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Episode Seven: Cornered by Fate

ABIGAIL STRUGGLED to maintain the connection. It was fleeting. Fading in and out of her conscious mind like a light bulb with a waning source of power. But she had found her. Her beloved *Gracieboots*—an affectionate nickname bestowed upon the two-year-old Grace many years ago. The name had always stuck and Grace didn't mind. It had always made her feel welcomed, loved. Even into adulthood Grace had encouraged the nickname by referring to herself as Gracieboots in front of Abigail and it always made both of them smile.

The connection was weakening.

Abigail caught mental glimpses of blinding white light contrasted against depthless black as she worked to concentrate without alerting Sand that anything was going on. A sudden surge of pins and needles swept over her body and she shuddered briefly.

Cold, she sensed a biting cold. Abigail was no stranger to ephemeral linking with the afterlife. She had discovered the skill at a young age—around her teens she believed—when she and her mother were exploring South East Asia on another arcane adventure to find lost literature. She had tried to describe the experience to her mother back then. Explaining it as a metaphor: *millions of glass filaments reaching out from her soul into the afterlife to pull her blood through the glass.*

To Abigail's dismay, her mother ignored the nonsensical ramblings. So later, as the experiences intensified, Abigail kept them to herself. She was certain that if anyone had learned she had been contacting the dead and consoling them, she would've surely been labelled a heretic and institutionalized, especially in the Deep South. So she kept her mouth shut and just enjoyed the experiences. Not to say the strange connections were not without pain. Abigail came to understand that to accomplish the task, she had to focus and break through delicate psychic membranes separating the dead from the living. Often, this would result in the spirits feeling much pain, but only briefly. Afterwards, a connection could be maintained for four or five minutes, often confusing the loved one at first, but comforting them with subsequent connections.

As Abigail grew, so did her skill. Her sessions with the dead could be maintained longer and with greater detail. But the process was fraught with trial and error. Occasionally she would come into contact with something unsavoury. A murderous soul or an angry spirit. These were few and far between but all in all, the experiences were consistent. Always cold, always crowded and always with many souls trying to talk to her at the same time.

Until now.

Something wasn't right.

She had managed to find Grace but something was very different.

The afterlife was empty.

Barren.

Where had everyone gone?

"Is there a problem, Abigail?" Sand said.

She shuddered and she was abruptly brought back with the connection completely severed. "I'm sorry? What?"

"You were mumbling something."

"Mumbling? What was I mumbling?"

Sand frowned. "You were asking someone where everyone had gone."

"I was?" she said, trying to sound relaxed. "I'm Sorry. Just thinking out loud."

"Well don't think too hard," Sand said. "Keep your mind on the task at hand."

Sand extracted a cell phone from his robe and dialled.

"Hello John," Sand said. "Yes everything's fine, so far. Keep an eye on Penny will you? Good."

"I told you that you don't have to do that," Abigail said. "I'm helping you."

"I know you are. But I also know you will be trying to calculate how you can deceive me. Penny is my insurance. Just do what you're told and all will be fine."

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Grace had collapsed onto her knees and wept. Deacon was crouched beside her. "What do you mean your aunt?" he asked.

"I mean I heard her as plain as day. In my head. She said everything was going to be all right and that I should be calm."

"Good advice. What else did she say?"

"She said try not to be scared. I'm in the afterlife."

"Yes. Hopefully you believe me now."

She swallowed hard and wiped the tears from her face. "She asked me a question..."

"What did she ask?"

Grace sniffled, regaining her composure. "She asked... she asked... where are all the people?"

Deacon straightened up. "C'mon. I think we should get moving."

“What’s really happening? I don’t understand. It’s not supposed to be this way.”
“I’m hoping we can find our answer further on.”

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The five of them had been walking for an hour in the searing heat of mid-day. Weed-like shrubs dotted the sandy landscape in front of them, jarring the expected image of what a typical desert should look like. Abigail’s wheelchair was hard to push through the sand and Roger stopped. “Wait a minute, wait a minute,” he said. Roger had the water satchel and took a swig. The mountains seemed closer. But they knew they had quite a way to go. “I’m afraid she’ll tip over,” Roger said. “What good is she if she breaks her arm and is in pain?”

“I won’t,” she said.

Sand wiped his brow with his sleeve. “Do you sense Duon? Is he there?”

She thought for a moment. “Too far away to tell.”

“Do you sense anything at all?” Sand asked.

“Yes. Something is on the other side of those mountains. Waiting for us.”

