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Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom became full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues because of the pain. They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds.

*Revelation 16:10-11*

## O N E

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FOR THE FIRST TIME since takeoff, Rayford Steele had second thoughts about his and Abdullah Smith's passenger. "We shouldn't have brought her, Smitty," he said. He stole a glance at Abdullah behind the controls.

The Jordanian shook his head. "That's on you, Captain, I am sorry to say. I tried to tell you how important she was to Petra."

The darkness enveloping only New Babylon, but visible from more than a hundred miles, was unlike anything Rayford had ever seen. By the time Abdullah initiated the descent of the Gulfstream IX toward Iraq, the clock read 1200 hours, Palace Time.

Normally the magnificent structures of the new world capital gleamed stunningly in the noonday sun. Now a stark and isolated column of blackness rose from New Babylon's expansive borders into the cloudless heavens as high as the eye could see.

Chang Wong was Rayford's mole inside the palace. Trusting the young man's assurances that they would be able to see where others could not, Rayford traded glances with Abdullah as he guided the craft into the dark from the whiteness reflecting off the desert sand. Abdullah flipped on his landing lights.

Rayford squinted. "Do we need an ILS approach?"

"Instrument landing system?" Abdullah said. "Don't think so, Captain. I can see enough to fly."

Rayford compared the freakish darkness to the beautiful day they had left in Petra. He peeked over his shoulder at the young woman, whom he expected to look afraid. She didn't. "We can still turn back," he said. "Your father looked reluctant when we boarded."

"That was probably for your benefit," Naomi Tiberias said. "He knows I'll be fine."

The teenage computer whiz's humor and self-confidence were legendary. She seemed shy and self-conscious around adults until she got to know them; then she interacted like a peer. Rayford knew she had brought Abdullah up to speed in computer savvy, and she had been in nearly constant touch with Chang since the lights went out in New Babylon.

"Why is it dark only here?" Naomi said. "It's so strange."

"I don't know," Rayford said. "The prophecy says it affects 'the throne of the beast, and his kingdom became full of darkness.' That's all we know."

Rayford's every visit to Petra had found Naomi growing in influence and responsibility among the Remnant.

She had emerged early as a technological prodigy, and as she taught others, Naomi had become the de facto head of the vast computer center. Quickly rising from go-to person to the one in charge, she'd finally become the teacher who taught teachers.

The center that had been designed by Chang's predecessor, the late David Hassid, was now the hub that kept Petra in touch with more than a billion souls every day. Thousands of computers allowed that many mentors to keep up with Tsion Ben-Judah's universal cyber-audience. Naomi personally coordinated the contact between Chang in New Babylon and the Tribulation Force around the world.

Having her join the flight to rescue him from New Babylon had been Chang's idea. Rayford had initially rejected it. He had enough trouble assigning himself the task of traveling more than seventy-five hundred miles from San Diego to Petra, then having Abdullah fly him the last five hundred miles to New Babylon. Combat-trained George Sebastian was better suited, but Rayford thought the big man had been through enough for a while. There was plenty for him to do in San Diego, and anyway, Rayford wanted to save George for what Dr. Ben-Judah called the "battle of that great day of God Almighty," now less than a year off.

Mac McCullum and Albie, stationed in Al Basrah—little more than two hundred miles south of New Babylon—stood ready. But Rayford had other things in mind for them.

Rayford's son-in-law and daughter, Buck and Chloe

Williams, both wanted in on the extraction of Chang from the enemy lair—no surprise—but Rayford was convinced Buck would soon be more valuable in Israel. As for Chloe, the International Commodity Co-op always suffered when she was away. And somebody had to be there for little Kenny.

“Store and grab all the equipment you need while I’m en route, Chang,” Rayford had said, the phone tucked between his shoulder and ear as he packed. “Smitty and I will come get you in a couple of days.”

Chang had explained that the job was too big and that he and Naomi working together could get him out of there that much faster. “I don’t want to miss a thing. She can help. I want to be able to monitor this place from anywhere.”

“Don’t worry,” Rayford said. “You’ll get to see her face-to-face soon enough.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Her father is one of the Petra elders, you know.”

“So?”

