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# ONE

IT WAS midafternoon in New Babylon, and David Hassid was frantic. Annie was nowhere in sight and he had heard nothing from her, yet he could barely turn his eyes from the gigantic screens in the palace courtyard. The image of the indefatigable Nicolae Carpathia, freshly risen from three days dead, filled the screen and crackled with energy. David believed if he was within reach of the man he could be electrocuted by some demonic charge.

With the disappearance of his love fighting for his attention, David found himself drawn past the jumbo monitors and the guards and the crowds to the edge of the bier that had just hours before displayed the quite dead body of the king of the world.

Should David be able to see evidence that the man was now indwelt by Satan himself? The body, the hair, the complexion, the look were the same. But an intensity, an

air of restlessness and alertness, flowed from the eyes. Though he smiled and talked softly, it was as if Nicolae could barely contain the monster within. Controlled fury, violence delayed, revenge in abeyance played at the muscles in his neck and shoulders. David half expected him to burst from his suit and then from his very skin, exposed to the world as the repulsive serpent he was.

David's attention was diverted briefly by someone next to Carpathia, and when he glanced back at the still ruggedly handsome face, he was not prepared to have caught the eye of the enemy of his soul. Nicolae knew him, of course, but the look, though it contained recognition, did not carry the usual acceptance and encouragement David was used to. That very welcoming gaze had always unnerved him, yet he preferred it over this. For this was a transparent gaze that seemed to pass through David, which nearly moved him to step forward and confess his treachery and that of every comrade in the Tribulation Force.

David reminded himself that not even Satan himself was omniscient, yet he found it difficult to accept that these eyes were not those of one who knew his every secret. He wanted to run but he dared not, and he was grateful when Nicolae turned back to the task at hand: his role as the object of the world's worship.

David hurried back to his post, but someone had appropriated his golf cart, and he found himself peeved to where he wanted to pull rank. He flipped open his phone, had trouble finding his voice, but finally barked at the motor-pool supervisor, "I had better have a vehicle

delivered within 120 seconds or someone is going to find his—”

“An electric cart, sir?” the man said, his accent making David guess he was an Aussie.

“Of course!”

“They’re scarce here, Director, but—”

“They must be, because someone absconded with mine!”

“But I was going to say that I would be happy to lend you mine, under the circumstances.”

“The circumstances?”

“The resurrection, of course! Tell you the truth, Director Hassid, I’d love to get in line myself.”

“Just bring—”

“You think I could do that, sir? I mean if I were in uniform? I know they’ve turned away civilians not inside the courtyard, and they’re none too happy, but as an employee—”

“I don’t know! I need a cart and I need it now!”

“Would you drive me to the venue before you go wherever it is you have to g—”

“Yes! Now hurry!”

“Are you thrilled or what, Director?”

“What?”

The man spoke slowly, condescendingly. “A-bout-the-res-ur-rec-tion!”

“Are you in your vehicle?” David demanded.

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s what I’m thrilled about.”

The man was still talking when David hung up on him

and called crowd control. "I'm looking for Annie Christopher," he said.

"Sector?"

"Five-three."

"Sector 53 has been cleared, Director. She may have been reassigned or relieved."

"If she were reassigned, you'd have it, no?"

"Checking."

The motor-pool chief appeared in his cart, beaming. David boarded, phone still to his ear. "Gonna see god," the man said.

"Yeah," David said. "Just a minute."

"Can you believe it? He's got to be god. Who else can he be? Saw it with my own two eyes, well, on TV anyway. Raised from the dead. I saw him dead, I know that. If I see him in person, there'll be no doubt now, will there? Eh?"

David nodded, sticking a finger in his free ear.

"I say no doubt, eh?"

"No doubt!" David shouted. "Now give me a minute!"

"Where we goin', sport?"

David craned his neck to look at the man, incredulous that he was still speaking.

"I say, where we going? Am I dropping you or you dropping me?"

"I'm dropping you! Go where you want and get out!"

"Sor-ry!"

This wasn't how David normally treated people, even ignorant ones. But he had to hear whether Annie had

been reassigned, and where. “Nothing,” the crowd-control dispatcher on the phone told him.

“Relieved then?” he said, relieved himself.

“Likely. Nothing in our system on her.”

David thought of calling Medical Services but scolded himself for overreacting.

Motor-pool Man deftly picked his way through the massive, dispersing crowd. At least most were dispersing. They looked shocked. Some were angry. They had waited hours to see the body, and now that Carpathia had arisen, they were not going to be able to see him, all because of where they happened to be in the throng.

“This is as close as I hope to get in this thing then,” the man said, skidding to a stop so abruptly that David had to catch himself. “You’ll bring it back round then, eh, sir?”

“Of course,” David said, trying to gather himself to at least thank the man. As he slid into the driver’s seat he said, “Been back to Australia since the reorganizing?”

The man furrowed his brow and pointed at David, as if to reprimand him. “Man of your station ought to be able to tell the difference between an Aussie and a New Zealander.”

“My mistake,” David said. “Thanks for the wheels.”

