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Episode Four: A Place to Fear

THE UNBREAKABLE rain continued to pour about the rambling estate of Jonathan Sand. Inside, Sand and Abigail stood watching Frobart collect the lifeless body of Gloria Devon. Abigail, in tears, said, "You will burn in hell for this. Both of you."

Frobart glanced at her but not long enough to absorb any of her fury. Sand said, "There is no hell, Abigail. But there's no heaven either. One death for all of us. One afterlife."

"And what makes you think I will help you?"

Sand laughed. "Oh come on. You don't think I anticipated your unshakable defiance?"

"As I said, what makes you think I will help you?"

Sand approached her, leaned close to her face and rested his arm on the armrest of her wheelchair. She felt his warm breath on her cheek. "Tell me," he said. "Can you read my mind?"

She leaned away from him.

He whispered, "What emotions am I feeling right now?"

She was reviled. "Satisfaction."

He nodded.

"Penny," Abigail said. "*Penny*."

"You see?" he said gleefully. "You're much more gifted than you give yourself credit for."

"If you touch her I will kill you," she said quickly.

"Really..."

"No," she said with robotic precision. "If you touch her I will extract the life from your body like a straw would extract liquid from a glass. I have the power. I will use it to protect her."

"I know you will," he said. "But it's not me you have to worry about. It's my friend, John. You sense him?"

Abigail closed her eyes. Jerked her head from side to side trying to resist the mental images flooding her mind's eye.

"A good friend," Sand said. "One whom I am paying handsomely for a very small task. Right now he's outside of Gloria's sister's house. Watching from a safe distance. He will extract Penny from their possession and murder her if I do not regularly call him at certain intervals with various code phrases. We will do this until you and I return from Syria."

Abigail just stared at Sand, drained.

"Abigail," he said. "It's so logical. You have no immediate family. And what family you do have thinks you're on a wonderful vacation for two weeks. But you don't really care about them. And they most certainly don't care about you. Your own life? You're too disciplined to care about that. But Penny. *Penny*. Just five years old. Like the daughter you never had. Next to

Gloria of course."

"From this moment on," Abigail said, "you are in more danger than Penny will ever be."

"I know, Abby. I know. Now let's go. We have a plane to catch."

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The plane wreckage had opened up a huge hole in the roof of the tunnel. The wreckage had been sitting on the ice cap above. Biting particles of snow now swooped through the fissure carried on a gale-force wind.

"What the hell is this?" Deacon said, squinting through the encroaching blizzard. He approached the wreck with caution.

Grace snapped her head back at him and glowered. "What do you mean what the hell is this? Don't you know?"

"Grace I have no idea what this is."

"It's an airplane. Deacon. *An airplane*. You understand that?"

"Yes, that's not what I meant. I understand it's an airplane. "

"What is going on? You lied to me! Where am I? What is this place?"

He remained calm yet fixated on the plane. "I didn't lie to you. This is the afterlife."

"Deacon!"

"Grace, I understand you're confused. So am I. I'm not sure how this is possible."

Grace walked up to him and snatched the satchel out of his hands. "I'll tell you how it's possible. This is the damn Arctic or some other god-forsaken place! You kidnapped me, you bastards! How do I get back? *What do you want from me?*"

"Grace... It's not earth. Think about it. You're not human anymore."

She stood her ground and clenched her fists around the bag. "Tell me what is going on? Did you drug me? Did drugs make me think I got stabbed in the chest and lived? What do you want?"

"Grace, listen to me. We're in the same boat, here... "

She dropped the bag, rushed up to him and pounded on his chest with her fists. "You take me back! Take me back! Now!"

He grasped her hands and tried to steady her. "Grace, listen to me. I'm not your enemy. I'm not! Grace! Stop!"

She paused and looked up at him, tears streaming down her face.

"Listen," he said. "I know you're scared. But you've got to believe me. I mean no harm to you and this is not a kidnapping."

She stepped back, teeth grinding. She regarded him for a moment, thinking quickly of her next move.

Off to the right of the pair, something large dropped from above and thudded to the ground.

It was another satchel.

"Hello!" came a voice from above.

Grace could make out several silhouetted figures standing around the perimeter of the gaping hole in the roof where the plane dropped through. Their flaming torches cleaving the snowy murk.

The voice boomed again. "Hello!" This time Grace recognized it. It was Maru.

Deacon glared up at him and the followers who surrounded him. "Maru? Is that you?"

"Yes it is. And I must say you're looking a little worse for wear."

Deacon walked closer to the opening above. "Maru! Look at this! It's an airplane! Do you have

any idea what this means?"

