

Angels and demons work aggressively as an ophthalmologist in practice for some thirty years faces financial ruin. A new eye surgeon has built a huge, ostentatious clinic and uses unethical tactics to suck up all the eye business in the area, doing cataract surgery on everyone his operatives can convince to have the procedure. Behind the scenes is an ongoing battle between good and evil, personified by the activities of numerous angels and demons.

Blind Ambition: A Novel

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BLIND AMBITION

A NOVEL

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CHAPTER 1

Dr. Joseph Newell sat in his bedroom, marooned in his three-dimensional world, his head in his hands, a grimace on his rotund face. While I was too occupied to belabor the thought, I was deeply aware of his plight and sympathized with him. His wife, Rita, was still asleep nearby, and Newell could faintly discern the sound of her quiet breathing. Outside, he could hear the wind blowing and the rain falling, the dismal day matching his mood.

The aging ophthalmologist surveyed the scene around him and considered his recent setbacks. His once-prosperous eye surgery practice was suffering and seemed +destined for failure, and the competition was undeniably strengthening. His modest home was situated in King's Bay, Georgia, a bustling seaside community that had until recently been a quiet, comfortable place to live and practice his specialty.

Close by Newell's quarters I was involved in an invisible war, and all participants bore battle scars, the result of hours spent fighting in the restrictive confines of the time dimension. Opposing forces could not have been more different in appearance, though in manner of combat they bore striking resemblance.

Our enemies were dark, sinister beings covered with a variety of gruesome skin: some coarse and filamentary, somewhat like a pig; some with unsightly wart-like knots all over; others slimy, scaly, or sticky. Most had faces that were very nearly monkey-like or bat-like, with gaping mouths and frightening teeth. Their ill-fitting garments were black and loose and their forms reeked a putrid, offensive odor. They flitted about like miniature gods, moving with ease, undetectable by natural eyes most of the time, though they occasionally flashed briefly into the visible spectrum. They were numerous and formidable—of various sizes, body-builder strong and hideously sadistic; slashing and sweeping with their weapons, pushing me and my forces back to the brink of total chaos.

I wrestled to withdraw in orderly fashion as my besieged army struggled despite our majestic, white splendor, dour grimaces on myriad handsome faces clearly reflecting the severity of our situation. Their gleaming raiment was sprinkled with jewels of the finest quality, each one emitting a continuous sparkle. The fabric of their clothing—fabric is as near as I can describe it in human terms—was tightly woven, superfine, shiny. Each of my angels wielded a gleaming silver sword with jewel-encrusted handle, a personal gift from our righteous Master. Unfortunately, all weapons at present were being used in defensive fashion, and black blades ricocheted off bright shields repeatedly, sending sparks like lightning in all directions.

Newell looked up, faintly cognizant of some kind of commotion. He heard strange, scuffling noises and barely audible cries. The nearly imperceptible swoop of a blade, so near that it made him cringe, caused him to open his eyes and search for the source of the sound. Was he simply hearing unruly wind and pouring rain? A clattering seemed to come from within an adjacent wall, like a metallic object being dropped on a concrete floor. Startled, he looked again, but there was nothing observable.

I, Yeshuaham, hard-pressed leader of the besieged legion, felt myself growing weaker as we fended off the awful spirits, and I watched in horror as my shining warriors retreated in disorder. In a terrible downpour, the conflict raged on outside the Newell residence, with my forces pursued ever more fiercely.

I was overjoyed to observe Newell finally reaching for his worn Bible, which he let drop open on his lap. I was aware that earlier he had intended to hold his daily devotional before Rita awakened, a thought he had unfortunately abandoned in his depression. To my extreme disappointment, he closed the book and got up, then moved stiffly to his study, where he plopped down in a corner recliner and flipped on a lamp. There he sat staring blankly for much longer than I could afford, the unopened book useless in his lap. I countered a harsh slice from one of my foes, sustaining considerable damage to one wing, while with difficulty I whispered encouragement to Newell to continue.

With a sigh he let the book drop open again, and I intervened to guide him as best my own battle would allow. His eyes drifted across

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the open page and fell on exactly the words I had in mind, which I intentionally highlighted: “*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*”

Newell pondered the words, but again he closed the book and laid it aside. I couldn't help but feel a huge disappointment. I saw several members of my force go down, virtually destroyed by their malevolent foes, while I fended off yet another devastating blow. Hope seemed to be at the lowest ebb for my legion.

Newell thoroughly surprised me when he bowed his head reverently.

“Lord, forgive me for being so ungrateful...” Newell whispered, slipping down onto his knees before plunging into a time of confession, and then he worshipped fervently.

Our forces quickly exploited Newell's feeble effort with remarkable effectiveness. Angels on the verge of annihilation rebounded remarkably, and soon there was a gruesome accumulation of hair, along with clattering pieces of spiritual garments, as well as remnant spots of smelly sweat and green-splattered blood, scattered over the firmament. As Newell continued his prayer, his own guilt confessed and his humility on full display, our foes began to slink away, at first a few at a time, and then in a panicked retreat. I thrust my sword high into the vapor, consumed by the sure knowledge the repugnant creatures would never taste lasting triumph, though I knew that a temporary win was possible and highly satisfying to them. They had been close to another and they would be back when circumstances allowed.

I smiled at my fellow soldier, Ben-Heovah, and embraced him in genuine love, his mighty arms enfolding my lesser ones, our sheathed weapons now hanging limply at our sides. Both of us checked on the wounded for several minutes before concluding they would all make full recovery. We had shared numerous celebrations of joy over the eons, but more times of sorrow and defeat than we cared to count. So much depends on such frail charges as Newell.

“As always, Yeshuaham, you did not leave our man in his hour of need,” said Ben-Heovah, first assistant to the High Archangel of this sector.

“Do not be concerned about Newell,” I replied, perhaps a little surprised at my own words. Had not Newell almost let us down? I contemplated the close call while I extracted my sword once more and wiped a few more ugly fragments from the sharp blade, as is my habit. “Thank you for coming to the aid of my warriors, brother.”

“Thanks and praise to our righteous Master. By His grace we were rescued, and Newell’s prayer was the key. Oh, how the One from the cross loves him!”

“I am well aware of their growing relationship, Ben-Heovah. I must admit that I feared for a moment that Newell was going to remain oblivious.”

Had either of us been visible to human eyes, we would have been a terrifying sight indeed. I have been privileged to deliver divine messages to human beings in millennia past, and I know what fear we inspire. I have eyes like fire glaring from my face, which I’m told by my fellows is pleasant and cherubic. My silver-colored armor emanates a blinding luster when I step into the physical world. My wings flare in magnificent fashion, a unique creation of our Master, each feather a different color that fans out like a celestial kaleidoscope. I was created a loving angel, and for millennia this trait had been my most exceptional characteristic. Yes, I love completely, I love absolutely, and I love without reservation. I love my own Master, and I love these weak human beings I guard during their brief physical lives. My challenge is to love more deeply and more fully, and to move my human charges into an eternal state that glorifies my Master. Like all angels, I have long ago been confirmed holy and I possess absolute purity.