“Only the two of them are left in the family. He’s very protective.”

“We both have too much work to do.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m not kidding, Captain Steele. Please bring her along. It’s not like I haven’t seen her on-screen already.”

“So, what do you think?”

“I told you. We have a lot of work to do.”

Rayford felt a tug on the back of his copilot's chair as Naomi pulled herself forward. "Can Mr. Smith see to land?"

"Not sure yet," Rayford said. "It's as if someone painted our windows brown. See if you can raise our boy."

Chang was to be sure the New Babylon runways were clear, but he couldn't talk by phone from there for fear someone would overhear. Naomi pulled a small, thin computer from an aluminum box and attacked the keys.

"Avoid runways 3 left and 3 right," she said. "And he wants to know which you choose so he can be there to meet us."

Rayford glanced at Abdullah. "He's serious, Naomi?"

She nodded.

"Tell him the tower is closed, and it's not like we were going to announce our arrival anyway. We can't see which runway is which from up here, so he's going to have to give us coordinates and—"

"Hold on," Naomi said, keyboarding again. "He's attached everything you need." She passed the machine to Rayford and pointed at the attachment. "It is voice activated. Just tell it what you want."

"It'll recognize my voice?" Rayford said, studying the screen.

"Yes," the computer intoned.

Naomi chuckled.

"Attachment, please," Rayford said.

A detailed grid appeared with an aerial view of the New Babylon airfield.

“I’ll set the coordinates for you, Smitty,” Rayford said, reaching to program the flight management system.

“This thing will do everything but cook a meal for you, Captain Steele,” Naomi said. “You have an infrared port?”

“I assume. Do we, Smitty?”

Abdullah pointed to a spot on the control panel.

“Here,” Naomi said. “Let me.” She leaned over Rayford’s shoulder and pointed the back of the computer at the port. “Ready to land, Captain?” she said.

“Roger.”

“Initiate landing sequence,” she said and hit a button.

“Runway choice?” the computer asked.

Naomi looked at Rayford, who looked to Abdullah. “Does that thing recognize even my accent?” the Jordanian said.

“Yes,” the computer said. “Congestion on runways 3 left and 3 right. Please select from runways 11 or 16.”

“Eleven,” Abdullah said.

“Left or right?” the computer said.

“Left,” Abdullah said. “Why not?”

Abdullah engaged the left autopilot and lifted his hands from the controls. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” the computer said.

Six minutes later the Gulfstream touched down.

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At just after one o’clock in the morning in San Diego, Buck bolted upright in bed.

Chloe stirred. "Go back to sleep, hon," she said.  
"You stood watch three straight nights. Not tonight."

He held up a hand.

"You need your sleep, Buck."

"Thought I heard something."

The tiny walkie-talkie on the nightstand chirped. Sebastian's telltale code. Buck grabbed it. "Yeah, George."

"Motion detector," Sebastian whispered.

Now Chloe sat up too.

"I'll check the periscope," Buck said.

"Carefully," Sebastian said. "Don't raise or rotate it."

"Roger. Anybody else aware?"

"Negative."

"On it."

Chloe was already out of bed and had pulled on a sweatshirt. She unlocked a cabinet, removed two Uzis, and tossed one to Buck as he headed for the periscope next to Kenny's tiny chamber. He set the weapon on the floor, dropped the walkie-talkie into his pajama pocket, and bent to peer into the viewer. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness he was aware of Chloe opening and closing Kenny's door. Going on four years old, Kenny slept longer but less soundly than he used to.

"He out?" Buck said, eyes still glued to the scope.

"Dead to the world," Chloe said, draping a sweater around Buck's shoulders. "As you should be."

"Wish I was," Buck said.

"I should think so." She rested her palms on his shoulders. "What do you see?"

"Nothing. George doesn't think I ought to rotate the

scope. It's facing west at ground level. I'd love to elevate it about six inches and let it give me a three-sixty."

"He's right, babe," she said. "You know it's got that whine when it moves. Anybody out there could hear it."

"I don't think anybody is out there," Buck said, pulling away and rubbing his eyes.

She sighed. "Want a chair?"

