Chapter One: A Second Chance

Somewhere along the lines of Latitude 31 and Longitude 35 is a desert plain of two rolling hills that make up a valley stretching up to six miles in length and roughly one mile across. Some fourteen miles from Jerusalem inside the West Bank is known to the locales as the Corridor. It’s there that these nomads, who prefer to be called pilgrims of the holy land, travel between these two places in search of valuable artifacts. And spending most of their days inside a valley with no name, they’ve been known to dig out relics as far back as two thousand years. The deeper they dig, the further back in time they go. It’s this type of work that their very lives depend on. To find something in the ancient world of humanity is to provide food for their family until hunger forces them to search once again. And although most of these relics value in riches, the reality often dwindles to pocket change.

Inside this valley is an older individual who’s been living in a cave for most of his life. Many have made it their homes in recent years, scavenging for values along the valley floor. And it’s this simple man who’s been entertaining himself by counting the campfires below. When he started this game some time ago, he remembers adding up to twelve a night. But those numbers have increased in recent days, and now it looks as if he’ll break yet another record. Also, some of these fires tell the tale of the dish they dine for. Sometimes it’s the pleasant scent of fresh fish and bread, others the sweet aroma of cooked lamb. But when he’s almost at the end of his count, he notices a small amount of sand trickling on his head from the ledge above. And without any warning, the ground begins to tremble with forces that move boulders off their foundation, rolling uncontrollably down the valley floor. Fortunately for the pilgrims below, they had enough time to run from these stones of death before being crushed by them. As for the older man above, it’s the first time he’s experienced such quakes during his lifetime. This is because the phenomenon lacks tectonic plates and lava flow to produce such seismic activities in the region. And it doesn’t stop there either. Mass avalanches begin to slide toward the floor, where the crevices have formed. And even though the danger is all around, it has everyone running terrified toward the Corridor exits. Once outside, they get a chance to view an anomaly in awestruck. An eerily blue atmosphere, forming in the shape of a dome, now covers the corridor ceiling with its brilliant glow. And from here on out, it’s a frantic race, all the way back to Jerusalem.

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Nothing more he can do, the lieutenant orders Romanowski to fire his shoulder missile at the inbounds, and again nothing happens. The pilots above are also affected, as they relentlessly squeeze the trigger to no effect. However, a resilient leader has persistently ordered another landing force to combat the team on the ground. And when they do, a weather anomaly begins to build inside the corridor. Resembling a hurricane, its core glows of deep blue with extreme winds swirling violently around. And on top of the hillside, Romanowski’s group has front row seats of what appears to be a battle against mother nature. It seems that the Jordanians’ aggressions have invited unwanted conditions that make it unbearable to continue with the engagement. Instead, they find their air support flying uncontrollably against the forces of the anomaly. Some are tossed out of sight, while others slam into the surrounding hills. Next, the phenomenon begins spreading rapidly, leaving the U.S. to hunker down in the crevices. The expansion continues to build in diameter until it fills the entire valley. The summit has the rest of the team lying behind boulders and any obstacles they can take cover from. Soon, they begin to hear the roaring winds fading into the night as the turbulence calms to a still. And before they knew it, it’s over.

What follows next is a remarkably bright light shining in the middle of the valley floor. And inside this calm setting, they feel a warm presence, pushing the chill of the night back into its extremities. It’s as if someone turned on the sun. And after a brief pause, both groups come off the hills to meet each other in the middle. There, they stand twenty feet from it while squinting their eyes, trying to get a glimpse inside. Uncertain what they see, there appears to be a translucent figure waving about in the center. They can feel the presence of its secured love, like a mother for her child. And it’s Collins who takes the extra step to communicate with it. “Whoever you are, thank you.”

 And without any warning, the angelical being implodes instantly, disappearing before their very eyes. Next, Romanowski and Collins look at each other dumbfounded.

“They’re never going to believe us, sir.”

“…Now that’s a problem, isn’t it?”

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The cyclone’s core creates a pulsating blue light from within, and Kenny’s readings suddenly drop off. Through the violent noises of the anomaly, the sergeant tries to shout over

it, “Sir, I have no idea where this storm is getting its energy! The tracking keeps telling me there’s nothing out here.”

As it increases strength, lightning bolts begin to discharge all around the corridor with the color of brilliantly blue strikes. Warfield looks through his visor and sees an incredible sight of heavy vehicles tossing around like toys. Next, their weapons are pulled from their grips and grenades yanked from their utility belts. All but harmless components stay behind as the rest disappear into the storm. Kenny, in the meantime, starts the countdown. “Impact in forty seconds!... Impact is now thirty seconds!... Wait a minute! What the hell?”

