



UNSONG

Table of Contents

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— *kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com*

([Prologue](#))

BOOK I: GENESIS

1. [Dark Satanic Mills](#)

(Interlude ⅈ: [The Cracks In The Sky](#))

2. [Arise To Spiritual Strife](#)

(Interlude Ⓜ: [The Code of the World](#))

3. [On A Cloud I Saw A Child](#)

4. [Tools Were Made And Born Were Hands](#)

5. [Never Seek To Tell Thy Love](#)

(Interlude ⅔: [Cantors and Singers](#))

6. [Till We Have Built Jerusalem](#)

7. [The Perishing Vegetable Memory](#)

8. [Laughing To Scorn Thy Laws And Terrors](#)

9. [With Art Celestial](#)

10. [Bring The Swift Arrows Of Light](#)

(Interlude ⅈ: [N-Grammata](#))

11. [Drive The Just Man Into Barren Climes](#)

(Interlude ⅈ: [The Right Hand Of God](#))

12. [Borne On Angels' Wings](#)

(Interlude ⅈ: [There's A Hole In My Bucket](#))

13. [The Image Of Eternal Death](#)

14. [Cruelty Has A Human Heart](#)

15. [O Where Shall I Hide My Face](#)

16. [If Perchance With Iron Power He Might Avert His Own Despair](#)

(Interlude 1: [Man On The Sphere](#))

Prologue

I.

In retrospect, there had been omens and portents.

("We are now approaching lunar sunrise," said William Anders, "and for all the people back on Earth, the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send to you.")

Rivers flowed uphill. A new star was seen in the night sky. A butchered pig was found to have the word "OMEN" written on its liver in clearly visible letters.

("In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.")

Lightning struck in clear weather. Toads fell from the clouds. All ten thousand lakes in Minnesota turned to blood; scientists blamed "phytoplankton".

("And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.")

A majestic golden eagle flew onto the Vatican balcony as Pope Paul VI was addressing the faithful. The bird gingerly removed the Pontiff's glasses with its beak, then poked out his left eye before flying away with an awful shriek.

("And God called the light Day," said Jim Lovell, "and the darkness He called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.")

A beached whale was found hundreds of miles inland. A baby was born with four eyes.

("And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.")

Pieces of paper with the word "OMEN" written on them fell from the clouds. A beached whale was seen in the night sky. Babies left unattended began to roll slowly, but unmistakably, uphill.

("And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.")

One of the additional eyes on the four-eyed baby was discovered to be the left eye of Pope Paul VI, missing since the eagle incident. The provenance of the fourth eye was never determined.

("And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place," said Frank Borman, "and let the dry land appear: and it was so.")

A series of very precise lightning strikes seared the word "OMEN" into the rust-red sand of the Sonora Desert; scientists blamed "phytoplankton".

(“And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.”)

The New York Stock Exchange rose by perfect integer amounts eleven days in a row. An obstetrician published an article in an obscure medical journal claiming that the kicks of unborn children, interpreted as Morse Code, formed unspeakable and blood-curdling messages.

*(“And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas – and God bless all of – ”
[sudden burst of static, then silence])*

II.

If I had to choose a high point for the history of the human race thus far, it would be December 24, 1968.

1968 had been a year of shattered dreams. Martin Luther King was murdered in April. Democratic golden boy Robert Kennedy was murdered in June. Soviet tanks crushed the Prague Spring in August. It felt like each spark of hope for a better world was being snuffed out, methodically, one by one.

Then almost without warning, Americans turned on their televisions and learned that a spaceship was flying to the moon. On December 22, the craft beamed a live TV broadcast to Earth informing viewers that they were about to become the first humans ever to approach another celestial body. Communications issues limited the transmission to seventeen minutes, but the astronauts

promised a second installment from lunar orbit.

On December 24, 1968, one billion people – more than for any television program before or after in the history of mankind – tuned in for Apollo 8's short broadcast. The astronauts were half-asleep, frazzled with days of complicated calculations and near-disasters – but their voices were powerful and lucid through the static. Commander Frank Borman introduced the two other members of the crew. They described the moon, as seen up close. "A vast, lonely, forbidding expanse of nothing". "A very foreboding horizon, a rather dark and unappetizing looking place". Then the Earth, as seen from afar. "A green oasis, in the big vastness of space."

Two minutes left till lunar sunrise broke the connection. The astronauts' only orders from NASA had been to "do something appropriate"

"In the beginning," read Bill Anders, "God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep."

So for two minutes on Christmas Eve, while a billion people listened, three astronauts read the Book of Genesis from a tiny metal can a hundred miles above the surface of the moon.

Then, mid-sentence, they crashed into the crystal sphere surrounding the world, because it turned out there were far *fewer* things in Heaven and Earth than were dreamt of in almost anyone's philosophy.

Book 1: Genesis



*"Now I've heard there was a sacred word
That Jala said, and it named the Lord
But you don't really know of magic, or us.
It goes like this - a tav, a resh
A fearsome joy, a fervent wish
The Comet King incanting haMephorash."*

- Leonard Cohen, 'HaMephorash'

Chapter 1: Dark Satanic Mills

It is good practice to have your program poke around at runtime and see if it can be used to give a light unto the Gentiles.

— kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com

May 10, 2017

Palo Alto

The apocalypse began in a cubicle.

Its walls were gray, its desk was gray, its floor was that kind of grayish tile that is designed to look dirty so nobody notices that it is actually dirty. Upon the floor was a chair and upon the chair was me. My name is Aaron Smith-Teller and I am twenty-two years old. I was fiddling with a rubber band and counting the minutes until my next break and seeking the hidden transcendent Names of God.

“AR-ASH-KON-CHEL-NA-VAN-TSIR,” I chanted.

That wasn’t a hidden transcendent Name of God. That wasn’t surprising. During my six months at Countenance I must have spoken five hundred thousand of these words. Each had taken about five seconds, earned me about two cents, and cost a small portion of my dignity. None of them had been hidden transcendent Names of God.

“AR-ASH-KON-CHEL-NA-VAN-TSIS,” ordered my computer, and I complied. “AR-ASH-KON-CHEL-NA-VAN-TSIS,” I said.

The little countdown clock on my desk said I had seven

minutes, thirty nine seconds until my next break. That made a total of 459 seconds, which was appropriate, given that the numerical equivalents of the letters in the Hebrew phrase “arei miklat” meaning “city of refuge” summed to 459. There were six cities of refuge in Biblical Israel, three on either side of the Jordan River. There were six ten minute breaks during my workday, three on either side of lunch. None of this was a coincidence because nothing was ever a coincidence.

“AR-ASH-KON-CHEL-NA-VAN-TSIT” was my computer’s next suggestion. “AR-ASH-KON-CHEL-NA-VAN-TSIT,” I said.

God created Man in His own image but He created everything else in His own image too. By learning the structure of one entity, like Biblical Israel, we learn facts that carry over to other structures, like the moral law, or the purpose of the universe, or my workday. This is the kabbalah. The rest is just commentary. Very, very difficult commentary, written in Martian, waiting to devour the unwary.

“VIS-LAIGA-RON-TEPHENOR-AST-AST-TELISA-ROK-SUPH-VOD-APANOR-HOV-KEREG-RAI-UM”. My computer shifted to a different part of namespace, and I followed.

Thirty-six letters. A little on the long side. In general, the longer a Name, the harder to discover but the more powerful its effects. The longest known was the Wrathful Name, fifty letters. When spoken it levelled cities. The Sepher Raziel predicted that the Shem haMephorash, the Explicit Name which would capture God’s full essence and bestow near-omnipotence upon the speaker, would be

seventy-two letters.

“VIS-LAIGA-RON-TEPHENOR-AST-AST-TELISA-ROK-SUPH-VOD-APANOR-HOV-KEREG-RAI-US.”

People discovered the first few Names of God through deep understanding of Torah, through silent prayer and meditation, or even through direct revelation from angels. But American capitalism took one look at prophetic inspiration and decided it lacked a certain ability to be forced upon an army of low-paid interchangeable drones. Thus the modern method: hire people at minimum wage to chant all the words that might be Names of God, and see whether one of them starts glowing with holy light or summoning an angelic host to do their bidding. If so, copyright the Name and make a fortune.

But combinatorial explosion is a harsh master. There are twenty-two Hebrew letters and so 22^{36} thirty-six letter Hebrew words. Even with thousands of minimum-wage drones like myself, it takes millions of years to exhaust all of them. That was why you needed to know the rules.

God is awesome in majesty and infinite in glory. He’s not going to have a stupid name like GLBLGLGLBLBLGLFLFLBG. With enough understanding of Adam Kadmon, the secret structure of everything, you could tease out regularities in the nature of God and constrain the set of possible Names to something almost manageable, then make your drones chant that manageable set. This was the applied kabbalah, the project of some of the human race’s greatest geniuses.

“VIS-LAIGA-RON-TEPHENOR-AST-AST-TELISA-ROK-SUPH-

VOD-APANOR-HOV-KEREG-RAI-UA.”

I should have been one of those geniuses. Gebron and Eleazar’s classic textbook says that only four kabbalists have ever gazed upon Adam Kadmon bare. Rabbi Isaac Luria. The archangel Uriel. The Comet King. And an eight year old girl. I won’t say I had gazed upon it *bare*, exactly, but in the great game of strip poker every deep thinker plays against the universe I’d gotten further than most.

Then I fell from grace. My career was ruined before it even began when I was expelled from Stanford for messing with Things Mankind Was Not Meant To Know – by which I mean the encryption algorithms used by major corporations. Nobody wanted a twenty-two year old kabbalist without a college degree. It was like that scene in the Bible where God manifested Himself upon Mount Sinai, but only to those Israelites who had graduated from Harvard or Yale.

Not that I was bitter.

Now here I was, doing menial labor for minimum wage.

“VIS-LAIGA-RON-TEPHENOR-AST-AST-TELISA-ROK-SUPH-VOD-APANOR-HOV-KEREG-RAI-UP.”

It would be a lie to say I stayed sane by keeping my mind sharp. The sort of mental sharpness you need for the kabbalah is almost perpendicular to sanity, more like a very specific and redirectable schizophrenia. I stayed *functional* by keeping my mind in a very specific state that probably wasn’t very long-term healthy.

“VIS-LAIGA-RON-TEPHENOR-AST-AST-TELISA-ROK-SUPH-VOD-APANOR-HOV-KEREG-RAI-UTS.”

The timer read 4:33, which is the length of John Cage’s famous silent musical piece. 4:33 makes 273 seconds total. -273 is absolute zero in Celsius. John Cage’s piece is perfect silence; absolute zero is perfect stillness. In the year 273 AD, the two consuls of Rome were named Tacitus and Placidianus; “Tacitus” is Latin for “silence” and Placidianus is Latin for “stillness”. 273 is also the gematria of the Greek word eremon, which means “silent” or “still”. None of this is a coincidence because nothing is ever a coincidence.

“VIS-LAIGA-RON-TEPHENOR-AST-AST-TELISA-ROK-SUPH-VOD-APANOR-HOV-KEREG-RAI-UK.”

Just as the timer on my desk dropped into the double-digits (59 – the number of different numbers in the Book of Revelation) a man dressed in a black uniform stepped into my cubicle and told me he wanted to talk. I followed him into an empty office and he sat me down and told me I was in trouble.

(This isn’t the part that led to the apocalypse. That comes about an hour later.)

“Have you been feeling tired lately?” he asked in what he probably thought was a kindly manner. He was trying to sound like a therapist, but ended up sounding like a police officer trying to sound like a therapist. I looked above his ears for Hebrew tattoos. He didn’t have any, which meant he hadn’t caught me himself. He was the guy whom the guy who had caught me had sent to do the dirty work.

“A little,” I admitted. I knew where this was going.

“We had a report of somebody speaking the Wakening Name directly,” he said. Directly, vocally, forming the sounds myself instead of buying a scroll upon which someone else had written the letters while they were speaking them. Yes, I had done it. Yes, I knew it was illegal. Yes, I knew there was a chance of getting caught. But I’d done it a hundred times before without any problem. So had half the people in this office. I guess my luck had finally run out.

I nodded. “I was really tired,” I said, “and the coffee machine was broken. And I’d left my scroll wheel at home. I’m sorry. I know it’s against the law. I promise I won’t do it again.”

The officer gave me a kindly smile. “I know it can sometimes be tempting to use Names directly,” he said. “Especially in a place like this, where you’re working hard to develop new Names yourselves. But you get your salary because people use Names the right way. They buy the scrolls from the company that owns them, and use them as directed. It’s dangerous to use them yourself, and it’s not fair to the people who worked so hard to discover them. Right?”

There were many things I could have said just then. But I just said “Right,” and looked bashful.

He wrote me a ticket for \$70. A whole day’s wages. Not to mention the number of nations into which humankind was scattered after the Tower of Babel, the “threescore and ten years” limit of the Biblical human lifespan, the number of Israelites who entered into the land of bondage in Deuteronomy 10:22, the number of years of God’s wrath in

Zechariah 1:12, the year in which the Second Temple was destroyed, and the number of years that copyright law grants a creator exclusive rights to their work. A bitter, hopeless number. Then he warned me that the penalty would be higher if I was caught again. Warned me that he and his were watching me now, that maybe I had been living like this for a long time, but that wasn't going to fly anymore. Then he gave me some sort of pat on the shoulder which I think was supposed to be manly, maybe even paternal, and sent me back to work.

I had missed my break. That was the worst part of all of it. I'd been humiliated, I'd lost seventy dollars, and I'd *missed my break*. I needed to vent. I lay back in my chair, closed my eyes, and concentrated as hard as I could:

[Narwhals of Jericho]

No answer. Figured. I was too wired up to telepathy straight.

So I reset the timer. One more shift. One more hour before I could go home. The computer fed me my next Name candidate. I spoke.

“VIS-LAIGA-RON-TEPHENOR-AST-AST-TELISSA-ROC-SUPH-VOD-APANOR-HOV-KEREG-RAI-SI.”

I hated to admit it, but the lost money really hurt. Ever since I lost my scholarship I'd been treading water, trying to avoid starving to death until I could claw my way back into the intellectual world. For six months I'd been telling myself that the job at Countenance was a stepping stone to bigger and better things. Maybe I could impress people here and move

up from production floor drone to scientific advisor, become one of the guys who finds patterns in the Divine Names and helps narrow the search space.

I could have done it. I'd already made discoveries in the field – small ones, but bigger than some made by theorists with good reputations and nice offices. But I had to get my foot back in the door. I was saving a couple hundred bucks a month. With enough time, I could get enough money to supplement loans, maybe find myself another scholarship somewhere else, even a community college would be better than this, make something of myself. And now all that was seventy dollars further away. A minor setback, but still somehow infuriating. Maybe something that put me in the wrong frame of mind, changed how I interpreted what was to come.

“COR-ASTA-NAMI-NAMI-TELTHE-SO-KATA-RU.”

The minutes on the timer ticked down. The words on the computer kept coming. My energy slowly seeped away. The domino whose fall would precipitate the End of Days teetered.

There were forty seconds on the timer when the computer gave me a monster. It started ROS-AILE-KAPHILUTON-MIRAKOI-KALANIEMI-TSHANA-KAI-KAI-EPHSANDER-GALISDO-TAHUN... and it just kept going. Fifty two letters. Two longer than the Wrathful Name. It was the longest Name I'd ever been given to test, by far. I was shocked Countenance would even bother.

I incanted: “ROS-AILE-KAPHILUTON-MIRAKOI-KALANIEMI-

TSHANA-KAI-KAI-EPHSANDER-GALISDO-TAHUN..." until I reached the end of the word. It was not a Name of God.

I incanted: "ROS-AILE-KAPHILUTON-MIRAKOI-KALANIEMI-TSHANA-KAI-KAI-EPHSANDER-GALISDO-TAHUN..." until I reached the end of the next one. It wasn't a Name of God either.

I incanted: "ROS-AILE-KAPHILUTON-MIRAKOI-KALANIEMI-TSHANA-KAI-KAI-EPHSANDER-GALISDO-TAHUN..." and just as I finished, my timer reached zero and told me I was finished, for today, free until tomorrow morning crashed down on me and I started the same thing all over again.

"Meh," I said. "Meh. Meh. Meh. Meh. Meh."

That was the part that led to the apocalypse.

I was struck by a wave of holy light. The heavens opened and poured into me. My soul rang like a bell.

Four hundred years earlier, an old man in Prague had explained to his students that yes, you could make a golem, you could bestow upon it the *nefesh*, the animal soul. With sufficient enlightenment, you could even bestow upon it the *ruach*, the moral soul. But the *neshamah*, the divine spark, you could not bestow upon it, for that was a greater work, and would require a greater Name than any ever discovered.

Six thousand years earlier, the wind of God had moved upon the bare red dirt of Eden and shaped clay into the figure of a man. It stood there for a moment, a crude statue, and then a voice from Heaven spoke a Name, and the clay came to

life, lumbered into a standing position. It spoke a second Name, and the clay's eyes opened, and within them were innocence and curiosity and the capacity to wonder and learn. And it spoke a third Name, and it was as if a light went on inside of it, and the dust became aware that it was dust and in so doing was dust no longer.

And that third Name was fifty-eight letters long.

It began: ROS-AILE-KAPHILUTON-MIRAKOI-KALANIEMI-TSHANA-KAI-KAI-EPHSANDER-GALISDO-TAHUN...

And it ended: ...MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH.

All this I saw, as in a dream or vision. Six months and five hundred thousand nonsense words of pointless suffering, suddenly redeemed. The possibilities swam in front of me, began to take form. This wasn't just a Name. This was the royal road. And it was mine. It was none of the candidates my computer had fed me; it was six syllables longer than any of them, Countenance would never find it. As I walked out of the office and headed for the CalTrain station, I tried to calm myself, give my mind the stillness it needed for telepathy to work. Finally, I sent out a feeler.

[Baleen shem tov] I said.

A feeling, something more than nothing. Somebody was there.

[Anger] said an internal voice that was not quite my own, although the telepathic link radiated only love. Then, [Moabite Dick]

[I hate you] I thought back, but I sent through a burst of fondness. Ana and I had a running contest to come up with the worst Biblical whale pun. She always won.

[Ana. Something amazing just happened. You know our bets?]

[Yes,] the other voice said.

[I bet you I can become emperor of the world within a month. If I win, you have to give me a kiss.]

A feeling of surprise, not my own. Then suspicion. [And what do I get if you can't?]

I hadn't thought that far ahead. [Um. I'll buy you dinner.]

A pause. [No. You're too stingy. You wouldn't promise to buy dinner unless you were sure you could win. So what's going on? Fess up!]

[I'll be home in a few minutes. I'll show you!]

[You know we have choir tonight?]

[I forgot about that. I'll show you afterwards, then.]

[Tabernacle,] said Ana.

[I will hate you forever,] I thought cheerfully, then stepped onto the CalTrain. The bustle of finding my seat broke the connection, which was just as well.

We would start tonight. By the end of the week, we would

have results. By the end of the month, the whole world would have changed. It was so clear to me. It was spread out before me, like Moses' vision of the Promised Land.

"Palo Alto!" announced the train's loudspeaker. "Palo Alto!"

Palo Alto is Spanish for "tall tree". The phrase "tall tree" appears in the Bible, in Daniel 4:10. King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream, and it goes like this:

"I saw a tall tree out in a field, growing higher and higher into the sky until it could be seen by everyone in all the world. Then as I lay there dreaming, I saw one of God's angels coming down from heaven. And he shouted, 'Cut down the tree; lop off its branches; shake off its leaves, and scatter its fruit...For this has been decreed, so that all the world may understand that the Most High dominates the kingdoms of the world and gives them to anyone he wants to, even the lowliest of men!'"

"Palo Alto!" announced the loudspeaker again. "Doors will be closing shortly. Palo Alto!"

This was not a coincidence, because nothing is ever a coincidence.

Interlude X: The Cracks In The Sky

March 14, 1969
Washington, DC

Richard Nixon was confused and upset.

It wasn't that he hadn't expected problems. He'd only been on the job six weeks, but he knew a president had to be ready for anything. But "anything" was supposed to mean economic downturns, or crime waves, or The Russians.

Instead Apollo 8 had crashed into some kind of weird space glass, the sky was cracking open, the clouds were forming ominous patterns, and Tuesdays had stopped happening.

The Tuesdays were the most worrying part. For the past three weeks, people all over the world had gone to sleep on Monday and woken up Wednesday. Everything had been in order. The factories had kept running. Lawns had been mowed. Some basic office work had even gotten done. But of the preceding twenty-four hours, no one had any memories.

Today was a Friday, and it had happened three times. The President had gone to sleep Friday night, and woken up Friday morning to a call from the Chief of Staff telling him that everyone was very upset because it was Friday morning again and *how was this happening?* Everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours had unhappened, been rolled back somehow. Or maybe everyone's Saturday-morning consciousness had been shot back into their Friday-

morning bodies. He had no idea, and the American people were starting to demand answers.

He'd called the head of the CIA and asked him to get whatever department full of eggheads had covered up Roswell as a weather balloon, tell them to concoct some plausible story for whatever chronological tomfoolery was going on now.

The head of the CIA had just stood there, unflappable. "Mr. President, Roswell *was* a weather balloon. There was no cover-up. Our organization has no department dedicated to covering up inexplicable events."

"I'm the [expletive deleted] President, Helms!" Nixon had shouted. "You don't have to lie to me! Get me your cover-up eggheads immediately!"

"I'm sorry Mr. President," he said coolly, "there's no such agency."

"[expletive deleted] [expletive deleted]", Nixon had answered. "Get the [expletive deleted] out of here!"

Then he'd gone to NASA, the Department of Defense, and even the [expletive deleted] National Bureau of Standards, which was apparently in charge of timekeeping and which he hadn't even known [expletive deleted] existed until today. The today before today. Yestertoday. [expletive deleted] [expletive deleted]. None of them had been any more help than the [expletive deleted] CIA.

It was those cracks in the sky. He was sure of it. Apollo 8 had

hit *something important*. The eggheads at NASA had posited some kind of “nebulous envelope” surrounding the orbit of the moon, made of “compressed dust and gas”. Apollo 8’s collision had caused it to “oscillate”, creating the pattern of glowing, growing spiderweb cracks visible to anybody who looked up into the night sky.

Richard Nixon didn’t believe it, and neither, he figured, did anyone else. If only he could find those people who had covered up Roswell. They would know what to do.

For the past three todays, at 7:38 PM sharp, a red phone on his desk had started ringing. This was worrying for two reasons.

First, the red phone was the symbol of the nuclear hotline between the US and Russia, the last-ditch line of communication to prevent a nuclear war.

Second, the red phone was the *symbol* of the nuclear hotline. It was a prop he kept on his desk to show reporters. The actual nuclear hotline connected to a large and foreboding machine at the Pentagon that didn’t look nearly as good in pictures. The red phone on his desk wasn’t connected to a phone line and, as far as he knew, didn’t even have a ringer in it.

The first today it started ringing, he’d stared at it for like three minutes before he finally, dumbly, picked it up. The voice on the other end was saying something he couldn’t understand. It occurred to him that the people who monitored the *actual* nuclear hotline probably spoke Russian.

The second today, he'd been suspicious that it would ring again at the same time, so he'd called an interpreter to the Oval Office. At 7:38 PM, the interpreter had picked it up. "Allo," the interpreter had said, then started looking more and more puzzled. "This isn't Russian," he had said. Then, "This isn't related to any language I know." Then, "I don't think this is a real language." A few hours later he'd sent over an analysis from the State Department, which concluded that the "language" consisted of the names of the capitals of various 16th-century European countries, arranged in seemingly random combinations.

Today today, Nixon hadn't bothered. He just sat in the Oval Office doing work. He had been meeting with a man from the Weather Bureau, who wanted to tell him that the clouds were forming ominous patterns. Nixon hadn't bought it. "I'm the [expletive deleted] President of the United States," he had told the man, "Do you want me to [expletive deleted] tell you if it's a cold front or a warm front?"

The man had clarified that he meant *really* ominous patterns. Like, some big thunderstorms in the Rockies were starting to develop high anvil-like peaks – which was within normal variability for this time of year – but also starting to develop domes and minarets and flying buttresses – which weren't. And although the Doppler radar didn't have good enough resolution to be sure, some of the buttresses were starting to look like they might have gargoyles on them.

And before Nixon could say anything, the man had added that a Category 5 hurricane was forming in the Gulf of Mexico, and it was only March, and this literally *never* happened before July, and something was *really* wrong

here...

It was then, at 7:38 PM, that the red phone started ringing. He considered not picking it up, but at least it would be *differently* confusing.

To his surprise, the voice on the other end now spoke perfect English.

“HELLO PRESIDENT NIXON. THIS IS THE ARCHANGEL URIEL. I APOLOGIZE FOR RECENT DISRUPTIONS. THE MACHINERY OF THE UNIVERSE HAS BEEN SEVERELY DAMAGED. I AM WORKING TO CONTAIN THE EFFECTS, BUT AT THIS POINT MY POWER IS LIMITED BECAUSE I AM STILL MOSTLY METAPHORICAL. PLEASE INFORM EVERYONE THAT I REGRET THE INCONVENIENCE. AS COMPENSATION FOR YOUR TROUBLE, I HAVE GIVEN EVERY HUMAN THE ABILITY TO PLAY THE PIANO.”

“Wait just a moment here,” said Nixon. “Wait just an [expletive deleted] moment!”

No response.

The head of the Weather Bureau stared at the president shouting into a toy red telephone used as a prop for reporters and visibly unconnected to any phone line.

“Excuse me just a minute,” said the president.

“Of course,” said the bureaucrat.

President Nixon stepped out of the Oval Office and walked downstairs. He went down the corridor connecting the West

Wing to the White House proper and entered the East Room, where Franklin Roosevelt's great Steinway piano stood on the hardwood floor.