“Okay. Keep moving,” Sand said. “We’ve got to keep moving.”

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Grace and Deacon passed under the spears of light and paused. They looked upward as the snowflakes gently landed on them and melted. Grace laughed. “It’s so peaceful.”

“Look how far it goes up.”

They were looking up what appeared to be a man-made chimney stack. No more than four feet in diameter. An open stone chute that shot up to the ice cap above—at least a hundred feet. Carved into the walls of the chute were rows upon rows of the same Newari markings.

“I think they’re vents,” Deacon said.

“To vent air?”

“Maybe. It’s quite a feat of engineering.”

She crinkled her nose. “And what’s that smell?”

“Age. Who knows how old any of this is. Could be a thousand years. Could be ten thousand. There’s no way to measure.”

“I wonder who built this place?” she mused.

“Well, we know they’re not dead. Maybe they’re here somewhere. Let’s keep on going.”

The pair continued through the chamber until they came to a break in the ceiling where the stone just crumbled away. Just beyond was a rocky incline that seemed to

lead up to the surface; daylight streamed down into the grotto. They approached cautiously, leaned on the rock and peered up.

“This looks like a way out,” Deacon said. “Where the builders had to stop. Looks like this rock formation was in the way.”

Grace glanced across to another passage. “But it looks like it continues down that way.”

“Yeah. I’m thinking we don’t want to get to the surface just yet. We would be vulnerable.”

“I would agree. Shall we keep going?”

They continued on for a few minutes down a long, snaking stone corridor until the passageway opened up into another large round chamber. Another rocky incline, much the same as the previous one, was situated in one corner supplying daylight. This time the gray stone walls were visible. Grace approached one wall and ran her hand along the thousands of carvings. She looked away for just an instant when her hand ran across a different texture. She looked back and screamed.

Deacon, on the other side of the chamber, hobbled over to her. “Grace! Are you okay?”

She was standing back, staring at a depression in the wall. Nestled inside was a body wrapped in aged linen, like a mummy. “Is that a body?” she asked, clearly shaken. Deacon examined the find closely. He touched the fabric. It was cold but soft. “I think it is,” he said. Deacon looked at the face. It was so still. He saw a hint of discoloured flesh peeking out from a gap in the wrappings. He reached out to touch it.

From several feet away, another mummy burst out of the wall and lunged at Deacon. Grace screamed. Deacon grabbed the figure and wrestled it away from him. The first mummy instantly peeled out of the wall and attacked Grace. Deacon was able to throw the mummy to the wall as it appeared smaller in stature than he. Grace was quickly able to do the same.

“Jesus!” Deacon yelled. “Grace!”

She rushed to Deacon’s side.

From the darkness, three other mummies stepped into the light and closed in on the pair.

“Deacon!” Grace yelled.

“I know! I know!”

“What do we do?”

Deacon caught sight of a far passage behind the third and fourth mummies. “On the count of three we run for it. Over there. Don’t look just run.”

“Okay!”

The first mummy Grace had thrown to the ground got up, faced the pair and opened its mouth.

“One!”

It reached up and pulled the wrappings from its face. Underneath was the face of a man. Dark-skinned. With Asian features.

“Two!”

He pulled more of the wrappings from his body and uttered several words Deacon didn't understand. But Grace frowned. “What?” she said.

The mummy repeated the words.

“What?” she said. “My name's Grace.”

Deacon snapped at her, “*Grace, what are you doing?*”

“He's speaking Newari. He's asking my name.”

“Newari,” the mummy mimicked.

Grace responded back in the same dialect.

“Yes,” the mummy replied. “English. We're not going to harm you.”

“I don't believe it,” Deacon said.

Grace scowled. “You attacked us.”

“My name is Maal,” he said. “We thought you were the V'sics.”

Grace turned and saw the other mummies removing their bindings, discarding them on the stone floor. She faced Maal. “V'sics?”

“Yes,” Maal said. “They know we're here.”

Deacon asked, “Did you build this place? Who are you?”

“My name is Jeto,” the second mummy said. “Our friends behind you cannot speak. We are the builders.”

“Okay,” Deacon said, more than a little shaken. “Why are you hiding in the walls?”

“Yes,” Maal said. “It's necessary. The V'sics sense movement. They can't find us if we sleep.”

“The V'sics?” Deacon said. “You mean the Veonissics?”

“Demons,” Jeto said.

Deacon nodded. “Huh.”

“Do you know where we are?” Grace asked. “Do you know what this place is?”

Maal answered, “This is our home.”