As he pulled away the man shouted, “’Course we’re all proud citizens of the United Pacific States now anyway!”

David tried to avoid eye contact with the many disgruntled mourners turned celebrants who tried to flag him, not for rides but for information. At times he was forced to brake to keep from running someone down,

and the request was always the same. In one distinct accent or another, everyone wanted the same thing.

“Any way we can still get in to see His Excellency?”

“Can’t help you,” David said. “Move along, please. Official business.”

“Not fair! Wait all night and half the day in the blistering sun, and for what?”

But others danced in the streets, making up songs and chants about Carpathia, their new god. David glanced again at the monstrous monitors where Carpathia was shown briefly touching hands as the last several thousand were herded through. To David’s left, guards fought to block hopefuls from sneaking into the courtyard. “Line’s closed!” they shouted over and over.

On the screen, pilgrims swooned as they neared the bier, graced by Nicolae in his glory. Many crumbled from merely getting near him, waxing catatonic. Guards held them up to keep them moving, but when His Excellency himself spoke quietly to them and touched them, some passed out, deadweights in the guards’ arms.

Over Nicolae’s cooing—“Good to see you. Thank you for coming. Bless you. Bless you.”—David heard Leon Fortunato. “Worship your king,” he said soothingly. “Bow before his majesty. Worship the Lord Nicolae, your god.”

Dissonance came from the guards stuck with the responsibility of moving the mass of quivering, jellied humanity, catching them as they collapsed in ecstasy. “Ridiculous!” they grumbled to each other, live mikes sending the cacophony of Fortunato, Carpathia, and the

complainers to the ends of the PA system. “Keep moving. Come on now! There you go! Stand up! Move it along!”

David finally reached sector 53, which was, as he had been told, deserted. The crowd-control gates had toppled, and the giant number placard had been trampled. David sat there, forearms resting on the cart’s steering wheel. He shoved his uniform cap back on his head and felt the sting of the sun’s UV rays. His hands looked like lobsters, and he knew he’d pay for his hours in the sun. But he could not find shade again until he found Annie.

As crowds shuffled through and then around what had been her sector, David squinted at the ground, the asphalt shimmering. Besides the ice-cream and candy wrappers and drink cups that lay motionless in the windless heat was what appeared to be residue of medical supplies. He was about to step from the cart for a closer look when an elderly couple climbed aboard and asked to be driven to the airport shuttle area.

“This is not a people mover,” he said absently, having enough presence to remove the keys before leaving the vehicle.

“How rude!” the woman said.

“Come on,” the man said.

David marched to sector 53 and knelt, the heat sapping his energy. In the shadows of hundreds walking by, he examined the plastic empties of bandages, gauze, ointment, even tubing. Someone had been ministered to here. It didn’t have to have been Annie. It could have been anyone. Still, he had to know. He made his way back to the cart, every seat but his now full.

“Unless you need to go to Medical Services,” he said, punching the number into his phone, “you’re in the wrong cart.”

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In Chicago Rayford Steele found the Strong Building’s ninth floor enough of a bonanza that he was able to push from his mind misgivings about Albie. The truth about his dark, little Middle Eastern friend would be tested soon enough. Albie was to ferry a fighter jet from Palwaukee to Kankakee, where Rayford would later pick him up in a Global Community helicopter.

Besides discovering a room full of the latest desktop and minicomputers—still in their original packaging—Rayford found a small private sleeping room adjacent to a massive executive office. It was outfitted like a luxurious hotel room, and he rushed from floor to floor to find the same next to at least four offices on every level.

“We have more amenities than we ever dreamed,” he told the exhausted Tribulation Force. “Until we can blacken the windows, we’ll have to get some of the beds into the corridors near the elevators where they can’t be seen from the outside.”

“I thought no one ever came near here,” Chloe said, Kenny sleeping in her lap and Buck dozing with his head on her shoulder.

“Never know what satellite imaging shows,” Rayford said. “We could be sleeping soundly while GC Security

and Intelligence forces snap our pictures from the stratosphere.”

“Let me get these two to bed somewhere,” she said, “before I collapse.”

“I’ve moved furniture in my day,” Leah said, slowly rising. “Where are these beds and where do we put them?”

“I wish I could help,” Chaim said through clenched teeth, his jaw still wired shut.

Rayford stopped him with a gesture. “If you’re staying with us, sir, you answer to me. We need you and Buck as healthy as you can be.”

“And I need you alert for study,” Tsion said. “You made me cram for enough exams. Now you’re in for the crash course of your life.”

Rayford, Chloe, Leah, and Tsion spent half an hour moving beds up the elevator to makeshift quarters in an inner corridor on the twenty-fifth floor. By the time Rayford gingerly boarded the chopper balanced precariously on what served as the new roof of the tower, everyone was asleep save Tsion. The rabbi seemed to gain a second wind, and Rayford wasn’t sure why.