My superior, Ben-Heovah, was created far more commanding than I, with a face exceeding in appearance that of any fanciful Greek false god, a noble nose framed by high cheeks, blazing eyes that can see in all directions at once, and splendid, spectacular wings. His are different from mine yet even more breathtaking, each feather a shimmering rainbow. Ben-Heovah’s entire person is overlaid with a covering the

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hue of finest gold, as is his armor. His particular strength is mercy, a trait he dispenses with utmost abandon. Still, situations that demand infinite quantities of his gift are frequent, so he constantly petitions our Master for even more of this vital commodity.

Both our polished, gleaming shields match our basic armor and bear an emblem shaped like a cross. Like our demonic foes, either of us has the ability to assume any form we wish in the dimension of time, space, and matter, but unlike demons we never do so except on orders or by permission. These attributes notwithstanding, our major aspect is absolute faithfulness to the One from the cross. We are unconcerned about the driving rain about us, a natural force of which we are aware but to which we are impervious.

“Do not fear. Love will triumph, my brother,” I assured my commander as we faded into the background with a casual flap of our wings. “I am aware of the enemy’s intentions. All praise to the One who suffered and died for this man.”

“And may all mercy be with Newell and with you,” said Ben-Heovah. “Our enemies have determined to destroy your charge. If they succeed, it will be a major defeat for us.”

“I am aware.”

Ben-Heovah disappeared from sight, leaving no physical trace, while I remained on guard at the Newell home.

* * *

“Wow, it’s a rough day out there,” commented Rita as she descended the stairs. Newell had moved into the kitchen after his devotional.

“Pretty rotten weather, all right. No problem, we need the rain.”

She moved over to her husband and put her hand on top of his bald head, then tilted it back and gave him a kiss. He returned the affection with as much interest as he could muster.

“Sleep well?”

“Restless. I got up depressed, too. I did manage to have my devotional, but not with much enthusiasm, I’m afraid.”

Lackluster had been his time of prayer, perhaps, but it had been most sincere and effective. I really loved this old doctor, flawed as he was, and had truly enjoyed being his guardian all these years.

“Oh, dear, you’ll get over it,” said Rita as she rambled in the refrigerator. “You’ve been that way ever since medical school. If I didn’t know better, I’d label you manic-depressive.”

“Ah, good old medical school,” Newell said, a little nostalgia in his voice. “I can’t ever remember being depressed in medical school.” “I can. Remember when I made less than \$200 a month teaching school, and that was all we had to live on? Now that was depressing!” “You? You’ve never been depressed a day in your life. Not even when we were on starvation wages.”

“Well, things have surely improved since then. This old house is paid off, our kids are grown...”

“Three great grown kids plus four little rewards of old age,” said Newell. “The Bible calls grandchildren the crown of old age.”

“I’m sure they are, but we aren’t old yet. I’m only 55, you know.”

“And retired from teaching for many years. It’s been a good life, Rita, with bonuses on all sides. Thanks for supporting me way back then so I could get a good education.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” said Rita. “Just love me like you always have. Your work has given us a good life and endless ministry opportunities. Think about all the surgery you’ve done, not only here in King’s Bay but all around the world.”

“I know. I’m grateful. But you know, Rita, this latest challenge to my practice has been the hardest ever. What am I going to do?”

“Pray about it. And so will I. Everything will be fine.”

“I’ll certainly do that. But I sure would like to see some answers.”

“For goodness sake don’t worry about it. We’ll adjust our lifestyle to our income level.”

Newell nodded and finished his breakfast. He shortly disappeared for a time, and then reappeared at the door, preoccupied with thoughts about the upcoming day. His balding head and his eyes sparkled, and he wore no glasses except when reading. He was cleanly shaved and clothed underneath his long raincoat in a simple short-sleeved shirt and

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an unpretentious tie. Rita accompanied him to the doorway in her housecoat, where she gave him a goodbye kiss.

I accompanied Newell as he got into his car, slammed the door, and backed out of his driveway. The short drive to his office was slower than usual as heavy rain obscured visibility and copious water had accumulated on the roadway. Traffic moved along briskly, though, and he was making good progress.

He glanced farther down the road where an eighteen-wheeler was approaching on the two-lane road, blasting out a rooster tail of water on both sides. Without warning it went out of control and skidded toward him across the centerline. There were massive oak trees on both sides of the boulevard leaving nowhere to escape, so the doctor braced for what could be a fatal impact. Miraculously, the truck edged back into alignment with the roadway as the driver regained control, and the rig missed Newell's compact car by inches.

"You idiot..." said Newell, wiping a bead of inconspicuous sweat from his forehead while considering his spontaneous epithet. "Forgive me, Lord! In fact, let me change that to thanks!"

I was sitting unseen in the back seat and I nodded hearty approval.

Newell's wracked nerves slowly recovered and he almost forgot the incident before he arrived at his office. Traffic now became more extreme and his vintage car crept along slowly, giving him plenty of time to think. He was deeply puzzled that his thriving ophthalmology practice, begun over thirty years ago in what had then been the small coastal town of King's Bay, Georgia, had fallen on such hard times. Slick competition was extremely hard for him to counter. Sheets of splashing liquid streamed from every passing car, but he negotiated the treacherous conditions with skill, encountering no more near-disasters despite his distracted mindset.

Newell's office was situated in a declining medical complex, where he pulled into his accustomed parking place in back, shut down his engine, and made a quick dash through the downpour to enter via a back door. His once-pristine building now had paint peeling from the metal fascia, the back door was rusted, and its rubber weather stripping had long since rotted away. The lock resisted his efforts to open it, but he finally got the recalcitrant mechanism to respond. He walked over

worn, moldy carpet and past peeling wallpaper to the front office, where his small staff was already assembled. He used a tissue to pick up a cockroach, lying dead and inverted on the floor, and cast it into a nearby waste can.

At least the lights were on and functional. Still, keeping salaries paid and enough money to cover bills had become nagging, chronic concerns. He had even thought of robbing his retirement plan to keep the practice going, but so far he had been able to avoid such a drastic measure by calling on a banker friend. Still, he knew that borrowing was no way to solve persistent cash flow problems.

“Good morning, Dr. Newell. You’ve got a man in lane one who’s pretty agitated,” his assistant, Shirley Stevens, said to him as he shook out his rain jacket and hung it on a peg behind his office door.

