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ONE

RAYFORD Steele worried about Mac McCullum's silence in the cockpit of *Global Community One* during the short flight from New Babylon to Tel Aviv. "Do we need to talk later?" Rayford said quietly. Mac put a finger to his lips and nodded.

Rayford finished communicating with New Babylon ground and air traffic control, then reached beneath his seat for the hidden reverse intercom button. It would allow him to listen in on conversations in the Condor 216's cabin between Global Community Potentate Nicolae Carpathia, Supreme Commander Leon Fortunato, and Pontifex Maximus Peter Mathews, head of Enigma Babylon One World Faith. But just before Rayford depressed the button, he felt Mac's hand on his arm. Mac shook his head.

Rayford shuddered. "They know?" he mouthed.

Mac whispered, "Don't risk it until we talk."

Rayford received the treatment he had come to expect on initial descent into Tel Aviv. The tower at David Ben Gurion cleared other planes from the area, even those that had begun landing sequences. Rayford heard anger in the voices of other pilots as they were directed into holding patterns miles from the Condor. Per protocol, no other aircraft were to be in proximity to the Condor, despite the extraordinary air traffic expected in Israel for the Meeting of the Witnesses.

"Take the landing, Mac," Rayford said. Mac gave a puzzled glance but complied. Rayford was impressed at how the Holy Land had been spared damage from the wrath of the Lamb earthquake. Other calamities had befallen the land and the people, but to Rayford, Israel was the one place that looked normal from the air since the earthquake and the subsequent judgments.

Ben Gurion Airport was alive with traffic. The big planes had to land there, while smaller craft could put down near Jerusalem. Worried about Mac's misgivings, still Rayford couldn't suppress a smile. Carpathia had been forced not only to allow this meeting of believers, but also to pledge his personal protection of them. Of course, he was the opposite of a man of his word, but having gone public with his assurances, he was stuck. He would have to protect even Rabbi Tsion Ben-Judah, spiritual head of the Tribulation Force.

Not long before, Dr. Ben-Judah had been forced to flee his homeland under cover of night, a universal bounty on his head. Now he was back as Carpathia's

avowed enemy, leader of the 144,000 witnesses and their converts. Carpathia had used the results of the most recent Trumpet Judgments to twice postpone the Israel conference, but there was no stopping it again.

Just before touchdown, when everyone aboard should have been tightly strapped in, Rayford was surprised by a knock at the cockpit door. “Leon,” he said, turning. “We’re about to land.”

“Protocol, Captain!” Fortunato barked.

“What do you want?”

“Besides that you refer to me as Supreme Commander, His Excellency asks that you remain in the cockpit after landing for orders.”

“We’re not going to Jerusalem?” Rayford said. Mac stared straight ahead.

“Precisely,” Fortunato said. “Much as we all know you want to be there.”

Rayford had been certain Carpathia’s people would try to follow him to the rest of the Tribulation Force.

Fortunato left and shut the door, and Rayford said, “I’ll take it, Mac.”

Mac shifted control of the craft, and Rayford immediately exaggerated the angle of descent while depressing the reverse intercom button. He heard Carpathia and Mathews asking after Fortunato, who had clearly taken a tumble. Once the plane was parked, Fortunato burst into the cockpit.

“What was that, Officer McCullum?”

“My apologies, Commander,” Mac said. “It was out

of my hands. All due respect, sir, but you should not have been out of your seat during landing.”

“Listen up, gentlemen,” Fortunato said, kneeling between them. “His Excellency asks that you remain in Tel Aviv, as we are not certain when he might need to return to New Babylon. We have rented you rooms near the airport. GC personnel will transport you.”

Buck Williams sat in the bowels of Teddy Kollek Stadium in Jerusalem with his pregnant wife, Chloe. He knew she was in no way healed enough from injuries she had suffered in the great earthquake to have justified the flight from the States, but she would not be dissuaded. Now she appeared weary. Her bruises and scars were fading, but Chloe still had a severe limp, and her beauty had been turned into a strange cuteness by the unique reshaping of her cheekbone and eye socket.

“You need to help the others, Buck,” she said. “Now go on. I’ll be fine.”

“I wish you’d go back to the compound,” he said.