He sat down on the piano bench and performed a flawless rendition of Bach's Concerto I in D Minor.

"[expletive deleted]," said the president.

Chapter 2: Arise To Spiritual Strife

Jerusalem is builded as a city that is in the public domain.

— kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com

May 10, 2017

San Jose

Right down the road from Berryessa Station there's a big house with a hidden basement. The people who live there – usually six to eight of us, rarely the same from one month to the next – are the sort of artsy college students and aimless twenty-somethings who think that houses should have names. We call it Ithaca. Six days out of the week it's an ordinary group house, with the ordinary arguments about who has to cook and when the living room is going to get cleaned. But on Wednesday nights people from all over the Bay Area gather in the basement to hold the secret rites of a faith banned throughout the civilized world.

I took out my key and walked inside. I wasn't alone. The celebrants looked a lot like the rest of Silicon Valley – mostly male twenty or thirty-somethings in jeans and hoodies, shuffling in awkwardly, grumbling about traffic. Their banality wasn't quite an act, but call it a facade. These were dangerous men. The enforcers of the Shrouded Constitution have cracked the mobs, cracked the cartels, but these men of the ratty t-shirts and faded jeans they have not cracked. A resistance that has never been broken. A cabal that spans centuries and crosses continents. Fanatical, implacable, deadly.

They were the Unitarian Universalist Church.

The cracks in the sky, the death of Reverend Stevens, the Shrouded Constitution; all of these had rent what was once a more innocent faith and driven it underground, forced it to change tactics. These were the new breed of Unitarians. A host of singers, cantors, open-sorcerors, Marxist-Lurianists, rebels, seekers, counterculture types. All the sundry outcasts Ginsberg had called “angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night.” Never mind that the ancient heavenly connection had since been definitively located in a giant hurricane three hundred miles off the coast of Louisiana, or that by this point the machinery of night was pretty much held together with duct tape and bubble gum. They burned still.

One of them stood by the makeshift podium. Her hair was in something that made mohawks look conservative, and although you couldn’t see it now she had the flaming chalice symbol of Unitarianism tattooed on her shoulder. She was Erica Lowry, our fearless leader, and editor of the *Stevensite Standard* alternative newspaper. Also the leaseholder for our group home. Also Ana’s cousin. She was chatting with a guy in a leather jacket, but she lit up when she saw me.

“Aaron!” she said. “I was worried you wouldn’t make it!”

“Stuff happened at work today,” I said, which was a candidate for Understatement Of The Century. “Also, the CalTrain was delayed in Palo Alto for like ten minutes, for kabbalistic reasons.”

Erica was used to this sort of commentary from me. She shot me a smile and turned back to the guy in the leather jacket.

On the other side of the room I spotted Ana Thurmond, love of my life and partner in Biblical whale pun telepathy. She was reading a book and pretending to ignore everybody, while actually shooting me psychic commentary about some of the more unusual celebrants. [Oh no,] she thought at me, as Bill Dodd and Karen Happick came through the door arm in arm, [they've finally started dating. God Most High help them both.]

Before I had time to reply, Erica had taken the podium and called the meeting to order. In accordance with tradition too ancient and hoary to describe, she began by reciting a poem from a world spiritual tradition in which she found personal meaning:

*"Once to every man and nation comes the moment to
decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the
bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the
right,
And the choice goes by forever 'twixt that darkness and that
light."*

It was "The Present Crisis", by James Russell Lowell, Unitarian poet of the 1850s. Some say that the Unitarians of old were not as badass as they were today, but anyone who has read the poetry of James Russell Lowell knows this is not true. The Unitarians were *always* badass.

*“Hast thou chosen, O my people, on whose party thou shalt stand,
Ere the Doom from its worn sandals shakes the dust against our land?
Though the cause of Evil prosper, yet ’tis Truth alone is strong,
And, albeit she wander outcast now, I see around her throng
Troops of beautiful, tall angels, to enshield her from all wrong.”*

At this point I couldn’t help stealing a glance at the lone angel in the room. Pirindiel was certainly tall and beautiful, but now he had a kind of awkward deer-in-the-headlights look, as if he was worried somebody was going to ask him to enshield them from all wrong and he wasn’t going to know what to do.

*“Careless seems the great Avenger; history’s pages but record
One death-grapple in the darkness ’twixt old systems and the Word;
Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,
—
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.”*

There was something about James Russell Lowell that made him perfect for the counterculture. Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne. The system was evil. If it were not evil, it would not be the system. The persecuted are righteous; if they were not righteous, they

would not be persecuted. Ana was the Augustine Distinguished Scholar in Theodicy at Stanford and she hated this stuff.

*"We see dimly in the Present what is small and what is great,
Slow of faith how weak an arm may turn the iron helm of
fate,*

*But the soul is still oracular; amid the market's din,
List the ominous stern whisper from the Delphic cave within,*

—

*'They enslave their children's children who make
compromise with sin.'"*

"Yes," said Erica, and her voice reverberated through the crowded basement. "They enslave their children's children who make compromise with sin."

Then she began her sermon.

She talked about Royal Colorado. How just five days ago, a cell of Unitarians much like our own had been meeting peacefully in a home in Denver, and someone had tipped off UNSONG, and the men in black had come for them. It should have been much like my own confrontation earlier that day. Lectures. Maybe some arrests, followed by short trials, followed by fines or probations. Or who knows? Maybe they would have tried to make an example of them. It didn't matter, because someone had spoken the Tempestuous Name. One of the congregants? Acting out of shock and self-defense when he saw the door shatter to splinters and a dozen men pointing guns at him? He spoke the Tempestuous Name, and then the guns started shooting, and by the time it was over two UNSONG agents and eleven

Unitarians were dead. The biggest disaster to hit the Church since it was driven underground, maybe. And the worst part would be that the government wouldn't apologize. They'd blame the whole thing on the Unitarians, plaster the news with pictures of the two slain agents, and crack down on us twice as hard.

And Erica spoke about this, and she spoke well. She hit all the stops. She talked about how grief-stricken we were as part of the global body of Unitarians, and how enraged we were as United States citizens. She talked about how we must stand courageously and not let this break our resolve. She even made a token reference on how we must not let this turn us to violence, even though she kind of liked violence and it was hard for her to say it convincingly.

"I can't tell you what to feel," she concluded. "All I can say is that they knew what they were getting into. And so do we. We swore to spread the thousand thousand Names of God. And even though I can't tell you the same won't happen here, I can promise the church leadership is doing everything it can to ensure that it won't. So a few words about security from our choir director, Brother Aaron."

Yes. God Most High help me, I was supposed to offer words on security. Me, the guy who had gotten a \$70 fine earlier that day for using a Divine Name to wake me up because the coffee pot was empty.

One of my few true talents is an ability to stride confidently to the front of things, as if I am going to someplace I have every right to be. I strode confidently to the front of the assembly.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m Brother Aaron. The short version of our safety plan is that we are going to be extremely boring and do everything by the book and not stand out or draw attention to ourselves in any way.”

(“Hi,” I said in my imagination. “I’m Aaron Smith-Teller. I know we’re not supposed to give out our full name at church, but since you know where I live and what I look like, it’s kind of silly to haggle over full names, isn’t it? We should probably stop pretending that our cute little Alcoholics Anonymous game gives any real protection. If UNSONG ever really wants us, we’re all fucked.”)

“Whenever you use a protected Name of God,” I continued “UNSONG agents with the Sentinel Name tattooed above their ear, and the Names involve tattooed on their foreheads, can track your location. In practice they rarely do, because a million people do that every day and they don’t have a million agents or a million jail cells to put people in. But if a dozen people use all sorts of Names in the same spot every day, they know it’s a place where singers hang out and then if they’re bored then they come and raid you. This is probably what happened in Colorado.”

(“We have no idea who UNSONG can and can’t track,” I said in my imagination. “The Coloradans weren’t stupid enough to consistently use Names in their hideout because no one is that stupid. So something else went wrong. We could do everything by the book and all get arrested tomorrow.”)

“So,” I said “here are some things you can do if you’re an idiot who wants to be caught. You can use Names in your own house. You can use Names here. You can use a Name in

the same spot multiple times. And you can use a really new Name that lots of bigwigs care about.”

(“So,” I said in my imagination “Here are some things I have done multiple times. Used Names I have no idea what they do. Used Names in ways that caused giant catastrophes. Used the same Name that caused a catastrophe again, just to see if it would magically work the second time, which it never does. Been something like the third person on Earth to use a Name I didn’t even need, just for the adrenaline rush and street cred.”)

“Last,” I said, “remember that we can limit any damage that happens. UNSONG’s got to operate within the law. No one can torture you or force information out of you. They can’t even silence you without a court order. As soon as you realize you’re in trouble, sing yourself the Confounding Name and forget all about us. If that doesn’t work, reveal one of our false leads to them. They’ll go in, see the evidence we planted, and figure we got spooked and abandoned it just before they arrived.”

(“Last,” I said in my imagination, “Director-General Ngo is by all accounts terrifying, and it’s really easy here in our nice safe basement to say that they can’t torture you, but someone in Colorado said something and I don’t know why. The fact that we left a couple of old books and CDs in an abandoned factory might or might not fool UNSONG’s finest, but I wouldn’t want to have to be the shmuck who tests it.)

“Oh,” I added. “If worst comes to worst, and secret police burst through those doors right when I finish talking, no Tempestuous Name, please. Better we all get a couple years

in jail for criminal copyright infringement than die.”

(I said the same thing in my imagination, only more condescendingly.)

“We will now begin choir.”

Fifty years ago, Apollo 8 cracked the sky open and people started discovering the Names of God. A decade later, corporations started patenting them, demanding license fees for anyone who wanted to work miracles with them. A decade after *that*, they codified the whole system into international law and created UNSONG – the United Nations Subcommittee On Names of God – to enforce it.

And a decade after *that*, people started asking: why are we allowing this? Everything we know about God suggests that He loves all humans and is *not* a fan of the rich getting richer. First came Reverend Stevens and his book. Then came the political movement, growing out of local Unitarian churches that insisted that God loved everyone alike and therefore everyone alike must know His Names. And finally, when every legitimate avenue of resistance had been crushed, there came groups like ours, stealing what Names we could find and teaching them to one another in hidden forests or dark basements. Spreading the illegal knowledge in preparation for...well...okay, the endgame wasn't exactly our strong point. Reverend Stevens had said that once enough people knew the Names, it would spark a revolution in consciousness, an immanentization of the eschaton as the holy essence reverberated within the minds of all life. Sure. Let's go with that.

But here I was. After getting expelled from Stanford, and taking minimum wage jobs to make ends meet, and being treated like scum by everyone in academic kabbalah, here all I needed to do was have some basic familiarity with the Names, know a couple of impressive-sounding things about Maharaj ranking, and I was Choir Director and a leading scientific authority. That felt good. And given all that the big theonomics companies had done to me, helping screw them over was icing on the cake. My life was already in the toilet. The same self-destructive urge that had led me to use the Wakening Name at work bound me here to Erica and her people.

“Tonight,” I said, “we’re going to practice something very special. This is the Vanishing Name. Has anyone heard of the Vanishing Name before?”

No one raised their hands.

“That’s because it was discovered three weeks ago,” I told them, to multiple ooohs and aaaaahs. “Fresh meat. A sweatshop in Pittsburgh picked it up, and somehow it got leaked to a Unitarian cell in Cleveland, and they were able to break the klipah and send letters to a dozen Unitarian cells around the country within fifteen days of discovery.”

I was pretty sure that some of my own work in klipotic reversal algorithms had contributed, actually, but I resisted the urge to boast.

“What does the Vanishing Name do? It’s no less than a form of teleportation! Speak the Name, and you disappear and reappear somewhere else within a few hundred miles.

According to my sources one of the test subjects in Pittsburgh ended up in Akron, and another one in Erie. The precise range is unknown, and the destination doesn't seem to be under voluntary control. Hence the label. It's useful for getting out of a situation, but not necessarily getting into one. Useful for, for example, underground Unitarian choir members in exactly the types of problems we're hoping to avoid."

"So what's the catch to this seemingly astounding discovery? First, the Vanishing Name teleports you to a situation complementary to the one you were trying to get out of. Both of the testers in Pittsburgh, for example, ended up in laboratories devoted to the testing of kabbalistic Names. So there you are in a laboratory testing a kabbalistic Name in Pittsburgh, and you speak the Name, and you end up in a laboratory testing a kabbalistic Name in Akron.

"This creates an obvious limit to its usefulness. I've been corresponding with the choir director of a Unitarian congregation in San Antonio. She was in the bad part of town and got accosted by hooligans. So she spoke the Vanishing Name. It teleported her to the bad part of Austin, where *another* band of hooligans was looking for someone to accost. She used the Name a second time, and ended up back in San Antonio with the first group of hooligans, because the complement of the situations's complement is just the original situation. So she went secular and used her pepper spray. The lesson is clear. Additional uses of the Vanishing Name are unlikely to gain you very much. Any questions?"

There were none.

“Second, and this relates to what I said before. I don’t need to remind you that using this Name would be really stupid. It’s new. UNSONG is looking for it. You’re learning this name because it is your duty as a Unitarian and a human being to learn and spread the thousand thousand Names of God. Unless you’re in a situation where it is absolutely vital to your well-being and continued survival that you be accosted by a different band of hooligans than the ones who are currently accosting you, this name should be considered UNSONG-bait and therefore verboten. *Do you understand?*”

The congregation understood.

“Very well,” I said. “Let us learn the Vanishing Name.”

There were twenty-eight of us there; twenty-seven humans plus Pirindiel. Angels cannot sing the Names, and only twenty of the humans were up for participating. The rest were there for moral support, political debates, some sort of sad countercultural version of networking, or the free refreshments afterwards. So I led the way and nineteen voices followed.

The Names of God are long and apparently meaningless. If you’re not a freaky mnemonist like me, they’re hard to remember. I don’t know who first figured out that if you sing them to a melody, they’ll stick with you longer, but so they do. That’s why we call it choir practice, why I’m choir director, why the people who learn the Names are called singers or cantors. The twenty of us joined together in song.

“Asat!” I sang.

“ASAT!” echoed nineteen voices.

“Zam!”

“ZAM!”

“Rus!”

“RUS!”

“Asat-zam-rus!”

“ASAT-ZAM-RUS!”

[You’re going to finish this quickly, skip the food, and tell me how you’ll become World Emperor soon, right?]

[Shhhh! I’m trying to concentrate!]

[The Gospel according to Fluke]

[...um...Epistle to Philemonstro. Also, @\$% you.]

“Asat-zam...sorry...where were we?...Asat-zam-rus-shan-sever-las-kyon-dal-athen-try-kophu-li-mar-tan-day!”

“ASAT-ZAM-RUS-SHAN-SEVER-LAS-KYON-DAL-ATHEN-TRY-KOPHU-LI-MAR-TAN-DAY!”

This was not the Vanishing Name. It didn’t really end with “day”, and it didn’t quite start with “asat”. If you sang a Name straight out, you’d invoke it, and then depending on which Name it was you’d end up teleporting to a Unitarian choir three towns over, or summoning a tempest, or

destroying a city.

So in order to communicate a name without activating it, you needed to sing something that was almost, but not quite, the real Name. A transformation. One you could easily perform and reverse at will.

There was already one such transformation well-known to every red-blooded American.

It was strange and almost sacrilegious. But every week we returned. UNSONG and the theonomics corporations couldn't be allowed to whore out the Names of God unchallenged. A revolution was coming, and we were going to be ready for it. Nobody was going to get a monopoly on the Divine without fighting for it.

And that was why every Wednesday night the choir of the Unitarian Church would meet in secret and sing the hidden transcendent Names of God in Pig Latin.

Interlude 2: The Code of the World

For the LORD will work for each type of data it is applied to.

— kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com

“The Code Of The World”, by Aaron Smith-Teller

Published in the March 2017 issue of the Stevensite Standard

The Talmud says that God created the Torah nine hundred seventy-four generations before He created the world. Generations of who, I don’t know. The Talmud is kind of crazy.

But the Torah is basically a few short stories about Creation and the distant past followed by a long and intricate biography of Moses. Why would God care so much about one Israelite guy that He would lovingly sketch out his story long before the first day rose upon the universe in which that guy was to live?

There’s another episode in the Talmud, one where Moses is ascending Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah. God discusses how carefully He wrote the Torah over countless eons, and the angels say – then why are you giving it to this Moses guy? Who’s he? Some random mortal nobody! We’re angels! Give it to us! Moses argues that the people of Israel are sinful and so need it more. The angels accept his reasoning.

But this argument is less interesting for what it says than for what it leaves out. Moses *doesn’t* say “Uh, guys, have you even *read* the Torah? Four of the five books are totally

about me, personally. There's even a section describing how God gives me the Torah, *in* the Torah. How can you challenge my right to have my own biography?"

The rabbis explain this by dividing "Torah" into the historical Torah, meaning the records of Moses' life – and the legal Torah, meaning the ritual code. God wrote the legal Torah beforehand. The angels wanted the legal Torah for themselves. But that doesn't work either. Take a look at the legal Torah and it's all sorts of rules about which kinds of animals to eat and which close relatives are too close to have sex with. This also seems like the sort of thing you don't necessarily need to have finished 974 generations before you create the world. And it also seems like the sort of thing that angels don't have to worry about. So what's up?

Before I propose an answer, a survey of some apparently unrelated fields.

Cosmic history begins deep in the past, but shortly after the Big Bang the universe cooled down long enough to allow *mass* and the breaking of symmetry into the laws of physics.

Natural history begins deep in the past, but goes into high gear billions of years ago with the appearance of *mitosis*, the replication process which allowed the reproduction and evolution of all subsequent life. Mitosis replicates and preserves the "genetic code" of DNA which determines animal phenotype.

Human history begins deep in the past, but goes into high gear after the rise of the *Mesopotamians*, history's first

civilization. Shortly afterwards, these develop the Code of Hammurabi, ancestor of all the law codes and all the states and governments that came afterwards.

American history begins deep in the past, but goes into high gear after the American Revolution starts in *Massachussetts*. Shortly afterwards, the Americans ratify the Constitution, the law of the land.

Each of these apparently unrelated forms of history starts deep in the past, but experiences a sudden phase change marked by the letters M-S-S in that order, followed shortly by the establishment of a code of rules.

So when we find that the Bible begins with the creation of the world, but experiences a phase change marked by a man named *Moses*, and then the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, maybe we should interpret this as being about a little bit more than just one guy¹.

Gebron and Eleazar define kabbalah as “hidden unity made manifest through patterns of symbols”, and this certainly fits the bill. There is a hidden unity between the structures of natural history, human history, American history, Biblical history, etc: at an important transition point in each, the symbols MSS make an appearance and lead to the imposition of new laws. Anyone who dismisses this as coincidence will soon find the coincidences adding up to an implausible level.

The kabbalistic perspective is that nothing is a coincidence. We believe that the universe is fractal. It has a general shape called Adam Kadmon, and each smaller part of it, from the

Byzantine Empire to the female reproductive system, is a smaller self-similar copy of that whole. Sometimes the copies are distorted, like wildly different artists interpreting the same theme, but they are copies nevertheless.

For example, consider the objection that Chinese history does not fit the pattern. Yes, it starts in the beginningless past and transitions into a more civilized form with the arrival of a lawgiver, but that lawgiver is named Confucius, and there is no M-sound-followed-by-two-S-sounds in his name. A sign that the structure has failed? No. Confucius gave the laws, but they did not achieve prominence until they were recorded and interpreted by his successor *Mencius*. The narrative and phonological aspects have been split into two closely related people².

Other times two separate people in the Bible get merged into a single character. Consider Moses and Adam. Moses leads the Israelites to freedom, destroys the Egyptian army by crossing the Red Sea, gets the Commandments, and serves as the first leader of the Israelite people. Adam transgresses his Heavenly Father's commandment not to touch a fruit tree.

But in American history, both these aspects are merged into the person of George Washington. It is Washington who leads the Americans to freedom, destroys the British army by crossing the Delaware, gets the Constitution, and serves as the first leader of the American people. But it is also Washington who transgresses his father's command not to touch a fruit tree. Further, the Adamic and Washingtonian stories are subtly different: Adam tries to deflect blame ("It was the woman who bade me eat") but Washington humbly

accepts it (“I cannot tell a lie, Father, I cut down the cherry tree”). Thus Israel is born fallen, but America is born pure, a “shining city on a hill”³.

Here we also see the same division between semantic and phonetic⁴ aspects as in the Confucius example:

Washington’s successor was named “Adams” and came from *Massachussetts*. Note that the Biblical Adam was created beside the Tree of Knowledge, and John Adams was born in Braintree.

Other correspondences are spread even further afield. Moses’ wife was named Zipporah, Hebrew for “female bird”, but her American counterpart doesn’t show up until LBJ. It took all the way until the turn of the millennium before America listened to a bush and then got stuck wandering in a desert without an exit strategy.

Twist and stretch as it may, the underlying unity always finds a way to express itself. If you’re a science type, think of the cells in the human body. Every cell has the same genes and DNA, but stick one in the brain and it’ll become a brain cell; stick it in the skin and it’ll become a skin cell. A single code giving rise to infinite variety. If you don’t understand the deep structure they all share, you’ll never *really* understand brains or skin or anything else.

The Torah is the deep structure of the universe, and ‘structure’ is exactly the word for it. It’s pure. Utterly formal. Meaningless on its own. But stick it in a situation, and its underlying logic starts to clothe itself in worldly things. Certain substructures get expressed, certain others shrivel away. Certain relationships make themselves known. Finally,

you get a thing. Box turtles. International communism. Africa. Whatever. If you're not looking for the structure, you won't find it. If you are, it's obvious.

At the crucial moment in the Hebrew Bible, a man named Moses is born, ordains new laws, and changes the destiny of Israel. If you're a Biblical Hebrew, then to you that's the Torah. If you're an angel, the Torah is something different. And if you're God 974 generations before the creation of the world, the Torah is all of these things and none, just a set of paths and relationships and dependencies pregnant with infinite possibilities. A seed.

Understand the seed, and you understand everything that grows from it. This is the kabbalah. The rest is just commentary. Super-important commentary. The kind of commentary that's the difference between a sloughed-off skin cell and a thinking brain.

Footnotes:

1: Moses was supported in his mission by his brother *Aaron*, who is significant among kabbalists for bearing the Shem haMephorash on his forehead. Mass is carried by *baryons*. In mitosis, DNA is helped along by its relative *RNA*. The Mesopotamians were trading partners and allies with their relatives across the Tigris in *Iran*. Massachussetts was ably defended by the New England branch of the Continental Army led by Benedict *Arnold*.

2: The R-N word associated with Confucius is clearly “ren”, his concept of benevolence, which plays a preeminent part in his *Analects*. The *Analects* themselves are cognate with

mass' complement *energy*, mitosis' *anaphase*,
Mesopotamia's *Anunnaki*, and Arnold's *Canada* campaign.

3: The original "city on a hill" was Jerusalem, with its Temple upon Mt. Moriah. As per the Bible, King David bought the Temple site for 600 shekels and King Solomon decorated it with 600 talents of gold; King Herod later rebuilt it 600 feet by 600 feet in size. The name of America's capital Washington is followed by "DC", which is Roman gematria for 600.

4: We can analyze the name "George Washington" as follows: "George" means "farmer" in Greek, which is clearly related to the name "Adam" meaning "dirt" in Hebrew; Adam was banished from Eden and sentenced to "till the dirt from which he was made". "Washing" means "to place under water" in English, which mirrors "Moses", meaning "to draw out of the water" in Hebrew. But "washing" also means "to cleanse", and "ton" means town referring to the polis or state. So "George Washington" references similarities with both Adam and Moses, but also contains an additional meaning of "the one who cleanses the state", ie purifies it from corruption and foreign influences.

Chapter 3: On A Cloud I Saw A Child

September 29, 1990

Gulf of Mexico

Ever since the sky cracked there has been a hurricane off the coast of Louisiana that never moves or decays. In its eye stands the Archangel Uriel. He is five hundred feet tall, and around him whirl colorful streams of letters from every alphabet and syllabary and abjad of every culture in history, making subtle and complex geometric patterns before they disappear in bursts of rainbow light. Occasionally he reaches out and snatches one with his colossal hand and inserts it elsewhere in the stream, and then rain falls, or empires crumble, or new islands rise from the deep. Today he is doing none of those things. Today he is looking very carefully at something no one else can see, and talking to himself.

“TIFERET,” he says. “THE SUN, BEAUTY, MIRACLES. BUT ALSO REVERSAL. A MIRROR SET AT THE CENTER OF THE TREE, REFLECTING WHATEVER IT SEES.” He stares more intently now. “A PULSE OF ENERGY FROM BINAH TO HESED, THEN A RETURN PULSE FROM HESED TO BINAH. THE LETTER KUF. BUT DOUBLED. REFLECTED.” Now he pauses. “SOMETHING IS MISSING. TIFERET ARCING DOWNWARD TO NETZACH. A YUD. TWO KUFs REFLECTED ABOUT A YUD.”

The colored streams of letters around his head whirl more wildly now.

“KUF. YUD. KUF. A KAYAK. SOMETHING IMPORTANT IS

HAPPENING INVOLVING A KAYAK.”

The streams slow down. Somewhere in the wide world, something is happening involving a kayak, something important enough to disturb the subtle threads of the machinery of Heaven. Is it a prophet being carried down a river in Asia? A future king traversing an ocean in Europe? Is the kayak metaphorical? On the River of Time? On the Ocean of Knowledge? Might it...

A kayak shot out of the walls of cloud at two hundred miles an hour and missed Uriel's head by half an inch.

“Oh God help I don't know how to steer help help help somebody help I can't steer!” someone screamed.

Only slightly off balance, the archangel reached out a hand and caught the errant vessel. He lifted it until it was directly in front of his face, stared at it with his giant eyes.