She shook her head. “No. I mean, this place. This land. Where are we?”

Jeto frowned, clearly confused. “This is death,” he said. “This is what it means to be dead. We built this place in reverence to our home. Much work. Just the five of us. A very long time.”

“Can you tell us how to get out of here?” Deacon asked.

“Out?” Jeto replied.

“We're looking for my father,” Grace said. “He disappeared. Along with many others.”

Maal nodded and pointed to a section of the wall on the other side of the chamber. He indicated to Grace that she should follow him. Together they all stepped over to a

solid wall with thousands of tiny carved markings. “The afterlife should not be empty,” Maal said. “Helap told the story here.”

“Helap?” Grace said.

Maal motioned to one of the three silent men to step forward. “Helap.”

Grace and Deacon nodded.

“This place is vast. Very dangerous. Many mountains and valleys much like earth but not like earth. Many creatures like earth... but not like earth. Many people lived here. Everywhere. Settling down to live quiet lives after they arrived. The snow was always here but God walked with us.”

Grace stopped him “Wait. What do you mean, God walked with you?”

Maal smiled. “He was here. We could see Him, touch Him. Be protected by Him. He spoke to us. When we all arrived on the snowfields He was there. Told us not to be afraid. This is how it’s supposed to be. We were happy to be close to Him. It was... quiet. Calm. No storms.” Maal’s expression softened. “But then the screaming. The fear. Then God was gone.”

“Explain,” Deacon said.

“He disappeared. Nowhere anymore. Many here believe He went to the dark side of the mountains. Travelled far across the ice with whoever could keep up. No one knows why. No one saw Him again. Then, just after Helap arrived, the V’sics came.”

Grace and Deacon stood in silence.

Maal continued, “They spread like fire. Settled above us to wait for new souls. When new souls came, the V’sics would snatch them up and take them away.”

Grace stepped closer. “Where would they take them?”

Maal shook his head. “We do not know. Helap wisely came underground and when we arrived, we joined together to build Jha Karek.”

“That’s what you call this place?” Grace asked. “Jha Karek?”

Maal nodded. “It took us many decades. Perhaps much longer, we have no sense of the passage of time. Little bits at a time until finished. V’sics knew we were here but couldn’t find us if we hid in the walls.”

“Okay,” Deacon pointed at a strange circular carving surrounded by an outward radiating collection of other symbols. “And what is this symbol here?”

Jeto spoke up, “Yes. That’s the Eye of God.”

“And what is that?” asked Deacon.

“It is the way to find God,” Maal said.

Grace scowled. “How?”

“The Eye of God is the link. The joining of the two worlds. Part of the nature of this place. It is the instrument from which all life was created. The mechanism God used to create us all.”

Back through the passageway from which they travelled, snowflakes continued to drift in silent dance down the massive chimneys to the stone slabs of the main chamber.

Of the several portals in the ceiling, one of them suddenly exhibited some activity. Snowflakes fell in small clumps; then a few seconds later, in larger masses. Loud scratching noises accompanied the bustle. This continued on for several minutes. At first, all that was seen was a gathering pile of snow on the floor at the base of the far chimney. Until finally something landed heavily on the temple floor. It was a man. From a crouching position, the man straightened up but was temporarily blinded by the darkness.

The man reached up and outstretched his hands. From above, a lit torch fell into his palm—a sharp wooden spire wrapped with linen and set alight—the man brought the flame down in front of him to see ahead. He pulled off his hood to get a better look ahead of him.

It was Maru.

Several other men, Maru's followers, descended onto the temple floor from the other chimneys in the same awkward manner.

Maru made eye contact with his group and motioned them to follow him into the structure.

Grace recoiled. "The mechanism? I've never heard that before," she said. "I thought He just created us by Himself."

"Yes," Jeto said. "God. And the Eye of God. Together. Find the Eye of God and it will reveal the location of the God's Kingdom."

"I think they're confused," Grace said.

Deacon was deep in thought. He stared at the carving. "Maal. Has anyone found The Eye of God? Ever found The Kingdom of Light?"

"I do not know."

"All right," Deacon said. "The Eye of God. Is it here? In the afterlife?"

"It is both."

Deacon nodded. "Of course."

"Now, wait a minute," Grace said. "You know what he's talking about?"

"Well. The Eye of God is a theory that dates back to the Byzantine Christians. Some of whom are probably here somewhere I'm sure. It's supposed to be a Divine Machine or a Tool God used to focus His power. An actual mechanism with moving parts. If I'm not mistaken, daVinci used the concept as inspiration."