He nodded and returned to the periscope. "Could have been an animal. Maybe the wind."

Chloe pressed a chair behind his knees and guided him into it. "That's why you should just let me—"

"Oh no," he said.

"What?"

He put a finger to his lips and pulled out the walkie-talkie. "George," he whispered. "Six, seven, eight, nine. Nine uniformed, armed GC directly above to the west."

"Doing?"

"Not much. Kicking at the vents. They look bored. Maybe something caught their eye on the way by."

"Vehicles?"

"I'd have to raise or rotate."

"Negative. Any more?"

"Can't tell from this angle. No more coming past. Only three left in sight now."

"Listen for engines."

Buck sat silent a moment. Then, "Yeah, there's one. And another."

"I hear 'em," George said. "Must be leaving. Can I come over?"

"Tell him no," Chloe whispered.

What palace personnel Rayford could make out in the eerie sepia-toned landscape through the cockpit window appeared to be in agony. Chang had told him that the people writhed and moaned, but a jet screaming onto the runway also clearly terrified them. They had to think it was about to crash, as some had on runways 3 left and 3 right.

It was as if the people had given up trying to see. Anyone near the Gulfstream IX had stumbled in the darkness to get away from it, and now they huddled here and there.

“That has to be Chang,” Rayford said, pointing to a slight Asian hurrying toward them and gesturing wildly to open the door.

“Let me get that, Miss Naomi,” Abdullah said, unstrapping himself and climbing past her. As he pushed the door open and lowered the steps, Rayford saw Chang turn to a small group of men and women in dark jumpsuits feeling their way along behind him.

“Keep your distance!” he shouted. “Danger! Hot engines! Leaking fuel!”

They turned and hurried away in all directions. “How did it land?” someone shouted.

“It’s a miracle,” another said.

“Did you all remember rubber-soled shoes?” Chang said, reaching to help them off the plane.

“Nice to meet you too, Mr. Wong,” Abdullah said.

Chang shushed him. “They’re blind,” he whispered. “Not deaf.”

“Chang,” Rayford began, but the boy was shyly greeting Naomi. “All right, you two, get acquainted back at the ranch. Let’s do what we have to and get out of here.”

---

“Should I change?” Buck said when he saw Sebastian in fatigues.

“Nah. I always wear these on watch. Let me have a look.” He peered through the periscope. “Nothing. Want to raise and rotate it, Buck?”

“Be my guest.”

“Clear. False alarm.”

Chloe snorted. “Don’t be saying that to put me at ease. At least nine GC were out there, and for all we know there were more, and they’ll be back.”

“Hey,” Sebastian said, “why not assume the best and not the worst?”

“Maybe I am,” she said. “Priscilla and Beth Ann sleep through this?”

He nodded. “I might not even tell Priss, so I’d appreciate it—”

“If I didn’t either? Makes sense, George. Let the little woman carry on, oblivious to the fact that it’s time to move,” said Chloe.

“Move?” Buck said. “I can’t even imagine it.”

“Then we sit here and wait till they find us, which they may already have?”

“Chloe, listen,” Buck said. “I should have let you take a look at those guys. They weren’t even suspicious. They

were probably talking about how this used to be a military base. They weren't tense, weren't really looking. They just saw the vents and checked them out, that's all."

Chloe shook her head and slumped in a chair. "I hate living like this."

"Me too," Sebastian said. "But what're our options? GC found an enclave of people without the mark yesterday in what's left of LA. Executed more'n two dozen."

Chloe gasped. "Believers?"

"Don't think so. Usually they'll say if it's Judah-ites. I got the impression it was some militia holdouts, something like that."

"Those are the people we're trying to reach," Chloe said. "And here we all sit, unable to show our faces, raising babies who hardly ever see the sun. Isn't there somewhere in the middle of nowhere where the GC wouldn't even know we were around?"

"The next best thing is Petra," Buck said. "They know who's there, but they can't do a thing about it."

"That's starting to sound more attractive all the time. Anyway, what are we going to do about what just happened?"

Buck and Sebastian looked at each other.

"Come on, guys," Chloe said. "You think Priscilla doesn't know you're gone and isn't going to ask where you've been?"

