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O N E

BUCK braced himself with his elbow crooked around a scaffolding pole. Thousands of panicked people fleeing the scene had, like him, started and involuntarily turned away from the deafening gunshot. It had come from perhaps a hundred feet to Buck's right and was so loud he would not have been surprised if even those at the back of the throng of some two million had heard it plainly.

He was no expert, but to Buck it had sounded like a high-powered rifle. The only weapon smaller that had emitted such a report was the ugly handgun Carpathia had used to destroy the skulls of Moishe and Eli three days before. Actually, the sounds were eerily similar. Had Carpathia's own weapon been fired? Might someone on his own staff have targeted him?

The lectern had shattered loudly as well, like a tree

branch split by lightning. And that gigantic backdrop sailing into the distance . . .

Buck wanted to bolt with the rest of the crowd, but he worried about Chaim. Had he been hit? And where was Jacov? Just ten minutes before, Jacov had waited below stage left where Buck could see him. No way Chaim's friend and aide would abandon him during a crisis.

As people stampeded by, some went under the scaffold, most went around it, and some jostled both Buck and the support poles, making the structure sway. Buck held tight and looked to where giant speakers three stories up leaned this way and that, threatening their flimsy plywood supports.

Buck could choose his poison: step into the surging crowd and risk being trampled or step up a few feet on the angled crossbar. He stepped up and immediately felt the fluidity of the structure. It bounced and seemed to want to spin as Buck looked toward the platform over the tops of a thousand streaking heads. He had heard Carpathia's lament and Fortunato's keening, but suddenly the sound—at least in the speakers above him—went dead.

Buck glanced up just in time to see a ten-foot-square speaker box tumble from the top. "Look out!" he shrieked to the crowd, but no one heard or noticed. He looked up again to be sure he was out of the way. The box snapped its umbilicals like string, which redirected its path some fifteen feet away from the tower. Buck watched in horror as a woman was crushed beneath it and several other men and women were staggered. A man tried to drag the victim from beneath the speaker,

but the crowd behind him never slowed. Suddenly the running mass became a cauldron of humanity, trampling each other in their desperation to get free of the carnage.

Buck could not help. The entire scaffolding was pivoting, and he felt himself swing left. He hung on, not daring to drop into the torrent of screaming bodies. He caught sight of Jacov at last, trying to make his way up the side steps to the platform where Carpathia's security detail brandished Uzis.

A helicopter attempted to land near the stage but had to wait until the crowd cleared. Chaim sat motionless in his chair, facing to Buck's right, away from Carpathia and Fortunato. He appeared stiff, his head cocked and rigid, as if unable to move. If he had not been shot, Buck wondered if he'd had another stroke, or worse, a heart attack. He knew if Jacov could get to him, he would protect Chaim and get him somewhere safe.

Buck tried to keep an eye on Jacov while Fortunato waved at the helicopters, pleading with one to land and get Carpathia out of there. Jacov finally broke free and sprinted up the steps, only to be dealt a blow from the butt end of an Uzi that knocked him off his feet and into the crowd.

The impact snapped Jacov's head back so violently that Buck was certain he was unconscious and unable to protect himself from trampling. Buck leaped off the scaffold and into the fray, fighting his way toward Jacov. He moved around the fallen speaker box and felt the sticky blood underfoot.

As Buck neared where he thought Jacov should be he

took one more look at the platform before the angle would obscure his view. Chaim's chair was moving! He was headed full speed toward the back of the platform. Had he leaned against the joystick? Was he out of control? If he didn't stop or turn, he would pitch twelve feet to the pavement and certain death. His head was still cocked, his body stiff.

Buck reached Jacov, who lay splayed, his head awkwardly flopped to one side, eyes staring, limbs limp. A sob worked its way to Buck's throat as he elbowed stragglers out of the way and knelt to put a thumb and forefinger to Jacov's throat. No pulse.

Buck wanted to drag the body from the scene but feared he would be recognized despite his extensive facial scars. There was nothing he could do for Jacov. But what about Chaim?