“I’m fine,” she insisted. “I just need to sit awhile. I’m worried about Hattie. I said I wouldn’t leave her unless she improved or became a believer, and she has done neither.” Pregnant, Hattie Durham had been left home fighting for her life against poison in her system. Dr. Floyd Charles attended her while the rest of the Tribulation

Force—including new member Ken Ritz, another pilot—had made the pilgrimage to Israel.

“Floyd will take good care of her.”

“I know. Now leave me alone awhile.”

Rayford and Mac were instructed to wait on the plane as Carpathia, Fortunato, and Mathews were received with enthusiasm on the tarmac. Fortunato stood dutifully in the background as Mathews declined to make a public statement but introduced Carpathia.

“I cannot tell you what a pleasure it is to be back in Israel,” Carpathia said with a broad smile. “I am eager to welcome the devotees of Dr. Ben-Judah and to display the openness of the Global Community to diverse opinion and belief. I am pleased to reaffirm my guarantee of safety to the rabbi and the thousands of visitors from all over the world. I will withhold further comment, assuming I will be welcome to address the honored assemblage within the next few days.”

The dignitaries were ushered to a helicopter for the hop to Jerusalem, while their respective entourages boarded an opulent motor coach.

When Rayford and Mac finished postflight checks and finally disembarked, a Global Community Jeep delivered them to their hotel. Mac signaled Rayford not to say anything in the car or either of their rooms. In the coffee shop, Rayford finally demanded to know what was going on.

Buck wished Chloe had been able to sleep on the flight from the States. Ken Ritz had procured a Gulfstream jet, so it was the most comfortable international flight Buck had ever enjoyed. But the four of them—Ken, Buck, Chloe, and TSION—had been too excited to rest. TSION spent half the time on his laptop, which Ken transmitted to a satellite, keeping the rabbi in touch with his worldwide flock of millions.

A vast network of house churches had sprung up—seemingly spontaneously—with converted Jews, clearly part of the 144,000 witnesses, taking leadership positions. They taught their charges daily based on the cyberspace sermons and lessons from the prolific Ben-Judah. Tens of thousands of such clandestine local house churches, their very existence flying in the face of the all-inclusive Enigma Babylon One World Faith, saw courageous converts added to the church every day.

TSION had been urging the local congregations to send their leaders to the great Meeting of the Witnesses, despite warnings from the Global Community. Nicolae Carpathia had again tried to cancel the gathering at the last minute, citing thousands of deaths from contaminated water in over a third of the world. Thrilling the faithful by calling Carpathia's bluff, TSION responded publicly on the Internet.

“Mr. Carpathia,” he had written, “we will be in Jerusalem as scheduled, with or without your approval, permission, or promised protection. The glory of the Lord will be our rear guard.”

Buck would need the protection almost as much as Tsion. By choosing to show up and appear in public with Ben-Judah, Buck was sacrificing his position as Carpathia's publishing chief and his exorbitant salary. Showing his face in proximity to the rabbi's would confirm Carpathia's contention that Buck had become an active enemy of the Global Community.

Rabbi Ben-Judah himself had come up with the strategy of simply trusting God. "Stand right beside me when we get off the plane," he said. "No disguises, no misdirection, no hiding. If God can protect me, he can protect you. Let us stop playing Carpathia's games."

Buck had long been anonymously broadcasting his own cyberspace magazine, *The Truth*, which would now be his sole writing outlet. Ironically, it attracted ten times the largest reading audience he had ever enjoyed. He worried for his safety, of course, but more for Chloe's.

Tsion seemed supernaturally protected. But after this conference, the entire Tribulation Force, not to mention the 144,000 witnesses and their millions of converts, would become open archenemies of the Antichrist. Their lives would consist of half ministry, half survival. For all they had been through, it was as if the seven-year tribulation had just begun. They still had nearly five years until the glorious appearing of Christ to set up his thousand-year reign on earth.

What Tsion's Internet missives and Buck's underground electronic magazine had wrought in Israel was stunning. The whole of Israel crawled with tens of thou-

sands of converted Jewish witnesses from the twelve tribes all over the world.

