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Can I Help You?

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One supplicant never made it across the pavement. Tires screamed on the pavement, followed by a horn blare. A crowd gathered, but just as many walked on, visibly disturbed by the inadvertent interruption to their day.

Jason Farber walked up the grand, stone steps to Harmon, English, Delacorte and Sons, Publishers. The building had been designed to instill a powerful sense of awe into those who entered its hallowed entrance gates. Right now, it was doing its job. Beyond the doors, was a vast expanse of marble flooring. The floors above supported by a forest of titanic square pillars of the same material.

To the right, a bank of stainless-steel elevators reflected the bright lights in the ceiling onto the floor before them like an elegant carpet of sunlight. Glass walls on the other three sides reflected the bright colors of passing traffic. Their fleeting images raced across the floor, an eclectic dance of tints and pigments. In the room's center rose a circular desk, its only opening facing the bank of elevators.

The desk hid a lower shelf, filled with monitors. Each gayly displaying their banks of information and images. A ballet of personal schedules, meetings and events which orbited this edifice. Jason approached steadily, licking his dry lips. A young lady, dressed in the finest fashion of the working class, greeted him. "May I help you?"

Jason choked. "I have an appointment with Mr. McFarland, Leonard McFarland?"

She smiled politely, running her slim fingers across the keyboard. "17th floor."

"Seventeen, you say?"

"17th floor. You can use the elevators over there."

Jason shuffled his feet over to the shiny, brushed-steel doors. His hand shook as he pressed the button with the up arrow. It lit up, as a flare might illuminate the darkness. When the door opened, he was joined by a veritable mob of people, all pressing into the small interior of the elevator car. Almost all were clutching a sheaf of paper tightly to their chests. A few held USB flash drives between their unsteady fingers.

Jason was forced to the back of the car. He raised one finger in the air and asked if someone would press seventeen for him. When the door closed, the humidity of their sweat was distinctive. Some of the passengers shifted from side to side. The doors open and a few of the inmates escaped, only to close again. Jason waited for his floor.

The car was almost empty by the time the number seventeen lit up on the control panel. Jason had to keep his knees under him in order to execute an exit from the conveyance. Outside the once crowded steel trap, the space exploded into a hive of activity. Workers with rolled up sleeves, marched rapidly between desks on urgent, unfathomable tasks. The sounds created the aura of a busy wasp's nest and the thunder of printers echoed off the walls as if heralding a coming storm.

Gathering himself, Jason approached a work area. "Can you tell me where I might find Mr. McFarland?"

The woman sighed and looked up at him with exasperated eyes. "Do you have a manuscript?" Before Jason could manage a response, she took the papers from his hands and placed them on her desk. She produced a rubber stamp and slammed it forcefully into an ink pad. Quickly and with the same force,

she imprinted Jason's paper and handed it back to him. "All the way in the back." She then returned to work as if Jason had already departed.

Jason's feet shuffled across the carpeted floor in an unsure manner as he proceeded to the far side of the floor. He looked about for any familiar signs or marks of identity, as his directions had had consisted of a rather vague route. Several times he was nearly run over as he passed the intersections between the desks. A few barely missed dowsing him with hot coffee before they continued on with their appointed rounds.

Reaching the opposite wall, a young man near a desk, grabbed Jason's papers. He wore a bleached white shirt with a colorful, but loose, tie. His collar was unbuttoned. Before Jason could say a word, he leaned over and performed the same action the woman had done outside the elevator. To insure quality, he not only stamped the document once, but repeated the deed three times. Almost as if stamping the paper was some form of exotic ritual. He returned the piece with the gusto of handing off a football. Placing his other hand on Jason's back, he angled him over toward the next desk and then departed. Gone with the nimble moves of a ghostly spirit.

The middle-age lady he found himself before had the nose of an eagle and the chin to match. She took his papers and harshly caressed them with the ink of her own stamp, before handing them back. She performed this accomplishment without looking up even once. Her attention remained focused on an unknowable task which seemed to require all her guile. "Mr. McFarland's personal assistant is the next desk over." She waved her hand dismissively, eyes never leaving her glowing screen.

Jason proceeded along the path indicated, nearly running into a youthful woman as she was leaving her desk. "Are you Mr. McFarland's four o'clock?"

"Yes, I'm Jason Far..." he never got to complete his sentence. The woman took his prize possession from him and proceed to add another stamp to it. She swiftly returned it to Jason, but he merely stared at the paper in astonishment. Mr. McFarland's personal assistant had placed yet another 'rejected' stamp on top of the eight other ones already present.

"Mr. McFarland had to go home early, so he won't be able to see you today." She retrieved Jason's papers and without further ado, placed one more 'rejected' stamp upon its rumpled surface before returning it to the clutches of the author. "There you go," she said politely. "This way you won't have to reschedule your appointment. Thanks so much for coming down." She waved her hand brightly. "Have a nice day."