“What do you mean by agitated? Is it a problem with his glasses?”

He reached for his work attire, a gleaming white medical coat with the name of the supplying company emblazoned on the lapel. In earlier days, he had worn the more costly personalized variety, but cheaper ones served the purpose.

“No. We’d have that fixed already. I’ll let him explain,” said the matronly assistant, who now doubled as his office manager. “He’s been here before. He’s the only patient so far, so you’ll have plenty of time. I’ve done the basic workup and he’s ready for you.”

Newell’s only other employee was Hillary Brewer, a secretary who also served as optician for the practice, though she was still somewhat in training. She had been with him a little over a year and seemed competent and efficient, plus she worked for much less than his previous optician. He had once had six employees, but these days of lagging cash flow wouldn’t bear such extravagance. While many employees had left the practice like mice leaving a sinking ship, Shirley had shown unusual allegiance, and he only hoped he could keep up her salary and benefits. Hillary worked for such a low salary that she would be difficult to replace, too.

Ah, Hillary, Newell thought as he straightened his collar and looked at himself in a mirror. I knew when he had lustful thoughts about the girl, a fact that had concerned me many times, but he seemed to be handling the intermittent bouts of temptation well. He could see the

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reflection of one of her well-proportioned legs as she sat in her work station, a most fetching sight. One thing in his favor was that Newell truly felt embarrassed at the licentious thoughts he had every time he looked at the girl. Still, she was picture perfect in every way, from her shapely legs to her luxurious hair, with her more intriguing parts all bouncy and impossible for him to ignore. I knew that he couldn't help such thoughts, and as a way of battling them I had trained him over the years to say a prayer of confession when he recognized them. To Newell it seemed paradoxical—the older and less able he became, and the less desirable he felt, and the more he noticed women like Hillary. I knew that he sometimes wished he hadn't hired her.

He finished buttoning his white coat and walked down the hallway, noting several more ceiling tiles freshly stained by rainwater, a couple of them showing linear cracks, until he reached the exam room where the patient was waiting. He picked up the chart from a box outside the door and read the name. "Francesco Giovanni" was clearly marked on the first page inside the folder. The doctor noted that the patient had been in for an eye exam only four months previously, had been found to have minimal, asymptomatic cataract, and had been advised to return in two years. For some reason Newell couldn't help having a feeling of dread as he entered.

* * *

As lead angel on the case, I sensed Newell's thoughts about this patient and I sympathized. Unfortunately, this man wasn't the only visitor to the office that morning. I stayed in the background as much as possible, but my enemies were well aware.

"What a nice plan we have in place here," said Lord Thuggrub to his understudy.

The ugly personage fingered his sword handle as he cast a scowl my way, and then inspected ravishing Hillary at some length. Surely he had plans to use the girl at some time for his purposes, but I couldn't yet conceive exactly how.

“Ignore that stupid angel and stay alert for an opportunity,” he ordered his underling.

“Never fear, my lord,” said Frogworm, “Lust never dies in a human being, even an aging one. Such men develop a most useful feeling of invulnerability. I remember a graying king once...”

“Oh, shut up. I know that story all too well. Lord Fuerte unfairly used that incident to leap past me in the hierarchy. And any part you may have played was minuscule at best.”

“Of course, my lord,” responded his underling, sounding hollow but contrite. “I apologize.”

“I should think you’d be much less presumptive after this morning’s disaster. A simple distraction of some sort at the right time would have saved you and your rabble a lot of pain. Why didn’t you position Newell’s cat so he would step on it at the right time?”

“An excellent suggestion, master, and one I’ve used effectively before.”

“But it never crossed your mind this time, did it? I’ve educated you exceedingly well, but you forget and falter far too often at critical junctures. Now get to work! You’re considerably behind schedule.”

Both demons were speaking so loudly that I could not help but ear, but they seemed not to care. I remembered the incident and the king, of course, having been involved myself. There was actually a rare grain of truth in Thuggrub’s account. I took note of the cat distraction, as well, having seen the ploy work all too handsomely on too many occasions. “Yes, my lord,” Frogworm growled, his foul mouth mumbling low a solid string of expletives. “But we had prepared Newell’s condition so meticulously! And if I might offer a very slight correction, master, we currently have not one, but two excellent instruments in Newell’s office.”

“Of course we do. Do you think I’m unaware of the potential of the patient in Newell’s exam room? He’s an integral part of our plan. He wouldn’t be there had I not arranged some circumstances beyond your regrettably limited control.”

“You simply don’t trust me to do good work, do you, my lord?”

“Trust? Oh, that poisonous accumulation of misdirected feelings that always spells catastrophe. No, my fiend, I do not trust you. I

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should have been by now millennia in the abyss had I ever trusted any being in the slightest.”

Again, there was some truth in Thuggrub’s ranting. I actually felt a twinge of sorrow at their blindness, and rejoiced that my own life overflowed with real purpose and meaning.

“What, then?” asked Frogworm, alternately extending and contracting his sharp claws while shooting his own evil glance my way.

“Trust is out of the question, but my respect and admiration you may earn,” said Thuggrub as he began fading from view. “My mandate to serve our master in innovative ways is also available. But your incompetence is legendary, my fiend.”

Frogworm had a stunned look in his swine-like eyes. Once more, I had to feel some sympathy. It was he who had schemed for days to get Giovanni to see Newell, and I had been trying to counter him at every step. He hissed under his breath, then angrily extracted his sword and slashed several deep gashes in one of the sagging ceiling tiles.

Frogworm seated himself in an advantageous location near the doctor and his patient. He cursed and glowered when I moved closer, while pointing his drawn weapon in my direction.

Here was a determined demon that was completely devoid of beauty, a repulsive unsightliness permeating completely. His hideous form gave off an offensive odor which human nostrils could detect only with difficulty. His face was like that of a gargoyle on a medieval church corner, made more realistic by bulging green eyes and tiny drum-like ears. His lips were oversized and he rarely showed his mouthful of fearsome teeth unless particularly aroused. His skin was green and slick, though the underside of his wings bore a residual of feathers, a rare trait in demons, an unusual throwback to a better, more purposeful era he had long ago left behind. He kept his wings folded tightly to his back because this aberrant wing-feather trait made his peers envious and therefore dangerous.

“Curse you in the name of my master!” Frogworm sneered at me through clenched teeth and retracted lips.

“A sweet greeting,” I said promptly. “Your ill-planned tractor-trailer ploy this morning was doomed from the start, of course.”

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Frogworm skulked as he backed up a bit and fluffed his wings. His next shot at Newell would likely be far more subtle and perhaps more difficult for our forces to neutralize.

* * *

Rex Durbin had his own appointment with a different eye doctor that day. He greeted the receptionist at Dr. Obed Haskins' office with a smile.