Buck sprinted left around the platform and skidded to a stop at the back corner, from where he could see Chaim's wheelchair crumpled on the ground, backstage center. The heavy batteries had broken open and lay twenty feet from the chair, which had one wheel bent almost in half, seat pad missing, and a footrest broken off. Was Buck about to find another friend dead?

He loped to the mangled chair and searched the area, including under the platform. Besides splinters from what he was sure had been the lectern, he found nothing. How could Chaim have survived this? Many of the world rulers had scrambled off the back of the stage, certainly having to turn and hang from the edge first to avoid serious injury. Even then, many would have had to

have suffered sprained or broken ankles. But an elderly stroke victim riding in a metal chair twelve feet to concrete? Buck feared Chaim could not have survived. But who would have carried him off?

A chopper landed on the other side of the platform, and medical personnel rushed the stage. The security detail fanned out and began descending the stairs to clear the area.

Four emergency medical technicians crowded around Carpathia and Fortunato while others attended the trampled and the crushed, including the woman beneath the speaker box. Jacov was lifted into a body bag. Buck nearly wept at having to leave his brother that way, yet he knew Jacov was in heaven. He ran to catch up with the crowd now spilling into the streets.

Buck knew Jacov was dead. From the wound at the back of Carpathia's head, he assumed Nicolae was dead or soon would be. And he had to assume Chaim was dead too.

Buck longed for the end of all this and the glorious appearing of Christ. But that was still another three and a half years off.

Rayford felt a fool, running with the crowd, the hem of his robe in his hands to keep from tripping. He had dropped the Saber and its box and wanted to use his arms for more speed. But he had to run like a woman in a long skirt. Adrenaline carried him, because he felt fast as ever, regardless. Rayford really wanted to shed the

robe and turban, but the last thing he needed just then was to look like a Westerner.

Had he murdered Carpathia? He had tried to, intended to, but couldn't pull the trigger. Then, when he was bumped and the gun went off, he couldn't imagine he'd been lucky enough to find his target. Could the bullet have ricocheted off the lectern and into Carpathia? Could it also have passed through him and taken out the backdrop? It didn't seem possible.

If he had killed the potentate, there was certainly no satisfaction in it, no relief or sense of accomplishment. As he hurried along, the screams and moans of Carpathia's faithful all around him, Rayford felt he was running from a prison of his own making.

He was sucking wind by the time the crowd thinned and began to disperse, and when he stopped to bend at the waist, hands on his hips, to catch his breath, a couple hurrying past said, "Isn't it awful? They think he's dead!"

"It's awful," Rayford gasped, not looking at them.

Assuming TV cameras had caught everything, especially him with the gun raised, it wouldn't be long before he would be sought. As soon as he was away from the busy streets, he shed the garb and stuffed it in a trash barrel. He found his car, eager to get to Tel Aviv and out of Israel before it became impossible.

Mac stood near the back of the throng, far enough from the gun that the report didn't reach his ears until after the

massive crowd began to move. While others near him shrieked and gasped and pleaded to know what was going on, he kept his eyes on the stage, relief washing over him. So, he would not have to sacrifice himself and Abdullah to be sure Carpathia was dead. From the commotion down front and from his view of the platform via jumbo screens nearby, it was clear to Mac that Nicolae had suffered the massive head wound believers knew was coming.

Ever the professional, Mac knew what would be expected of him. He slid his cell phone from his jacket and dialed the Tel Aviv tower. “You got a jockey certified to shuttle the 216 to Jerusalem?”

“Already looking, sir. This is a tragedy.”

“Yeah.”

Mac dialed Abdullah. From the limited noise in the background, he could tell his first officer was not at the Gala. “You hear, Ab?”

“I heard. Shall I go get the Phoenix?”

“Hang loose; they’re trying to get it here. I saw you leave the hotel. Where are you?”

“Doctor Pita’s. I suppose I’ll look suspicious finishing my meal when the big boss is dying and everyone else has run into the streets looking for a TV.”

“Stick it in your pocket, and if you don’t hear from me, meet me at Jerusalem Airport in an hour.”