Suddenly, all missiles start moving in opposite directions.

 “Sir! I’ve got loose cannons here. I repeat I’m tracking loose cannons!”

“Roman, this is Commander Warfield; track the missiles in real-time and read it out to me.”

Roman begins reading their trajectories, step by step. “Tracking six missiles…Two Arabian Emad and four friendlies. Altitude is 1,000 feet, veering N, NE, S, SW, W, and NW, ranging four miles out and falling. Impact in 4, 3, 2, 1. Detonation detected on the surface.”

“I concur, sir. They’ve impacted all over the desert floor,” Kenney adds.

Finally, Warfield gets Roman to search the skies once more.

 “There are no threats to report at this time.”

 The team begins to ease up, and the enemy goes into full retreat. And no sooner than they do, the phenomenon gives way to a clear night.

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The team leader, Amon Saul, responds with the headcount in his vehicle. When the inventory is satisfied, Warfield puts away his tablet with the comfort of knowing that the mission is off to a great start. As they continue toward the valley, the hills on the east and west side begin to take rise, which is an indication that the corridor is near. And after five minutes, they observe something they haven’t seen before. With a half-moon lit on a clear night, the view is like another world in some far-out galaxy. The atmosphere now glows, in deep blue, that domes over the corridor. And as if alive, the color seems to pulsate with every flux. It’s an eerie feeling that grows with each passing minute. Awestruck, both the cardinal and priest express their thoughts on the mystical valley.

“Oh my, Your Eminence. Have you ever seen anything like this before?”

“No, never. Not in all my travels. There’s something very different about this place. Very, very unusual.”

Saul quickly capitalizes on the moment. “What the hell happened out here?”

“He’s right. There’re no animals, no insects, nothing on my instruments to indicate life out here,” Ms. Shine adds.

With such remarks, the cab becomes quiet, with the exception of the vehicle running in the background. Then, Rigoli remembers a book he once read. “You know, the agnostics once believed that the spirit world and this one could actually merge together, creating strange anomalies from within.”

“How do you mean, brother?”

“…Well, they believe the spirit world to be adjacent to this one. That Heaven has always been here, but we just can’t see it. Perhaps the anomaly in the corridor is understood to be God's work.”

“If this is true, then maybe the Almighty is preparing for his return, right here in this valley.”

“Perhaps you’re right, Your Excellency. That would explain a lot of things.”

Again, the cab is silent to the low humming noises of electromagnetic engines running in the background. No matter how they look at it, it’s as if the corridor is alive and trying to speak to them. And just as they were about to enter, the American vehicle abruptly stops in front of them.

Tammi Shine, one of Saul’s scouts, interrupts the father with her own point of view.

 “I find that incredible, Father. How can you be so sure about this? Because if what you say is true, then you’ve just solved the greatest riddle known to the human race. I mean, let’s be honest here. Nobody really knows why we’re here in the first place, not even the Pope himself. Oh, I’m sure the Holy Father has some personal ideas on the subject, but nothing definitive. After all, the Lord moves in mysterious ways, right? Correct me if I’m wrong here, but how can anyone really know the truth as to why God put us in such a violent universe in the first place. I understand that he must have his reasons, but the question still remains—why?”

 Afraid of confusing the team further, he tries to explain it in such a way as to put themselves in God’s shoes, “Try to understand, daughter, that God gave us free will to grow. For example, sacrificing oneself is the greatest love that anyone can give. This is who he is—pure love. However, you can’t sacrifice yourself in a perfect world where the universe is free of pain, anguish, and death, all of which have no spiritual value. Pain is that of which we sacrifice in an imperfect world. That it’s the imperfect world in which creates the opportunity to grow. And keep in mind that he understands the sufferings that go with it. Practicing what he preached, he’s done it before. He was brutally beaten, tortured, humiliated, and died a slow death on a cross he had to carry. And he did it for us all, which is the greatest sacrifice one can give. You see, he could’ve saved himself from the Romans but refused to condemn his butchers. To condemn is to inflict. He didn’t want to use the dark side of selfishness to save his own life against those who threatened it. And it’s he who doesn’t want to condemn us today. So what did the Son of God do? He sacrificed himself willingly. Jesus understood the Romans’ failure to see through the barrier of hate. And he also understood the growth they would gain from it, which is why Christianity eventually became the Empire's leading religion. For us to exercise this free will the way he did is the salvation to his heart.”

 Ms. Shine moves from her seat to get closer to Rigoli and holds his hands with a smile.

“I believe you, Father, and thank you.”

 He tells her that God says she’s welcome and gives a word of warning to the others.