Rather than asking Ken Ritz to find an out-of-the-way airstrip where the Tribulation Force could slip into the country unnoticed, Tsion informed his audience—and also, of course, Carpathia & Co. —of their itinerary.

Ken had landed at the tiny Jerusalem Airport north of the city, and well-wishers immediately besieged the plane. A small cadre of Global Community armed guards, apparently Carpathia's idea of protection for Tsion, would have had to open fire to get near him. The international witnesses cheered and sang and reached out to touch Tsion as the Tribulation Force made its way to a van. The Israeli driver carefully picked his way through the crowd and south down the main drag toward the Holy City and the King David Hotel.

There they had discovered that Supreme Commander Leon Fortunato had summarily bounced their reservations and several others' by supremely commandeering the top floor for Nicolae Carpathia and his people. "I assume you have made provisions for our alternative," Tsion told the desk clerk after half an hour in line.

"I apologize," the young man said, slipping Tsion an envelope. The rabbi glanced at Buck and pulled him away from the crowd, where they opened the note. Buck looked back at Ken, who nodded to assure him he had the fragile Chloe in tow.

The note was in Hebrew. "It is from Chaim," Tsion said. "He writes, 'Forgive my trusted friend Nicolae for this shameful insensitivity. I have room for you and your

colleagues and insist you stay with me. Page Jacov, and you will be taken care of.”

Jacov was Chaim Rosenzweig’s driver and valet. He loaded their stuff into a Mercedes van and soon had the Tribulation Force installed in guest rooms at Chaim’s walled and gated estate within walking distance of the Old City. Buck tried to get Chloe to stay and rest while he and Ken and Tsion went to the stadium.

“I didn’t come here to be on the sidelines,” she said. “I know you’re concerned about me, but let me decide what I’m up to.”

At Kollek Stadium, Buck had been as stunned as the others at what had been arranged. Tsion was right. It had to have been God who used the rabbi’s cyber pleas to pull together Israeli witnesses to handle the logistics of this most unlikely conference.

In spite of and in the midst of global chaos, ad hoc committees had arranged transportation, lodging, food, sound, interpretation, and programming. Buck could tell that Tsion was nearly overcome with the streamlined efficiency and no-frills program. “All you need worry about, Dr. Ben-Judah,” he had been told, “is being prepared to inspire and inform us when you are due at the microphone.”

Tsion smiled sadly. “That and praying that we all remain under the care of our heavenly Father.”

“They’re onto you, Rayford,” Mac said over pita bread and sauce.

Rayford shook his head. “I haven’t been a mystery to Carpathia for months. What are you talking about?”

“You’ve been assigned to me.”

“I’m listening.”

“I don’t rate direct contact with the big man anymore. But last night I was called to a meeting with Leon. The good news is they’re not onto me.”

“That *is* good. But they know about the device on the plane?”

“He didn’t say, but he couldn’t have been clearer that you’re history. If the device still works—”

“It does.”

“—then I’ll use it and keep you posted.”

“Where will I be?”

“Anywhere but here, Ray. I’m convinced the driver was listening, the car may have been bugged, the cockpit, no question about our rooms.”

“They hope I’ll lead them to the others, but they’ll be in plain sight in Jerusalem.”

“They want to *keep* you from the others, Ray. Why do you think we’ve been assigned to Tel Aviv?”

“And if I leave?”

“I’m to let them know immediately. It’ll be the end of you, Ray.”

“But I’ve got to see my family, the rest of the Force.”

“Not here. Carpathia’s pledge is to protect Tsion and the others. Not you.”

“They really think I won’t go to Jerusalem?”

“They hope you will. You must not.”

Rayford sat back and pursed his lips. He would not

miss the job, close as it had brought him to what was going on in the camp of the enemy. He had long wondered how the end would come to this bizarre season of his life. "You're taking over?"

Mac nodded. "So they tell me. There's more good news. They like and trust David."

"Hassid? Good!"

"He's been put in charge of purchasing. Beyond all the computer stuff he's been doing, he contracts for all major purchases. Even in avionics."

Rayford squinted. Mac pulled a yellow sheet from his jacket and slid it across the table. "Don't tell me he's bought me a plane," Rayford said.