"Good morning, Mr. Durbin," said the petite blonde, returning his pleasant look. "Dr. Haskins will be ready for you in a moment. You're today's first patient."

"I shouldn't take long. I've been having no visual problems at all, so I'm just here for a routine check for glaucoma and so forth. Even my reading glasses seem to be okay."

"Let's let Dr. Haskins decide," she advised, showing a mouthful of beautifully whitened and perfectly straight teeth.

"That's fine with me. I talked to Obed at Rotary Club the other day and he told me I was way overdue a checkup."

"We'll get it done shortly."

In back of the office, Ben-Heovah had stationed Durbin's guardian, a legion angel whose name was Glorius, a stunning being with snow white hair, huge fanned-out golden wings, and clothing like soft, fluffy clouds. I knew that he had risen in rank to legion angel because of his extreme love for the One from the cross, and that he now commanded a thousand faithful spirits. Still, he had his own personal charge, as well, in keeping with angelic tradition and history.

Dr. Haskins had dark brown eyes and was overweight. His eyes were magnified several times by his own thick glasses, and they seemed to metamorphose to a darker brown when he spoke to Durbin after completing his exam.

"Rex, I hate to tell you this, but you've got cataracts. You need surgery."

"What? Cataracts? But Obed, I see fine. I don't want any surgery."

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“Well, the option is blindness. You need to go see Dr. Henry Braniff as soon as we can get you in. He’s pretty busy, but he’ll do you a great job and you’ll be glad you had it done.”

Glorius sat weeping as he vainly tried to warn Durbin. The man was under the spell of his doctor, though, and paid no attention. A wicked spirit whose name I didn’t know was in charge here, and he neutralized Glorius’ effort by the simple mechanism of standing between him and Durbin.

“If you say so, Obed,” said Durbin. “I trust your judgment. What’s involved in this kind of surgery?”

“Not much. It’s outpatient. There are no stitches or shots, and Braniff is so good at it he doesn’t even put a patch on the eye. You’ll have one eye done the first day and probably the other one the next day. I’ll take care of you from that point on.”

“Okay,” said Durbin slowly. “I suppose I could at least go talk to the surgeon.”

“You’ll do more than talk. You need surgery.”

Glorius turned away from the scene, tears clouding his luminous eyes. The receptionist picked up the phone and touched a single button to reach the Christian Medical Eye Institute.

“Great news,” he could hear her saying to Durbin. “Head on over there now and they can do your first eye tomorrow! They’ve apparently had a cancellation. You’re in luck!”

“Luck? I don’t call this luck. What time do they want me there?”

* * *

I would have to sit in on Newell’s exam session in my usual fashion as an unseen observer. My adversary would not leave, but in deference to Newell’s spiritual sensitivity he had to seat himself farther from the conversation.

“Good morning, Mr. Giovanni,” Newell said in a pleasant voice, extending his hand and looking the patient over. “What brings you back so soon?”

Giovanni was about Newell's age but in much better general physical shape. He had a full head of dark hair and skin that was deep olive in color and almost wrinkle-free. His right orbit was slightly swollen and there was a detectable droop to the upper eyelid on that side. The left eye was white and normal in appearance, but the right one was the color of freshly-cut flesh. As Newell observed, a rose-tinted tear spilled down Giovanni's cheek. I already knew the full disgusting story, but it would be a major surprise for Newell.

"Doc, I've got a problem," said Giovanni in a heavy Italian accent. "I also have to confess. I've had my cataracts removed since I was here."

"Really?" asked Newell, scanning the chart. "They were nowhere near being ready for surgery four months ago. Did you start having trouble seeing?"

"Not really. I've got a friend who had cataract surgery scheduled at that big place over by the interstate, and I went with him as his driver. He did just fine and was satisfied. While I was in the waiting room, a pretty chick came by doing a survey of some kind. One question she asked was whether I'd already had cataract surgery."

Newell winced a little.

"Bottom line is that I said no, I hadn't, but that I'd been told that I had small ones. Right away she offered me a free exam. Doc, I'm not opposed to getting something free now and then, so I took her up on it. She looked me over and told me I had bad cataracts and needed surgery. A guy named Braniff, Dr. Henry M. Braniff, to be exact, came in to check behind her. Apparently he's the big dog at that place, and he's the same guy who was operating on my friend. He said I shouldn't even leave that day before having it done, because I was going blind."

"You were," said Newell blandly. "In ten to twenty years."

"Now I can't see anything out of my right eye. He did the left one first and it sees as well as ever. But he had some kind of problem with the right one and it wound up getting an infection. They sent me to a specialist in Jacksonville, and I had two more operations. It can't even see daylight now with that eye, and it hurts all the time."

"What does Dr. Braniff say about all this?"

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“Nothin’,” said Giovanni, his voice revealing deep-seated disgust. “Since he looked at me after the eye started hurting, I haven’t seen him again. His girls arranged for me to see the guy in Jacksonville. Now I call that Christian place and they won’t even give me an appointment. They tell me to go back to Jacksonville, because Braniff doesn’t treat what I’ve got now.”

He paused to catch another tear cascading down his right cheek, gently dabbing with a convenient tissue, and then continued.

“Doc, I’m sorry I didn’t take your advice.”

“So am I,” said Newell as he scanned the information recorded earlier by Shirley. He noted a pressure of zero in the right eye, and a normal 16 in the left. Vision was 20/20 in the left eye, but the right eye was NLP, no light perception, totally blind. The doctor shook his head grimly.

He had Giovanni lean forward to the chin rest of his slit lamp instrument and press his forehead against an upper band. Newell looked first at the functioning left eye, and noted it contained an intraocular lens implant of a modern type centered in the proper position, and appeared well-healed and free of inflammation. Basically, it was a competent job of surgery. He swung the light beam of his instrument to the right eye and at once felt slightly sickened. Brown iris lay plastered to the inner cornea, eliminating the normal fluid-filled space that separates these structures. Dark tissue protruded through the cataract incision between an irregular line of bulging sutures. Loose tissue covering the eyeball also held stitches, evidence of recent additional surgery. The eye was beyond all hope with a dead optic nerve. The low pressure signified onset of phthisis bulbi, a degenerating, shrinking eye that would eventually require removal.

“Okay, relax now.” Newell gently pushed his patient back to a more comfortable position. “I’m sorry, Mr. Giovanni, but nobody except God himself can fix that right eye. The left one is well done, though.”

Giovanni looked at Newell in pleading fashion before a look of resignation seemed to come over him.

“Doc, I was scammed. Even my left eye doesn’t see any better than it did before. I’d still be seeing well with both eyes if I hadn’t been talked into surgery.”