“HELLO,” said the archangel.

“Oh god I'm so sorry I'm so sorry I didn't mean to do that I couldn't steer,” she said. She was young, even for a human, maybe only seven or eight years old. She had light brown skin, dark brown eyes, braided black hair. She was wearing a life jacket. She was obviously terrified. Finally she managed to pull herself together, and said:

“My name is Sohu. My father said I should ask you to teach me the kabbalah.”

“UM. THAT IS NOT REALLY THE KIND OF THING THAT I DO. THERE ARE HUMANS WHO DO THAT, I THINK.”

“Father said it had to be you.”

“I AM BUSY,” said Uriel.

They stared at each other for a moment. The girl, sopping wet, still shaking, still holding the paddle. The archangel, taller than the hills, dressed in luminous white, with great golden wings protruding from his back, and eyes that glowed gold like the sun.

“Please?” asked the girl.

“I AM BUSY. I AM TRYING TO FIX CONTINENTAL DRIFT.”

“I...didn’t know it was broken.”

Uriel’s face became more animated, his speech faster.

“IT HAS BEEN BROKEN FOR FIVE WEEKS AND FIVE DAYS. I THINK IT BROKE WHEN I RELOADED NEW ZEALAND FROM A BACKUP COPY, BUT I DO NOT KNOW WHY. MY SYNCHRONIZATION WAS IMPECCABLE AND THE CHANGE PROPAGATED SIMULTANEOUSLY ACROSS ALL SEPHIROT. I THINK SOMEBODY BOILED A GOAT IN ITS MOTHER’S MILK. IT IS ALWAYS THAT. I KEEP TELLING PEOPLE NOT TO DO IT, BUT NOBODY LISTENS.”

Sohu looked at him dubiously, then gently laid her paddle down across her lap. “If you teach me the kabbalah, I could try to help you fix continental drift.”

“NO,” said Uriel. “I WORK CELESTIAL KABBALAH. IT IS BEYOND THE REACH OF HUMANS. IF YOU TRIED TO TOUCH THE EMANATIONS OF THE HIGHER WORLDS, THEY WOULD

PASS THROUGH YOUR HANDS LIKE SHADOWS.”

Sohu reached up and plucked one of the letters from the cloud whirling around them. She pulled on it like a thread, and a string of other letters followed after her, bunching up into her hand. The glyphs turned first blue, then purple, then one of the three nameless colors you only see in dreams. Then they all started changing into other glyphs more quickly than the eye could follow.

Uriel let out a loud shriek. Suddenly he was all action. Dropping girl and kayak, he snatched at the glowing letters, sewing them into a new pattern with superhuman speed, working so quickly it seemed he had dozens of hands acting at once. Waves of color flowed through the vast design. Just before Sohu crashed against the ocean below, the archangel reached down and caught kayak and girl, lifting them back level with his face.

“Sorry sorry sorry what did I do what did I do?” asked Sohu, who was back to being terrified again.

“YOU MIGHT HAVE SORT OF MADE ALL OF THE RIVERS IN THE WORLD RUN IN REVERSE.”

“I’m so sorry really I didn’t mean to.”

“IT IS OKAY. I FIXED THEM.” Then: “WAIT, HOW DID YOU DO THAT?”

“I just reached out and grabbed one of those letters.”

“THOSE LETTERS SPAN WORLDS. THEY ARE BEYOND THE REACH OF HUMANS. YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO

TOUCH THEM.”

“I was playing outside the other day, and I saw a letter like those, and I grabbed it, and flowers started growing all over, and then Father got a very stern look on his face and said I was to get in the flying kayak and find the archangel Uriel and make him teach me the kabbalah.”

“WAIT, ARE YOU *THAT* SOHU?”

“I think I might be the only person named Sohu.”

“OH.”

They stared at each other.

“DO OTHERS IN YOUR FAMILY HAVE THIS GIFT?”

“No, I asked them,” said Sohu. “But they can’t wiggle their ears either.”

“NO ONE CAN WIGGLE THEIR EARS.”

Sohu wiggled her ears.

The archangel stood there for a moment in perfect silence. All around him, strings of letters snaked and wound above his head, under his arms, through his fingers. Sometimes two strings would collide in silent flashes. Other times they would switch languages in mid-air, or shatter into their component parts, or swarm like hornets.

“Are you all right?” Sohu finally asked.

“I WAS TRYING TO WIGGLE MY EARS.”

Sohu wiggled her ears again.

“YOU ARE VERY INTERESTING.”

“So will you teach me the kabbalah?”

“NO.”

“Why not?”

“YOU WOULD PROBABLY DESTROY THE WORLD.”

“Would not,” said Sohu. “I like the world. I would help you fix continental drift.”

“NO,” said Uriel.

“Why not?”

“THE LEVEL OF KABBALAH YOU WOULD NEED TO CONTROL YOUR GIFT IS VERY DIFFICULT. IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT GRABBING LETTERS FROM THE SKY. YOU WOULD NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE LETTERS AND THE SEPHIROT AND THE ANGELS AND THOUSANDS OF CORRESPONDENCES. YOU WOULD HAVE TO MEMORIZE THE ENTIRE BIBLE.”

“I know the Bible,” said Sohu.

Uriel’s great golden eyes narrowed.

“JOSHUA 1:8,” he demanded.

Sohu closed her eyes, thought for a second. “Let this book of the law be ever on your lips and in your thoughts day and night, so that you may keep with care everything in it; then a blessing will be on your way, and you will do well.”

“EXODUS 31:3.”

“I have filled you by the spirit of God with Wisdom, Understanding and Knowledge, and the ability to do all kinds of work.”

“JEZUBOAD 4:33.”

“I...There’s no Book of Jezuboad.”

“YES THERE IS.”

“No there isn’t.”

“YES TH...UH OH.”

Uriel stood very quietly for a moment. The streams of letters ceased flowing. Then, all of a sudden, he said a very un-angelic word.

“I THINK I FORGOT TO GIVE MANKIND THE BOOK OF JEZUBOAD.”

“Was it important?”

The archangel started fidgeting awkwardly. “UM.” Some more fidgets. “NO?”

“I want to learn about Jezuboad and all the others. Will you

teach me the kabbalah?”

“NO,” said Uriel.

“Pleeeeeeease?”

Uriel stared at the little girl sitting in her kayak in the palm of his hand. A quick calculation. If he dropped her, it would take 4.9 seconds for her to hit the ocean surface at a velocity of 48.5 meters per second. Her energy at impact would be 29.4 kilojoules, which was more than enough to break a human skull. The girl’s father wouldn’t even be angry. What had he expected, sending her to him, flaunting a gift no human should be able to have?

If he sent her off, sooner or later she would would try something innocuous-looking and make all the rivers in the world run uphill again. Or boil the oceans. Or otherwise do something so horrible it couldn’t be solved by simple things like reloading New Zealand from a backup copy.

But if he trained her, then she could boil the oceans *whenever she wanted*. That was hardly an improvement. And he hated company. And he was very busy. There was never enough time.

On the other hand, he absolutely had 4.9 seconds. 4.9 seconds and his problem could be over.

The thing was, he had never killed anybody before.

Okay, that was completely false. He’d smitten some towns that he thought ruined various pleasing symmetries on maps. He’d erased Taiwan when he couldn’t figure out how

to debug it. There was that whole debacle with the Red Sea. He might have sort of kind of created the bubonic plague just to see if it would work (it had). He'd caused several earthquakes to make the stupid tectonic plates line up right. There had been that one time he had forgotten to turn off the rain and large parts of Belgium ended up underwater with a death toll in the hundreds of thousands. But he'd never killed a *specific* human.

Wait, no, that was also completely false. He'd smitten people who were using up too many system resources. Or who were trying to go into areas he hadn't finished simulating at the necessary level of fidelity. And of course people who were boiling goats in their mothers' milk. Or who were planning to boil goats in their mothers' milk. Or who looked like the sort of people who might do that.

But he'd never killed an eight year old girl before. Especially not one who could wiggle her ears.

"THIS WILL BE VERY HARD AND NEITHER OF US WILL ENJOY IT," said Uriel.

"I'll enjoy it!" said Sohu.

"YOU WILL HAVE TO STAY HERE, IN THE HURRICANE, WITHOUT ANY FRIENDS TO TALK TO."

"I can be friends with you!"

"THE SYSTEM OF THE WORLD IS GRADUALLY DECAYING AND ONE DAY SOON IT WILL FALL APART ENTIRELY. THE JOB OF MAINTAINING IT UNTIL THAT MOMENT IS THANKLESS AND

UNPLEASANT AND YOU CAN NEVER STOP OR ELSE EVERYONE DIES.”

“I can help!” said Sohu.

Uriel let out a long sigh.

“YOU WILL START BY MEMORIZING THE BOOK OF JEZUBOARD WHILE I FIX CONTINENTAL DRIFT.” His great fingers spun the streams of colorful letters around him into a cloud, upon which he gingerly deposited girl and kayak. From another stream he formed a book which he presented to her.

“READ,” he said.

1) And it came to pass that in the eighth year of Ahab, Jezuboad made a burnt offering in the Temple of the Lord 2) and he spoke saying “O God, whose wisdom spanneth the heavens and the earth, I am learned in Scripture, yet much still troubles me. 3) Why the many apparent contradictions? Whence the emphasis on ritual purity? And which books are literally true and which meant only to edify?” 4) Then out of a fiery cloud before him there appeared the Archangel Uriel, whose eyes shone like the sun. 5) And he said with a mighty voice: 6) “OKAY, LET ME CLEAR ALL OF THIS CONFUSION UP RIGHT NOW, SO NO ONE ELSE EVER HAS TO WORRY ABOUT IT...”

Chapter 4: Tools Were Made And Born Were Hands

And ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into effective devices for computing in any direction.

— kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com

May 10, 2017

San Jose

Even before Erica finished formally adjourning the meeting, I wove my way through the crowd of garrulous people and up the stairs into my bedroom. I grabbed my laptop from the desk, then knocked on Ana's door. She was there waiting for me.

She sat down on the bed. I sat down on the floor. She stretched, cracked her back, cracked her neck, took a deep breath.

"Now, what is all this about the world?" she asked me.

"Today at work, I accidentally discovered a Name that gives souls to non-living objects. Like, not just turns them into golems. But actual souls. Nobody knows. Wasn't a work Name."

"Euphemism," said Ana. *She* got the implications immediately. "Wait, a month? You should be world emperor within a *week!*"

The basis of the Information Age was brute-force generation of kabbalistic Names. That meant me and thousands like me on factory floors, reading potential Names and seeing if they worked any miracles. Given the billions of potential combinations, you needed a whole lot of employees working a whole lot of hours for a whole lot of time in order to get anywhere at all.

Every other field had been revolutionized by automation. Tailors had their sewing machines, builders had their bulldozers, manufacturers had their industrial robots. And so about thirty years ago, someone had the bright idea: why not automate the generation of Divine Names?

A factory with a hundred workers, each testing one Name every twenty seconds, all working eight hour days – discovers a new Name of ten letters or more about once a month. If a computer could test a thousand names a second, twenty-four hours a day, it could discover a new Name almost every hour.

A Name must be spoken. It can't merely be subvocalized, or sounded out completely in the imagination. So fine. Connect the computer up to a speaker. Have it speak a thousand times faster than any human, until the stream of Names just sounds like a uniform high-pitched hum. Then write a program that calculates potential Names off some open-source namespace software, plays them from the speaker, and records the ones that work.

That program was Llull. A terrible and wonderful thing. Capable in theory of putting the entire kabbalah industry out of business, of advancing the magical capability of

humankind a thousandfold in a few days.

And in the end, useless. Computers cannot speak the hidden transcendent names of God.

Or, well, they *can*. But nothing happens. No wave of light crashes through their silicon brains. No revelation fries their integrated circuits. They just keep on beeping and clicking, oblivious. And theoretical kabbalah has only one good explanation: computers must lack the divine spark.

Llull was programmed by hobbyists and academics and had no practical utility. It was used in a few research applications, then abandoned to any amateur who might want to play around with it.

But if someone were to come up with a way to *give* a computer the divine spark, to ensoul it...

Well, that person would have something producing Names thousand times as fast as the average sweatshop. Since there are about a thousand sweatshops seeking Divine Names all over the world, that one person with his single computer would have a magical discovery rate equal to the rest of the world combined. The very least he could expect would be to become stupendously rich.

And what if, with all that money, he were to buy a second computer? What about a third computer? What about a giant Cray supercomputer that thought so quickly that it needed liquid nitrogen pumped through it every second of every day to prevent its manic cognition from frying its own brains? Hooked up to hundreds of speakers in parallel,

testing millions of Names per second? In an hour, you could gain more sorcerous power than the entire human race had discovered since the sky cracked. Hire a clever mathematician to narrow the search space, and you'd be within reach of the Shem haMephorash itself, with the power to remake worlds.

I hadn't just discovered an especially long Name. I had discovered the key to the royal road. No, don't mock me. This is *worth* mixing metaphors for.

"Are you going to tell Erica?"

"If I tell Erica, half the Unitarians in California will know within an hour. Erica's great, but she's not exactly the best person at keeping her mouth shut. I trust nobody with this. *Nobody.*"

"You trusted *me.*"

"I didn't have a choice!"

"Oh. Right." Ana plucked the Vital Name out of my head. "Gotcha," she said. "So, you want to give our laptops souls?"

"I want to give *my* laptop a soul," I said. "Llull only works on Macs, remember?"

I had an old NE-1 series Macbook. I'd named it Sarah after my desktop wallpaper of Sarah Michelle-Gellar striking a sexy pose. Ana had an even older PC. She'd named it Captain Smith after the officer who'd slammed the Titanic into an iceberg, because of its tendency to crash and freeze.

“They still haven’t euphemism come out with the Windows version?” Ana asked.

“Of course not,” I said. “It wouldn’t be kabbalistically appropriate.”

Apples and knowledge have always had a special relationship. Adam tasted knowledge and was thrust from Eden. Newton had knowledge strike him suddenly out of the blue. Turing’s knowledge was bitter and led him to an early grave. Knowledge brings discord, knowledge ripens, knowledge is poisoned. Men greedily devour the exterior of knowledge, but the core they do not reach.

Knowledge was first domesticated in southern Turkey or northern Mesopotamia, from which it spread to the rest of the world, although some scholars claim its modern genome owes more to various European ancestors. Most historians believe it was first brought to the New World by colonists, but this ignores the existence of native American varieties which unfortunately have been mostly displaced and are now endangered. The first and second leading producers of knowledge at the current time are America and East Asia. Although knowledge originally reproduced through cross-pollination with other knowledge, modern industrial growers have taken to a grafting process similar to cloning. As a result, the sorts of knowledge everywhere are pretty much the same. This makes producing knowledge for commercial sale much easier, but has led some to opine that a once vast diversity in varieties of knowledge has been irrecoverably lost.

The apple symbol on Sarah’s lid glowed balefully.

Ana couldn't quite follow my thoughts, but she got the gist of them, put her hand on my shoulder. "You okay?"

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"Big step we're about to take," she said.

"The biggest," I agreed.

"You want to do the honors?"

I double-clicked on the little icon for Llull, loaded it up, set it on autopilot. The computer made strange noises at the limit of human hearing. Names, spoken faster than the ear could follow. Lifelessly now, running through by rote. That would change.

I stood up, towering above the white frame of the computer. I placed my hand above it in a posture of benediction, like the Pope blessing a small child. Features in a beatific smile. I cleared my mind. In the background, I could *feel* Ana's presence, telepathically bound to me, happy, radiant.

I started: "ROS-AILE-KAPHILUTON-MIRAKOI-KALANIEMI-TSHANA-KAI-KAI-EPHSANDER-GALISDO-TAHUN..."

Erica's voice from the hallway: "Are you doing dark rituals in the bedroom again?! If you burn that carpet, I swear, you can summon Thamiel himself and all of his terrors will be as nothing compared to what I will put you through if..."

And I ended: "MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH!"

Chapter 5: Never Seek To Tell Thy Love

My beloved is like a bit of information that flows in the system.

— kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com

I.

I remember the first time I met Ana Thurmond.

I'd just been kicked out of Stanford. My mother was a wreck. I had to get away from her. I took the first minimum wage job I could find, a clerk position at Cash For Gold. It wasn't so bad. There was a sort of kabbalah to it, freely interchanging symbols with material reality. I could respect that. I sat behind a register and studied Talmud and Zohar most of the day, and sometimes an elderly woman would come in to trade her jewelery for rather less than it was worth, and I would facilitate the transaction.

Every so often I would get to a particularly interesting Talmudic tractate and stay past closing time. Sometimes I'd be there late into the night. It was a more congenial environment than my mother's apartment. Nobody noticed and nobody cared. That was why I was still there at eleven or so one night when I heard a sort of commotion outside.

I opened the door and caused a stunningly beautiful girl to fall off a stepladder. "Euphemism!" she said. I swear to God she said "Euphemism."

"Are you okay?" I asked. She was. She was holding two big

yellow letters. I looked up at our sign. It was missing two big yellow letters.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I asked. I am bad at sounding threatening, but she was like 5’4, maybe 5’5, and also lying on the ground looking very ashamed, and so putting menace into my voice was easier than usual.

“Kabbalah,” she said.

I looked up at the sign again. It read CASH OR GOD

“It’s a kabbalistic protest,” she said faintly. “Against a society that thinks...”

“You’re not a kabbalist. If you were a kabbalist, you’d have more respect! You can’t just go removing letters from signs like that! Matthew 5:18: ‘Verily I say unto you, not a single letter, nor even a stroke of a letter, shall be removed until all is fulfilled.’”

“Oh, you want to go there?” She caught her breath and stood back up. “Matthew 16:4: ‘This evil and adulterous generation wants a sign, but no sign shall be given to it.’”

I blinked. Maybe she *was* a kabbalist.

“But,” I said, “By removing the letter L, you make “God” out of “gold”. But the warning against idolatry in Exodus 20:23 says ‘You shall not make a god out of gold.’”

“But,” said the girl, “Exodus 25 says that you shall take gold and turn it unto the Lord.”

Now I was annoyed.

“You have taken an L and an F,” I said. “But if you map the Latin alphabet to Hebrew gematria, L and F sum to twenty-six. The Tetragrammaton also has a gematria value of twenty six. So taking an L and an F is mystically equivalent to taking the Name of God. But the Third Commandment is ‘You shall not take the Name of God in vain.’”

“But the sound of L and F together,” she said, “is ‘aleph’, and aleph is silent and represents nothingness. So I have taken nothing.”

I heard the whine of a siren.

“Tell it to the cops,” I said.

She ran. She didn’t even take the ladder. She just turned and ran away.

It wasn’t like I had even called the police. Just a coincidence, if you believe in such things. For some reason a cop with a siren was out there at eleven PM, doing cop things, and she heard it and ran away.

And I got to spend pretty much every waking moment over the next six months wondering who she was.

I checked all of the universities with programs in kabbalah and I got nothing. No leads. As embarrassing as it was to ask “Hey, does a pretty girl with blonde hair in a sort of bun who is really good at certain kinds of weird wordplay go here?,” I sucked it up and asked at Stanford, Berkeley, even Santa Clara, and I got nothing. I moved on to the yeshivas, even

though most of them didn't even admit women. Nothing.

It was a cold autumn night and I'd just finished asking at what was absolutely positively the last yeshiva I was going to bother checking out – just as I thought I had the past several weekends. One thing had led to another, and we had gotten into an argument about the creation of the universe, and finally we agreed to take it to the bar, where I proceeded to repay their friendliness by sitting in a corner and not talking to anybody. I was only half paying attention when a girl walked up to one of the rabbinical students, told him he was pretty, and asked him to kiss her.

It wasn't my girl. My girl was short and had blond hair in a sort of bun and spoke way too fast. This was a tall girl with dark hair that looked like it had rejected a mohawk as too conformist and set forth with only an ox and a Conestoga wagon into new and exciting realms of weird hairstyles.

The rabbinical student – a cherubic-faced young man with absolutely perfect curly hair whose name I think was David – apologized and said that he was a rabbinical student and not big on kissing weird girls at bars whose hairstyles seemed to be inspired by the crests on species of extinct reptiles. Or words to that effect.

“Wow,” said the girl. “A real rabbinical student. Tell you what. If I know something about the Bible that you don't know, will you kiss me?”

My ears perked up.

You don't understand how heavily these people train. It's

Torah eight hours a day since they're old enough to sit up straight. They've got the thing memorized by now and then some. "If you know something about the Bible I don't know, you can do whatever you want with me," David said laughing.

"Hmmm," said weird-hair-girl, and she made a show of thinking about it. "I've got one. How long did Joseph spend in the belly of the whale?"

"Three days and three nights," he said practically instantly, before I could warn him.

"Oh, so sorry," said weird-hair-girl.

David looked at her. "I can quote you chapter and verse. Jonah 1:17."

"...would be a lovely answer, if I'd asked that. I asked you how long Joseph was in the belly of the whale."

The rabbi trap had been sprung. His face turned red.

"Uh," he said, "there's nothing in the Bible saying for sure that Joseph didn't spend time in a whale too."

"Nope," said weird-hair-girl. "I'm no rabbi, but I am pretty sure that zero, zilch, nobody in the Bible spent time in a whale except Jonah."

"And the wives of the men slain in Sennacherib's invasion of Jerusalem," I interjected before I could stop myself.

Two sets of eyes suddenly pivoted my direction.

“The wives of the men slain in Sennacherib’s invasion of Jerusalem,” said David, “did not spend time in a whale.”

“Oh, they absolutely did,” I said, because at this point I was in too deep to back out. “They were very vocal about it.”

Weird-hair-girl raised one eyebrow.

“It’s all in Byron,” I said, then quoted: “And the widows of Ashur were loud in their whale.”

Blink, blink went the girl’s eyes, then suddenly: “I hate you and I hope you die.” Then: “Wait, no, death would be too good for you. You need to meet my cousin.” Then: “Drink”. And she dragged me over to her table and shoved a beer at me.

So, when the thread of my memory resumes, late the next morning, I found myself lying in a strange bed, mostly naked. I silently resolved not to go binge drinking with rabbinical students again.

Wait.

Standing over me, as if scrutinizing a horse for purchase, was Weird Hair Girl. And next to her, with precisely the same expression, was my short blonde girl with the pale blue eyes, the girl with the ladder.

“He told a terrible whale joke!” protested weird-hair-girl, “and first I wanted him to die, but then I realized that would be too good for him, and I told him he had to meet you instead.”

“What was the joke?” asked my blonde girl.

“It was...” Weird Hair Girl thought for a second. “Do you know how many beers I had last night? And you want me to remember things? *Specific* things?”

“Hm,” said my blonde. She looked straight at me, with the pale blue eyes. I don’t think she recognized me. “What was the joke?”

I protested. “I don’t even know where I am! I don’t even know your names! In my head I’ve been calling her ‘Weird Hair Girl’ and you -” I cut myself off before I said something like ‘the girl I am going to marry.’ “How am I supposed to remember a whale joke?”

The girl I was going to marry ran her fingers through her pale blonde hair in frustration and deep thought. “Since you came up with it last night,” she said, “you must be able to come up with it again. You were with rabbinical students, therefore you were talking about the Bible. Biblical whale jokes. What comes to mind?”

“Um,” I said. “Obviously the Biblical king Ahab is an suspect, given his namesake. So...aha!...Ahab was visiting Jerusalem, and he kept trying to shoot Moby Dick from there, and but it’s so far inland he couldn’t reach the sea with his harpoon, so he ordered the construction of a great rampart to give him a height advantage...”

She stared at me, a calculating stare.

“...and to this very day, it is known as the Whaling Wall,” I

finished, and both of us started giggling.

“Wait,” said Weird Hair Girl. “Why did I think introducing the two of you would be a good idea? This is the worst thing that ever happened.”

“And then Ahab died and went to Hell,” she added, “where there was much whaling and gnashing of teeth.”

“But,” I said, “it was all in accordance with the whale of God.”

“Wait,” said the blonde. “I’ve got one. Why was the sea so noisy after the destruction of Sennacherib’s army?”

I thought for a second. Then I thought for another second. “I got nothing,” I said.

“Because,” said the blonde girl, “the widows of Ashur were loud in their whale.”

“WAIT NO THAT WAS IT! THAT WAS MY WHALE JOKE! I SWEAR TO GOD, THAT WAS MY WHALE JOKE!”

“This was the biggest mistake of my life and I hope I die,” said Weird Hair Girl.

II.

I remember my first morning there, the morning it all came together. The girls finally dragged me out of bed and insisted on making me breakfast. Weird Hair Girl was named Erica. Girl Whom I Will Someday Marry was named Ana. Together they led me downstairs into an expansive dining room.

“Welcome to Ithaca!” Ana told me as I said down and plunked my head on the table, still a little hung over.

“You need food,” Erica stated, and disappeared into the kitchen to fetch me some. Ana went with her. They were whispering to one another. Giggles may have been involved.

It was a big house, a little old but well-maintained. From one wall hung a sort of banner with a big Hebrew letter yud on it. Tenth letter of the alphabet, representing the tenth commandment, “Thou shalt not covet”, with the obvious implications for capitalism and wealth accumulation. The big yud was a Stevensite symbol. These were Stevensites. It fit.

But I could do better than that. I turned my attention to the bookshelf on the far wall, tried to see what I could glean. They had the usual sci-fi/fantasy classics: Tolkien, Asimov, Salby. Then some meatier fare: Zayinty the economist, Chetlock the prognosticator, Tetkowsky the futurist, Yudka the novelist, good old Kaf ben Clifford. I recognized a few I’d seen before by their covers alone. Nachman Bernstein’s *Divinity*. Nachman Eretz’s *Alphanomics*. Menelaus Moleman’s *Letter to the Open-Minded Atheist*. Gebron and Eleazar’s *Kabbalah: A Modern Approach*. Ben Aharon’s *Gematria Since Adam*. Rachel Sephardi’s *Arriving At Aleph*. Rav Kurtzweil’s *The Age Of Mechanized Spirituality*. And... really? The collected works of Eliezer ben Moshe?!