Mac snorted. "Should have thought of that. You know those little handheld electronic organizers? David ordered a half dozen specially built. He doesn't even know yet that he won't be seeing you around anymore."

"I can't steal these, not even from Carpathia."

"You don't have to steal them, Ray. These are just the specs and where to get 'em. They're not cheap, but wait till you see what these babies can do. No more laptops for you guys. Well, maybe the rabbi still needs a keyboard, but these things are solar powered, satellite connected, and contain geographic positioning chips. You can access the Internet, send and receive, use them as phones, you name it."

Rayford shook his head. "I suppose he thought of tracer blocks."

"Of course."

Rayford stuffed the sheet into a pocket. “What am I going to do, Mac?”

“You’re going to get your tail out of this hemisphere, what else?”

“But I have to know about Amanda. Buck will tell me only face-to-face, and he’s in Jerusalem.”

Mac looked down. “You know how that’s going to go, Ray. I’d be the last one to try to tell a man about his own wife, but you know as well as I do that everything points to what you don’t want to hear.”

“I haven’t accepted it yet, but I have to know.”

“Buck found out for sure?”

“Sounds like it.”

“How can *he* be sure?”

“I told you about Hattie.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She knows.”

“So ask her yourself, Ray. Go home.”

“Like I wouldn’t be noticed trying to slip out of here tomorrow morning.”

“The GC can’t keep track of everything. Use your people’s pilot—Ritz, is it? What’s he got to do the next few days?”

Rayford looked at Mac with admiration. “You’re not as dumb as you look, old-timer.”

Mac pulled a phone from his pocket. “Know his number?”

“Your phone scrambled? If I get detected talking to Ken Ritz on either of our phones—”

“You *are* dumber than *you* look if you think I’d risk

that. I know the purchasing guy, remember?” Mac showed Rayford the phone, a generic model that had been doctored by David Hassid.

Rayford dialed Chloe’s phone. “Daddy!” she exulted. “Are you here?”

Buck considered it a privilege to pray with the Israeli committee before he and Ken and Tsion headed back to find Chloe. He threw his arm around Tsion. “Are you as tired as I am?”

“Exhausted. I only hope the Lord will allow me to sleep tonight. I am ready to share his message with these dear members of the family, and all that is left before that is to talk with Eli and Moishe. You will go with me, will you not?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Me either,” Ken said.

But the news from Chloe changed Ken’s plans. “Daddy called,” she whispered. “He needs a ride home tomorrow.”

After she explained Rayford’s situation, Ken decided to get the Gulfstream out of the Jerusalem Airport and into Ben Gurion that night. Buck was nearly despondent, wanting to talk to Rayford personally. “At least he can hear the truth about Amanda from the horse’s mouth,” he said.

An hour later Jacov drove as they delivered Ken to the airport. “We will see you back here Friday,” Tsion said, embracing him.

Chloe fell asleep on Buck's shoulder during the after-dark ride to the Temple Mount. As they left the car, the spectacular new temple gleamed on the horizon. "I do not even want to see the new structure," Tsion said. "It is an abomination."

"I can't wait to meet the witnesses," Chloe said.

"You may not actually meet them," Tsion cautioned. "These are heavenly beings with their own agenda. They may communicate with us; they may not. We approach them with great caution."

Buck felt the usual tingle to the soles of his feet.

"You know the stories, hon."

Chloe nodded. "I'm not saying I'm not scared."

The three slowed as they approached the typical crowd that gathered thirty feet from the wrought-iron fence, behind which the witnesses stood, sat, or spoke. Usually they spoke. No one had seen them sleep, and none dared get closer. Threats on the lives of the two witnesses had ended in the ugly deaths of would-be assassins.

Buck's excitement masked his fatigue. He worried about Chloe but would not deny her this privilege. At the edge of the crowd of about forty, Buck was able to see past the fence to where Eli sat, Indian style, his back to the stone wall of a small building beyond the fence. His long hair and beard wafted softly in the breeze, but he was unmoving, unblinking, his leathery skin and burlaplike garb appearing to meld.