"It doesn't matter, Deacon. If it's God's doing, He has a reason."

"This could change everything! This may not be the afterlife! This is a connection to earth!"

"Don't be an idiot, Deacon," Maru said. "You know it's the afterlife as much as I. That's why we're here. We want to give you one last chance to join us to find God."

Deacon said, "How did you find us? An earthquake opened up this hole. There's no way you would've known we were here!"

"I know you, Deacon. I know the tunnels you frequent. You've been secretly trying to find your way to the mountains without anyone knowing."

"That's not true!" Deacon yelled.

The sinking feeling Grace had harbored in the pit of her stomach since her arrival flared like a nuclear explosion when she heard Deacon's tone. She could no longer trust him. She wondered if his sincerity had been some kind of ruse to get her out here. She was, once again, on her own. Grace went up to Deacon and glared at him. She then turned her attention to Maru. "Maru!" she said. "Where did this plane come from?"

"I don't know, Grace! But I do know this... when we find God, He will tell us and everything will become clear."

Then Grace surprised Deacon. She said, "Take me with you! I want to find God!"

"No Grace!" Deacon shouted.

She was livid. "*And why not?* What are you afraid of? That I'll find the truth? Obviously you don't know the truth. Why should I trust you? Maybe I should be trusting Maru."

Above them, Maru smiled, satisfaction burning in his veins at the notion of Deacon's new found ally turning against him.

"Of course, Grace," Maru said. "You're making the right choice."

Deacon shouted, "Maru! You're a fool. You don't know what this could mean! We found an airplane!"

Maru spat back, "The trouble is, Deacon, you just don't have enough faith. You're an insurgent against God. And you will be punished for that arrogance."

Grace turned to Deacon. "You seem to know so much about this place. About everything we seemingly have become but you didn't know about this?" She gestured toward the plane. "What other secrets have you kept? What other—"

The ground trembled.

One of Maru's followers bellowed from above, "Earthquake!"

Both Deacon and Grace were knocked to the ground next to the plane's tailfin.

Maru instantly backed off from the edge of the chasm. "Get back!" he yelled. "Get back from the edge!"

Below, the tunnel floor heaved. Then cracked. With a booming roar of twisting metal and falling rock, the tunnel opened up beneath them. The plane wreckage, Grace and Deacon fell into a monstrous black abyss. Snow and ice chopped up and fell below as Maru and his followers scurried away from the widening gulf.

Within seconds the quake subsided.

All that remained was a massive crevice that opened up into an enormous subterranean canyon.

The plane had disappeared. And so had Grace and Deacon.

Maru hoisted his head to look at the devastation through the blustering snow.

He saw sinuous shadows, dozens of them, glide across the snow and slip below into the newly open crater as if they were chasing something. A frantic, hungry clicking sound echoed through

the storm.

"We need to get off the ice cap," Maru said.

A young man lying beside him said, "What happened to them?"

Maru never smiled. He just squinted at the sprawling black hole beyond and watched as dozens more shapes slipped into the void below. "God is exacting His punishment. We can't help them. They're gone."

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Abigail sensed the hustle and bustle of the outside world just a pane of glass away yet she couldn't scream for help.

So she sat quietly.

Sand and at least three other individuals who sat with her in the back of Sand's limosine kept her under close watch.

They were going to Gatwick airport.

Abigail bristled at the keen gaze of her captor. He was staring right at her and she could sense him easily. For Abigail, it was like being backed against a wall by a porcupine: hundreds of hair-like spines pressing against her skin. "I know what you're thinking," Sand said. "If you could only open the door and tumble to freedom."

"That wasn't what I was thinking," she retorted.

"But even if you could manage to unlock the door and escape, you would be crossing paths with the traffic of the M1. That wouldn't bode well with your desire to stay alive." Sand leaned back and smacked his lips. "You don't have to worry," he said. "I'll take quite good care of you. We can't have you damaged in any way." He glanced out the window at the passing cars. "You sense them out there don't you? All these fools. They think they're actually making a difference. Stumbling through their pathetic little lives completely oblivious to the wonder that waits for all of them. All of us. Only none of them have any foresight to prepare now: while they're still living. Pathetic."

Abigail grinned. "Not quite the speech I would expect from a Nobel Prize seeker."

Sand snapped his head at her. "It's exactly the view, my dear, of a Nobel Prize seeker. It lifts me above my brethren to see clearly the paths that must be taken."

A male voice crackled over the intercom, "Entering the airport Mr. Sand. Your plane is waiting on runway two."