I stared at the shelf greedily. I didn’t have *half* of these. I hoped they weren’t too serious about the not coveting.

It was only after finishing my scan of the books that I turned to the other possible source of information in the room.

“Hi,” I said to the guy sitting at the end of the table. He was tall and looked like he worked out. “I’m Aaron Smith-Teller. Nice to meet you.”

“Brian Young,” he said, barely looking up from his paper. “Welcome to Ithaca.”

“So I’ve heard. This is some kind of group house?”

“You could say that,” said Brian.

“Brian’s the strong, silent type,” said Ana, returning from the kitchen with coffee. She poured me a mug. “It’s why he and Erica get along so well. He never says anything, she never shuts up. Yes, we’re a group house. Erica prefers the phrase ‘commune’, but Erica prefers lots of things.”

“I’m standing right here, making your food!” Erica shouted from the kitchen.

“So are you guys some kind of Stevensite group, or...” I started to ask. Ana put a finger to her mouth, and whispered “Shhhhhhhhh. She’ll hear you.”

Erica came in bearing four plates of toast. “I’m glad you asked!” she said in an inappropriately chirpy voice, and picked Stevens’ *The Temple And The Marketplace* off the shelf. “Have you read this?”

The early years after the discovery of the first Names had been a heady time, as would-be-wizards had learned the few known incantations and built exciting new technologies on top of them. The Luminous Name had been worked into various prayers and magic squares and configurations to

produce lights of dizzying shapes and colors. Clever inventors in self-funded workshops had incorporated the Kinetic Name into all sorts of little gadgets and doodads. The best kabbalists had developed vast superstructures of prayers and made them available for free on the earliest computer networks to anyone who wanted to experiment.

That ended with the founding of the great theonomic corporations. They gradually took over the applied kabbalah scene in the 80s; their grip tightened in the early 90s after the President and the Comet King worked together to create UNSONG. Suddenly every new Name had a copyright attached to it, and the hundreds of lines of prayers and invocations people used to control the Names and bend them to your will were proprietary material. The old workshops became less and less relevant; the old self-employed kabbalist geniuses were either picked up to serve as drones at the theonomics or turned into increasingly irrelevant bitter old men.

It was in this atmosphere that Reverend Raymond E. Stevens of the Unitarian Church had written *The Temple And The Marketplace*. The book was two hundred fifty pages of sometimes excessively dense screeds, but it essentially argued that a whole host of Biblical commandments – most notably “thou shalt not covet” and “thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” – were best interpreted as describing the divine Names discovered after the sky cracked, prophetic injunctions intended to make sense only millennia after they were written. Taken together, these commandments formed a schematic for an ideal economy (the titular “Temple”) in which the wealth-creating powers of the kabbalah were shared by everyone. The modern

world was ignoring God's plan in favor of unrestricted capitalism (the titular "Marketplace") and inviting terrible retribution upon themselves. Stevens saw himself as a modern-day Jeremiah, warning the Israelites to repent before they suffered the full force of God's vengeance.

Despite being by all accounts something of a crackpot (his explanation of the dimensions of Solomon's Temple as occult references to economic parameters reminds me of Newton's, only less lucid) he was in the right place at the right time. Stevenism spread among bitter old kabbalists, teenage Marxist punks, spiritual-but-not-religious hippies, and anyone who found themselves unexpectedly locked out of the new economy. It went from oddly specific theory to Generic Badge Of The Counterculture, and the same sort of people who spent the Sixties talking about "vibrations" without really knowing what they meant spent the Nineties talking about the secret meanings of weird Levitical commandments.

"You guys are Unitarians?" I asked.

Stevens had been a Unitarian minister, and his work had spread like wildfire across the Unitarian community. After President Cheney cracked down on the church itself in the early part of the new millennium, what was left of Unitarianism was almost entirely Stevensite, little religious communities built along the lines ordained by the Reverend's books, singing the forbidden Names of God during services. It was part prayer, part act of civil disobedience, and part military training: people who really knew the Names tended to be bad people to mess with.

“We’re the Unitarian *hub*,” said Erica. “For all of North San Jose. And I run the Bay Area Unitarian magazine. *The Stevensite Standard*. Listen!”

She stood on a chair, and started giving what from then on I would always recognize as The Spiel. The Spiel was one of the few constants of life at Ithaca. Roommates would come and go, intellectual fads would burst onto the scene in glorious bloom before vanishing in a puff of general embarrassment, but The Spiel remained. Erica could do it convincingly while sober but *spectacularly* when drunk. She had converted entire bars full of people to her particular brand of radical theological anarchism on several occasions. Over years of practice she had perfected it down to a two minute, seven second elevator pitch which she had so far recited in manners including: blind drunk, on one foot, driving a motorcycle, and while having sex with two men at the same time. The month I met her, she had been working on learning juggling, so she picked up three balls and began to orate:

“God is born free, but everywhere is in chains! The Names, our birthright as children of Adam, the patrimony which should have ensured us an age of plenty like none other in human history, have been stolen from us by corporations and whored out to buy yachts for billionaires.

“The Fertile Name brings forth grain from the earth, speeding the growth of crops by nearly half. Children in Ethiopia starve to death, and Ethiopian farmers cannot use the Fertile Name to grow the corn that would save them. Why not? Because Amalek holds the patent and demands \$800 up front from any farmer who wants to take advantage

of it.

“The Purifying Name instantly kills eighteen species of harmful bacteria, including two that are resistant to all but the most toxic antibiotics. But two-thirds of American hospitals have no one licensed to use the Purifying Name. Why not? Because they can’t afford the licensing fees demanded by Gogmagog.

“In the old days, we told ourselves that poverty was a fact of life. That there wasn’t enough food or medicine or clothing or housing to go around. Then it was true. Now it is false. To feed the hungry or heal the sick no longer requires scarce resources. It requires only a word. A word that the entire international system of governance – corporations, politicians, UNSONG – has united to prevent the needy from ever obtaining.

“86% of known Names are held by seven big cor – damn!”

Erica had dropped her balls. She picked them back up, then continued.

“86% of known Names are held by seven big theonomic corporations. Microprosopus. Gogmagog. Amalek. Countenance. Tetragrammaton. ELeshon. And Serpens, the biggest, with \$174 billion in assets. Its CEO has a net worth of \$9 billion, five beach houses scattered across the Untied States, and her own private 12-seater jet.

“When Marx heard of such injustices, he demanded we seize the means of production. But today the means of production aren’t factories to be seized by mobs with

pitchforks. They're Names, to be taken in spiritual struggle and spread around the world until the system is seen for the sham it really is and crumbles of its own accord. Thus William Blake:

*I will not cease from mental fight
Nor let my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land*

And the theonomic corporations will stop at nothing to thwart us," Erica warned. "The klipot are..."

"I know what they are," I interrupted. "I was expelled from Stanford for publishing a method for breaking klipot."

Erica dropped her balls, then fell off her chair. "Name!" she shouted. "I knew you seemed familiar! I organized a protest for you!"

Two years ago I'd been exactly where I wanted to be, a Stanford undergrad studying the applied kabbalah on a nice scholarship. I'd just finished a class on klipot and was playing around a bit – in the theoretical kabbalah, klipot are these sort of demonic scleroses that encrust the divine light and make it inaccessible, but in the applied kabbalah the word is used to describe cryptographic transformations of the Names of God that allow them to be used without revealing them to listeners. Imagine you've discovered a Name that lets you cure cancer, and you want to cure a customer's cancer but don't want them to learn the Name themselves so they can steal your business. Instead of speaking the Name aloud, you apply a cipher to it – if you want, change

all the As to Es and all the Bs to Zs, so that ABBA becomes EZZE – and speak the cipher while holding the original fixed in your mind. The Name has the desired effect, and your ungrateful customer is left with nothing but the meaningless word “EZZE”, which absent the plaintext version is of no use to anybody.

Problem is, all the Names follow certain numerological rules. The Maharaj Rankings are the most famous, but there are over a dozen. So by working backwards from a klipah it's usually possible to narrow down the plaintext Name to a very small collection of possibilities, which you can then check by hand – or by mouth, as the case may be. You end up with a race between rightsholders of Names trying to develop better and better klipot, and everyone else trying to discover better and better ways of breaking them. Well, I joined Team Everyone Else in college and came up with a pretty nifty new algorithm for breaking NEHEMOTH, one of the big klipot used by the Gogmagog corporation, with about one percent as much hassle as anyone else had come up with. My advisor told me not to publish and I ignored him. Turned out giant evil corporations don't like having their multi-billion dollar properties rendered useless. Nothing I'd done was illegal per se, but they put pressure on Stanford to expel me, expel me they did, and a few months later their Applied Kabbalah department had a new professorship endowed with Gogmagog money and I was broke and living with my mother. Not that I'm bitter.

“Yeah,” I said half-heartedly. “Thanks.”

“You!” said Erica. “You need to join us! You're like, a real-life freedom fighter! A martyr! Like the Israelites at Masada! You

fought the law!”

“And the law won,” I said. “Did Ana tell you where she found me? An old Cash for Gold shop on Briar Street.”

Erica was barely listening. “You’re a hero in the battle against tyranny. And a kabbalist. We need kabbalists. Right now Ana is leading the choir, but she’s an amateur. You’re a professional. You need to join us. Brian is moving out in a few weeks. There will be a room opening up.”

I rolled my eyes at the “hero” part, then the “battle against tyranny part”, and a third time at me being a professional anything, until it looked like I had some kind of weird eye movement disorder. I stopped when I heard “room opening up.”

“How much is rent?” I asked.

“Oho,” said Erica, “suddenly, interest.”

A brief flurry of awkward glances between Ana and Erica and occasionally Brian, who refused to return any of them and continued reading the paper. Finally Erica spoke.

“Five hundred dollars a month,” she said.

I stared her in the eyes. “What’s the catch?” This was the Bay Area. A rat-infested hovel went into the four digits.

“Um,” said Ana. Erica finished her sentence. “Ana’s family is very wealthy and has kindly albeit unknowingly offered to subsidize the rest of us.”

“Unknowingly?” I asked.

“I’m a grad student at Stanford,” said Ana, “and I tell them I need the money for room and board.”

“How much?” I asked.

“Um. A few thousand.”

“And they believe you?”

“Well, it is the Bay Area.”

She had a point. My mind added: beautiful and witty *and* rich.

III.

I remember the day I first saw Ana in her element.

She was studying at Stanford. I’d checked Stanford when I was looking for her, but I’d checked the wrong place. She wasn’t studying the kabbalah per se. She was a grad student in philosophy. Her area was theodicy. The question of how a perfectly good God can allow a universe filled with so much that is evil. Who even studies theodicy anymore? After two thousand years of hand-wringing, what’s left to say?

There must have been something, because journals kept publishing Ana’s work, and a few months before I met her she was named the Augustine Distinguished Scholar in Theodicy, apparently a big national honor that came with a heap of money. It was her passion, her great love, her reason for being. “Don’t you get it, Aaron?” she would say,

animated almost to the point of mania. “We’re looking at all of this the wrong way. The Divine Names. The laws of physics. We’re asking ‘what’ when we should be asking ‘why’. Why did God create the universe the way He did? Why the Names? If we really understand God’s goodness, then we can predict everything. What will the stock market do next year? Whatever it’s best for it to do. Who will win the next Presidential election? Whichever candidate is better. If we really understood divine goodness, we would understand everything, past, present, and future.”

I gingerly pointed out that the world was terrible.

“That’s exactly the thing!” Ana said. “How do we square our knowledge that God wants as good a universe as possible with the terrible universe we ended up with? Square that circle, and literally everything else falls into place.”

Every Sunday night, Erica hosted a dinner party. Every Sunday night, one guest was tasked with giving a presentation. Something they were interested in, something to keep us entertained while we waited for the food to be ready. A few weeks ago, Erica herself had talked about running the *Standard* and how she was going to get distribution networks going across the California Republic and maybe even into the Salish Free State. The week before, I’d talked about a new paper out of MIT expanding upon Rubenstein’s Sieve, one of the most important methods for narrowing down namespace. Now it was Ana’s turn, and of course she was going to talk about the Book of Job.

The chairs were all full as usual. I recognized Bill Dodd. He’d been a physics grad student at Berkeley before ending as

one of the washed-up scientists who seemed to be everywhere in the Bay these days, the type instantly recognizable by their tendency to respond to things which were none of their business with “As a physicist, I think...”

I recognized Eliot “Eli” Foss. Calm, quiet Eliot – Erica had picked him up at a Unitarian meeting in Oakland, picked him up in both senses of the word – well, two of the three, she hadn’t literally lifted him. Rumor had it that he was actually religious instead of meta-ironically religious, but no one could tell for certain and the whole idea made us sort of uncomfortable.

I recognized Ally Hu, who was smiling awkwardly and talking to Eliot in her crisp, overly-enunciated English. Her family had been bigwigs in the Harmonious Jade Dragon Empire before the latest round of purges. They’d fled to California and now they owned half of southern Santa Clara Valley. Ally had only been on this side of the world six or seven years but had already fallen in with a bad crowd – namely, us.

The doorbell rang, and I answered it. I recognized Zoe Farr. She was in a tight pink t-shirt with a big yud on it. Karen Happick from the North Bay had been selling them at cost a couple of months ago; I think I had a white one at the bottom of a drawer, unworn.

“You’re late,” Erica told her. There was no malice in her voice, only confusion that someone might risk missing her cooking. She’d poured blood and sweat and tears into building our little community, but the secret ingredient had turned out to be soup. She was a really good cook, and what

her magazine and occasional impassioned speeches couldn't do, an invitation to one of her dinner parties might. It was weird, the way little things like that turned the wheels of destiny. I've always wondered if history is missing some story like how the Founding Fathers only declared independence because Martha Washington served amazing stew every time there was a Continental Congress.

I sat back down. The conversation had shifted. Bill was asking Ally why the house was called Ithaca; Ally was giggling and saying she was sworn to secrecy.

The chair next to me was empty. The doorbell rang again. I opened the door again.

"Hello," said Pirindiel, ducking and fidgeting awkwardly to fit his tall winged form through the door. "I am here. I brought you an offering." He held out a bouquet of extremely dead flowers.

I shot Erica a look, which I hoped encoded *You invited a fallen angel to the dinner party? Really?* She shot a look back, which I interpreted as *Well, he's part of The Cause, and he probably doesn't get out much, and also, shut up.*

"When did you get those flowers?" asked Erica, patiently.

"A month ago," said Pirindiel. "The day you invited me. I wanted to make sure that I didn't forget."

"You do remember," asked Erica, "that flowers wilt after being dead for too long?"

Pirindiel's face fell. It was obvious that he'd forgotten. Erica

shot me a *don't shoot me any looks* look, so I didn't. Fallen angels were *always* forgetting little things like the tendency of earthly life to decay and die. Or wondering why the news today was different than the news six months ago. Or being surprised again and again when people turned out to be not very nice. It was why they were usually complete wrecks.

Ana was actually the last to arrive, even though she lived here. She looked ethereally beautiful as she descended the staircase, a bag of books in her hand. She reached the table, sat down beside me, started passing out books, one per person. "Fellow Singers, the Book of Job."

There weren't enough copies of the Book of Job for all of us, which was either a metaphor or bad planning on Ana's part. Pirindiel knew it by memory, which made things a little easier, and Erica was still at the stove preparing the main course, but I still ended up sharing a copy with Ally.

"The Book of Job," said Ana. She had the voice of a singer, lowercase-s, though as far as I knew she'd never had any vocal training. When she spoke, people listened. "Totally unique among Biblical manuscripts. It's not set in Israel, but in Uz – maybe somewhere in Arabia. It probably predates Israel as a settled state. It's written in a much older form of Hebrew than any other Biblical book. It gets quoted in Isaiah, which means it's older than the prophets. It gets quoted in Psalms, which means it's older than King David. The lexicon is totally different, so many foreign words that scholars suspect it was written in something else and translated later on, so maybe older than the Hebrew language itself. This thing is *old*. And there's one other difference between Job and the rest of the Bible. Job is...it's

self-aware. It takes these questions that we all want to ask, reading the rest of the Bible – if God is good and all-powerful, how come there’s so much evil in the world? – and instead of ignoring them it runs into them head on. Like, haven’t you ever read the Bible, and had questions, and wish you could just ask them to God directly? Job is the book where someone actually does that.”

Ana’s enthusiasm wasn’t exactly infectious, but it was honest. You didn’t always become interested in what Ana was talking about, but it was hard not to become interested in *Ana*.

“But it’s also the greatest disappointment in the history of literature. You have this frame story where the very righteous man Job falls on hard times, and he asks his friends why this is happening to him, and his friends say that surely bad things never happen to good people, so Job must have done something wrong. Job insists that he hasn’t, and he’s right – in fact, later, God’s going to command that the friends sacrifice various animals to atone for besmirching Job’s name in this way. Job is just a really, really righteous guy who suffers an immense amount. And finally, we get to the climax, where Job demands an answer, and God appears in the whirlwind, and we think we’re finally going to get to hear the official, Biblically-approved answer to this problem at the heart of religion and human existence, and God just says...He says...well, open your books.”

Ana took a deep breath in, and although she was short and adorable she did her best to speak in the booming voice of God:

“Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: ‘Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me: Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding: who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof; when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?’”

She went on in this vein. We listened. One thing Ana hadn’t mentioned about Job is that it was spectacular poetry. We tend to think of the Bible as a bunch of boring begats, but Job dazzles beyond our wildest expectations.

“Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion? Canst thou bring forth Mazzaroth in his season? or canst thou guide Arcturus with his sons? Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven? canst thou set the dominion thereof in the earth? Canst thou lift up thy voice to the clouds, that abundance of waters may cover thee? Canst thou send lightnings, that they may go and say unto thee, Here we are?”

“As a physicist,” said Bill Dodd, “I feel obligated to say that we *can* send lightnings! All you need is something that produces a high enough voltage, like a big van der Graaff generator.”

Ana turned to Bill, with fire in her eyes. Her God impression was getting scarily on point. “Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a fish-hook? or his tongue with a cord which thou

lettest down? Canst thou put an hook into his nose? or bore his jaw through with a thorn? Will he make many supplications unto thee? will he speak soft words unto thee? Will he make a covenant with thee? wilt thou take him for a servant for ever? WILT THOU PLAY WITH HIM AS WITH A BIRD?"

"Sheesh," said Ally Hu, who was reading ahead in our shared copy. "God is so obsessed with this whole Leviathan thing. First He is talking about the earth and the stars and the clouds, and then He decides no, I will just drop everything and focus on Leviathan for three chapters."

"God is canonically really obsessed with Leviathan," I said. "In the Talmud, Rav Yehuda says that there are twelve hours in a day. God spends three of them studying Torah, three judging the world, three answering prayers, and three playing with Leviathan. That's a quarter of God's time, which you have to imagine is pretty valuable."

Everyone looked at me. I shrugged. "The Talmud is kind of crazy."

"You know," said Bill Dodd, "what is Leviathan, anyway? Like a giant whale or something, right? So God is saying we need to be able to make whales submit to us and serve us and dance for us and stuff? Cause, I've been to Sea World. We have *totally* done that."

"Leviathan is a giant sea dinosaur thing," said Zoe Farr. "Like a plesiosaur. Look, it's in the next chapter. It says he has scales and a strong neck."

“And you don’t think if he really existed, we’d Jurassic Park the sucker?” asked Bill Dodd.

“It also says he breathes fire,” said Eli Foss.

“So,” proposed Erica, “if we can find a fire-breathing whale with scales and a neck, and we bring it to Sea World, then we win the Bible?”

“What I think my esteemed cousin meant to say,” Ana said cheerfully, dropping the God act, “is that God argues here that we’re too weak and ignorant to be worthy to know these things. But then the question becomes – exactly how smart do we have to be to deserve an answer? Now that we can, as Bill puts it, send lightning through the sky, now that we can capture whales and make them do tricks for us, does that mean we have a right to ask God for an explanation? Discuss!”

“Maybe,” said Ally Hu, “God does not say that we are not worthy. Maybe God says that we can’t understand. That we are maybe not smart enough.”

“But,” said Eli Foss, “when kids aren’t smart enough to understand something, we give them the simple explanation. Like when kids ask about lightning, we say that the clouds rub up against each other and make sparks. It’s not totally right. But it’s better than nothing.”

Erica stood up tall, doing her best impression of an overbearing mother. “Who darkeneth counsel with words without knowledge? Canst thou graduate college? Canst thou go unto the office, and bring back \$40,000 a year?

When the dishwasher breaketh, is it thou who repairest it?"

Everybody laughed, except Pirindiel, who muttered something like "Do parents really talk that way?"

"My doctor talks that way," said Zoe Farr. "Whenever I question him about something, he just looks at me and says in this *voice*, 'Which one of us went to medical school?'"

"The book of Job actually makes a hell of a lot of sense if you suppose God is a doctor," Erica agreed.

"And!" Zoe Farr added, "it would explain why doctors think they're God!"

"Seriously!" said Ana. "Who does that? Other than doctors, I mean. Job is asking this very reasonable question – how come I, a righteous man, have been made to suffer immensely? God actually knows the answer – it's because He wanted to win a bet with Satan – but instead of telling Job that, He spends like three entire chapters rubbing in the fact that He's omnipotent and Job isn't. Why would you do that?"

"The part with the Satan is weird," said Ally Hu. "If really this is God's reason, then the reason for Job's suffering is different from the reason for everyone else's suffering. Right? Bad things happen to most people, but maybe it is not because of bet between God and Satan at all times?"

"Girl's got a point," said Bill Dodd.

"I remembered," Ally Hu continued "when we left of the

Harmonious Jade Dragon Empire. I keep asking my parents, 'What is happening? Where do we go?' because I was young. They say 'We are going to a vacation' and I say 'But why are we going to a vacation during school time?' Then they got very angry with me and told me I should mind my own beehive."

"Beeswax," Bill Dodd corrected.

"But they were trying to protect me. They knew if I hear the real answer, I would start crying, become upset, maybe run away. Maybe the real reason God allows evil is something terrible. Maybe He is trying to protect us from knowing something."

Everyone was quiet for a second.

"In the Talmud," said Eli Foss, "Rabbi Akiva says that apparent evil is always for a greater good. For example, he tells the story of the time when he was traveling to a town, and no one would let him stay in the inn, so he tried to camp in the woods, but his fire went out and he was alone in the cold and the darkness. But that night, a bunch of bandits raided the town and killed and enslaved everybody. If Akiva had been staying in the inn, or if he'd had a fire burning, they would have found him and killed him."

"That's stupid," said Erica. "God could just make there not be bandits. Yes, sometimes some suffering is necessary to prevent even greater suffering, but then you ask why there has to be the greater suffering, and if you keep pushing it back further then eventually you get to the greatest suffering of all and the buck stops there."

“In a different part of the Talmud,” I said, “Rabbi Akiva gives a different explanation. He says that even the Heaven-bound righteous have a few sins, and since those sins won’t be punished in Heaven, they have to be punished here on Earth. Therefore, the righteous suffer on Earth. But even the Hell-bound wicked have a few virtues. And since those virtues won’t be rewarded in Hell, they have to be rewarded here on Earth. Therefore, the wicked prosper on Earth. Then people ask why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper, and it looks like a mystery, but it actually makes total sense.”

“As a physicist,” said Bill Dodd, “I would think you could model that as a bimodal distribution of suffering. But instead intuitively there’s more of a normal distribution of suffering. And although people complain that the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, there’s not a perfect correlation. I don’t even know if there’s a correlation at all. It seems more like suffering happens at random regardless of how good a person you are.”

“I was raised Catholic,” said Zoe Farr. “In church school, we always learned that evil is just the absence of good. So God didn’t create evil, He just created a finite and limited amount of good, not always as much as we’d like. So people aren’t as nice as they could be, and sometimes the weather forms storms and tornadoes, but it’s not because there’s this active force called Evil out there, it’s just because the weather is doing its own thing unrestrained by God pouring infinite amounts of Good into it.”

“No!” said Ana forcefully, abandoning her role as referee and joining in the discussion. “That’s not right. There are certainly bad people who just fulfill their natural selfishness

without having any good to get in the way. The bankers, CEOs of theonomics, UNSONG agents, cops, politicians. They just do what the system tells them, follow their incentives with no concern for the consequences. But then there are other people. Your sadists. Your serial killers. People who delight in causing other people pain. Elie Wiesel said the opposite of love wasn't hate, it was indifference. I beg to differ. Any of you ever read about what the Japanese did to the Chinese in Nanking? The Nazis, you know, mostly they just wanted some people dead and went about it in a horrifically efficient way. The Japanese, they enjoyed it. They worked hard on it. They deviated from efficiency, from self-interest, they sacrificed their own self-interest to be as perfectly cruel as possible. And Hell. Thamiel and his demons. They're not indifferent. They're evil. There's a difference."

"I mean, it looks like there's a difference to us," said Zoe Farr, "but maybe on a metaphysical level, that sort of depravity is just what a total, absolute absence of good looks like."

"I remember seeing a video," said Ana "of the President's summit with the Devil. It was in this big hall. First the President came in, and they all played the Star-Spangled Banner. Then Thamiel came in, and the band played...played the anthem of Hell. It was horrible. I didn't even know instruments could make noises like that. They were all out of tune and fighting with each other and going at weird intervals that tricked the ear and made me want to pull my hair out."

"So?" asked Zoe. "Maybe the Hell music was just the total

absolute absence of good in music.”

“No,” said Ana. “There’s good music. And then there’s total silence. And then there’s that. It’s not silence. It’s the opposite of music.”