Moishe stood two feet from the fence, silent, unmoving, staring at the crowd. Occasionally someone

shouted. “Speak! Say something!” But that made others back away, obviously fearing the violent reactions they had heard of. Moishe’s feet were spread, his arms loose at his sides. Earlier in the day Buck had monitored on his computer a long monologue from Moishe. Sometimes the two traded off speaking, but this day must have been all Moishe’s responsibility.

“Watch them carefully,” Buck whispered to Chloe. “Sometimes they communicate without opening their mouths. I love how everyone understands them in his own language.”

Commotion near the front caused several people to back away, opening a gap in the crowd. Someone said, “Carpathia! It’s the potentate!”

Tsion held up a hand. “Let us stay right here,” he whispered.

Buck was riveted as Leon Fortunato smoothly supervised GC guards who kept gawkers from Carpathia. The potentate appeared bemused, boldly moving to within ten feet of the fence. “Hail, Potentate!” someone shouted. Carpathia half turned, holding a finger to his lips, and Fortunato nodded to a guard, who stepped toward the crowd. They backed away farther.

“Stay here,” Buck said, slipping away.

“Honey, wait!” Chloe called, but Buck moved around behind the crowd and into the shadows.

He knew he would appear to the guards as simply someone leaving. But when he was far enough away to be ignored, he doubled back through shrubbery to where he could see Carpathia’s face as he stared at Moishe.

Carpathia appeared startled when Moishe suddenly spoke in a loud voice. “Woe unto the enemy of the Most High God!”

Nicolae seemed to quickly collect himself. He smiled and spoke softly. “I am hardly the enemy of God,” he said. “Many say I *am* the Most High God.”

Moishe moved for the first time, crossing his arms over his chest. Carpathia, his chin in his hand, cocked his head and studied Moishe. The ancient witness spoke softly, and Buck knew only he and Carpathia could hear him.

“A sword shall pierce your head,” Moishe said in a haunting monotone. “And you shall surely die.”

Buck shivered, but it was clear that Carpathia was unmoved. “Let me tell you and your companion something,” he said through clenched teeth. “You have persecuted Israel long enough with the drought and the water turned to blood. You will lift your hocus-pocus or live to regret it.”

Eli rose and traded places with Moishe, beckoning Carpathia closer. The potentate hesitated and looked back to his guards, who tentatively raised their weapons. Eli spoke with such volume that the crowd dispersed and ran, and even Tsion and Chloe recoiled.

“Until the due time, you have no authority over the lampstands of God Almighty!”

The guards lowered their weapons, and Fortunato seemed to hide behind them. Carpathia’s smirk remained, but Buck was convinced he was seething. “We shall see,” he said, “who will win in the end.”

Eli seemed to look through Carpathia. “Who will win in the end was determined before the beginning of time. Lo, the poison you inflict on the earth shall rot you from within for eternity.”

Carpathia stepped back, still grinning. “I warn you to stay away from the charade of the so-called saints. I have guaranteed their safety, not yours.”

Eli and Moishe spoke in unison. “He and she who have ears, let them hear. We are bound neither by time nor space, and those who shall benefit by our presence and testimony stand within the sound of our proclamation.”

Buck thrilled at the message and looked beyond the square to where Tsion stood with Chloe. The rabbi thrust his fists in the air as if he had gotten the message, and he walked Chloe back toward the car. Buck ducked out of the shrubs and headed around the other way, arriving in the parking lot seconds later.

“Did you hear that?” Tsion said.

Buck nodded. “Incredible!”

“I didn’t get it,” Chloe said. “What were they saying?”

“Did it sound like Hebrew to you?” Tsion said. “They spoke in Hebrew.”

“I heard it in English,” she said.

“Me too,” Buck said. “They said that he *or she* who had ears to hear—”

“I heard,” Chloe said. “I just don’t understand.”

“That is the first time I ever heard them add ‘or she,’” Tsion said. “That was for you, Chloe. They knew we were here. We did not have to approach them, did not

have to identify ourselves, did not have to face Carpathia before we were ready. We did not even have to discuss with Eli and Moishe plans for their appearance at the stadium. They said that those who would benefit by their presence and testimony stood within the sound of their proclamation.”

“They’re coming?” Chloe said.

“That is what I gather,” Tsion said.

“When?”

“At just the right time.”