“Mr. Giovanni, you’re ultimately the one who made the decision to have surgery. I assume you also signed some ironclad permission forms. Your options are pretty limited. By definition, a bad result isn’t malpractice unless you can prove negligence.”

“I already tried to go after this guy, and it got tossed out. But I’ve got some other options,” said Giovanni dourly, a deep frown creasing his forehead, his aroused anger causing Frogworm to edge a little closer, a crooked smile on his face. “And they might include that judge who squelched my case. I hear he’s a friend of Braniff.”

“I wouldn’t know about that, but I’d certainly advise against any drastic measures. The damage is done. All you can do is inform others of your experience. I do believe you were subjected to unnecessary surgery, but I know that doesn’t help you. Sometimes you make a poor decision and you just have to live with it.”

“I’m not satisfied with that,” said Giovanni resolutely. “Thanks for looking me over, doc.” “Think nothing of it,” said Newell, his voice deep with the kind of concern that causes angels to rejoice. “There’s no charge for today.”

“I appreciate that, too. I’ve spent over a hundred grand on this eye,” he gestured with his index finger as he turned and walked out of the room.

Newell frowned and looked at the floor. He briefly considered calling Braniff, but he’d tried that on a couple of occasions and was never able to get through. I already knew why—Braniff just felt too important and too busy to talk to an ordinary ophthalmologist. Or else he would be out sailing.

Ah, yes, sailing, the only diversion Newell’s competitor seemed to enjoy. As an angel, I couldn’t really appreciate the charm of it all, but it was obviously an addictive pursuit. Braniff’s 40-foot sloop was well known in and around the waters off King’s Bay, with its American flag flying high and the letters “CMEI” displayed prominently above the boat’s name, *Prosperity*.

My client did call the local sheriff and his longtime friend, George Ricks, to warn him about Giovanni’s threats. Ricks made a note of it, but intimated that the only threats he could act upon were those involving “imminent danger or national security.” Still, I heard him

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promise to call Braniff himself and tell him about it. I heard later from Ricks' guardian that his charge followed through with that promise, though he, too, was unable to reach Dr. Braniff.

As Newell sat writing in Giovanni's chart, Shirley stuck her head in the door.

"We've only two more patients today, Dr. Newell. We booked thirty, but they either cancelled because of the rain or didn't show up."

Actually, I knew that the no-shows outnumbered the ones who called and cancelled by a dozen to one. I was the only one in the office at the time who was aware of the real reason, except for a certain employee and my demon-foe, Frogworm.

"Well, let's do the best we can for those two," said the doctor as he finished the chart work and reached for the city newspaper. "When they get here, bring them on back."

Newell read the headlines while listening to Shirley as she screened a patient across the hall. He turned the page and was hit in the face by one of Braniff's colorful full-page ads, a regrettably frequent fact of life in King's Bay's media. There was a large picture of a smiling Braniff in surgical garb beside the words, "Most Modern Eye Surgeon in America." Another line claimed the young physician held numerous patents on top-of-the-line surgical equipment and had designed many new and better procedures. The ad hailed Braniff as tops in his field and in great demand as a speaker at eye conferences everywhere. Glowing patient testimonials formed a frame around the flashy ad. There was even a quarter-page section about Braniff's humanitarian interests and announcement of an upcoming medical mission trip to Honduras. Knowing the full story as I did, I chuckled a little when I read the ad, but I stifled my mirth by contemplating how serious the state of affairs had become for my poor client.

I had accompanied Newell to India and other impoverished countries more than twenty times, as he earned for himself indescribable joy and giving the same to me and my Master. He had performed several thousand free cataract operations for underprivileged people with no thought of the personal cost to himself in time and money. He had planned his next trip months ago and it was drawing nearer. My Master and I knew such a task was always hard, relentless

work that exacted a toll on the bodies and minds of servants like Newell. Nevertheless, it resulted in spiritual growth and had proven effective in relieving suffering and spreading the Good News. Hardships apart, Newell always came home refreshed and with new perspective, though in human terms hardly anyone outside his small church knew about his mission trips. A major obstacle to this year's trip was funding, something that had never been of much concern until of late. I rejoiced when I heard Newell say a brief, inaudible prayer asking for such details to work out.

Newell closed the newspaper and sighed, his face limp, his only expression a deeply wrinkled brow. How did one counter such tactics? He knew many of the ad's claims were outright fabrications. But proving false advertising to a gullible public could involve a head-to-head legal confrontation, and he had neither the will nor the cash for such. He'd considered doing some advertising himself, but to do so would violate a precious long-held principle. Newell had done thousands of successful cataract operations and other eye procedures, but his volume had tapered off to practically zero since opening of the ostentatious Christian Medical Eye Institute.

He didn't even know if his practice could survive, and in truth neither did I.

CHAPTER 2

I stood with my commander surveying the town of King's Bay, Georgia, while noting how the place stood in booming growth mode. Its major nuclear submarine base anchored the local economy. A very mild coastal climate drew retirees, while new developments and businesses were springing up continually. As far as human endeavors are concerned this one held every look of success.

"Yeshuaham, we face a tremendous challenge," said Ben-Heovah. "Be ready with your forces."

"I am well aware, beloved commander. We are monitoring all aspects," I replied. I noted the beauty of the physical world surrounding us as we stood amid twisted oaks and ancient cypresses. Spanish moss draped the trees while green lily pads with clean, white blossoms floated on a nearby waterway. There was a hint of red and a touch of blue here and there among the massive limbs where colorful birds flitted about, calling at intervals from the trees. Our Master's work of creation remained ever astonishing. I forced myself to concentrate on the threat at hand.

"Our man Newell will be tested. We must stand by to assist when he calls," Ben-Heovah continued. He appeared unusually serious, but gave me a reassuring nod.

"And he will call, I have all confidence," I said, though perhaps my voice was tainted by doubt. I had seen so many catastrophic failures when humans needed only to cry out for help.

"Do not be overly concerned, Yeshuaham," said Ben-Heovah, instantly picking up on my misplaced fears. "Worry is for our adversaries. We are creatures of infinite confidence. Remember the One from the cross."

"I will never forget, brother."

"Glorius tells me that Rex Durbin has been scheduled for surgery by Dr. Braniff. I have it on higher authority that he will be an important element in the coming days and weeks."

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“I have also spoken with Glorius about him, my commander,” I said. “He is disturbed by planned developments involving Durbin, but he will be resolute in standing by him.”

“Of course he will. Love never fails.”

We embraced as usual, and then Ben-Heovah faded from my sight. I began testing spiritual temperatures of believers all around town and assigning my forces as wisdom dictated.