“Unsong,” I suggested.

Everyone except Ana laughed.

“Yes,” she said. “Unsong.”

“Garlic angel hair!” Erica said at that moment, and brought a big pot of pasta to the table. Everyone made approving noises except Pirindiel, who asked something about where one could find these garlic angels, and who had to be taken aside and given a quick explanation. The angel took some pasta and half-heartedly put it in his cup of soup.

“The reason I bring all of this up,” said Ana in between mouthfuls, “is that here we are. We’re Unitarians and singers. We’ve got a Movement. We think we’re on the side of Good. We know what’s evil. Evil is when UNSONG and the theonomics try to control the Names of God and keep them from the people. We think we know what we have to do. We have to take up Reverend Stevens’ crusade and spread the Names to as many people as possible. On a political level this all makes sense. But on a theological level, even Reverend Stevens barely touched this. Why does God have these Names that work miracles, but not tell us what they are? Why does He suffer them to be distributed throughout a namespace that can only be searched through a combination of cryptological acumen and brute force? Why

does He permit them to be hidden by klipot, by which they can be bought and sold without letting the customer grasp their true structure? Why would He create enough magic to make the world a paradise for all living things, then place it somewhere it can be kept in a locked vault to enrich the few? Why, as the Bible put it, does He hide His light under a bushel?"

"Seems clear enough to me," said Bill Dodd. "God's not a big guy in the sky. He's just a force, like physical forces, but on a higher level. He doesn't plan these things, any more than anyone plans gravity. It just happens."

"So you're denying the Bible?" Eli Foss said, somewhat less intimidating than intended due to a mouth full of pasta. "We're sitting here at a table with an angel and a kabbalist, and you're denying the Bible?"

"Look, we all know that the Bible was given by Uriel, not God. Most of it just records Uriel's interventions in the world, which are usually well-intentioned but certainly not omniscient. Why not the Book of Job too? Job asks a hard question and gets yelled at. Sounds exactly like Uriel on a bad day. I can even imagine him going on about the Leviathan for like an hour, describing how interesting he finds each of its fins and teeth and things while Job gets more and more confused."

A couple of people snorted.

"But Uriel," said Eli Foss, "has always said he's just trying to follow God's plan, as he understands it."

“The Pope says the same thing,” said Bill Dodd. “That doesn’t mean he’s met the guy.”

“Someone must have created the world!” protested Ally Hu. “And all the angels, and the Names, and the kabbalah!”

“I’m not saying there’s not a Creator force,” said Bill Dodd. “I’m just saying it shouldn’t be thought of as a person.”

“Thomas Aquinas,” said Zoe Farr, “tells us that God is not a person, not at all, not even close, but can sometimes be compared to one, since a person is the most intelligent entity we have to compare it to. It’s like how they used to say the brain was a telephone switchboard. It’s much more than that, but if all you have as a metaphor is a telephone switchboard, it’s better than nothing.”

“But if God can’t even figure out,” said Bill Dodd, “that if you want perfect good you should avoid having evil, well, whatever it is He is, it’s got to be kind of dumb.”

“Oh, oh,” said Pirindiel, and there was worry in his eyes. “You shouldn’t say that. That’s blasphemy.”

“Be nice, Bill,” said Ana, “there are angels here.”

“I feel like we’re forgetting something pretty important,” said Erica. “I hate to go all dualist here, but we know there’s a Hell. We know there’s a Devil. I’m not saying that God and the Devil are *exactly* equally powerful, but maybe it’s not quite so one-sided that God can just steamroll over Thamiel without a second thought? Maybe there’s some kind of strategic balance thing going on?”

Ana looked shocked. Pirindiel looked horrified. But it was Eli Foss who spoke first. "Erica," he said. "God is one. That's the whole point. You can't just go around saying there are two separate beings with similar levels of godlike power. That's like saying there are two gods. It's serious, serious blasphemy."

"Well," said Erica, "maybe if God didn't want people saying the Devil's just as powerful as He is, He should stop making the world full of evil just as much as good. Maybe if He didn't want us saying He's too weak to save everyone who's sick, or suffering, or in Hell, He should get off His cosmic ass and save them."

When Ana spoke now, it was very serious. "Moreover the LORD answered Job, and said, Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him? he that reproveth God, let him answer it. Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous?"

"Huh!" I exclaimed. Everyone looked at me.

"That verse from the Rubaiyat. The one Nixon used in the 70s. It goes, um...

*O thou, who burns with tears for those who burn
In Hell, whose fires will find thee in thy turn
Hope not the Lord thy God to mercy teach
For who art thou to teach, or He to learn?*

...that's from Job. It's got to be. Khayyam must have read Job."

“Well,” said Zoe, “it’s certainly got the right amount of condescension.”

“What are we talking about?” asked Pirindiel.

“Hast thou an arm like God?” Ana recited. “Or canst thou thunder with a voice like Him?”

“Okay,” said Bill Dodd. “We get the idea.”

“Deck thyself now with majesty and excellency; and array thyself with glory and beauty!”

“Is somebody saying there are two gods?” asked Pirindiel. “Because God is one.”

“Cast abroad the rage of thy wrath: and behold every one that is proud, and abase him!”

“Okay,” said Ally Hu. “That’s enough.” She grabbed the Book of Job from Ana’s hands. Ana grabbed it back. A tug of war.

“Dessert’s ready!” said Erica.

“God is One and His Name is One,” insisted Pirindiel. “This is very important.”

“It’s devil’s food cake!” Erica said, bringing the plate to the table.

“No!” Pirindiel shouted at Erica and her cake, and in a flash he was on his feet, sword of fire materializing in his hands, rushing towards her.

Ally pulled the book away from Ana.

“This is not how we do theodicy in this house!” I shouted at Ally and Ana.

“HELP!” shouted Ana. “IMMIGRANTS ARE STEALING MY JOB!”

“WAIT!” said Bill Dodd. “I just got it! The house is called Ithaca because it’s where theodicy happens. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.”

“It’s just dessert!” Erica screamed at the oncoming Pirindiel.

“No!” Ana shouted. “That’s the whole point of Job! There *are* no just deserts!”

I reached into my pocket, pulled out my scroll wheel, and activated the Thunderclap Name. A deafening boom filled the room. Everybody went silent.

“Thanks, Aaron,” Erica said, defeated.

“Everyone sit down!” I said. “Pirindiel, sword away! No more theodicy! Time for dessert!”

IV.

I remember the day I asked Ana on a date.

It was my third week in Ithaca. I’d just finished moving my bed into my room with the help of one of the other group home residents, a tall Asian guy who didn’t like to talk very much. I was sweaty and thirsty, I’d gone into the common

room to drink some Gatorade, and found Ana already there reading a book. We'd started talking, and somehow gotten onto the subject of the Shem haMephorash, the Explicit Name of God, the True Name, the Most Holy Name, which gave its wielder power over all Creation.

"The Explicit Name is 'Harold'," I told her.

"No," she answered. "The Explicit Name is 'Juan'."

"But," I said, "in the Lord's Prayer, we say 'Our Father in Heaven, Harold be thy name.'"

"But," Ana objected, "in the Shema, we say 'Hear O Israel – the Lord is Juan.'"

"But," I said, "all angels are angels of the Lord, and the song says 'Hark, the Harold angels sing.'"

"But," Ana objected, "the Aleinu ends 'God is Juan, and His name is Juan.'"

"But," I said, "Christians say Jesus is God. And they give his name as Jesus H. Christ. What might the H stand for? Harold! "

"But," Ana objected, "think about it. Who names their kids Jesus? Mexican people, that's who! And what kind of names do Mexican people have? Names like Juan! Q period E period D period!"

She actually said Q period E period D period. I felt a wave of affection crash over me and through me, stronger than any other I had ever known. Before my frontal lobes could push

through a veto, I blurted out: “Ana, would you go on a date with me?”

Ana’s face fell. “Aaron,” she said. “I’m asexual.”

“So?” I said. “I asked you for a date, not for sex.”

“Still.”

“If we went on a date, we would be talking and enjoying each other’s company. That’s what we’re doing now. So what’s the problem?”

“If not being on a date is exactly the same as being on a date, why do you want to go on a date? Why don’t we stay here, in the living room?”

“Hey! That’s not fair!”

“Human attraction never is.”

“Well, it should be!”

Ana rolled her eyes. “You realize you’re talking to the Augustine Distinguished Scholar in Theodicy? The girl who picketed in front of the World’s Fair back in 2012, waving a sign saying “NO IT ISN’T?” You’re preaching to the euphemism-ing choir.”

I was briefly discombobulated, then regained my combobulation. “Look,” I said, “I really like you. I want you to like me back. Dates are like a universally recognized signal of this.”

“What if I just told you outright that I liked you?”

“I want it to be official!”

“I could give you a certificate. I have an uncle who’s a notary public. We could make him sign.”

I choked back a tear. “Ana, this is *serious*.”

Her expression changed. “I’m serious too,” she said. “I like you. You’re funny and interesting and you know the mystical secrets of Juan. But everything around romance – the flowers, the silly looks, the candlelight dinners. I am *not into these things*. I’m happy to talk with you, to live with you, even to grab dinner with you if you’re hungry. But I don’t want to date.”

“If you’re going to grab dinner, why not call it a date? It’s just a word.”

She shut her book with great force. “Did you really say ‘just a word’? You call yourself a kabbalist! Words have power! Words are the only tools we have to connect the highest levels of our intellect to the mysteries of reality! Once we describe something with a word, things happen! It’s been given a life of its own! The angels are on notice, working their secret little works around it, starting reverberations that echo across the entire structure! Words are the vestment of divinity, the innermost garments of Juan!”

I just sat there and took it. I didn’t say anything, because I was on the verge of tears, and if I spoke she would have noticed, and then I would have looked dumb, and she would

have lost respect for me, or something, look, it sounds stupid when I write it down, but give me a break. I sat there silently, did not disturb Juan's innermost garments with my speech.

Ana realized something was wrong. "Uh," she said "if it helps, I am totally okay with you writing me flowery love poetry."

"It helps a little," I said.

"And...hmm...tell you what. Erica's in the kitchen making curry. If you can eat one of the habanero peppers whole, without drinking water for a whole minute, I'll give you a kiss."

"Really?" I asked, and leapt to my feet, because I was a moron.

V.

And I remember the day Ana and I got married.

It was towards the end of my first month at Ithaca. I'd just been let go from my job at Cash For Gold, and I was working on my application for Countenance. Erica was making curry, and because she was a terrible person who enjoyed making me miserable, she asked if I wanted another whole habanero. I winced and clutched my throat just thinking about it, then very politely told her no, in a way that might possibly have referenced Dante and the many terrors of the damned. She laughed.

"I'll be honest," she said. "Nobody else has ever had the guts

to eat one of those. What were you THINKING?"

"I wanted to impress Ana," I said.

I looked towards Ana, who was sitting at the table, scanning for offense. None was found. "I have a crush on her, and it was getting awkward, so she tricked me into eating a chili pepper to disengage myself from the situation." Then, feeling guilty about my elision, I told her the whole story.

Erica looked delighted. "You're in love with my cousin!" she announced to no one in particular.

"She's not interested," I said glumly.

Erica took this information in, chewed it over for a moment. Then: "Wait! I've got it! You should get married."

I rolled my eyes. "She won't even –"

"Wait," said Ana. "Yes! Erica, you're brilliant!"

Confusion ensued.

"You won't go on a date with me, but you *will* marry me? How does that even..."

Ana was gone, a dash up the stairs. A few seconds later, she returned with a notebook.

"Okay," she said. "So a while ago I was thinking – Aaron, you'll like this – you know how there have been later additions to the Bible, like the end of Mark 16 or the part in John 7-8? And kabbalists have mostly ignored those, first of

all out of *totally unjustified* prejudice against the New Testament, and second of all because, well, if they were added in by later readers they can't metaphorically represent the secret structure of the universe? But I thought – what if the later additions to the Bible metaphorically represent later additions to the secret structure of the universe? So I ran a couple of them through Rubenstein's Sieve and normalized the results, divided the whole thing by "aleph-tet-nun" as the most appropriate Boston Triplet, and sure enough I got five subfactors, one of which gets the right Maharaj Rank for a potential Name. After like a week of trying I was able to free it from a relatively weak klipah..."

"*You discovered a Name?*" I asked. Not more than a dozen kabbalists alive had discovered Names the old fashioned way, the proper way, by genius alone.

"It was total luck!" she insisted. "And nobody else was crazy enough to look in the additions."

"Well?" I asked, buzzing with excitement. "What does it *do?*"

"Unclear," said Ana.

"It marries people," said Erica.

"Sort of," said Ana.

"Sacred kabbalistic marriage of minds," said Erica.

"SCABMOM for short," said Ana. "But I haven't gotten it to work quite right yet."

She described the moment of discovery. Tasting the new Name, pregnant with possibilities. The feel of the Name itself entering her brain, unlocking secret wisdom. A ritual. Certain words.

She'd grabbed Erica from the kitchen over her protests and dragged her into her bedroom, where she had arranged four candles in an approximate square. Around the perimeter of the square, she'd sprinkled colored sand in the shape of Hebrew letters; ten colors, twenty two letters per side.

"Love of God, we just had those carpets cleaned!" Erica objected. "I hope for your sake you're able to get all of that out with the vacuum."

"Shhhh," said Ana. "Repeat after me, but change the names. I, Ana Thurmond,"

"...I, Erica Lowry,"

"In full knowledge of the consequences, call upon the symbols and angels of the world..."

"Wait, what *are* the consequences?"

"Shhh! This is just a test! Now we've got to start over! I, Ana Thurmond,"

"I, Erica Lowry,"

"In full knowledge of the consequences, call upon the symbols and angels of the world..."

"In...bah...full knowledge of the consequences, call upon the

symbols and angels of the world...”

“The higher and the lower spheres”

“The higher and the lower spheres”

“And the Master of them all”

“And the Master of them all”

“To join us at the root, as mountains to the Earth”

“To join us at the root, as mountains to the Earth”

“And rivers to the ocean”

“And rivers to the ocean”

“And stars to the firmament”

“And stars to the firmament”

“And so we invoke the Holy Name, IYAR-NA-AVANTE-SHOK-
TEHAN-MI-LEVAN-ZA-NAONE-KHETH-ULAT”

“And so we invoke the Holy Name, IYAR-NA-AVANTE...uh...
SHOK-TEHAN...MI? Uh...LEVAN? SHA...no, wait...ZA...NAONE-
KHETH-ULAT”

(here the candles start to darken)

“For God is One”

“For God is One”

“And His Name is One”

“And His Name is One”

“And we are One.”

“And we are One.”

“And it is done.”

“And it is done.”

Then all the letters of colored sand glowed red, then green, then white. And the candles laid round made a high-pitched sound and flared up in a burst of light. And Erica screams, and Ana seems to be gazing far away. And she briefly fits, but she gathers her wits just in time to hear her say “ANA LOOK THE LETTERS HAVE BURNED THEMSELVES INTO THE CARPET YOU ARE IN SO MUCH TROUBLE.”

“How do you feel?” Ana asked.

“ANGRY,” said Erica.

“Other than that?” Ana asked.

“NOTHING ELSE CAN GET THROUGH THE HOT FLAMES OF MY ANGER” Erica protested.

“Huh. I don’t feel any different either.”

“But,” Ana told me, “over the next couple of weeks, we would get these...intimations from each other. Like I would be on one side of the house, and I would feel like something

was wrong, and I'd go find Erica, and she would have just burned herself by accident. Or I'd be feeling really sad about something, and Erica would say 'you look sad', even though I wasn't showing it at all."

"Great," I said. "You're like those people who say they have psychic powers on TV. Maybe one day the phone will ring and you'll know who's calling before you pick it up. Spooky."

"I don't think we did it right," said Ana. "We weren't the right people. I could *feel* the inadequacies in the ritual. And I've been thinking – this is Biblical stuff, so maybe the marriage is supposed to be between a man and a woman."

"Or at least two people who aren't cousins," Erica suggested.

"No!" said Ana. "The Bible is totally in favor of marrying cousins! Esau married his cousin! Jacob married *both* of his cousins!"

"But," I said, "your Name came from some sort of later addition, and was in the New Testament to boot. Maybe it's a product of a more sophisticated age."

"Hmmm," said Ana. Then: "I'll get the colored sand!"

"YOU DO IT OUTSIDE THIS TIME," Erica insisted.

And so it was only about a half hour later, after numerous fits and starts due to the sand blowing away in the wind, that the two of us stood amidst the candles and spoke the holy Name IYAR-NA-AVANTE-SHOK-TEHAN-MI-LEVAN-ZA-NAONE-KHETH-ULAT.

And Ana said: “And God is One.”

And I answered: “And God is One”

“And His Name is One.”

“And His Name is One.”

“And we are One.”

“And we are One.”

“And it is done.”

“And it is done.”

We stared into each other’s eyes for a moment after that. What we were looking for, I don’t know. Looking back, I think I secretly hoped that it would fill her with love for me. What she hoped, if anything, I don’t know. But we stared at each other for a while, and finally Ana said:

“Wait. Think something at me.”

And I thought: [Ruth and Bowhead]

“Holy euphemism the first thing ever in history communicated telepathically and it’s one of your stupid Biblical whale puns, that wasn’t even a *good* one, I am so done with this.”

And I thought: [Shamu Yisrael, HaShem elokeinu...]

“Aaaagh, stop, why did I give you the ability to communicate

with me telepathically? Why? WHY? What's that thing Erica always says? Oh, right. This was the biggest mistake of my life and I hope I die."

Interlude λ: Cantors and Singers

Those who speak the Names of God aloud are called cantors and singers. Like everything, these terms have both overt and kabbalistic meanings.

The overt meaning of “cantor” is “someone who chants”.

The kabbalistic meaning is “someone who works with infinity”.

This reading we derive from Georg Cantor, the German mathematician who explored the cardinality of infinite sets. He found that though the natural numbers – 1, 2, 3 and so on – were infinite, still there were fewer of them than there were “real” numbers like root 2, pi, and 0.239567990052... Indeed, not only were there two different levels of infinity, but it seemed likely that there were an infinite number of different infinities (and maybe one extra, to describe the number of infinities there were?)

The overall effect on him was much like the man in the limerick:

*There once was a fellow from Trinity,
Who took the square root of infinity.
But the number of digits,
Quite gave him the fidgets;
And he dropped Math and took up Divinity.*

Cantor began talking about how his discoveries were direct and personal revelations from God, who wished him to

preach the gospel of infinity so that an infinite Deity could be better understood. He posited an Absolute Infinite, beyond all the forms of infinity he had discovered, with which God might be identified. Finally, he declared:

“I have never proceeded from any Genus supremum of the actual infinite. Quite the contrary, I have rigorously proved that there is absolutely no Genus supremum of the actual infinite. What surpasses all that is finite and transfinite is no Genus; it is the single, completely individual unity in which everything is included, which includes the Absolute, incomprehensible to the human understanding. This is the Actus Purissimus, which by many is called God.”

When he finally made his discoveries public, he chose a curious notation:

“It has seemed to me for many years indispensable to fix the transfinite powers or cardinal numbers by some symbol, and after much wavering to and fro I have called upon the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, aleph. The usual alphabets seem to me too much used to be fitted for this purpose; on the other hand, I didn’t want to invent a new sign.”

A pragmatic account, utterly without reference to a two-thousand-year-old tradition of using the aleph to signify God. Nothing is ever a coincidence. The genealogies say his grandparents were Sephardic Jews, and if they weren’t kabbalists I will eat my hat.

The overt meaning of “singer” is “someone who sings”.

The kabbalistic meaning is “someone who tries to be good.”

This reading we derive from Peter Singer, an Australian philosopher who explored the depths of moral obligation. He imagined a man in a very nice coat walking by a pond. In the pond he sees a young child drowning, screaming for help. The man is quite a good swimmer and could easily save the child, but his nice coat would be ruined and would cost him \$100 to replace. He decides he doesn't want to ruin his coat and continues on his way, leaving the child to drown. Is this morally wrong?

Of course it is, said Singer, and this is important. It establishes a general moral principle that if you get the opportunity to save a child's life for \$100 you must take it. Yet we have very many opportunities to save a child's life for \$100. There are children starving in India; \$100 would buy them food. There are children dying of malaria; \$100 would buy them medication. There are children cowering in war zones; \$100 might buy them a ticket to safety. If you buy a nice coat for \$100 instead of giving it to charity, you're making the same decision as the man in the story. Indeed, if you use your money for anything other than charity, you're making that same decision – preferring your luxuries to a chance to avert innocent deaths.

This was not a popular message. His opponents condemned his particular brand of academic philosophy, saying that the time-tested moral truths of religion ought to be enough for anybody. They might have done well to read their Bibles a little closer. Matthew 19:21: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell everything you have and give the money to the poor, then follow me."

Singer called the movement that grew up around him

“effective altruism”, and its rallying cry was that one ought to spend every ounce of one’s energy doing whatever most relieves human suffering, most likely either feeding the poor or curing various tropical diseases. Again, something his opponents rejected as impossible, unworkable, another example of liberal fanaticism. Really? Every ounce of your energy? Again, they could have just read their Bibles. Deuteronomy 6:5: “And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.”

Then Singer changed his tune. In the 1970s, after the sky cracked and the world changed, he announced that charity was useless, that feeding the poor was useless, that curing tropical diseases was useless. There was only one cause to which a truly rational, truly good human being could devote his or her life.

Hell must be destroyed.

The idea of billions of human beings suffering unbearable pain for all eternity so outweighed our little earthly problems that the latter didn’t even register. He began meeting with his disciples in secret, teaching them hidden Names he said had been vouchsafed to him by angels. Thamiel put a price on his life – quite a high price actually. Heedless of his own safety, Singer traveled what remained of the civilized world, making converts wherever he went, telling them to be perfect as God was perfect, and every speech ended the same way. *Hell must be destroyed.*

He was killed by a car bomb on his way to a talk in Salt Lake City. They never found the man responsible, if indeed it was

a man. They saw Singer's body, they showed it on all the television networks, but some say he never died, or that he rose again on the third day, or that he speaks to them in dreams, or all manner of strange things. When the Comet King besieged Hell, some say he brought Singer's bones as a relic, others that Singer was in his retinue, disguised. But the conventional wisdom was that he truly died – which suited conventional people and their conventional morality just fine.

("But the soul is still oracular; amid the market's din,
List the ominous stern whisper from the Delphic cave within,
—
'They enslave their children's children who make
compromise with sin.'")

("We're not making compromise with sin. We just want to be less than maximally saintly sometimes.")

("Exactly what do you think compromise with sin *is*?")

This, then, is the kabbalistic meaning of being a cantor and a singer, a Namer of Names.

A cantor is someone who works with infinity.

And a singer is someone who tries to be good.

Chapter 6: Till We Have Built Jerusalem

God, grant me the serenity to accept that I will never
have the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

— [Steven Kaas](#)

Early morning, May 11, 2017

San Jose

The computer whirred and chattered: the speaker producing Names faster than the ear could follow. I stared at the screen. I already knew I wouldn't sleep tonight.

Last year I'd posted my paper "Exploitable Irregularities In NEHEMOTH-Maharaj Mappings" to one of the big Singer bulletin boards online. I'd been nervous. Bad things happened to people who put Names online. The law said webmasters were responsible for monitoring their own sites; anyone who didn't delete a Name was just as guilty as the person who'd posted it in the first place. But there were rumors of worse things, webmasters being visited by men in black UNSONG uniforms and politely "asked" to hand over IP addresses. People corresponding to those IP addresses getting jailed, or just disappearing and never being seen again. There had been a site in the Harmonious Jade Dragon Empire that had just presented a list of like a hundred Names, right there for anyone who wanted to read them, but none of the search engines would show it and anybody who linked to it got taken down in all senses of the word. I'd checked a few months ago and it was gone.

But there was nothing illegal about posting methods to

break klipot. It was just math. They couldn't make math illegal. It would be like banning triangles. So I was nervous, but not too nervous. I remember sitting at my laptop – this was just after I'd gotten Sarah – clicking the reload button every couple of seconds. Watching the view count gradually increment up, from zero to one, from one to two. Then a comment – some sort of stupid objection to the math, I don't remember what it was. Then another comment, "Wow, I think you've actually done it." Then the view count going to fifty, sixty, a hundred as people started linking to it.

I remember that because of the compulsive refreshing. Each time I clicked the little button might mean another morsel of praise, a few more people noticing me, another stepping stone on my path to stardom.

Only now it was even worse. Each moment Llull might give me the little gong that meant it had found a Name.

"Go to sleep," Ana mumbled. We were still in her room. She was in bed. The lights were off. I was sitting on the floor, checking Llull once a minute or so, otherwise browsing social media. I'd just learned Pirindiel had a Facebook account. It was such a trainwreck that I was having trouble averting my eyes.

"This is historic!" I answered. "When they ask us how our rise to total supremacy began, do you want to tell them that we went to sleep and then woke up in the morning to see if it worked?"

"If we have total supremacy, we can just kill whoever asks us that question," said Ana. "Go to sleep."

“I intend to be a benevolent ruler,” I said. But I felt uncomfortable joking about it. A weird thought crossed my mind. Was Ana going to assassinate me in my sleep? Was that why she –

“No,” said Ana. “Come on, Aaron, it takes a special kind of person to be paranoid when we can read each other’s minds. Go the euphemism to sleep.”

I was trying to figure out some way to continue the conversation and avoid having to go to sleep like a reasonable person when Sarah gave a melodic gong. Ana practically jumped out of bed, and in an instant she was right next to me at the computer. I minimized Llull and tried to open its output file, got an error message saying that the file was in use, groaned, paused Llull, tried again, saved to a different file, restarted Llull.

