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ONE

John's Message

JOHN Preston sat at the communications center of the United North American States ship *Peacekeeper 1*, wondering if he would ever see his friends again. Less than two years earlier, he and his cousin Mark Eisman had met Judd Thompson Jr. on their first day back at Nicolae High. The kids had seen their share of trouble, and even death. Several times John had begun typing a message but erased it when someone came near. He had to wait for the right moment.

John had hoped the kids could be together at the Meeting of the Witnesses in Jerusalem. Now that seemed out of the question. John had set up a computer in his quarters to record each session and couldn't wait to hear Tsion Ben-Judah teach live.

An alarm sent people scurrying. Officers

barked orders. John studied a blip on a radar screen and pointed it out to his friend, Carl.

Carl nodded. "Finally gonna see some action."

After the Wrath of the Lamb earthquake, John had been taken from college and put to work with the Global Community Navy. Carl had taken John under his wing. There didn't seem to be anything about computers or technical equipment Carl didn't understand.

Carl smiled. "Only ships allowed out here now are GC approved," he said.

"Who else would want to be?"

"Drug pushers, weapons dealers, you name it," Carl said. "We consider them modern-day pirates."

"Three miles and closing, sir," an officer shouted.

"Should we be worried, Carl?"

Carl smiled. "Not even God could sink *Peacekeeper 1*. Best communications, most precise weaponry, and amazing speed."

John stared through a scope at what looked like a cargo ship.

"No registry evident, sir," an officer reported.

Carl raised his eyebrows. "Guys on deck," he said.

John saw patrols with high-powered rifles walking back and forth.

"Attention," the captain said over the loud-speaker. "The ship we're intersecting is in violation of Global Community maritime law. We could destroy it from here, but we suspect illegal weapons and hostages."

Carl shook his head. "I don't like their chances."

"We're sending a team into the water before the ship spots us," the captain continued. "We'll give the hostages every chance."

John watched the undersea monitor. *Peacekeeper 1's* small sub approached the cargo ship, and men in wet suits floated through the hatch. Another monitor displayed a few climbing the side of the ship.

The captain rushed to the communications center and pushed the talk button in front of John. "Stay down! Stay down! Unfriendlies coming your way."

But they had been spotted. The men in wet suits dropped back into the water as men onboard opened fire. John saw blood in the water. One diver made it back to the sub.

The captain ordered pursuit, and the sudden acceleration threw John back in his chair. The cargo ship turned to flee, but it was no match for *Peacekeeper 1*.

"They don't stand a chance," Carl said.

"What about the hostages?" John said.

Carl shook his head.

As they closed in, bullets pinged off the hull, and John saw the frightened faces of the enemy patrols.

"Warning," the captain said over the loud-speaker. "Release your hostages now or we sink your ship."

The patrols fled below deck. John thought they might release hostages, but two masked men returned with bazookas. John felt the explosion, and the captain rattled off a series of orders. The *Peacekeeper 1* turned its guns on the scared crew.

Carl shook his head. "Idiots," he said.

Peacekeeper 1's cannon opened a huge hole in the cargo ship. It tipped one way, then the other. As water filled the hole, the crew leaped overboard. John saw one of the divers from the *Peacekeeper 1* scramble onto the deck of the other ship and disappear into a smoke-filled stairwell.

"Pelton, no!" the captain shouted. "Get him out of there!"

Carl clicked a button and spoke to the diver, but there was no response.

John's heart raced as five civilians appeared through the smoke. As soon as they hit the sloping deck, they slipped and fell over the railing. Within seconds the submarine

surfaced and picked two civilians from the water. John watched for any sign of the diver who had performed the rescue. Just as the stairwell sank below the waterline, the diver emerged. The submarine surfaced. John moved closer to the monitors.

Seconds seemed like an eternity. A whoop went up in the ship as the lone diver shot out of the water with the three remaining civilians clinging to him.



Since the judgment of fire, hail, and blood, the kids had hidden at the gas station. Judd was surprised by the anger of the Young Trib Force.

Shelly began, "We've been—"

"I don't want to hear her," Mark said. "She turned and ran."