"She knows I was on watch."

"But you don't come over here unless something's up."

"I'm hoping she slept through it."

Chloe stood and moved to Buck's lap. "Look, I'm not trying to be cantankerous. Buck, tell him."

"Chloe Steele Williams is not trying to be cantankerous," he announced.

"Good," Sebastian muttered. "Coulda fooled me."

Chloe shook her head. "George, please. You know I think you're one of the best things that's ever happened to the Trib Force. You bring gifts nobody else has, and you've kept us from disaster more than once. But everyone living here deserves to know what you guys saw tonight. Not telling people, pretending it didn't happen, isn't going to change that we came this close to being found out."

"But we didn't, Chloe," Sebastian said. "Why stir up everybody?"

"We're already stirred up! I'm with these wives and kids all day. Even without bands of GC nosing around right over our heads in the middle of the night, we live like prairie dogs. The kids get fresh air only if they happen to wake up before the sun and someone herds them out the vehicle bay door. You guys have to sneak around and drive thirty miles, hoping you're not followed, to get to your planes. All I'm saying is that if we're going to have to defend ourselves, we have a right to be prepared."

---

Rayford would have to ask Tsion about this one. What was it about the darkness that was so oppressive it left victims in agony? He had heard of disaster scenes—train

wrecks, earthquakes, battles—where what haunted the rescue workers for years had been the shrieks and moans of the injured. As he and Abdullah and the two young people tiptoed across the massive runways, around heavy equipment and between writhing personnel, it was clear these people would rather be dead. And some had already died. Two crashed planes lay in pieces, still smoldering, many charred bodies still in their seats.

As he moved from the dead to the suffering, Rayford was overcome. The wailing pierced him and he slowed, desperate to help. But what could he do?

“Oh! Someone!” It was the shriek of a middle-aged woman. “Anyone, please! Help me!”

Rayford stopped and stared. She lay on her side on the tarmac near the terminal. Others shushed her. A man cried out, “We are all lost and blind, woman! You don’t need more help than we do!”

“I’m starving!” she whined. “Does anyone have anything?”

“We’re all starving! Shut up!”

“I don’t want to die.”

“I do!”

“Where is the potentate? He will save us!”

“When was the last time you saw the potentate? He has his own concerns.”

Rayford was unable to pull away. He looked ahead, but even he had but twenty feet of visibility, and he had lost the others. Here came Abdullah. “I dare not call you by name, Captain, but you must come.”

“Comrade, I cannot.”

“Can you make it back to the plane?”

“Yes.”

“Then we will meet you there.”

Abdullah was off again, but their muffled conversation had caused a lull in the cacophony of agony. Now someone called out, “Who is that?”

“Where is he going?”

“Who has a plane?”

“Can you see?”

“What can you see?”

The woman again: “Oh, God, save me. Now I lay me down to sleep—”

“Shut up over there!”

“God is great; God is good. Now I thank him—”

“Put a sock in it! If you can’t produce light, shut your mouth!”

“God! Oh, God! Save me!”

Rayford knelt and touched the woman’s shoulder. She wrenched away with a squeal. “Wait!” he said, reaching for her again.

“Oh! The pain!”

“I don’t mean to hurt you,” he said quietly.

“Who are you?” she groaned, and he saw the United European States’ number 6 tattooed on her forehead.

“An angel?”

“No.”

“I prayed for an angel.”

“You prayed?”

“Promise you’ll tell no one, sir. I’m begging you.”

“You prayed to God?”

“Yes!”

“But you bear Carpathia’s mark.”

“I despise that mark! I know the truth. I always have. I just didn’t want to have anything to do with it.”

“God loved you.”

“I know, but it’s too late.”

“Why didn’t you ask his forgiveness and accept his gift? He wanted to save you.”

She sobbed. “How can you be here and say that?”

“I am not from here.”

“You are my angel!”

“No, but I am a believer.”

“And you can see?”

“Enough to get around.”

“Oh, sir, take me to food! Get me inside the terminal to the snack machines. Please!”

Rayford tried to help her up, but she reacted as if her body were afire. “Please, don’t touch me!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Just let me hold your sleeve. Can you see the terminal?”