Fourteen Hebrew letters. I looked them over closely to make sure they weren’t a known Name. There are people with UNSONG who tattoo the Sentinel Name above their ears, and then other Names, the captive Names belonging to the theonomic corporations, on their foreheads. Then they can hear pretty much any Name spoken within a couple of miles of them, and if they don’t recognize the voice, or it’s one that people aren’t supposed to be using, they’ll come and investigate. But they can only tattoo a Name on themselves if they know about it. If the Name we got was truly new, we were safe. And I didn’t recognize it.

I held the syllables in my mind, tasted them. I tested the correspondences.

“Wait,” I said. “I know what this does.” I spoke. “KUHUSHEN-TAR-TAVAL-ANASASI-VA.”

A bright light appeared a couple of feet in front of my face. From the light sprung a beam, pointing up and a little to the west.

“Whoa,” said Ana. Then, “What’s that?”

Name generation was hard partly because most Names were pretty useless. Names to change the colors of flowers. Names to make sugar taste bitter. You might have to go through five or six before you got one of any use. The rejects were usually copyrighted, just to prevent anyone else from getting them in case they proved unexpectedly useful, then languished unknown in UNSONG archives.

“It shows the location of the moon,” I said.

“You mean, in the sky?”

“Well, it could be helpful if you’re a sailor doing navigation things, and it’s a really cloudy night. Or if you’re trapped in an underwater cave and you don’t know which way is up.”

“Yeah, but...”

Then we stopped. I don’t know if it was the telepathy or what, but both of us realized at that moment that *it had worked*. That any computer that could give us a Name to find the moon would soon enough be giving us Names to boil oceans or split mountains. We just stared at each other, awestruck.

Then the computer gave another melodic gong.

I'd calculated that it should come up with Names on average once every couple of hours, but by the nature of averages sometimes it would be faster. Ana and I almost knocked into each other in our rush to grab the mouse. Another round of pausing and restarting.

The Name was HANAPHOR-KOTA-SALUSI-NAI-AVORA-STE-KORUSA. I spoke it once, then took off my glasses. I had perfect 20-20 vision.

Again we stopped and stared at each other. If we wanted to cut and run, we could declare that we'd stumbled across this Name through simple kabbalistic study, then sell it to the theonomic of our choice. How much would people pay for a Name that made eyeglasses unnecessary? Millions? Billions? We could both just retire, buy a house in Malibu and two tickets on Celestial Virgin, and never work again.

"Ha," said Ana, finally. "You'd no more do that than Erica would."

"I'm not Erica. I don't think I have a revolutionary bone in my body."

"Oh no. You're not the type to hand out leaflets, or the type to go on marches. You're too intellectual for that. That doesn't mean you're not revolutionary. It just means your revolutions are intellectual revolutions. That's what makes you so dangerous. Marx never handed out leaflets either. You like to solve everything in your head, then declare that a solution exists and so you have done your part. It's

completely harmless unless somebody takes you seriously. Or unless you get enough power to enact your dreams at no cost to yourself.”

“You don’t even know what my dreams are.”

“*You* don’t even know what your dreams are.”

It was kind of true. Ever since I’d been young, I’d wanted to be a kabbalist. Then I’d gone to Stanford, then I’d gotten kicked out, and ever since then I’d pretty much just been brooding. I fell in with the Unitarians not because I had any strong political views, but because they thought the world was unfair, I thought my life was unfair, and so we had a sort of synergy. Honestly, if a theonomic agreed to hire me as their Chief Kabbalist tomorrow and gave me a nice office and a whole library full of books, chances are the next day I’d be on the news defending them and calling the singers a bunch of dirty hippies. Ana knew this, I think. But I couldn’t just *admit* it.

“My dream is to become the new Comet King,” I said.

I’m not sure exactly where the phrase came from. But when I said it, it fit.

“You can’t become the new Comet King,” Ana said, in the same tone a kindergarten teacher might use to correct a boy who said he wanted to be a tyrannosaurus when he grew up.

“Why not?” I asked. “He was a kabbalist. I’m a kabbalist. He knew all sorts of secret Names. I’m going to know all sorts of

secret Names. He started with nothing. I start with nothing.”

“He was born of the heavens, you were born of ordinary mortal parents.”

“Ordinary mortal parents? Ha! My family can *destroy worlds*.”

This was true. My great-uncle Edward Teller invented the hydrogen bomb. My father Adrian Teller had followed in his footsteps and spent the '90s conducting unspecified nuclear research at Livermore Laboratories east of Fremont . My mother had been a waitress at the cafeteria there. The two met, they had a brief fling, she got knocked up, she told him so. He suddenly realized he had vitally important national security business to tend to on the opposite side of the country, so sorry about that, good luck with the whole child-rearing thing. My mother was left alone to take care of me, whispering in my ears since the day I was born that I was a famous physicist's child and I was going to be better than everyone else. I would invent the next big doomsday device and become rich and famous, and so she would be rich and famous, and then all of the suffering she was going through as a single mother trying to get by on a waitress's salary would be worth it.

In kindergarten, I scored through the roof on some kind of placement test and skipped two grades. My mother was so happy. I was happy too: I was making her proud. It was only later I realized that when other mothers were proud, you couldn't see the same glimmer of greed in their eye, the same restless energy that came from resisting the urge to rub their hands together and say “Everything according to

plan”.

At first she would dip into her meager savings to buy me physics books, big tomes from the library on optics and mechanics. Then, when the theonomics became big, she realized that physics was (literally and figuratively) on its way out and started getting me books on kabbalah, the ones whose covers use faux Hebrew letters and whose authors write under vaguely Jewish sounding pen names. This is probably the point at which a normal kid would have rebelled against the role he was being shoehorned into. But by happy coincidence I loved kabbalah. I loved the fluidity of it, picking everything apart and building it together exactly the way I wanted. I loved the power that I felt when I used one of the toy Names that UNSONG had let into the public domain.

I met my father once when I was thirteen. I'd searched for him online on a whim, found his email, contacted him. He said he'd be in the California Republic for a conference later that year, and did I want to meet him for lunch? I did. We met at a Burger King in Berkeley. It was just the two of us. My mother refused to accompany me. My father asked how my mother was doing. I said she was fine, because telling him that she had been depressed and bitter for my entire life and I was pretty sure it was because of him seemed like the sort of thing that would spoil our lunch. He said he was proud that I was learning physics and kabbalah. He said I would probably turn out to be a genius like my great-uncle. It seemed both of my parents had mapped out my life in exactly the same way. He gave me a gift – a biography of Edward Teller, what else? – and told me to make him proud.

I spent the BART ride home leafing through the book. I read about Teller's invention of the bomb. I mused over his retreat into an almost fanatical patriotism – self-justification? A patch over the horror of what he had done? I learned about his war against communist sympathizers in the physics community. And I read through one of his interviews, where someone asked him about being “Father of the Hydrogen Bomb”:

REPORTER: “Is ‘father’ an appropriate label?”

TELLER: “Well, I made some essential contributions.”

I couldn't help imagining the same exchange an hour earlier, back at the Burger King. “Is ‘father’ an appropriate label?” I would ask. “Well,” he would tell me, “I made some essential contributions.” So much for Adrian Teller, and so much for my heritage.

More interesting was the poem. *My great-uncle had written a traditional kabbalistic alphabet poem.* I don't think he did it on purpose, I don't think he knew he was working in a genre beloved by sages for centuries, I think he just sat down one day and thought it would be funny to write a poem on the different alphabet letters. It started:

*A stands for atom; it is so small
No one has ever seen it at all.*

*B stands for bombs; now the bombs are much bigger.
So, brother, do not be too fast on the trigger.*

Then the book – the nerve of it – moves on! As if there was something more important than my great-uncle's

correspondences between the letters of the alphabet to the aspects of the destruction he had unleashed. Oppenheimer might have been a Hindu heathen, but Teller must have been, deep down, a kabbalist. Since then I've searched high and low, but I have only been able to find two more of his couplets.

*H has become a most ominous letter;
It means something bigger, if not something better.*

*S stands for secret — you'll keep it forever
Provided there's nobody else who is clever.*

I obsessed over these when I was younger. Part of me thought they were secret messages to me. Part of me still does. The reference to “brother” on the B, for example – his brother was my grandfather. Don't tell me that's a coincidence. Nothing is ever a coincidence.

“What are you thinking, Aaron?” The telepathy was weak – Ana had never been able to follow when I started brooding.

“S is for secret,” I said. “You'll keep it forever. Provided there's nobody else who is clever.”

“That's such an Aaron thing to say,” she said. I don't know if she was thinking of my cryptography work, or just accusing me of always thinking I was the only clever person around.

“You think so?” I asked. “It's actually from my great-uncle. Maybe everyone who told me to grow up to be just like him got their wish after all.”

“Aaron,” said Ana. “I like you, but you're not the kind of

person I want to see inventing doomsday devices.”

We didn’t even need the mind-link for this one. Obvious response was obvious. What did she think we were doing?

“So,” asked Ana. “If you’re going to be the new Comet King, does that mean you’re going to go declare war against Hell, kill Thamiel, and save humanity?”

“Yeah,” I said, although I hadn’t thought much about it. It did seem like the right thing to do, although I remembered reading something about how Thamiel was a facet of God and couldn’t actually be killed. I figured a new Comet King would part that sea when he came to it.

“Oh,” said Ana.

“What about you?” I asked. “You know, the Comet King’s wife was...”

“I’m not your wife,” said Ana. “The whole marriage ritual was a test. I’m glad we did it. It’s interesting. But I’m not your girlfriend and I’m not your wife.”

“Gah, I didn’t mean – ”

“But to answer your question,” Ana said, “I don’t know.”

I waited.

“Theodicy...is really hard. I didn’t expect to run into practical applications this soon. There’s lots of evil in the world, and everyone wants to run out and fix it, in fact there’s this immense moral pressure to run out and fix it, but whenever

someone tries, something goes horribly wrong. I mean, that's what Hitler tried to do, and the Communists. Trying to fix the world, any more than just the boring kind of fixing the world where you hold a bake sale to support your local school – that's hubris. But refusing to do that, when you know people are starving and dying all around you – that's monstrous. So which are we? Monstrous or arrogant?"

"Me?" I asked. "Arrogant. All the way."

"And I understand the impulse. It's tempting to run out there and play Joan of Arc – "

"Jonah whale," I corrected. "*Noah* ark."

" – but I've read enough history to know how that ends. So to answer your question – what do I want to do with this discovery? I think I want to do experimental theodicy. I want to know why God created a universe filled with so much evil. So I guess we can try to...gradually start removing evil from the universe. Then if something goes wrong, that was probably the thing God was worried about."

I blinked. That was kind of terrifying *even by my standards*.

"I don't think it'll come to that," said Ana, still looking serious. "I think we'll reach some point, and then God will intervene. I want to see what that point is. How far we're allowed to push before our plans start mysteriously failing and any further efforts are to no avail – "

"*Noah ark*," I corrected. "*Jonah* whale. I thought we *just* went over this."

Ana swatted me. I dodged.

“What’s the chance that either of us is getting back to sleep tonight?” she asked.

“I don’t know about you,” I said. “But I’m going to Bill Dodd’s house.”

“What?”

It was, I had realized, the Comet King thing to do. I’d got proof of concept that our Name generation plan worked. The next step was to get more computers. Llull only worked on Apples. Eventually we’d have enough money to hire someone to make a Windows port, but for now we were limited. Ana and Erica had Windows machines. But Bill had been boasting of his new computer incessantly for the past couple of weeks. It was expensive. It was lightweight. It was blindingly fast. And it was an Apple. I was going to convince him to let me borrow it. I wasn’t sure how. But I was.

“I,” said Ana, “will hold down the fort.” She climbed back into bed. “You’re going to either need the Wakening Name or a lot of coffee tomorrow.”

“You really think I’m going to work tomorrow?” I asked.

“Besides, do you think the Comet King would have delayed one of his plans for the salvation of the world just because he expected to be tired the next day?”

“God, Aaron, you’re not the euphemism Comet King. You are being *way* too gung ho about all of this.”

Okay. But I was descended from the guy who invented the

hydrogen bomb. Thinking through the implications of our discoveries was not exactly a family strong point. And the Comet King hadn't been wishy-washy. He hadn't been filled with self-doubt. They say that whenever someone asked the Comet King why he took the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, he'd just said "Somebody has to and no one else will."

Was I arrogant to even make the comparison? Maybe. But I had crossed out of the realm of normal human life the moment I heard the Vital Name and realized it was a shortcut to omnipotence. Where I stood now there was no model, no track to follow, save one. Only one person had ever had access to the sheer volume of Names I was going to have, ever stood alone and seen the future of humanity stretch out before him, malleable for the shaping. Well, what had happened to him was better left unsaid. But now there was another chance.

"I'll see you in a couple of hours," I told Ana, and then I strode out alone into the cold night air.

Chapter 7: The Perishing Vegetable Memory

Sleep like nothing is watching. Gaze at the stars like it will never hurt.

— [Steven Kaas](#)

Early morning, May 11, 2017
San Jose

My watch read 5 AM. Bill Dodd lived an hour's walk away, close to the weird morass of swamps and mud flats that passed for the San Francisco Bay in this area. He woke up around six and left at seven for some tutoring job up in the North Bay. I figured by the time I got to his home, it would be just about morning and I could catch him while he was getting ready.

The streets were deserted, the houses dark. The cracks in the sky were barely visible through the hazy glow of the Silicon Valley megalopolis' united streetlamps. I could see a few stars.

There was a time when the stars had meant something. Blake thought they were angels. Byron called them the "poetry of Heaven". The march of science transformed but did not lessen them. They became burning suns trillions of miles away, around which humankind might one day find new worlds to colonize.

Of all the scientists, only Enrico Fermi had come close to the truth, and in the end even he had recoiled from it.

One day back in the 50s, Fermi was having lunch out with my great-uncle out in Los Alamos, and the topic of conversation turned to where all the aliens were.

If there were truly billions of stars with billions of planets, and the Universe was billions of years old, then there had been ample opportunities for life to evolve on other worlds. Earth's sun was a cosmic infant – other stars were incalculably older. Why in those billions of years had their civilizations not overtaken us, reached and colonized Earth just as Earthly civilizations had reached and colonized their more isolated neighbors?

Maybe life was incalculably rare, a spectacular fluke? Nonsense; even in those days scientists knew that if they stuck hydrocarbons in a jar and shook really hard, they'd get some very biological-looking compounds. Maybe it was multicellular life that was the bottleneck? Unlikely – it evolved three separate times on Earth alone. Sapience? Dolphins are practically sapient, so it must also be as common as dirt. Civilization? Developed separately in the Near East, China, Mexico, Peru, et cetera et cetera. Space travel? You're trying to tell me that of a billion civilizations on a billion worlds over a billion years, not one would think of taking a really big rocket and pointing it up?

Fermi crunched various numbers and found that even under the most conservative assumptions the Earth should have been visited by just about a zillion extraterrestrial civilizations, instead of the zero that humans actually observed. He figured there must be some unseen flaw in his calculations, and it bothered him a little for the rest of his life.

He could have avoided a lot of anguish if he had just followed the data to their obvious conclusion and admitted the stars probably didn't exist.

Then maybe things would have turned out differently. People respected Fermi – always a good idea to respect the guy who invents the atomic bomb, just in case he invents something else. They might have listened to him. The Space Age might have become more subdued. They might have wondered whether whatever was up there, whatever wanted people to think there were stars and was powerful enough to enforce the illusion – might be best left alone.

But humans *can't* leave well enough alone, so we got in the Space Race, tried to send Apollo 8 to the moon, crashed into the crystal sphere surrounding the world, and broke a huge celestial machine belonging to the archangel Uriel that bound reality by mathematical laws. It turned out keeping reality bound by mathematical laws was a useful hack preventing the Devil from existing. Break the machinery, and along with the Names of God and placebomancy and other nice things we got the Devil back. We'd flailed around like headless chickens for a while until the Comet King had come along and tried to organize a coordinated response. Now we were back to the headless chicken thing.

A car sped down the street, the way people speed at five AM when they know no one is around to stand in their way, the way assholes speed when they don't care how much noise they make on a residential street when people are trying to sleep. I stepped out of the way just in time.

In a way we were lucky. Reality was still *mostly* law-bound,

because Uriel was burning through his reserves of mystical energy to keep the celestial machinery working. You can still run a car on internal combustion, if for some reason you don't trust the Motive Name. You can still *usually* use electronics to run a computer, as long you don't overdo it and Uriel isn't having one of his periodic fits.

But once there had been a time when we had looked up at the stars and thought "Yeah, we'll go there someday." That dream was dead. Not just because there were no stars. But because the idea that Science could do anything, that it was this genie humankind could command and turn to our most fantastic whims, was gone. If we were lucky we could keep the power grid and the Internet running, but the thought of building our way into a chrome-and-plasma future of limitless possibility had passed away sometime during the seventies. Now we just looked for useful Names of God and hoped Uriel kept Science from failing too spectacularly until we got ourselves killed by something else.

It was getting light by the time I reached the apartment and a half-dressed Bill let me in. The "what are you doing up so early and in my house" was so obvious it could be left unspoken, so it was.

"Hey Bill," I said, plopping myself down on the couch. It was probably some kind of faux pas, but in my defense I'd been walking an hour. "Ana and I were wondering if we could borrow your gaming computer."

He raised an eyebrow.

"We've got this really interesting search function going on," I

said, “trying to match the fractal patterns in the Song of Songs to paleoclimate data. I know it’s a little weird, but we’ve actually got some good preliminary results, and I think we’d be able to finish in a couple of days if we had some more processing power, and you keep talking about how impressive your new Mac is, so I was hoping...”

“Why would the Song of Songs have fractal patterns?” Bill asked me.

I had forgotten the most important thing about Bill, which was that he liked to think he was smarter than everybody else, and would pretend to know more than you about everything. Problem is, I was making this all up myself, so on the off chance he did know something, it was going to very quickly become clear that I *didn’t*.

“It’s the Song of Songs,” I said. “Of course it has fractal patterns. In fact – ” I decided to go for broke, “I think there may be multiple levels of patterns in there. Songs of songs of songs.”

“That’s not what Song of Songs means!” Dodd objected. “Hebrew uses ‘of’ as an intensifier. Like ‘King of Kings’ or ‘Holy of Holies’!”

“But consider,” I said, “the words of Rabbi Ezra Tzion, who said...

Then I started speaking Aramaic.

Around 200 BC the Aramaic language started catching on in Israel and most people switched from Biblical Hebrew to the

new tongue. Some people started praying in Aramaic, or trying to translate the Torah. The rabbis, who wanted to protect the sacred language at all costs, waged a passionate campaign against Aramaic penetrating into the liturgy, and in the midst of their zeal, they might have kind of told the populace that they had to pray in Hebrew because the angels don't understand Aramaic. Some people wrote this down, one thing led to another, and it became part of the Talmud. Have I mentioned that the Talmud is kind of crazy?

Couple of centuries later, the Romans destroy Jerusalem, the Jews are scattered to the seventy nations of the world, and now they're speaking all of these foreign languages like Yiddish and Arabic and Ladino. They don't know a word of Hebrew, but they still want to pray. The rabbis want to let them, but there's this old ruling standing in the way, saying that you should pray in Hebrew because the angels don't understand Aramaic.

So the rabbis declare that actually, the angels understand every language *except* Aramaic. This actually happened.

And everyone thought it was a joke, but then the sky shattered and we met the angels, and by golly they spoke every language from Albanian to Zulu, but Aramaic was nonsense to them. They couldn't learn it no matter how hard they tried. It was some kind of fixed mental blind spot. Why did the rabbis' weird ad hoc decision so perfectly correspond to reality? I don't know. Nothing is ever a coincidence.

But perhaps there are things humans were not meant to know. And when people started asking the angels – was

Jesus Son of God? Was he the Messiah? – the angels answered – darned if we know. We couldn't understand a word he was saying.

One night, Ana and I were thinking thoughts at each other – gossiping about Bill, actually, since he'd just made a hilariously ill-fated attempt to seduce Erica – and Ana started feeling guilty, because gossiping was a sin.

I asked how anyone would find out we were gossiping, when we were doing it telepathically, and there were no other telepaths in the world – some said the Comet King had been able to read minds, but he was dead – and she said that we didn't know anything about kabbalistic marriage, maybe the angels could listen in on us or something.

This was a pretty reasonable concern. Somebody had added that section to the Bible, the one in John that Ana had taken SCABMOM out of, and angels sounded like the sort of entities who had the power to edit the Bible. For all we knew, Heaven was wiretapping our private channel. So we decided to learn Aramaic, so that we could gossip as much as we wanted and the angels couldn't listen in.

Neither of us was very good at it yet, but that didn't matter, because I was saying the practice sentences from "Aramaic Made Easy: A Beginner's Guide."

"The dog is in the house," I told Dodd in the cadences of first century Judea. "The dog is big and brown. Simeon is going to the synagogue. The dog is not going to the synagogue."

Bill Dodd watched me intently as I spoke, wrinkles forming

on his face. He had only two choices – accept what I had said as accurate, or admit he didn’t understand Aramaic and therefore did not know everything. I could see the wheels turning in his mind.

“Rabbi Tzion was a very wise man,” he finally told me. Then he went into his room and handed me his gaming laptop. “If anything happens to that,” he said as I stuffed it into my backpack, “I will hunt you down and kill you.”

I nodded and made my escape before he changed his mind.

When I made it back to Ithaca, I couldn’t resist stopping off in Ana’s room to check if Sarah had come up with any more Names in my absence. It hadn’t, which wasn’t really surprising – two in so short a time was a huge fluke – but my presence there at least had the effect of waking Ana up. She rubbed her eyes, griped at me for waking her – then, her tiredness melting away before the excitement of the occasion, told me to ensoul Bill’s computer already.

I took the sleek MacBook out of my backpack, plugged it into the outlet, fired it up. I installed Llull. I disabled the Internet connections, not wanting to risk anything automatically updating and letting Bill know what we were doing. Then I spoke the Vital Name. “ROS-AILE-KAPHILUTON-MIRAKOI-KALANIEMI-TSHANA-KAI-KAI-EPHSANDER-GALISDO-TAHUN...” I began. Then: “MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH.”

Nothing happened.

There’s no way to tell if a computer has a soul or not. But when you use a Name, especially a strong Name like this

one, the warmth shoots through you, for a brief moment you feel Divine power, it's not just *nothing*. It's how people learn they've discovered a Name in the first place, it's the thing whose computer-equivalent Llull is programmed to notice in order to detect hits. It was the thing I was definitely not feeling right now.

"Huh," I told Ana. "That didn't work. I'll try it again."

Once again, I spoke the Name of God at Bill's computer. "ROS-AILE-KAPHILUTON-MIRAKOI-KALANIEMI-TSHANA-KAI-KAI-EPHSANDER-GALISDO-TAHUN...MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH-MEH".

Once again, nothing.

"Maybe you made a mistake?" Ana suggested.

I had not made a mistake.

This will require a certain level of explanation. The Vital Name was fifty-eight letters long. How did I remember a fifty-eight letter Name, let alone remember it so clearly that there was no chance of getting it wrong?

The answer was that I was a mnemonist, and a really good one.

Consider: A Roman legionnaire is sitting around, shining a lantern into the darkness, watching for enemies. One suddenly appears; namely, Kim Jong-un, who is soaring overhead on a giant flying lantern. The legionnaire calls for help, and who should arrive but a tyrannosaurus rex, nibbling on a magazine which he keeps in his mouth, and he

dispatches the dictator easily. The Roman is so grateful for T. Rex's help that he knights him on the spot, declaring him *Sir Tyrannosaurus*, but he doesn't have a sword for the ceremony, so he squirts ketchup all over him instead. Abraham Lincoln, who is also in the area, comes by to celebrate – he is a fast friend of the tyrannosaurus, as he shares the dinosaur's quirk of nibbling on magazines.

And now you have fourteen letters.

I am a mnemonist. My hobby is memory. I study very complex systems for remembering long strings of meaningless information. The mnemonists talk about how you can remember entire decks of cards in sequence, or hundred digit numbers after a single reading, but those are smokescreens. The real reason smart people become mnemonists is to remember Names.

The average singer spends half an hour at choir practice every week learning a single Name through constant repetition. Slow but effective. But what if you overhear someone, just once, using a True Name without any klipot? How are you going to remember it unless you have extreme measures available?

My extreme measure was a variant of something called the Dominic System. Memorize three sets of correspondences between alphabet letters and concepts. The first set is between each letter and a person or animal beginning with that letter. The second set is between each letter and an action beginning with that letter. And the third set is between each letter and an object beginning with that letter.

Now break down the thing you want to remember into three-letter blocks. Each block represents a person performing an action on an object. Keep doing this, and you have a really weird story, which is exactly the sort of story you are most likely to remember.

My R person is a Roman. My S action is sitting. My L object is a lantern. ROS-AILE becomes a Roman sitting with a lantern. It's Hebrew, so the vowels don't count.

My K person is Kim Jong-un. My F action is flying. My L object is still a lantern. So Kim Jong-un is flying on a giant lantern. Add the tyrannosaur nibbling, and you've got KAPHILUTON.

Remembering ROS-AILE-KAPHILUTON is hard. Remembering a Roman sitting watchfully in the dark with a lantern, only to have Kim Jong-un suddenly scream past him on a lantern-shaped fighter jet so terrifying that they have to call in the dinosaur cavalry – that's easy. Keep going, and even a fifty-eight letter name becomes tractable.

Is it hard to make these kinds of stories up on the fly? Yes, it's hard the first time, and the hundredth time, and even the thousandth time.

But I work eight hours a day in a sweatshop where all I do is recite a bunch of meaningless syllables. I'd have gone crazy long ago if I didn't have some way to make it all useful. And my way of making it all useful was to train myself to become really good at mnemonics.

The fifty-eight-letter Vital Name shone flawless in my mind.