Mac made his way to the front of the plaza as the place emptied in a frenzy. He flashed his ID when necessary, and by the time he reached the platform, it was clear Carpathia was in the final throes of life. His wrists were drawn up under his chin, eyes shut tight and bleed-

ing, blood trickling also from his ears and mouth, and his legs shook violently, toes pointed, knees locked.

“Oh, he’s gone! He’s gone!” Leon wailed. “Someone do something.”

The four emergency medical technicians, portable monitors beeping, knelt over Carpathia. They cleared his mouth so they could administer oxygen, studied a blood pressure gauge, pumped his chest, cradled his head, and tried to stanch the flow from a wound that left them kneeling in more blood than it seemed a body could hold.

Mac peeked past the panicky Fortunato to see Carpathia’s normally tanned hands and face already pale. No one could survive this, and Mac wondered if the bodily movements were merely posthumous reflexes.

“There is a hospital nearby, Commander,” one of the EMTs said, which threw Fortunato into a rage. He had just made eye contact with Mac and seemed about to say something when he turned on the EMT.

“Are you crazy? These—these *people* are not qualified! We must get him to New Babylon.”

He turned to Mac. “Is the 216 ready?”

“On its way from Tel Aviv. Should be able to lift off in an hour.”

“An hour?! Should we helicopter him straight to Tel Aviv?”

“Jerusalem Airport will be faster,” Mac said.

“There’s no room to stabilize him in a chopper, sir,” the EMT said.

“We have no choice!” Fortunato said. “An ambulance would be too slow.”

“But an ambulance has equipment that might—”

“Just get him into the chopper!” Fortunato said.

But as the EMT turned away looking disgusted, a female colleague looked up at him. Carpathia was still.

“No vitals,” she said. “He’s flat lined.”

“No!” Leon bellowed, bullying his way between them and kneeling in Nicolae’s blood. Again he leaned over the body, but rather than holding Carpathia to him, he buried his face in the lifeless chest and sobbed aloud.

Security Chief Walter Moon dismissed the EMTs with a nod, and as they gathered up their equipment and went for the gurney, he gently pulled Leon away from Carpathia. “Don’t drape the body,” he said. “Let’s load ’im up now. Say nothing about his condition until we’re back home.”

“Who did this, Walter?” Fortunato whined. “Did we catch him?”

Moon shrugged and shook his head.

Buck ran toward the hostel. He dialed Chaim’s number again, as he had all along the way. Still busy. The people in Chaim’s house—Stefan the valet, Jacov’s wife, Hannelore, and Hannelore’s mother—had to have been watching on TV and were likely calling anyone they knew for news of their loved ones.

Finally, Hannelore answered. “Jacov!” she shouted.

“No, Hannelore, this is Greg North.”

“Buck!” she wailed. “What happened? Where—”

“Hannelore!” Buck said. “Your phone is not secure!”

“I don’t care anymore, Buck! If we die, we die! Where is Jacov? What happened to Chaim?”

“I need to meet you somewhere, Hannelore. If Chaim shows up there—”

“Chaim is all right?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see him after—”

“Did you see Jacov?”

“Meet me, Hannelore. Call me from another phone and—”

“Buck, you tell me right now! Did you see him?”

“I saw him.”

“Is he alive?”

“Hannelore—”

“Buck, is he dead?”

“I’m sorry. Yes.”

She began to wail, and in the background Buck heard a scream. Hannelore’s mother? Had she deduced the news?

“Buck, they’re here!”

“What? Who?”

He heard a door smashing, a yell, another scream.

“GC!” she whispered fiercely. And the phone went dead.

Onboard the Phoenix 216, Nicolae Carpathia’s personal physician examined him and pronounced him dead.

“Where were you?” Leon demanded. “You could have done something.”

“Where I was supposed to be, Commander,” the doc-

tor said, “in the auxiliary trailer a hundred yards behind the platform. Security would not let me out, fearing more gunfire.”

As the 216 taxied toward the runway, Leon came to the cockpit and told Abdullah, “Patch me through to Director Hassid at the palace, secure line.”