Rayford left the instrument panel lights on and, of course, the outside lights off. He fired up the rotors but waited to lift off until his eyes had adjusted to the darkness. The copter had twenty feet of clearance on each side. Little was trickier—especially to a fixed-wing expert like Rayford—than the shifting currents inside what amounted to a cavernous smokestack. Rayford had seen choppers crash in wide-open spaces after merely hover-

ing too long in one place. Mac McCullum had tried to explain the physics of it, but Rayford had not listened closely enough to grasp it. Something about the rotors sucking up air from beneath the craft, leaving it no buoyancy. By the time the pilot realized he was dropping through dead air of his own making, he had destroyed the equipment and often killed all on board.

Rayford needed sleep as much as any of his charges, but he had to go get Albie. There was more to that too, of course. He could have called his friend and told him to lie low till the following evening. But Albie was new to the country and would have to fend for himself outside or bluff his way into a hotel. With *Carpathia* resurrected and the GC naturally on heightened alert, who knew how long he could pull off impersonating a GC officer?

Anyway, Rayford had to know whether Albie was “with him or agin him,” as his father used to say. He had been thrilled to see the mark of the believer on Albie’s forehead, but much of what the man had done in the predawn hours confused Rayford and made him wonder. A wily, streetwise man like Albie—one who had provided so much at high risk to himself—would be the worst kind of opponent. Rayford worried that he had unwittingly led the Tribulation Force into the lair of the enemy.

As the chopper rumbled through the shaft at the top of the tower, Rayford held his breath. He had carefully set the craft as close to the middle of the space as he could, allowing him to use one corner for his guide as he rose. If he kept the whirring blades equidistant from the walls in

the one corner, he should be centered until free of the building.

How vulnerable and conspicuous could a man feel? He imagined David Hassid having miscalculated, trusting old information, not realizing that the GC itself knew Chicago was safe—not off-limits due to radiation. Rayford himself had overheard Carpathia say he had not used radiation on the city, at least initially. He wondered if the GC had planted such information just to lure in the insurgents and have them where they wanted them—in one place for easy dispatch.

With his helicopter free of the tower, Rayford still dared not engage the lights. He would stay low, hopefully beneath radar. He wanted to be invisible to satellite surveillance photography as well, but heat sensing had been so refined that the dark whirlybird would glow orange on a monitor.

A chill ran up his back as he let his imagination run. Was he being followed by a half dozen craft just like his own? He wouldn't hear or see them. They could have waited nearby, even on the ground. How would he know?

Since when did he manufacture trouble? There was enough real danger without concocting more.

Rayford set the instrument panel lights at their lowest level and quickly saw he was off course. It was an easy fix, but so much for trusting his brain, even in a ship like this. Mac had once told him that piloting a helicopter was to flying a 747 as riding a bike was to driving a sport utility vehicle. From that Rayford assumed that he

would do more work by the seat of his pants than by marrying himself to the instrument panel. But neither had he planned on flying blind over a deserted megalopolis in wee-hour blackness. He had to get to Kankakee, pick up Albie, and get back to the tower before sunup. He had not a minute to spare. The last thing he wanted was to be seen over a restricted area in broad daylight. Detected in the dead of night was one thing. He would take his chances, trust his instincts. But there would be no hiding under the sun, and he would die before he would lead anyone to the new safe house.

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In New Babylon frustrated supplicants had formed a new line, several thousand long, outside the Global Community Palace. GC guards traversed the length of it, telling people that the resurrected potentate would have to leave the courtyard when he had finished greeting those who happened to be in the right place at the right time.

David detoured from his route to Medical Services to hear the response of the crowd. They did not move, did not disperse. The guards, their bullhorned messages ignored, finally stopped to listen. David, looking puzzled, pulled up behind one of the jeeps, and a guard shrugged as if as dumbfounded as Director Hassid. The guard with the loudspeaker said, "Suit yourselves, but this is an exercise in futility."

"We have another idea!" shouted a man with a Hispanic accent.

“I’m listening,” the guard said, as the crowd near him quieted.

“We will worship the statue!” he said, and hundreds in line cheered.

“What did he say? What did he say?” The question raced down the line in both directions.

“Did not Supreme Commander Fortunato say we should do that?” the man said.

“Where are you from, my friend?” the guard asked, admiration in his voice.

“*Méjico!*” the man shouted in his native tongue, and many with him exulted.

“You have the heart of the toreador!” the guard said. “Let me check on it!”

The news spread as the guard settled in his seat and talked into his phone. Suddenly he stood and gave the man a thumbs-up. “You have been cleared to worship the image of His Excellency, the risen potentate!”

The crowd cheered.

“In fact, your leaders consider it a capital idea!”

The crowd sang and chanted, edging closer and closer to the courtyard.

“Please maintain order!” the guard urged. “It will be more than an hour before you will be allowed in. But you *will* get your wish!”

David shook his head as he executed a huge U-turn and headed to the courtyard. People along the way called out to him. “Is it true? May we at least worship the statue?”

David ignored most of them, but when clusters moved

## THE MARK

in front of his speeding cart, he was forced to brake before slipping around them. Occasionally he nodded, to their delight. They ran to get in a line that already stretched more than a quarter mile. Would this day ever end?