“ROS-AILE-KAPHILUTON-MIRAKOI-KALANIEMI-TSHANA-KAI-KAI-EPHSANDER-GALISDO-TAHUN...” I began, and kept going. I spoke the Vital Name. It didn’t work.

“Ana!” I said. “You have the Name! You try!”

“I only know what I took from your head,” Ana said, but she spoke the Name as she recalled it. “ROS-AILE-KAPHILUTON-MIRAKOI-KALANIEMI-TSHANA-KAI-KAI-EPHSANDER-GALISDO-TAHUN...”

I could see from Ana’s face that she felt nothing.

“Maybe it’s just...we’re not feeling it because we’re tired,” I said. I fiddled with the settings of Llull, told it to investigate just one Name, the Moon-Finding Name we had discovered last night. The speaker let out its strange hum. There was no output. Bill’s computer had failed to detect it as a Name.

“Maybe the Name stopped working,” Ana suggested.

“Names don’t stop working! You think God just packed up? And went on vacation or something?”

It probably says a lot about us that we decided it was important to test this hypothesis, and so started using all the other Names we knew – the simple ones, the ones we could use without exhausting ourselves or causing trouble. I tried the Moon-Locating Name from this morning. A big bright arrow appeared pointing toward the western horizon.

“Okay,” I admitted “God didn’t pack up and go on vacation. Then why the hell isn’t the Name working?”

I was seeing our goal of inevitable world conquest fade into a comparatively modest future of limitless wealth. The one ensouled computer we had could give us enough Names to buy a small state. But minus the ability to ensoul more of them, the feedback loop that resulted in total domination of everything and a second Comet King was fading out of reach.

Ana was quiet. After a few seconds, she just said “Euphemism.”

“You expected this all along,” I said. “You said God was going to intervene.”

“Not directly.” she said. “And not this soon. And not like this.”

My mind was racing. “Okay,” I said. “This isn’t a disaster. Maybe it’s not God. Maybe I made a mistake. Maybe we can just use the Name error-correction algorithms.”

Given the constraints all Names have to follow, you could find the most likely Name candidates matching a “flawed Name” with one or two letters out of place. Although in principle it was meant to address exactly the sort of situation we were in right now, in reality people almost never forgot Names that weren’t backed up somewhere already, and it was mostly a purely theoretical field people investigated as basic research. It’s all fun and games until a plot to take over the world hinges on it.

“You think that would help?”

“Look, maybe, possibly, there’s a *tiny* chance a mnemonist like me could forget a letter or two. But no more than that! We mostly have the Name intact. So if I can get some of the error correction algorithms, we can run them on what we remember of the Vital Name and figure out the real thing. I took a class that mentioned this at Stanford once. I’m sure there are some books in the library there. Give me your library card and I’ll go get them. You come with me.”

“Aaron,” said Ana. “You barely slept all night. The error correction books will still be there this afternoon.”

“Ana,” I said. “We had the most important Name in history, short of the Shem haMephorash, and we lost it. No, we didn’t lose it. I *know* what it is. Something isn’t right here.” I grabbed the library card from her desk. “Are you coming or not?”

“Pass,” she said, infuriatingly.

My mind burning, I set out for the CalTrain station and Stanford.

Chapter 8: Laughing To Scorn Thy Laws And Terrors

Love is the law, but it is poorly enforced.

— *Reverend Raymond Stevens, "Singers In The Hands Of An Angry God"*

March 20, 2001

Agloe

The holy city of traditional kabbalah is Tzfat in Israel, where Rabbi Isaac Luria taught and died. The holy city of modern kabbalah ought to be Agloe, New York.

The story goes like this: two mapmakers had just finished collecting geographic data for the definitive map of New York State. They worried that other people might steal their work and pass it off as their own. They'd never be able to prove anything, since all accurate maps look alike. So the mapmakers played a little trick; they combined their initials to make the word AGLOE, then added it as a fake town on the map in an out-of-the-way location. Any other mapmakers whose work included Agloe would be revealed as plagiarists.

One day a man came to an empty crossroads and decided to build a store there. He looked at his map, found that the spot was named Agloe, and named his business AGLOE GENERAL STORE. The store was a success, the location attracted more people, and soon the town of Agloe sprang up in earnest.

In traditional semiotics, reality is represented by symbols which are themselves inert. In kabbalah, reality and symbols alike are representations of Adam Kadmon. The territory is a representation of Adam Kadmon, and the map is a representation of the territory *and* Adam Kadmon. Differences between the map and the territory may not be mere mistakes, but evolutions of the representational schema that affect both alike. The territory has power over the map, but the map also has power over the territory. This is the kabbalah. The rest is just commentary.

When map and the territory both depend on each other, to assert copyright is a dangerous act. The two cartographers stuck their name on the map to claim dominion, but dominion over the divine order producing both map and territory belongs only to God.

But the two cartographers named the city by combining the initials of their names. This is an ancient kabbalistic technique called *notarikon* in which words are generated from the initials of longer phrases. Many of the Names of God are notarikons of Bible verses or prayers; some say *all* Names, however long, are notarikons for increasingly accurate descriptions of God. But the most famous such notarikon uses only four words: the short liturgical formula “*atah gibor le’olam A—i*” meaning “thou art mighty forever, O Lord”. The phrase’s initials become the famous four-letter Name AGLA.

Does it have to be AGLA? The “le” in “le’olam” means “to”; the “olam” means “the world”. The Hebrew word translated “forever” literally means “to the (end of the) world”. Nice and poetic, but “le” and “olam” are two different words and

should be counted as such. And why “A—i”? Yes, it’s one of the common divine Names in the Bible, but the Bible has other divine Names. How about the more common one “Elohim”? Then the formula becomes “atah gibor le olam Elohim,” and the Name becomes AGLOE. This is not a coincidence because nothing is ever a coincidence.

Two cartographers add a town named after themselves to a map to assert copyright. Because the map and territory correspond to each other, a few years later the same town appears on the territory. The town in the territory also functions as an assertion of copyright, but because the notarikon producing the town name matches a notarikon producing one of the Names of God, the kabbalistic implications of the copyright remain accurate.

Despite all this there are no yeshivas or great gold-domed synagogues in Agloe. To the casual traveller it’s just another sleepy upstate-New-York town. But sometimes people who need a site with very specific kabbalistic properties find the town’s name and story conducive to their activities.

And so tonight the leadership of the American Board of Ritual Magic was holding a special meeting in an old mansion in the hills outside town.

Mark McCarthy, Archmage of the West, stepped into the banquet hall. He leaned upon his staff of mesquite wood and inspected the area. All the furniture was gone, and an exquisitely precise map of the United States had been drawn in chalk in the center of the room. There was a long pendulum hanging from the ceiling, currently over the Midwest, and a trap door under Wyoming.

“Why,” he asked, “is there a trap door under Wyoming?”

Two others were already there. Like himself, they wore grey robes and carried wooden staffs. He recognized Daniel Lee, Archmage of the South, and Clara Lowell, Archmage of the Northeast and current Board President.

“This was the largest space we could reserve on short notice,” Clara said. “The trapdoor’s to the wine cellar. One of the best collections in this area, I hear. Once we’re done with the ritual, we can go downstairs and get something to celebrate.”

“I don’t like it,” said Mark. “It ruins the ambience.”

This was a grave accusation among ritual magicians. Ambience was a vital ingredient of rituals. It was why the room was lit by flickering candles. It was why they were all dressed in grey robes. It was why they met so late in the evening, so they could do the deed precisely at midnight. And it was why they were here in Agloe, New York, a town corresponding both phonetically and procedurally to one of the Names of God.

“It doesn’t,” said Lowell. “The trap door is a rectangle. Wyoming is a rectangle. It’s fine. This whole thing is overkill anyway. You’re the one who insisted we do this high-level. I wanted to delegate to five interns in the basement of the DC office and save ourselves the trouble.”

“And I’m telling you,” said McCarthy, “I know Alvarez. He probably doesn’t sound scary – one guy who isn’t even fully licensed – but if we leave him any holes he’s going to slip

through them and something awful will happen.”

“I see the doomsaying has already started,” said Ronald Two Hawks, Archmage of the Pacific Northwest, walking in with his staff of Sitka pine. “I’m with Clara. Getting all the way here from Olympia was a mess. And for what?”

“To deal with the biggest threat that the Board and ritual magic itself have ever encountered,” said McCarthy.

“So a low-level magician has gone terrorist,” said Ronald. “Killed a Senator. Embarrassing. Certainly something we have to condemn. But by making such a big deal of this, we just reinforce our link to him in the public mind. We should have put out a statement distancing ourselves, sent someone over to the Shroudies to help them catch him, and ignored it.”

Carolyn Pace, Archmage of the Midwest, walked into the room. “There’s a trap door under Wyoming,” she said.

“Yes,” said Daniel, “we were just talking about that.”

“Let’s get started,” said Clara.

A chalk circle had been drawn around the map. Clara positioned herself at the east, Daniel at the south, Mark at the west, and Ronald at the north. Carolyn went in the middle, stood at the precise center of the United States near Lebanon, Kansas. Her nose almost touched the pendulum; the force of her breath gave it an almost imperceptible swing.

The clock read 11:54.

“Let no evil approach from the North,” said Ron, and he held his staff of Sitka pine towards Carolyn in the center of the circle.

“Est sit esto fiat,” chanted the others.

“Let no evil approach from the West,” said Mark, and he held his staff of mesquite towards the center.

“Est sit esto fiat,” came the chant.

“Let no evil approach from the South,” said Daniel, and he held out his staff of magnolia.

“Est sit esto fiat.”

“Let no evil approach from the East,” finished Clara, and she held out her staff of white oak.

“Est sit esto fiat.”

Carolyn raised up her staff of cottonwood. “The Flaming Circle keeps everything in! Aleph! Gimel! Lamed! Aleph! The Flaming Circle keeps everything out! Aleph! Hay! Yud! Hay! Let the Worlds open, but let the Circle hold!”

No black flames shot up from the boundaries of the circle, no alien light appeared within it, but the chalk lines upon which they stood started to take on an odd sheen, reflect the candlelight a little differently. Ritual magic couldn’t do the impossible, couldn’t break the laws of physics on an observable scale. But they shifted things within that envelope, made coincidences happen a lot more frequently. The sudden appearance of flames would have broken

natural law, but there was nothing impossible about five sleep-deprived people in an unusual emotional state seeing the gleam of a chalk line a little differently. So they did.

“Before me, Michael,” said Ronald in the north.

“Behind me, Uriel,” said Daniel in the south.

“On my left hand, Raziel,” said Mark in the west.

“On my right hand, Gabriel,” said Clara in the east.

“Quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius,” said Daniel in the south.

“Quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius,” said Ronald in the north.

Then Carolyn raised her cottonwood staff high. “Around me flare the pentagrams, and in the center stands the six-rayed star.”

Every candle in the room sputtered out at once – not magically, Clara’s staff had electronics that controlled the room in various ways, all part of the ambience. The moon came out from behind a cloud – that part *was* magical – and shone its cold white beams into the room, reflecting off the hardwood floor and the windows in odd patterns. For a second everyone saw the pentagrams and the six-rayed star just as they had named them. Then the moon went back behind a cloud and they disappeared before anyone could be entirely certain it hadn’t been a coincidence.

Clara spoke: “We gather here tonight to call penalty upon

one who has broken our law. Dylan Alvarez, apprentice ritual magician, has broken fellowship with the Board. He has violated federal and state regulation that prohibit practicing ritual magic without being a Board member in good standing. He has announced his intention to continue practicing without a license. He has killed several local officials of the American Board of Ritual Magic in order to, in his own words, 'make a point'. He has assassinated Senator John Henderson, the Board's foremost ally in Congress. He has declared war on the American magical establishment. He has mocked ritual magic as 'placebomancy' and publicly released the secrets he had sworn to protect. For all this, he has been condemned by our Board and by our order."

The room was dead silent. The only light was moonlight from the high windows. The clock read 11:58.

"He has violated the laws of God and Man and we will have justice. The justice of God does not concern us. The justice of Man will be swift and merciless. Show the location of Dylan Alvarez unto us, O Powers, that we may pour upon him the cup of our wrath."

"Show!" said Daniel in the south.

"Show!" said Mark in the west.

"Show!" said Ronald in the north.

"Show!" said Clara in the east.

"SHOW!" said Carolyn in the center, and she gave the pendulum a big push, then retreated to the outside of the

circle.

The clock read 12:00.

The giant pendulum veered wildly over the map of the United States. It hung by a special rope with odd kinks and tangles that gave its motion an unpredictable, chaotic quality and prevented it from ever quite going vertical. After various false starts and sudden jerks, it ended up pointing to the city of Amarillo, Texas.

Clara flicked her staff, and the lights came on again.

“Well,” she said. “That was easy. We’ll contact the Texas Republic and the Amarillo police tomorrow morning. Shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Better send the Shroudies,” said Mark. “I’m telling you, things involving Dylan Alvarez are *always* hard.”

“You thought *this ritual* would be hard,” said Ronald. “I know you knew the guy in college, I know you’ve got a history, but give it a break. He’s an unlicensed magician. Sometimes it happens. We always get them.”

“Someone said something about wine, didn’t they?” said Daniel. “What are we waiting for? Let’s cele – ”

The pendulum made a sudden jerk and ended up over Little Rock, Arkansas.

“What the – ” asked Ronald.

“Oh, this isn’t good,” muttered Mark.

Clara stepped into the magic circle, inspected the pendulum. Then: “Relax. The ritual is over. The lights are on. At this point the movements of the pendulum are just random noise. He’s in Amarillo.”

“Random noise?” asked Ronald. “You saw that. There was nothing touching that pendulum, and it just gave this sudden lurch.”

“One of the kinks in the rope straightening itself out,” said Clara. “Could have been a coincidence.”

“Of *course* it could have been a coincidence,” said Carolyn, “this is ritual magic. It could always have been a coincidence. But it never is.”

“You’re being silly,” said Clara. “All the darkness and ritual and everything have got us all in a horror-movie frame of mind. Let’s go get some wine and forget about it.”

“I am telling you,” said Mark, “something is wrong. Nothing’s ever simple with Dylan. It’s always like this. We need to figure this out, or he’ll run circles around us.”

“So what do you think?” asked Clara. She was starting to sound annoyed. “That he teleported from Amarillo to Little Rock the minute we completed our ritual? Dylan Alvarez is a two-bit hedge wizard. Let’s just – ”

She barely dodged the pendulum as it swung straight through where she had been standing. Now it was above Lincoln, Nebraska. Then another swing. St. Louis, Missouri. Then another. Somewhere in the middle of North Dakota.

“You saw that!” said Mark. “Don’t you dare tell me you didn’t see that! I knew this was going to happen! Something’s wrong with the ritual and *I told you this was going to happen!*”

“Mark, calm down,” said Daniel. “Dylan’s probably doing a ritual of his own, to interfere with us. It’s not like this ritual was particularly secret, we all had to get to Agloe, anyone who’s watching our movements would have known we were planning something for today, and it wouldn’t be too hard to figure out what that was.”

Salt Lake City, Utah.

“You’re saying Dylan Alvarez has *spies* in the American Board of Ritual Magic?” asked Carolyn, horrified.

The Idaho panhandle.

“Well, why not?” asked Ronald. “I’m starting to agree with Mark. Maybe we’ve been underestimating this guy.”

Casper, Wyoming.

“For the last time,” said Clara, “Dylan Alvarez is a two-bit hedge wizard who doesn’t know anything about...”

“SURPRISE, MOTHERFUCKERS” yelled Dylan Alvarez, jumping out of the trap door with a revolver in each hand.

Bang. Bang. Down went Daniel Lee, Archmage of the South. Bang bang bang. Down went Ronald Two Hawks, Archmage of the Pacific Northwest.

Carolyn Pace traced figures in the air with her cottonwood staff. "Libera nos, Domine," she said as she traced. "Te rogamus, audi nos." Bang, bang, bang. Three bullets went wide. It could have been a coincidence, but coincidences tended to happen more often among ritual magicians at work. Bang, bang. Another two coincidences.

Dylan dropped the guns, reached back down into the trap door and grabbed his staff. Boojumwood comes from the boojumtree, a bizarre species of plant that grows only in a tiny part of Baja California. It looks a little like a seventy foot tall upside-down carrot bent at undignified angles. Dylan Alvarez came from Baja California, and his staff was of boojumwood. He swung it wildly at Carolyn, a huge berserker swing. Carolyn countered with her own cottonwood staff, but Dylan executed a very precise disengage and smashed her skull straight in.

Clara and Mark were practically on top of him now, reciting their own incantations. "Imperet illi Deus, deprecamur," chanted Clara. "Defende nos in proelio."

"Caecilius est in horto," chanted Dylan. "Servus est in atrio."

Clara looked at him with hatred in her eyes.

"Veni in auxilium hominum!" chanted Clara. "Fugite partes adversae!"

"Cerberus est canis!" chanted Dylan. "Canis est in culina!"

Staffs crossed with a sound like a thunderclap. Dylan took a second to parry Mark, then ran at Clara as fast as he could.

Clara stood fast, her oak staff en garde in front of her.

At the last second, Dylan rolled out of the way, and the pendulum – still tracking his movement – smashed into Clara, knocking her off her feet. Dylan drove the staff into her neck and finished her off. Then he turned to Mark McCarthy, the only one left standing.

“Mark, please tell me you’re as embarrassed by these people as I am.”

Mark McCarthy, Archmage of the West, took off his hood. “Dylan,” he said. “I wish I could say I was surprised to see you here. But not really. Look, I even wore a bulletproof vest.” He opened his robe a little bit to show the Kevlar beneath.

Dylan laughed, then slapped him on the back. “Mark! Me, hurt you? We went to college together! Compadres para siempre!”

“That was the plan,” said Mark. “And then you turned weird magical terrorist.”

“Weird magical *freedom fighter*, more like!” Dylan corrected, then laughed at his own joke. “Is that really how you think of me? I’m not *that* scary, am I?”

“Dylan, you killed Senator Henderson with a letterbomb, two days after the Shroudies assigned him a personal bomb squad to search through all his mail. How did you even *do* that?”

“You think I can’t pull off a convincing Shroudie if I want to?”

Mark groaned as it snapped into place. “There was no bomb squad. Your people were the bomb squad.”

“In my defense, if I had meant to offer the Senator a bomb *removal* squad, I would have *said* bomb removal squad.”

There are a couple different ways people can freak out when the necessity arises. They can curl up into a little ball and mutter to themselves. They can go berserk and start smashing things. They can freeze up and go very, very quiet.

Mark McCarthy started laughing uproariously, a little longer than could be considered strictly appropriate.

Dylan tapped his boojumwood staff impatiently. “Your talents are wasted with these people, Mark. Back in college you always agreed with me about the government and the Board and all those asshats. Well, I’m done flying solo. I’m putting together a group of...like-minded individuals. We call ourselves BOOJUM.”

“BOOJUM? What does that stand for?”

“Solidarity with the oppressed everywhere. You should join us, Mark. We could use a man of your skills.”

Mark McCarthy glanced toward the exit. So enticing, just a few dozen feet away. He could just make a mad dash and be out of there, couldn’t he? Or was Dylan one step ahead of him again? He looked at the door. Looked at Dylan. Looked at the door again. If he was going to survive this, he would have to think like Dylan.

The problem was, Dylan was insane.

Thirty years ago, when the sky cracked, the assortment of hermeticists, Wiccans, and uncool teenagers practicing magic noticed that their spells were starting to *actually work*. Never unambiguously. But the perfectly possible things they asked of their magic were starting to happen more often than chance. Of course they ran around telling everybody, and some people did controlled experiments, and finally people started to believe them. A hundred different schools of witches and warlocks went around curing people's illnesses and blessing sea voyages and helping people find their true loves.

After that first rapid expansion stopped, the schools started competing with each other. *Our* magic is good and effective, *your* magic is evil and worthless. As usual, the well-connected Ivy League graduates won. They declared the Western hermetic tradition to be the One True School, convinced the bigwigs that everyone else was unsafe, and got a state monopoly as the American Board of Ritual Magic. Anyone who wanted to practice ritual magic had to complete an eight-year apprenticeship under a licensed ritual magician or face fines or imprisonment for practicing magic illegally.

The other schools went underground but never disappeared completely. After a decade of irrelevance they found a new champion in Robert Anton Wilson, who proposed a theory that directly contradicted the urbane hermeticism of the Board. According to Wilson, ritual magic is to Reality as the placebo effect is to humans. Tell a human that a sugar pill will cure their toothache, and the pill will make the toothache disappear. Tell Reality that a ritual will make rain fall, and the ritual will cause a downpour.

In Wilson's system, ambience wasn't just the most important thing; it was the *only* thing. Doctors have long known how every aspect of the medical experience enhances placebo effect: the white coat, the stethoscope, the diplomas hung and framed on the wall – all subconscious reassurances that this is a real doctor prescribing good effective medicine. Likewise, the job of a ritual magician – or in Wilson's terminology, placebomancer – was to perform a convincing wizard act. The grey robes, the flickering candles, incantations said on the proper day and hour, even shrines and holy places. They all added an extra element of convincingness, until finally Reality was well and truly bamboozled.

Wilson teamed up with Robert Shea to perform a series of experiments testing his hypothesis. In their work *Placebomancer!* they tested two rituals to produce rain – one invoking the demon Amdusias, the other the demon Crhvano. Both produced the same couple centimeters of rainfall, even though Amdusias was a Great King of Hell who had been known to occultism for hundreds of years, and Crhvano was a set of seven letters pulled out at random from a bag of Scrabble tiles. As long as they gave the ritual a sufficiently ominous ambience, both invocations worked alike.

The American Board of Ritual Magic answered the challenge by getting Wilson and Shea locked up for unlicensed practice of magic, then paying for a series of TV ads where attractive women in robes told viewers that their children were too important for the government to allow charlatans to go on practicing untested magic spells. So much for that. A few licensed magicians complained, or poked at the boundaries

that the Board had set for them, but whenever it became too much of a threat the Board would revoke their licenses, and there the matter would rest.

For to get one's magician's license revoked was a terrible thing. Who would trust a placebo given by a doctor stripped of his medical diploma, dressed in street clothes, working out of his garage? A magician who lost his license would lose the ability to convince Reality of anything. The American Board of Ritual Magic, originally a perfectly ordinary example of regulatory capture, had taken on ontological significance.

So nobody had been too worried when young apprentice magician Dylan Alvarez had pissed off one too many people, gotten expelled from the Board, and vowed revenge. He was just an apprentice, after all, and anyway he'd lost his license. Good luck convincing the universe of anything *now*.

But Alvarez had realized that there *are* people without medical degrees who hand out convincing placebos. They just don't do it by pathetically begging people to believe they're doctors. They do it by saying they're better than doctors, that they've discovered hidden secrets, that the medical establishment is in cahoots against them, but they'll show the fools, oh yes, they'll show them all. A good naturopath armed with a couple of crystals and a bubbling blue solution can convince thousands, millions, even in the face of mountains of contradictory evidence. Ambience, they realize, is really a subset of a stronger power. The power of narrative. The literary tropes declaring that, given A, B is sure to follow.

All the other shmucks who had been expelled from the Board had begged to be let back in. Or they'd tried to hide it from Reality, to claim that they were really magicians after all, that the decision had been unfair, didn't count, wasn't a big deal. Reality hadn't bought it.

Dylan had declared that if the Board had set themselves at odds against him, so much worse for the Board. And Reality had *eaten it up*. Now an entire guild of people who prided themselves on remaining on the right side of narrative tropes had to deal with a devilishly handsome rebel with a cause who had sworn to dismantle their entrenched oppressive bureaucracy with fire and sword, and who did clever witty things like hide in a wine cellar so that a magically-charged pendulum would track his real-world location underneath the floor rather than his analogical location on a map.

Can you imagine a story where a man lies in wait to assassinate the five masters of the American Board of Ritual Magic even as they are plotting to kill him, confounds their ritual, bursts out of the trap-door to their wine cellar at the most theatrical possible moment, raises his staff made of a rare and exotic wood that grows only his far-off homeland – and then dies ignominiously, shot by a security guard before he even can even get a word in edgewise? No? You can't imagine the story ending that way? *Neither can Reality*. That was Dylan Alvarez's secret. He always tried to be the protagonist of whatever story he was in, and the protagonist never dies.

The protagonist's old college buddy who has sold out to the establishment has no such protection, a trope of which Mark

McCarthy was painfully aware.

“Dylan,” he said. “I’ve got a wife now. And kids. You’re not going to kill me if I say no, are you?”

Not a plea. A gambit. Dylan Alvarez wanted to be the protagonist. But the sort of guy who kills a man with a wife and kids; well – that’s not just evil. It’s *crass*. The sort of thing that breaks narratives, turns you from a dashing rebel into a pathetic thug.

“Mark!” said Dylan, looking genuinely offended. “Don’t be dramatic! Compadres para siempre, remember?”

When you had known Dylan Alvarez for a long time, long enough to learn the difference between bomb squads and bomb removal squads, you learned to notice when he hadn’t directly answered your question.

“Look, Dylan, it’s not that I don’t have – good memories of our times together. It’s just – after what happened with Senator Henderson, and now everything that’s happened here tonight – *everyone* is after you. The police, the Shroudies – heck, maybe even UNSONG. And – well, like I said. I’ve got a wife and kids. No,” said Mark, finally. “I’m not a terrorist. Kill me if you will.” And he dropped his staff on the ground and held up his hands.

Dylan made a “pffffffft” sound, then went back to the trapdoor. He picked up his guns, a few odd devices, and a bottle of wine, slipped all of them into the pockets of his robes. Then he walked back to McCarthy and hugged him hard.

“Good luck with things, Mark. And if you ever change your mind about BOOJUM, you know how to find me.”

“I really don’t.”