* * *

This morning was little different from other mornings in one expensive home overlooking the coastal marsh. Like many high-end properties, the development was gated and guarded, and each home had access to a boating canal connected to the nearby ocean. Braniff could have moored his sailboat practically in his own yard had the deep keel of the vessel not made that hazardous.

Braniff was tall and handsome with a definite athletic look. He had sandy hair that descended low on his forehead, a close-cropped blonde mustache, and a superman profile. His face bore a rugged, weather-beaten appearance from time spent on the open waters of nearby Cumberland Sound. He was married to his second wife, a beautiful Mexican registered nurse he had met while in residency, at which time he had dumped his hard-working but homely first wife. Since he had accumulated no wealth up to that time and had no children, divorcing wife number one had been easy, convenient, and uncontested.

After an early morning workout, Braniff showered and entered the kitchen. Nobody was there, so he went first to the refrigerator and then to a pantry for breakfast makings. Finding both nearly empty, he muttered something under his breath and then boomed, “Angelica! Where is my cereal?”

A sleepy voice called back weakly from an upstairs bedroom.

“In the cabinet, just like always.”

“Oh, yeah, here it is. Hey, how about milk? And I don’t see any fresh fruit!” he said loudly, afterward lowering his tone somewhat.

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“Why can’t you at least do the basics? You don’t have to love me, but something to eat would be nice.”

“You never here, Gringo. Never here. *¿Porque necesito ayadarle tanto?*” replied Angelica defiantly, appearing in her nightgown at the top of the stairs.

“*Aydarme tanto*, my rear end,” said Braniff, glowering at her. He picked up a vase on the dining room table and oddly adjusted it so the handle pointed in the opposite direction. “See, you did it again! Why won’t you respect what I tell you to do? You never do anything for me! Nothing but nothing!”

“I no need to help you, Gringo. I see big ad in the paper. You pay big to claim to be somebody, but you nobody! Nobody, you hear? You can’t get in medical school in this country so you go to Grenada. You go there to sail and catch girls, not to learn. You can’t get eye training in this country so you come to my country. You can’t pass the test to do doctor work in America, so you have to take it ten times. You complain eye board exams are too hard, so you won’t take them again. You the one who complains! I’m sorry you meet me!”

“I’m sorry, too, you arrogant... Why can’t you be satisfied with a million-dollar home, Angelica? Why can’t you just keep your Mexican mouth shut and take care of the boys without complaining? Why can’t you...”

“Oh, shut up. You want me to be your house girl? Well, you got me. Happy home, that’s the Braniff family.”

He stomped out of the house, wearing his usual scrub clothes, and headed down the stairs, stinging from the undeniable truth in Angelica’s harsh words. Thankfully, none of his patients ever even asked about his board certification status, which wasn’t even a requirement in Georgia, anyway.

Yesterday’s stormy weather had given way to brilliant sunshine, and Braniff’s episode of temper subsided as he drove westward. His gleaming BMW hummed as he zipped along a quaint lane lined with ancient live oaks, their massive fern-covered limbs undulating outward and reaching the ground. Long filaments of lovely gray moss clothed the giant trees like delicate angel hair. Braniff was practically oblivious to these coastal charms, though, and shortly began dreaming of hoisting

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the halyards up the mast of his boat, setting mainsail and jib, then running through the wind-churned bay waters in his fast, sleek sloop with a colorful spinnaker flying out front.

Ahead of him the town center loomed, near rustic docks where clunky shrimp boats came and went, and he could see masts towering above dockside buildings. The road broadened as it led toward I-95, the busy main artery to Florida, and near the interstate he wheeled into a side road to enter the white brick parking lot of the Christian Medical Eye Institute. He looked up at a giant neon sign with some pride, noting its excellent position to attract attention from any direction. The facility's slogan was clearly visible in large red letters on the digital portion of the sign, which stated "Leading Edge Technology for Leading Edge Eye Surgery."

His ad team certainly did excellent work.

* * *

I, Yeshuaham, was the only one present who could see the agitated demon. How often I have wished I could become invisible to my foes, but we of the spiritual dimension are mutually aware. He cast a nefarious eye at me as I appeared nearby. I recalled my orders, which I would carry out with as little fanfare as possible. For now it seemed prudent to simply watch and listen.

Lord Thuggrub is a fiendish beast indeed. He stood invisible to human eyes on a grassy lawn near the Christian Medical Eye Institute and watched the spectacle of patients congregating for the famous doctor's daily surgical session. Thuggrub was obviously uneasy as he paced up and down, stomping his clawed feet into the deep grass and scowling frequently. His hideous face was covered with coarse hair and his eyes were red and hot, like pieces of steel fresh from a furnace. His nose appeared large and bulbous, and his ears were oversized, giving him a look some might judge comical were it not so fierce. He barely possessed lips, allowing his dagger-like teeth to show constantly. His bat-like wings were covered with sparse, stiff hair, and folded like worn leather onto his back. These he alternately furled and unfurled as his

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anger ebbed and flowed. His hands each held five fingers plus a thumb, all of which were tipped with claws similar to a grizzly bear: long, curved, and heinous. At the bottom of his hairy, bowed legs, his feet had six appendages like those on his hands. In his physical form he was large, much larger than an average demonic personage, an asset that could not be ignored by his kind. In addition to this imposing appearance, even I had to recognize that his mind was as sharp as a diamond blade. This supernatural intelligence put him ever on the upward climb in the hierarchy, almost always at the expense of less capable beings. On this particular day, Thuggrub was becoming more restless by the moment and was seriously considering calling down another fierce thunderstorm to placate his escalating wrath. I held my place at some distance, avoiding any direct, unprotected confrontation with such a monster.

“We shall see what explanation he offers this time,” Thuggrub growled, emitting a low, lion-like sound that only I could hear. “Where is that despicable imp?”

I had deduced that he grudgingly admired how well Frogworm made excuses, a trait that had earned his subordinate some reputation among his cohorts. As usually occurred, however, envy overrode Thuggrub’s better opinion and allowed his hatred free rein.

“Someday,” he shouted aloud gleefully, “This upstart Frogworm will fail to have good enough reason, and it will be the end of his vile carcass!”

He obviously knew that I heard, and he practically dared me to do anything about it. Thuggrub smiled wickedly, likely harboring thoughts of his loathsome understudy forever imprisoned under most unfavorable circumstances, some of his despised feathers flying away in his infinite freefall. The mutual hatred and mistrust in the demon fraternity is something we angels struggle to comprehend.

Thuggrub’s deep-rooted impatience made his wait seem longer than actuality. Shortly a vehicle pulled up to the institute and wheeled onto the lush grass, its driver ignoring numerous “No Parking” signs designed to protect fragile turf and shrubbery. Atop the car was Frogworm, basking in irrepressible self-congratulation, grinning so broadly his shark-like teeth were visible. Seeing his boss, he left his

perch as the car's driver opened his door and emerged. Frogworm fluffed his wings in a fashion that seemed practically defiant and landed softly beside Thuggrub.