“Barely,” he said. “I can get you there.”

“Please, sir.” She struggled to her feet and gingerly clasped the cuff of his sleeve between her thumb and forefinger. “Slowly, please.” She mince-stepped behind Rayford. “How far?” she said.

“Not a hundred yards.”

“I don’t know if I can make it,” she said, tears streaming.

“Let me go get you something,” he said. “What would you like?”

“Anything,” she said. “A sandwich, candy, water—anything.”

“Wait right here.”

She chuckled pitifully. “Sir, all I see is black. I could go nowhere.”

“I’ll be right back. I’ll find you.”

“I’ve been praying that God will save my soul. And when he does, I will be able to see.” Rayford didn’t know what to say. She had said herself it was too late. “In the beginning,” she said. “For God so loved the world. The Lord is my shepherd. Oh, God . . .”

Rayford jogged toward the terminal, stepping between ailing people. He wanted to help them all, but he knew he could not. A man lay across the inside of the automatic door, not moving. Rayford stepped close enough to trip the electric eye, and the door opened a few inches and bumped the man.

“Please move away from the door,” Rayford said.

The man was asleep or dead.

Rayford pushed harder, but the door barely budged. Finally he lowered his shoulder and put his weight behind it. He bent and drove with his legs, feeling the pressure on his quads as the door slowly rolled the man away. Rayford heard him groan.

Inside, Rayford found a bank of vending machines, but as he reached in his pocket for Nick coins, he saw that the machines had been trashed. Enough people had felt their way here to tear the machines open and loot them for every last vestige of food. Rayford searched and searched for something, anything, they

had missed. All he found were empty bottles and cans and wrappers.

“Who goes there?” someone demanded. “Where are you going? Can you see? Is there light anywhere? What has happened? Are we all going to die? Where is the potentate?”

Rayford hurried back outside. “Where’re you going?” someone shouted. “Take me with you!”

He found the woman on her stomach, face buried in her arms. She was wracked with sobs so deep and mournful he could barely stand to watch.

“I’m back, ma’am,” he said quietly. “No food. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, God, oh, God and Jesus, help me!”

“Ma’am,” he said, reaching for her. She shrieked when he touched her, but he pulled at the sides of her head until he could see her hollow, unseeing, terrified eyes.

“I knew before everybody disappeared,” she said pitifully. “And then I knew for sure. With every plague and judgment, I shook my fist in God’s face. He tried to reach me, but I had my own life. I wasn’t going to be subservient to anybody.

“But I’ve always been afraid of the dark, and my worst nightmare is starving. I’ve changed my mind, want to take it all back. . . .”

“But you can’t.”

“I can’t! I can’t! I waited too long!”

Rayford knew the prophecy—that people would reject God enough times that God would harden their hearts and they wouldn’t be able to choose him even if they

wanted to. But knowing it didn't mean Rayford understood it. And it certainly didn't mean he had to like it. He couldn't make it compute with the God he knew, the loving and merciful one who seemed to look for ways to welcome everyone into heaven, not keep them out.

Rayford stood and felt the blood rush from his head. And that's when he heard the loudspeakers.

"This is your potentate!" came the booming voice. "Be of good cheer. Have no fear. Your torment is nearly past. Follow the sound of my voice to the nearest loudspeaker tower. Food and water will be delivered there, along with further instructions."

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"I'll make a deal with you," Chloe said. "I'll take over the rest of the watch, and you agree that we tell everybody in the morning that we had visitors tonight."

Buck looked to George, who pointed at him. "You're in charge when your father-in-law is away, pal."

"Only because of seniority. I defer to you on military stuff."

"This isn't combat, man. It's public relations. If you want my advice, I'd say do what you want but do it right. Tell them, 'It's only fair we tell you people we saw GC around here last night, but as far as we know there's nothing to be concerned about yet.'"

"Fair enough, Chlo'?" Buck said.

She nodded. "I'd rather pray and pass the ammu-

niton, but yes. Treat everybody like adults and you'll get the best out of them.”

“If you're really taking watch, Chloe,” Sebastian said, “I'm going home and turning off my walkie-talkie.”

“Deal.”