"What are you talking about?" Shelly said.

"You took the easy way out and got a ride without facing Blancka," Mark said.

Vicki's face flushed. "You have no right to judge," she said. "You don't know what she's been through."

"We've all been through a lot," Mark said. "Let's not decide stuff on emotion."

Shelly's lip trembled. Judd cut in. "Every-

body is equal," he said. "We'll listen to everybody."

Vicki crossed her arms. "He probably wants to go blow people up, like Taylor Graham."

"If it weren't for Taylor," Mark said, "we'd have never gotten out of there. Judd's plan was wimpy."

"Everybody be quiet!" Judd yelled. Judd saw Taylor storm out the front of the gas station.

Conrad put his face in his hands. "I didn't know it was gonna be like this."

Judd closed the office door. Boyd Walker, manager of the gas station, and Judd's friend Pete stood nearby.

Shelly stood up. "That's it. Either Mark goes or I do."

Mr. Stein stepped forward. "I am new to this," he said. "We have been through a lot. We could have died yesterday."

"Not her," Mark said.

"From what I understand," Mr. Stein said, "this young woman intervened on your behalf at the Stahley mansion."

"Yeah," Vicki said.

Mr. Stein put up a hand and stared at Mark. "Is it not true she put her life on the line and could have been arrested by the Global Community guards, not once, but twice?"

John's Message

"I'm not saying she can't be part of the group," Mark stammered, "I just—"

"I have read only a little of the Scriptures, but aren't we supposed to love each other?" Mr. Stein sat. Everyone seemed a little calmer. Judd nodded at Lionel.

"Tsion's E-mail got to me," Lionel said. "With all the judgments coming, we don't know how much longer we have left. We have to be smart but bold."

"What does that mean?" Vicki said.

"People need to know the truth," Lionel said. "If we hide, we're wasting a chance to be part of the soul harvest."

Judd said, "The Global Community knows our faces. We're spending our energy running from them."

"Shelly, Mark, and John are the only ones they're not onto," Lionel said.

Darrion spoke up. "My family has a place in Wisconsin," she said. "If it survived the earthquake, we could go there."

"I'm tired of running," Vicki said.

The meeting ended. The kids argued every day. Mr. Stein pestered Judd for Tsion Ben-Judah's private E-mail address, but Judd was reluctant. Tsion was busy and Judd didn't want to bother him. But Judd had finally relented, and Tsion had written to Mr.

Stein. The rabbi encouraged him to get to Israel, but recommended against a face-to-face meeting in the States.

Mr. Stein said he had hidden a stash of money before he was arrested by the Global Community. In the wee hours of the morning, Mr. Stein, Taylor Graham, and Judd's friend Pete prepared to retrieve the money. Judd awoke and heard the rumble of motorcycles.

Pete stuck his head in the door. "Looks like we've got company. Hide."

Judd recognized the voice of Red, the big, long-haired biker with an attitude. "Guess you're pretty proud of yourself for breaking up the gang," Red said.

"We didn't have to split," Pete said. "You decided to leave."

Red cursed. "The holy rollers in there?" he said.

"If you mean the rest of the gang, no," Pete said. "They moved on. You want to come inside?"

"Done talkin'," Red said.

Judd saw a light in the window of the gas station. He ducked but it was too late. A bearded man with two gold teeth looked at him. "Gotcha," Gold Tooth said. "Hey, Red," the man shouted as he ran to the

front. "Think we got something back there!"



Before his shift began, John stood on deck and watched the sun rise over the ocean. He had grown up singing about God's love being as wide as the sea, but he had never seen anything so impressive.

Carl approached, clutching a piece of paper.

"I was thinking about those kidnappers," John said. "You think the sharks—"

"Look," Carl interrupted. He handed John a fax. It looked like a drawing of something in space.

John shook his head. "I don't get it."

"You will," Carl said. "It's a new meteor."

John rolled his eyes. "Big deal."

"It is a big deal," Carl said. "This thing's headed straight for Earth."

John remembered Tsion Ben-Judah's warning about an object falling from the sky. A judgment from God. He studied the picture closely.

"When's it supposed to hit?" John said.