"You fool," hissed Thuggrub, "Where have you been? Do you think I've nothing better to do than watch these stupid humans come and go at a doctor's office? You still look like you just lost a major battle, by the way, from the state of your shredded cloak. Have you no pride in appearance?"

"I've been following your orders, my lord. You said for me not to leave the one-eyed man, so I've had no time for self-examination. But these contemptible humans must have their sleep, and not even a master like me can manipulate them completely. Nobody else could have made Giovanni drive faster or more directly to this place."

"Master, is it? Hmm. Well, tell me what you've learned and let's finalize our plans."

"Giovanni is primed. He's quite nicely enraged."

"If you're considering inciting him to murder Braniff, forget it. We have no permission and besides, destruction of such a valuable resource can't be in my—uh, our interests, unless there's a tremendous payoff."

"I know that, my lord. Besides, I have a better plan. We currently own Giovanni, but he's susceptible to—our exalted master forbid—learning about that detestable cross thing. Committing murder could eventually drive him to that extreme, or make it easier for our enemies to lure him there."

"You are correct for a change," said Thuggrub, his deep frown showing prominently once more across his dark forehead. "How many times have I seen exactly such a catastrophe? I can't even count the losses."

"Don't worry, my lord," replied Frogworm, glancing my way and lowering his voice some. "We can be more subtle, and also perhaps penetrate the dreadful mist that surrounds that old goat, Newell, so much of the time. He must pay for the great damage he has done to our cause. Yesterday was an aberration..."

Frogworm rubbed his badly chafed face where coarse hair was already growing back in several deep abrasions. Since we had

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succeeded in derailing his plan, I knew he wouldn't mention to Thuggrub about Newell and the tractor-trailer rig.

"You don't have to review the issue," said Thuggrub. "What do you propose?"

"It's already in motion," replied Frogworm smugly. "Follow me, please, master."

I slipped out of the physical dimension for the next several moments because I anticipated what was coming. An angel can hardly bear to watch something so wicked, and I was more than glad to depart.

* * *

Braniff opened the heavy door of his BMW, reached into the back seat to grab his laptop, and then slammed the car shut and locked it. He spun on his heels and headed for his towering facility, pride welling as he noted the brilliant brass façade around the top floor. Its tone perfectly matched the windows and doors, and his personal entrance, off limits to everyone else, likewise featured a brass awning. White bricks, countless thousands in number, lined up perfectly on all walls, harmonizing with the hand-laid parking areas. His architect had done an amazing job, even though he had charged Braniff outrageously. There were more than a dozen examination rooms, plus three operating rooms and a spacious patient care area. Exceptional landscaping added eye appeal and preserved the property's coastal charm.

Numerous sprawling live oaks had been meticulously spared in the construction process, and a serpentine walkway traversed between them. It was good to be alive and rich, the doctor thought to himself. And he was getting richer. In fact, there was the likelihood of getting extremely rich, if everything worked out according to plans. He smiled inside as he neared his personal doorway. He was just clearing the last strand of lush Spanish moss swaying near the walkway's termination.

Suddenly, someone grabbed him from behind and wrestled him roughly to the ground, destroying his proud demeanor in a humiliating flash. A fist landed roughly in his face as he tried to get up, blasting him backward onto the still-damp ground again.

“Curse you, Braniff! You ruined my eye when I didn’t even need surgery!” yelled an enraged Giovanni as he swung at the doctor again, this time narrowly missing the surgeon’s delicate face. His attacker backhanded him, however, and blood splattered from a ruptured vessel in the doctor’s nostril, while his upper lip burst as well. Braniff struggled to fight back, but it was useless. After partially fending off several more blows, he finally lay still in the grass, looking up at his glowering adversary.

“Can I sit up, at least?”

“You don’t even know who I am, do you? You can’t even remember those you mess up. You don’t really care, Braniff. You’re scum. Dr. Newell is the class eye doctor in this town, and he says you did unnecessary surgery. If I could, I’d sue you out of business.”

“Oh, I remember you. You filed that malpractice case that—uh—,” said the stunned physician, measuring his words.

“It was unjustly dismissed, thanks to your friend the judge,” interrupted Giovanni. “I’m blind in one eye for life, and Dr. Newell says I didn’t need surgery in the first place. I’ve a good mind to...”

“Get down on the ground, mister! Hands behind your head! Now!” said a commanding voice from the institute building. A uniformed man stepped toward them through an emergency exit, brandishing a pistol that was aimed at Giovanni. He kept the weapon trained on him while he helped Braniff to his feet.

“Thanks, officer,” said Braniff, dusting himself off and feeling his swelling face. “Where did you come from?”

“I was just getting a complimentary exam from one of your assistants when someone yelled there was a guy beating you up. I’m not on duty until later today, but I just happened to be here.”

“She’ll tell you that you have cataracts and need surgery,” said Giovanni coolly from his sitting position. “Maybe you’ll be luckier than me.”

“You shut up,” said Braniff, confident now, looking first at Giovanni and then at the officer. “He’s angry because he got an unfortunate infection and lost vision in one eye. It’s rare, but it happens sometimes. We did everything we could, but sometimes you just can’t win.”

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“What’s your name, fellow?” asked the officer.

“Francesco Giovanni.”

“You’re under arrest for assault. You have the right to remain silent...”

“Oh, cut the crap, officer. I know that line already.”

“Well, you’d better cool off for a while before you do something you’ll really regret,” said the policeman as he applied handcuffs. “A unit is on its way, Dr. Braniff. I’ll hold this guy until they get here.”

“Thanks again, officer,” said Braniff as he moved stiffly toward his door.

“Assault can carry a pretty heavy jail sentence, fellow,” the policeman said to his prisoner.

“He deserved it.”

As Braniff continued to inspect himself for damage, his practice manager met him at his private entrance. She was a pretty blonde named Trina Brinson, the wife of Braniff’s accountant.

“Oh, Dr. Braniff, you’re hurt,” she said in a sympathetic tone as she took his hand and led him into his plush office. She seated him in a comfortable corner recliner and smoothed his ruffled hair while massaging his shoulders affectionately. “Let me get a towel and we’ll clean you up.”

“I’ll just shower, Trina, and you can look me over then,” he said as he pulled his shirt over his head. “Bring some fresh scrubs from the O.R. While you do that I’m going to call Tom Brewster about this assault. That guy needs to burn a little, even if he does have a bad eye. And I’m more than a little peeved at old Newell. It’s like he incited the man. And he may be liable.”