Grace just shook her head. "Why does The Eye of God sound so familiar?"

"Huh. Probably because of 1962," Deacon said. "The Eye of God cult. You remember? Houston, Texas. Fourteen bodies on a chartered sailboat."

"Oh, before my time," she said, nodding. "But I remember books about it."

“Yeah. Fourteen bodies slashed to pieces with razors. They believed something like the... Eye of God was submerged in the Gulf of Mexico and they were supposed to bleed in the water or something to cause the machine to rise. It made every headline. Poor souls.”

“It must’ve been awful. But you’re saying this machine actually exists?”

“I... well. I mean it was a theory detailed in an old rabbinic text,” Deacon said. “I was fortunate enough in my former life to read one in Jerusalem in 1945. It basically put out the idea of a machine that God uses to focus His power. Like a lens. But a physical one. It was a theory well outside of mainstream religion. Conjecture mostly. But who’s to say any of what we read about God is real or supposed? You really have to die and meet God to find out.”

“But we’re dead,” Grace griped. “And we’re still no closer to God than when we were alive.”

“That’s true,” Deacon said. “But it’s a start.”

Deacon turned to Maal. “Do you have any idea where the Kingdom of Light is? God’s Kingdom? The place where God is?”

Maal gazed at Deacon and smiled. “You need to travel to the edge of Jha Karek. Out to the water. Follow the beach. The V’sics will not follow you to the water.”

“The water?” Grace said, confused. “Will you come with us then?”

Jeto shook his head rapidly. “No. We belong here. We will not leave. We’re safe here.”

Deacon chuckled. “To the end of Jha Karek.”

“To the end,” Maal said, and pointed to a far passageway in a remote corner of the chamber. “That way.”

“This is getting stranger the longer I’m here,” Grace said.

Deacon nodded. “I know. Right now we don’t have any choice but to follow their suggestion and continue to the edge of the monastery.”

Without any warning, something whooshed past Deacon accompanied by a hot wind. The soft *chuck* of wood embedding itself deep within flesh followed. Maal turned and found he was impaled in the stomach by a flaming wooded torch. Instantly he was caught alight. Grace screamed in shock. She quickly grabbed some of the discarded sack cloth strewn on the ground, wrapped her hands and tried to smother the flames. Deacon grabbed Maal and forced him to the ground but quickly had to back away as the flames intensified. Now on the ground, Maal screamed and started to roll. But it was too late. Fire engulfed his body. Grace collapsed back shedding and stamping out the flaming sack cloth on her hands.

“There’s no water!” Deacon yelled. “Roll! Roll!” The other mummies bolted back to their corners of the chamber in fear. Maal no longer moved. The flames crackled and charred his flesh. Black smoke choked everyone. Grace was on her knees crying. Deacon, struggling to keep back his own tears turned to see Maru. Grinning.

“Damn,” Maru said. “Missed.”

“Maru?”

“Deacon!” Maru shouted. “Good to see you, old man.”

Maru’s followers gathered behind their leader.

“*What the hell are you doing?*” Deacon screeched.

“I’m doing God’s work, my friend.”

Grace turned to him. “You have nothing to do with God, you bastard. You’re a murderer.”

Maru shook his head at her. “News for you, honey: you can’t murder what’s already dead. Now, does this mean you don’t want to join me anymore?”

Maal’s head, licked by flame, moved and produced an almost inaudible groan of pain.

“He’ll live,” Maru said. “Sort of. Although he may sting in the morning a bit. And he won’t ever be able to move again. Fitting for a heretic.”

“They aren’t heretics you idiot!” Deacon yelled. “They’re innocent souls! They’re men of God!”

Grace glared at Maru. “You’re evil.”

“It’s such a relative term, isn’t it?” Maru said. “Evil. From our point of view, *you* are evil. You are the ones who have abandoned God. You are the ones who have rejected the pilgrimage.”

“We’re on our own pilgrimage you son of a bitch,” Deacon shouted. “Why don’t you just leave us alone!”

Maru saw the monks. “Looks like you found some help, old man. More heretics to help you in your unholy search.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Deacon said. “*What do you want?*”

Maru grinned and stepped toward them. “You, Deacon, deceived us all. It’s you who’s trying to find God and murder Him. I can’t allow that. And now, I’m going to show both of you how it’s still possible... to kill someone in the afterlife.”

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Coming Soon:
EPISODE EIGHT:
LEVIATHAN’S SPLINTER