Abdullah nodded and glanced at Mac as Fortunato backed out. The first officer made the connection and informed Leon over the intercom. With creative switch flipping, Abdullah allowed Mac to listen in, while muting the input button to keep out noise from the cockpit.

“You’re aware of the awful news, David?” Leon said.

“I heard, yes, sir,” David said. “How is the potentate?”

“He’s dead, David . . .”

“Oh.”

“. . . but this is top secret by order of Chief Moon until further notice.”

“I understand.”

“Oh, David, what will we do?”

“We’ll look to you, sir.”

“Well, thank you for those kind words at such a time, but I need something from you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Scramble the satellites to make it impossible for those who did this to communicate with each other by phone. Can you do that?”

A long pause. “Scrambling the satellites” was not the exact terminology, but David could produce Fortunato’s desired result. “Yes,” he said slowly. “It’s possible, of course. You realize the ramifications . . .”

Mac whispered to Abdullah. “Call Buck, call Rayford, call the safe house. Leon’s going to shut down communications. If they need to talk to each other, it has to be now.”

“Tell me,” Leon said.

“We’re all served by the same system,” David said. “It’s the reason we’ve never been able to shut down the Judah-ites’ Internet transmissions.”

“So if they’re shut down, we’re shut down?”

“Exactly.”

“Do it anyway. The landlines in New Babylon would still be operable, would they not?”

“They would, and this would not affect television transmission, but your long distance is all satellite dependent.”

“So those of us in New Babylon would be able to communicate only with each other.”

“Right.”

“We’ll get by. I’ll let you know when to unscramble.”

Two minutes later Leon called David again. “How long does this take?” he said. “I should not be able to reach you!”

“Three minutes,” David said.

“I’ll check back in four.”

“You’ll not reach me, sir.”

“I should hope not!”

But four minutes later Leon was preoccupied with the doctor. “I want an autopsy,” he said, “but zero leaks about cause of death.” Through the reverse intercom bug, Mac heard Leon’s voice catch. “And I want this

man prepared for viewing and for burial by the finest mortuary technician in the world. Is that understood?”

“Of course, Commander. As you wish.”

“I don’t want the staff butcher in the palace, so whom would you suggest?”

“One who could use the business, frankly.”

“How crass! This would be a service to the Global Community!”

“But surely you’re prepared to reimburse—”

“Of course, but not if money is the primary concern. . . .”

“It’s not, Commander. I simply know that Dr. Eikenberry’s mortuary has been decimated. She’s lost more than half her staff and has had to reorganize her business.”

“And she’s local?”

“Baghdad.”

“I do not want Nicolae shipped to Baghdad. Can she come to the palace morgue?”

“I’m sure she’d be more than happy . . .”

“Happy?”

“Willing, sir.”

“I hope she can work miracles.”

“Fortunately his face was not affected.”

“Still,” Leon said, his voice husky again, “how do you hide the, the . . . awful injury?”

“I’m sure it can be done.”

“He must look perfect, dignified. The whole world will mourn him.”

“I’ll call her now.”

“Yes, please try. I’d like to know whether you’re able to get through.”

But he was not able. Global telephone communications were off the air. And Abdullah too had failed to reach anyone.

Mac was about to shut off the intercom bug when he heard Leon take a huge breath and let it out. “Doctor?” he said. “Can your mortician, ah—”

“Dr. Eikenberry.”

“Right. Can she do a cast of the potentate’s body?”

“A cast?”

“You know, some sort of plaster or plastic or something that would preserve his exact dimensions and features?”

The doctor hesitated. “Well,” he said finally, “death masks are nothing new. A whole corpse would be quite an undertaking, pardon the expression.”

“But it could be done?”

Another pause. “I should think the body would have to be dipped. The palace morgue has a large enough tank.”

“It could be done then?”

“Anything can be done, Excellency. I’m sorry, I mean Commander.”

Fortunato cleared his throat. “Yes, please, Doctor. Don’t call me Excellency. At least not yet. And do arrange for a cast of the potentate’s body.”