Braniff had over sixty employees in the facility, including reception and secretarial help, assistants, surgical counselors, opticians, insurance clerks, nutrition specialists, and other categories he couldn’t even remember offhand. Almost all of his female employees were real lookers, too. Braniff had an uncommon affinity for female beauty, and he carefully screened each one personally. Trina had been with him from the beginning and remained a favorite.

He noticed the handle on a decorative vase on his desk was turned to the right, obviously a mistake by the cleaning woman. Such little

details could not be ignored, and he reached up and turned the vase so the handle was pointing left.

“No wonder this happened! I’ve told that woman a hundred times and she still screws up!” yelled Braniff. “Trina, tell her she’s fired!”

“I will, Henry,” she said as she left the room, giving him a wink. “But before I do that, let me get things ready for your bath.”

“I’ve got to make that call first.”

He pulled up a number in his cell phone, and within a half minute he was discussing the incident with his lawyer.

“Tom?”

“Yeah, Henry?”

“Some guy just tried to kill me,” said Braniff, explaining the episode. “His name is Francesco Giovanni. He got a bad outcome from surgery I did a while back, and he’s really livid. And Joe Newell told him I did unnecessary surgery. That was like throwing gasoline on a hot stove.”

“Oh, that guy. Isn’t that the same patient who just tried to sue you?”

“That’s him. He got nowhere, thanks to you and Judge Smathers.”

“Henry, it sounds like you’ve got a tight case against Giovanni,” said Brewster. “I know about that guy, though, and he can be bad news. He’s obviously already as mad as a rodeo bull, plus he’s got mob connections. It’s just not healthy to press charges. Anyway, about all you could do with him is lock him away for a while. His kind hides money so well you probably couldn’t collect, even if you won damages.”

“Too bad. What about Newell?”

“Now you’re talking. He’s got good deep-pocket insurance plus some hard assets, and you have a statement from the attacker that his violent behavior was triggered by Newell. We can get Giovanni to admit it under oath, I’d wager, though it might be best to keep him out of the action completely. Let me do a little thinking and we’ll see. I’m on my way to your place now, so we’ll discuss it a little more if you have time.”

“Research every facet, Tom,” said Braniff. “I’d like to put a nail in old Newell’s coffin, anyway. Our system pretty well eliminates most of his patients, but he still sees some and does some of my surgery.”

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“I’ll work on it. I think, offhand, a civil suit would be the best route. That would quickly put substantial money from the old man into our pockets. When he’s found liable, we just might go after a criminal conviction, too. That would likely involve jail time, which would put him completely out of business.”

“Sounds like a good plan. See you shortly?”

“Yep, I’m on my way now. I’ve got a friend with me. Don’t keep us waiting.”

Trina reentered the office with lotion and an armload of towels. She turned and locked the door behind her.

“We’ve got to make this quick, Trina. You can check me out in the shower really well,” said Braniff. “Before I start my cases I have a meeting with some guy Brewster is bringing over.”

“Poor, busy baby!” cooed the beauty as she tossed his soiled clothes into a hamper and then nimbly pulled her blouse over her head. “Just relax and we’ll make sure you’re completely at ease. You’ve got to make lots of money today, baby.”

“Nothing will keep me from becoming a billionaire, Trina,” he replied, wincing a little as she washed his burst upper lip under the flow of warm water. “Lots of insignificant people become millionaires, and I’m way past that, baby. After I become a billionaire, life will be as good as it can get.”

“And Dan and I are here just to help you, dear.”

“And you’ll both be well paid for it,” replied Braniff. His smile was slightly twisted by his swollen lower lip, but he was still as handsome as ever.

While they were in the marble bath, the phone on the wall rang. Braniff hesitated, but then decided to answer it. He talked in low tones for a half minute, then hung up and turned to Trina again.

“Brewster is already here with his business associate,” he said. “Well, Brewster and Arbusto can just wait a few minutes on me.”

* * *

As I re-entered time and space at the Christian Medical Eye Institute, I couldn't help but grimace a little at the satisfied looks on the faces of my enemies. Frogworm and Thuggrub were in self-congratulation mode, hardly able to hide their glee.

"I have to admit it," said Thuggrub to his underling, loud enough that I could hear him. "This is pretty good planning. I didn't think you were capable of anything like this."

"I'm smarter than you think," said Frogworm through clenched jaws, almost allowing one of his sharp fangs to protrude. "We pump up Braniff for future use, magnify and expand his innocent superstitions, destroy the economy of that old fog-shrouded doctor, and deepen the whole texture of evil in this town and beyond. What could be better?"

"Perhaps we could use a little less of your boasting. And I'm not convinced that your plan will ultimately work as you envision. I reserve final judgment until we see the outcome. After all, that angel over there just reappeared and he's been watching us," said Thuggrub, pointing across the parking lot to where I stood. "It's regrettably impossible to know what he's thinking, but if anyone began petitioning against our plan, using that dreadful Name, it would certainly fail. Remember how easily 'that old doctor,' to whom you refer so disparagingly, caused you so very recently to lose most of your body hair, as well as some of your vile feathers? You and your hapless company were an ugly sight to behold."

Thuggrub threw back his head and laughed at the thought, a hearty, menacing, laugh devoid of mirth. I shuddered a little at the sound and turned my head away for a moment.

"Who would do anything like that?" asked Frogworm. "Besides Newell, I mean. And I've got another idea on how to take care of him and his silly praying. One thing I've noticed is Newell's profuse charity. A useless trait, to be sure, but it's something that must be neutralized by Braniff. It will take some complex preparation, but by the end of the month our man will be advertising free surgery for any and all who come in, regardless of insurance coverage or ability to pay. That, along with my skillful orchestration of some legal troubles, should completely defeat Newell."

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“Destroying Newell shouldn’t be too difficult, but I can’t wait to see how you’ll get Braniff to be so generous. He’s so selfish he wouldn’t operate on his own mother if she couldn’t pay. But it’s your plan. You have to anticipate and avoid such unpleasantness as spurious acts of love, kindness, self-control, or the horror of prayer. And remember, if you fail, it’s entirely your fault. That’s our agreement with Lord Fuerte.”

“Isn’t it always?”

Frogworm scoffed quietly, not enough to agitate his boss, but adequately to register a protest. He drew his wings in tightly against his back and smiled inwardly.

I faded away and left the scene in order to attend a meeting with Ben-Heovah.

Angels and demons work aggressively as an ophthalmologist in practice for some thirty years faces financial ruin. A new eye surgeon has built a huge, ostentatious clinic and uses unethical tactics to suck up all the eye business in the area, doing cataract surgery on everyone his operatives can convince to have the procedure. Behind the scenes is an ongoing battle between good and evil, personified by the activities of numerous angels and demons.

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