom, and Luke. Vicki wiped away tears. A few minutes into the session, she got up and went outside.

Zeke joined her under one of the awnings the group had constructed between cabins. "I know you're upset, but you can't give up hope."

"I have to do something. The GC is making all the moves. It's like we're trapped."

"You know how long it would take you to get to South Carolina from here? The best thing you can do is pray."

"I don't want to pray. I want to do something!" Vicki sobbed.

Zeke nodded, his long hair swishing against his chubby shoulders. "I know exactly how you feel. When the GC picked up my dad, I wanted to go in there with guns blazing and get him out. You know how

hard it is to know someone you love's going to die?"

Vicki couldn't speak.

Zeke put a hand on her shoulder. "Dad was ready, and Judd and Lionel are too."

"Don't talk like that! Judd's coming back, and I'm going to help him!"

Vicki ran inside the building. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need a vehicle."

Marshall Jameson stood. "Vicki, you can't be serious."

"I have to help them."

Shelly hugged Vicki and they both cried.

Mark ran a hand through his hair. "Vicki, this is insane."

She turned to Zeke. "Isn't there a part of you that wishes you had tried to save your dad? Don't you ever wonder if you might have been able to help him?"

Zeke just stared at her.

Colin Dial stepped forward. "If this program that Commander Fulcire created goes through, there'll be a million eyes watching. If everyone knows they can make money finding people without the mark of Carpathia, we'll be a prime target."

"The program hasn't started up here," Vicki said. "Besides, I'll stick to back roads—"

Becky Dial put a hand on Vicki's shoulder. "I know how upset you are, but Colin's right."

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You can't go anywhere right now. We have to trust God."

"He helped you by sending that angel Anak," Charlie said. "Maybe God will send an angel to Judd."

Vicki looked from face to face, sensing their concern. Everyone in the room wanted Judd and Lionel to return safely.

"I'm going to my cabin," Vicki said. "Call me the moment you hear anything."

Vicki raced away, wiping tears from her face. She collapsed on her bunk and sobbed, crying out to God.



Judd caught his breath as the two men in the next room shoved wicker furniture away from the window. Lionel struggled to his feet and moved toward the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" Judd said.

Lionel turned and felt along the tabletop. His eyes lit and he scampered back to the couch. With his hands still cuffed behind him, he held out his pocketknife. "He took this and some clips from me earlier." He sat on the couch, leaning forward, trying to open the small blade.

Max returned and Lionel sat back, hiding the knife in his palm.

"Get these two into the back of the truck," Max said, glaring at Judd and Lionel. "And switch your gun to kill. No more trying to be nice to these kids."

Albert hustled Lionel and Judd into the back of the truck and closed the tailgate. Max had fastened plywood over the broken window, and it was dark inside.

"You try to get away and it'll be the last time," Albert said.

The plastic cuffs were tight around Judd's wrist, and Lionel said he had lost most of the feeling in his hands. Lionel told Judd to scoot close. He pricked Judd's arm once with the blade, and Judd helped guide the knife to the plastic strip.

Lionel pulled the blade back and forth along the plastic. With the sawing motion they hoped to cut a notch into the thick plastic.

"Good thing they didn't have the metal cuffs or there would be no way we'd get them off," Lionel said. "You think the guy you saw was Luke?"

"I've never seen him before, but I can't imagine who else it would be."

Judd held still as Lionel worked. Max and Albert hadn't returned, and Judd wondered if they had followed Tom into the woods. After a few minutes, Lionel pulled the knife away,

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and Judd managed to get his little finger to the middle of the cuffs.

"I don't feel any notch at all," Judd said. "It's not working."

"I have another blade with a serrated edge. Let me try that."

Judd helped guide the blade again, but this time the edge cut his arm and he yelled.

"Sorry, man," Lionel said.

Minutes later the bounty hunters returned, and Judd heard the clatter of a weapon in the front seat.

"You know I don't do well at that place," Albert whined.

"It's not like there's a bunch of gators down there," Max said. "Just take these two and have them processed. I'll stay here and wait on the dogs so we can find the other one."

"Max, let me stay."

Max spoke through clenched teeth. "Go. I'll find the other one."

The door closed and the truck started. Lionel kept working on the cuffs as they bounced along the bumpy road.

"You ever think it would end this way?" Lionel said. "Guess you won't get to see Vicki again."

"Concentrate!"

Judd didn't want to think about anything but getting free. Now, as Albert drove along the deeply rutted road, Judd thought of Vicki. Unless Tom got back to his group and told the story, no one would know about Judd's and Lionel's fate. *Is this God's plan?* Judd thought. *How could this possibly glorify God?*

Years before, Bruce Barnes had said, "Pray as if everything depends on God, but work as if everything depends on you."

Lionel stopped for a moment and worked out a cramp in his hand. "Feel it and see if we're making any progress."

Judd ran a little finger around the plastic, feeling for a notch. Lionel had been working the new blade long enough to get a cramp, but Judd's heart sank when the surface was completely smooth.