"Excellent," Sand replied. "Abigail, you'll have the run of the plane... as long as you don't stray from your seat." An amused chuckle circulated about the car. Abigail just ignored the comment. Her mind was preoccupied with measure and countermeasure. Visualizing every possible scenario they could experience on their trip. Weighing odds and examining the consequences. She was calculating her escape.

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Grace opened her eyes and was greeted with pitch-black. Deeper and richer than anything she had ever experienced before. She was cold and she felt pressure all over her body. It was snow, packed tightly against her skin. She quickly concluded she was buried alive. She shook her head as best she could to create a small pocket of air. Her mouth shot open and attempted to draw in a

breath. As her lungs filled with a microcosm of air, she stretched her arms upward, forcing snow to move back into her face.

She panicked and started to struggle.

Then she felt it.

Wind.

A breeze on her fingers. Her hand had reached above and broke the surface. She clawed her way upward in frenzied desperation. Breaking through with her hands she raised herself enough to hit her hand on something cold and hard; the leading edge of the airplane tailfin. Groping the metal she found the edge and gripped it. Straining with all of her might she winched herself upward. Her head broke through and she found herself under the tailfin. She gulped the air as if she had just emerged from an impossibly long ocean free dive. The tailfin must've sheltered her from the avalanche. Although she couldn't die, she remembered that she could still feel pain and she thanked God the plane hadn't landed right on top of her. Pulling herself up, Grace moved the snow away and rested her arms on the surface of the plane's fin, panting. "Deacon!"

No answer.

"Deacon!" She surveyed her surroundings. She saw the huge metal bulk of the aircraft fuselage to her right. To her left, the massive drift of newly fallen snow on which she was perched. The slope receded down to a rocky floor. She had landed at the bottom of a canyon.

She craned her neck upward and saw the sky far above. They had fallen through a crevasse into a vast fissure in the ice. She remembered falling, surrounded by huge chunks of snow. There was an impact but it was cushioned. A mental image of the plane's tailfin in quick descent reverberated in her mind. She knew the plane hit first and after that a blank. She figured if she had hit first followed by the plane, she wouldn't have been so close to the surface. Possibly buried alive forever under dozens of feet of snow. Particles of snow continued to cascade from above.

"Deacon! Dea—"

Clicking.

She recognized the sickening sound instantly. She scrambled up and got her back against the plane fuselage. Beyond the edges of the enormous snowdrift, out at least fifty yards into the canyon she saw shadows move quickly about the rocky outcroppings and stalagmites.

Devils.

Wraiths.

The same foul abominations she remembered when she first materialized on the ice cap. They knew she was here.

She needed to hide. She needed—

Bang!

The noise startled her and she jumped.

Bang!

Coming from just behind the bulkhead. "Grace!" It was Deacon's voice, muffled and laborious.

"Deacon?" she yelped.

"Yes!" he shouted back.

"Deacon! How do I get in? Where's the door?"

"Move back!" he yelled. "It's covered in snow."

From a dense shield of packed snow plastered on the fuselage a fist broke through forcefully into open air. Grace scrambled toward it. "Deacon!"

The fist pummelled at the snow until a whole slab fell away. Deacon's head poked through.

"C'mon," he yelled. "Take my hand."

She grasped his outstretched fingers and he pulled her through the portal inside the plane. They collapsed just inside the fuselage. The interior of the plane was barren. Apart from being full of snow, the body was empty, like a cargo plane. Drifts stuck between the metal ribbings of the superstructure and covered the floor.

"What happened?" Grace asked.

"The quake opened up the tunnel. We fell about eighty feet."

"There's something out there," she rasped.

"I know. Veonissic demons. We've got to hide."

"Hide? Hide where? There's no door, there's no—"

Bang! On the outside of the plane.

Both Grace and Deacon froze. "What are Veonissic demons?"

Grace lamented. Deacon covered her mouth quickly. "Not now. Keep... quiet."

Her eyes widened darting back and forth.

Bang! Bang!

The fuselage shook. Deacon kept his hand firmly locked over Grace's mouth. He whispered, "It's important we don't move. Don't even breathe."

Grace looked down and saw a gaping wound in Deacon's leg. He had cut himself badly. Had he been human, he would've been losing blood quickly, but in his new state, bleeding to death was conveniently not possible.

Grace grunted toward his leg wound.

"Not now, keep quiet."

She glanced at the open portal. Deacon was trying to move them back into the bowels of the aircraft. She sensed something wasn't right. He still had a firm grip of her. Her immediate thought was that of a cornered animal. Deacon was giving them no escape route. She looked at the portal in time to see the pale tip of a shiny, wet tentacle curl around the edge of the doorway.

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Coming Soon:
EPISODE FIVE:
KINGDOM OF LIGHT