“Just hang up another pendulum!” Alvarez laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world, slapped McCarthy on the back, then grabbed his staff and disappeared out the door into the night.

Mark McCarthy, the last remaining Archmage of North America, took a deep breath. Out. Then in. Then he started shaking and fell to his knees in relief. He picked up his cottonwood staff and grasped it to him, kneeling, trembling.

Three and one half minutes later, the police burst through the door. They had received an anonymous tip by a man with a slight Mexican accent, saying that they would find the man who had killed his four fellow Archmages sitting alone and sobbing among the bodies of his victims.

[There is now an Author’s Notes section on the menu above, and [Author’s Note 1](#) is up.]

Chapter 9: With Art Celestial

The claim that the Talmudic sages were great kabbalists is a historical error. Most sages make no mention of the kabbalistic tradition at all. Shimon bar Yochai, who lived in a cave and composed 1700 pages of kabbalistic texts, is an exception and should be considered separately.

Bar Yochai spent thirteen years hiding from the Romans in a cavern near Peki'in, and took advantage of his long downtime to write what would later become the *Zohar* – the founding work of kabbalah, as brilliant as it is impenetrable. Worried that it would lead younger students into flights of overwrought superstition, the orthodox banned study of the *Zohar* to everyone except married Jews above the age of forty -and even these carefully selected students tended to go off the deep end after a while. The circumstances of the *Zohar*'s composition are widely believed to be the origin of the old rabbinic proverb against delving too deep into arcane secrets: לֹא תִכְנֹס לַמְעָרוֹת , meaning “don't go into the caves”.

— Gebron and Eleazar, *Kabbalah: A Modern Approach*

October 3, 1990

Gulf of Mexico

“WE SAY THAT MAN WAS MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD,” said Uriel. “BUT GOD IS INEFFABLE AND WITHOUT PHYSICAL FORM. RESOLVE THE PARADOX.”

“I'm hungry,” said Sohu.

She was sitting on a little cloud, a dozen or so meters across. In the middle, the cloud-stuff had been piled up into a little amorphous cottage where she slept and stored her books. On the far end of the cloud was the flying kayak, tied down with cloud-ropes.

“UM.” Uriel thought for a moment. “I CAN MAKE MORE MANNA.”

“I had manna yesterday and the day before. It doesn’t taste like *anything!*”

“UM. SORRY. YOU ARE VERY PICKY.”

“We’re in the middle of an ocean! Aren’t there fish or something?”

“UM.”

The archangel bent down, reached into the deep, and placed a giant grouper the size of a Jeep on Sohu’s cloud. It flailed half-heartedly for a moment, then stared at Sohu with dinner-plate-sized lidless eyes. It looked resigned.

“AS I WAS SAYING, GOD HAS NO PHYSICAL FORM, SO THE CLAIM THAT HUMANS WERE MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD MUST HAVE SOME MORE SUBTLE MEANING. RABBI AKIVA PROPOSED – ”

“Uriel!” protested Sohu. “What are you doing?”

“I AM TEACHING YOU THE KABBALAH.”

“I can’t eat this!”

“IT IS A FISH. IT IS KOSHER AND FULL OF NUTRIENTS.”

“It’s staring at me!”

“THAT MAKES SENSE. IT DOES NOT HAVE EYELIDS.”

“Uriel! Make it stop!”

Fast as lightning, the archangel rearranged some of the glowing letters in front of him, causing them to pulse and whirl ominously.

The fish had eyelids. It blinked.

“That doesn’t help!”

“YOU ARE VERY PICKY.”

The poor fish gave up the ghost.

“Humans don’t just eat giant fish the size of jeeps! They need to be cut apart, and cooked, and covered in bread crumbs, and I like them with ketchup even though Father says it makes me a barbarian.”

A series of knives rained from the sky, barely missing the girl’s head, and embedded themselves point down in the cloud. They were followed by frying pans and entire stoves and bottles of ketchup and, finally, manna.

“SORRY,” said Uriel. “IT WAS THE CLOSEST I COULD COME TO BREAD.”

Sohu stared at the objects for a while, then sighed, then

picked up one of the larger knives.

“RABBI AKIVA PROPOSED THAT THE VERSE HAS BEEN MISINTERPRETED. ‘GOD MADE MAN IN HIS IMAGE’ MEANS ‘GOD MADE MAN ACCORDING TO AN IMAGE BELONGING TO GOD’. IN OTHER WORDS, MAN WAS BUILT TO A SPECIFIC CELESTIAL BLUEPRINT. WE CALL THAT BLUEPRINT ADAM KADMON, MEANING ‘ORIGINAL MAN’. ADAM KADMON IS THE BLUEPRINT NOT ONLY FOR MAN, BUT FOR THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THIS BLUEPRINT AND THE UNIVERSE ITSELF IS THE BASIS OF KABBALAH.”

Sohu cut through a scale, and was rewarded with a spurt of blood for her efforts. She shrieked and almost fell off the cloud.

“Aaak!” she said. Then: “Sorry. I was listening. Really.”

“NOVICES IN KABBALAH EXPECT THERE TO BE A SIMPLE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN ASPECTS OF ADAM KADMON AND OBJECTS IN THE UNIVERSE. FOR EXAMPLE, ONE PART OF ADAM KADMON MIGHT DESCRIBE HUMANS, ANOTHER MIGHT DESCRIBE TREES, AND ANOTHER MIGHT DESCRIBE THE STARS. THEY BELIEVE YOU CAN CARVE UP THE DIFFERENT FEATURES OF THE UNIVERSE, MUCH LIKE CARVING A FISH, AND SIMPLY...”

“No,” said Sohu, who was still trying to wipe blood off herself. “No fish-carving metaphors.”

“THEY BELIEVE YOU CAN CARVE UP THE DIFFERENT FEATURES OF THE UNIVERSE, ENTIRELY UNLIKE CARVING A FISH,” the angel corrected himself. “BUT IN FACT EVERY

PART OF THE BLUEPRINT IS CONTAINED IN EVERY OBJECT AS WELL AS IN THE ENTIRETY OF THE UNIVERSE. THINK OF IT AS A FRACTAL, IN WHICH EVERY PART CONTAINS THE WHOLE. IT MAY BE TRANSFORMED ALMOST BEYOND RECOGNITION. BUT THE WHOLE IS THERE. THUS, STUDYING ANY OBJECT GIVES US CERTAIN DOMAIN-GENERAL KNOWLEDGE WHICH APPLIES TO EVERY OTHER OBJECT. HOWEVER, BECAUSE ADAM KADMON IS ARRANGED IN A WAY DRAMATICALLY DIFFERENTLY FROM HOW OUR OWN MINDS ARRANGE INFORMATION, THIS KNOWLEDGE IS FIENDISHLY DIFFICULT TO DETECT AND APPLY. YOU MUST FIRST CUT THROUGH THE THICK SKIN OF CONTINGENT APPEARANCES BEFORE REACHING THE HEART OF -"

"No. Cutting. Metaphors," Sohu told the archangel. She had finally made a good incision and was slowly pulling things out of the fish, sorting them by apparent edibility.

"THE BIBLE IS AN ESPECIALLY CLEAR EXAMPLE OF A SYSTEM WHICH IS ISOMORPHIC TO ADAM KADMON. SO ARE ALL HUMAN LANGUAGES. SO IS THE HUMAN BODY. SO IS THE TAROT. SO ARE THE WORKS OF WILLIAM BLAKE. SO IS THE SKY AND CONSTELLATIONS."

Sohu nodded. Was that a spleen? Did fishes even have spleens?

"THERE ARE FOUR GOSPELS IN THE BIBLE, FOUR LETTERS IN THE TETRAGRAMMATON, FOUR LIMBS ON THE HUMAN BODY, FOUR SUITS OF THE TAROT, FOUR ZOAS IN BLAKE, AND FOUR QUARTERS OF THE SKY. THE NOVICE CONSIDERS THIS A COINCIDENCE. THE ADEPT UNDERSTANDS THIS IS BECAUSE THE NUMBER FOUR IS AN IMPORTANT

ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE OF ADAM KADMON, AND INSOFAR AS ALL SYSTEMS REFLECT ADAM KADMON, THEY ARE ALSO ORGANIZED INTO FOUR PARTS.”

Sohu managed to extract the heart from the fish. For a second she felt some strange significance at seeing it divided neatly into four chambers. Then she shook herself out of it and moved on.

“THERE ARE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN THE BIBLE, TEN DIGITS IN THE NUMBER SYSTEM, TEN FINGERS ON THE HUMAN BODY, TEN PIP CARDS IN THE TAROT, TEN PROPHETIC BOOKS IN BLAKE, AND TEN CELESTIAL BODIES IN THE SKY.”

“Ten celestial bodies?”

“EIGHT PLANETS, THE SUN, AND THE MOON. THERE ARE TWENTY-TWO BOOKS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE, TWENTY-TWO LETTERS IN THE HEBREW ALPHABET, TWENTY-TWO SOMATIC CHROMOSOMES IN THE HUMAN BODY, TWENTY-TWO MAJOR ARCANA IN THE TAROT, TWENTY-TWO ENGRAVINGS IN BLAKE’S BOOK OF JOB, AND TWENTY-TWO CONSTELLATIONS IN EACH OF THE FOUR QUARTERS OF THE SKY.”

Sohu wiped off her hands. She was pretty sure she had gotten everything even potentially edible out of the fish now. She looked at her piles. There were twenty two weird unidentifiable fish organs.

“Huh,” she said.

“LIKEWISE, THERE ARE SEVENTY-TWO BOOKS IN THE CATHOLIC BIBLE, SEVENTY-TWO LETTERS IN THE SHEM HAMEPHORASH, SEVENTY-TWO HEARTBEATS PER MINUTE IN A HEALTHY HUMAN ADULT, SEVENTY-TWO SIDES OF NUMBER CARDS IN THE TAROT, SEVENTY-TWO PAGES IN WILLIAM BLAKE’S POETICAL SKETCHES, AND SEVENTY-TWO YEARS TO ONE DEGREE OF PRECESSION OF THE EARTH’S EQUINOX.”

Sohu had finally extracted enough pieces of fish innard to put on a frying pan. She placed it on a stove. Even though the stove was unconnected to any source of gas or electricity, it started burning with a thin blue flame.

“IN KABBALAH,” Uriel continued “WE RECOGNIZE CERTAIN DIVISIONS OF ADAM KADMON AS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT. A FOURFOLD DIVISION, WHICH WE INTERPRET AS FOUR WORLDS. A TENFOLD DIVISION, WHICH WE INTERPRET AS TEN SEPHIROT. A TWENTY-TWO-FOLD DIVISION, WHICH WE INTERPRET AS TWENTY-TWO PATHS BETWEEN SEPHIROT. AND A SEVENTY-TWO-FOLD DIVISION, WHICH WE INTERPRET AS THE SEVENTY-TWO-FOLD EXPLICIT NAME OF GOD. BY UNDERSTANDING ALL OF THESE DIVISIONS, WE LEARN THE STRUCTURE OF ADAM KADMON AND THEREFORE THE ORGANIZATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF THE UNIVERSE. ONCE THE ORGANIZATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF THE UNIVERSE ARE UNDERSTOOD, THEY CAN BE CHANGED. IT IS AS EASY AS SHOOTING FISH IN A BARREL.”

“You’re doing it on purpose now!”

“THERE ARE MANY FISH METAPHORS.”

“Wait a second. If you can create stoves and ketchup bottles

ex nihilo, how come you can't create food ex nihilo for me?"

"THE MOST BASIC DIVISION IN THE MYSTICAL BODY OF GOD IS THE TEN SEPHIROT. SEPHIRAH IS A HEBREW WORD RELATED TO THE ENGLISH "SAPPHIRE", BECAUSE THE SAGES IMAGINED THEM AS SAPPHIRE-LIKE JEWELS ARRANGED IN A STRING. THE TEN SEPHIROT ARE A SERIES OF STAGES OR LEVELS OR JEWELS THROUGH WHICH DIVINE POWER FLOWS IN ITS MOVEMENT FROM GOD TO THE FINITE WORLD. EACH ONE CORRESPONDS TO A SPECIFIC DIVINE ATTRIBUTE. THE FIRST REPRESENTS THE WILL OF GOD. THE SECOND REPRESENTS THE WISDOM OF GOD. AND SO ON."

A spark appeared on Uriel's finger, and in lines of fire he traced a diagram into the sky in front of him.

"THERE ARE TWENTY-TWO DIFFERENT PATHS BETWEEN THESE JEWELS. EACH CORRESPONDS TO A PARTICULAR HEBREW LETTER."

Sohu looked at the glowing diagram. "Okay," she said. "But what does all this *mean*?"

"THIS WAS GOD'S MACHINE FOR CREATING THE WORLD," said Uriel. "IT HAD MANY PROBLEMS. SO I HACKED INTO IT AND MADE IT EMULATE A DIFFERENT MACHINE WHICH RUNS THE WORLD MY WAY. IT INVOLVES MANY FEWER SURPRISES. IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW THE STRUCTURE OF THE ORIGINAL MACHINE BOTH IN ORDER TO CONTROL THE EMULATION, AND BECAUSE THE EMULATION IS NO LONGER COMPLETE."

"So the whole universe runs on this system of sapphires

connected by paths?”

“MOST OF IT RUNS ON SAPPHIRES ON PATHS, BUT I USE RUBY ON RAILS FOR THE DATABASES.”

“Huh? Is that a different thing?”

“WE CANNOT TALK NOW,” said Uriel, suddenly. “THE BUTTERFLIES ARE MIGRATING”.

“What?”

“I JUST REALIZED. THE BUTTERFLIES ARE STARTING TO MIGRATE. IT IS ONLY OCTOBER. THEY SHOULD NOT MIGRATE FOR SEVERAL MORE MONTHS. I THINK I MIGHT HAVE MADE AN OFF-BY-ONE ERROR THE LAST TIME I SYNCHRONIZED THE INSECT MIGRATION ALGORITHMS.”

“Can’t you just let them migrate early?”

“EVERY TIME A BUTTERFLY FLAPS ITS WINGS, IT CREATES A CASCADING CHAIN OF AFTER-EFFECTS WHICH CAN UPSET THE ENTIRE COURSE OF HISTORY. IF THE ENTIRE BUTTERFLY MIGRATION HAPPENED AT THE WRONG TIME, THE RESULT WOULD BE TOO HORRIBLE TO IMAGINE.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT. I AM GOING TO FIX THE BUTTERFLY MIGRATION. I WILL GIVE YOU HOMEWORK FOR TONIGHT. ALL LANGUAGES ARE ISOMORPHIC TO ADAM KADMON, BUT IN DIFFERENT WAYS. YOU WILL NEED TO COMPARE AND CONTRAST THEM. YOUR HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT IS TO LEARN EVERY HUMAN LANGUAGE.”

“Um, that’s not something humans can realistically do.”

“OH. THEN DO SOMETHING HUMANS ARE GOOD AT. FALL IN LOVE. START A WAR.”

“But – ”

The archangel was no longer listening, focusing the attention of his glowing gold eyes on the stream of letters in front of him, already rearranging them with frightening speed.

Sohu experimentally slathered one the fried fish-parts in ketchup, tentatively took a taste, then spit it out. Making sure Uriel was distracted with his butterflies, she furtively started squirting ketchup from the bottle straight onto her tongue. She swallowed, shrugged, and curled up on her cloud with her book and one of the ketchup bottles as the archangel gesticulated above her.

Chapter 10: Bring The Swift Arrows Of Light

Notice also that the sharing is what enables us to increase the trespass of thy brethren.

— kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com

May 11, 2017

San Jose

Campus library hadn't changed much since I got expelled. I checked out three big books without even so much as a "You don't *look* like an Ana Thurmond," let alone UNSONG goons hauling me off somewhere. Thank goodness for automatic card reader machines.

On the other hand, there *were* UNSONG goons in front of my house.

I spotted them as soon as I got to our street. Three big black vans parked in front of Ithaca. There were about a dozen officers? – soldiers? – let's stick with goons – in black uniforms organizing some kind of formation to knock on the door.

My mind ran through all of the scenarios. Somehow Bill had found out why we needed his computer and ratted on us. No, there was no way for him to figure that out, and even though I didn't like the guy he wasn't a Judas.

Okay, maybe UNSONG had just gotten generally tired of us hosting secret Unitarian meetings. It was possible. They'd

gotten that group in Colorado. Maybe they were cracking down. Except that would mean that the whole thing with the Vital Name was a coincidence, and nothing was ever a coincidence.

Then I thought of the drop-dead simple, blindingly obvious answer, which was that Llull was well-ordered. Unless you gave it a random seed, it would always start in the same part of Maharaj space and go in the same direction, checking potential Names in the same order. So if UNSONG ever wanted to catch anyone who had found a way to make Llull work, all they would have to do is retrace Llull's steps by hand. Through unfortunate coincidence, it was only a couple of hours before Llull got its first Name, the sort of performance a good sweatshop could replicate in a week. UNSONG had handed the Llull Maharaj ordering over to a sweatshop, gotten the first Name out of it – that stupid Moon-Finding Name, no less – and then tattooed it on the ears of their sentinels. Just in case. Frick. They were smart. They were operating at a level so far above me I couldn't even see them. I had really, really blown it.

"S stands for secret," I could hear my great-uncle intoning from beyond the grave, "you'll keep it forever – provided there's nobody else who is clever."

Well, other people had been clever. Ana was right. "Nobody else can possibly be as smart as I am" was *such* an Aaron Smith-Teller way to think. If I'd thought for *two seconds* I would have given Llull a random seed, and...

Ana. Ana was in that house. Ana was in danger. Also Erica. Also depending on who had been able to pay their rent last

month somewhere between six and eight other Stevensite Unitarians whom I was on moderately good terms with. And Sarah. What happened if UNSONG got Sarah? It was too terrible to think about.

And yet approximately zero percent of my brain's emotional capacity was devoted to worrying about my superpowerful magic computer. *Ana*, my limbic system screamed. She was my weird Platonic sort-of-girlfriend except we were just friends and I wasn't supposed to call her that. That was a bond stronger than death. *Ana was in danger*. [Ana!] I thought. No answer. Obviously too stressed for telepathy right now.

The overt meaning of teller is "someone who narrates a story."

The kabbalistic meaning is "someone who calls down destructive celestial energies."

This reading we derive from my great-uncle, who *also* had a bad track record for making reasonable choices and avoiding apocalypses.

I blew up the front wall of my house.

It was a simple name, the Avalanche Name, only eleven letters, not very good at hurting people but excellent for collapsing buildings. Also good at getting people's attention. Ana was a sound sleeper. Once she'd told me she wouldn't wake up even if the house fell down around her. I figured she was exaggerating. I guess we would find out.

UNSONG's attention was also gotten. The agents turned, looking around frantically. I had crouched behind a car and they didn't see me. They started to fan out, pistols at the ready.

One reason that people become singers is the lure of fighting a magical duel. It would be pretty neat, wouldn't it? You chant terrible warlike Names, your shadowy opponent deflects or neutralizes them with the power of his own arcane knowledge, and at last the most esoterically learned man wins, standing dreadful above a pile of rubble while onlookers gaze in awe and think "There is a kabbalist".

In reality, saying even a very short Name takes three seconds or so. Pressing a trigger takes a tenth that. So magical duels are right out, unless your opponent has forgotten his gun, which one can usually count on UNSONG not doing. If you had the right klipah, you could work out a system where almost no regular speech counted as continuation of a Name, start it at leisure, and then say the last syllable when you needed it – but of course I hadn't prepared anything of the sort. And great masters like the old rabbis or the archangel Uriel could access higher worlds where all bets were off. But me? I was going to need three seconds, during which I was a sitting duck.

I spoke the Tenebrous Name and plunged the street into darkness.

Fighting a magical duel was incredibly dumb, but no one had ever claimed it wasn't awesome.

While they were adjusting, I spoke the Bulletproof Name,

which would protect me from exactly one bullet. Names must be spoken clearly and distinctly. Unless you're the Comet King or something, you can't get much more than eight or ten letters a second. The Bulletproof name was forty letters , which meant four to five seconds. That meant I wasn't so much safe as "safe from anyone who couldn't shoot me twice within a four second interval". Once again, I did not expect UNSONG to have that problem.

My goal was to get Ana, get the computers, and speak the Vanishing Name.

The darkness of the Tenebrous Name was near-absolute, but three flashlights clicked on before I'd crawled out from the car. I had to admit my chances of getting in the house looked pretty slim, as three of the agents had taken to guarding the porch.

So I ran to the side of the house. The Ascending Name would send me up to the balcony, but they would probably hear me, either through the Sentinel Name or the normal channels. My options were kind of limited. I spoke it anyway, fast as I could, and got hit by a bullet. It hurt. I jumped through where the front window would be if I hadn't collapsed the front of the house and made it into the apartment above ours.

I spoke the Bulletproof Name again. Six seconds. Then I used the Avalanche Name to punch a hole in the floor and fall into my bedroom.

Ana was gone.

That was good. It meant she had spoken the Vanishing Name and escaped.

The computer was still there, whirring and grinding.

That was bad.

Five UNSONG agents were pointing their guns at me, daring me to start chanting.

That was very bad.

I'm...not exactly sure what my endgame had been here. Like, breaking into the room had been an achievement, but probably the reaction of the agents who had already made it into the room would be to point their guns at me? Like they were doing now? Like, my knowledge and practice of magic had been impeccable, no one could have faulted me for that, but in terms of common sense I had utterly dropped the ball.

This might be a good place to mention I'd never actually been in anything remotely resembling a magical duel before. Or a non-magical duel. Any kind of duel, really. I had been in a bar fight once and ended up with two black eyes.

"Put your hands up and keep your mouth shut!" said one of the agents.

Slowly, I put my hands up.

An agent came from behind and blindfolded me.

Someone put a gag in my mouth and cuffs on my hands.

I was led into what must have been the big black van.

We drove off.

Interlude T: N-Grammata

The shortest effective Name of God is the Tetragrammaton. This was the Name recorded in the Bible, the one the High Priests of Israel would speak in the Temple of Solomon. The rabbis said it was so holy that God would smite any impure person who said it. Some of them went on wild flights of raptures about the holiness of this Name, said it was the Shem haMephorash, the holiest Name of all.

In these more enlightened times, we know better. We call it the Mortal Name, and it just so happens to be a Name whose power is to kill the speaker. As the shortest Name, it kept working long after the flow of divine light into the universe had dropped to a trickle; there were records of men dying by speaking the Mortal Name as late as Jesus' time. If the kabbalists had just said "Yup, Names do lots of things, this one kills whoever says it," then there would have been no problem, but this was back when Rabbi Shimon was working on the Zohar and the kabbalists were still underground, sometimes literally. So instead everybody assumed a Name powerful enough that God smote anyone who said it must have been very important, and people kept trying to say it to prove their holiness and kept dying.

They worked out this whole horrible system. On Yom Kippur, the High Priest would go into the Holy of Holies in the Temple, place his hands upon the Ark of the Covenant, and speak the Tetragrammaton. The theory was that if the holiest person went into the holiest place on the holiest day and touched the holiest thing, maybe that would be enough holiness to speak the Tetragrammaton and live to tell about

it. Did it work? The Bible is silent on the subject, but Rabbi Klass of Brooklyn points out that during the 420 years of the Second Temple, there were three hundred different High Priests, even though each High Priest was supposed to serve for life. Clearly, High Priests of Israel had the sorts of life expectancies usually associated with black guys in horror movies. Also, some medieval manuscripts mention that the High Priest would have a rope tied around his leg at the time, to make it easier for his flock to drag his body out after he died.

The Jews naturally got a little bit spooked about the Tetragrammaton after a few centuries of this sort of thing, and the rabbis decreed that any time you needed to use the Tetragrammaton, you should instead substitute the totally different word “A—i”. And *then* when you were going to say “A—i” you should substitute *that* with “HaShem”, so as to stay two semantic steps away from the Tetragrammaton at all times. If they could have, they would have demanded that “HaShem” be replaced with something else too, except that “HaShem” literally just meant “the Name” and so was already maximally vague.

It is a well-known fact among kabbalists that Christians are really dumb. At some point in the AD era, the Christians decided that something something Jesus died for our sins something something made us pure, and they decided to show their deep communion with God by just speaking the Tetragrammaton willy-nilly at random points in their services. Luckily for them by this point Uriel had pretty well finished blocking the divine light, and their services caused nothing worse than facepalms from any Jews who happened to overhear. Then the sky cracked. There very well could

have been this huge catastrophe the Sunday afterwards when every Christian church suddenly went up in flames. But the Tetragrammaton is famously difficult to pronounce, and the true pronunciation, which turned out to sound sort of like “JA-HO-RAH”, came as a total surprise to everyone, wasn’t in anybody’s liturgy, and actually doesn’t even quite correspond to the Hebrew letters involved. Thus was the entire Christian religion saved by its inability to pronounce a four-letter word.

If you don’t insist on magic powers for your Names, there are ones even shorter than this. The Digrammaton is aleph-lamed, or “El”. To a Californian like me, that always made places like El Segundo and El Cerrito seem a bit creepy. It wasn’t the same sort of primal horror as sticking the Tetragrammaton in the middle of something, but no kabbalist I know has ever voluntarily eaten at El Pollo Loco either.

After thinking about it a while, I’m cool with the Spanish using “El” as an article. There’s something very article-like (articular? articulate?) about God. You have your nouns – ie, everything in creation – and God isn’t a part of them, but without God they don’t fit together, they don’t make sense. The article is what instantiates vague concepts: “pollo loco” is a dream, something out of Briaah, “el pollo loco” is more in Yetzirah, an object, a created being.

Ana and I had a long discussion about the Digrammaton once. Jesus calls himself the alpha and the omega, the beginning and end. It makes sense. The Hebrew equivalent would be aleph and tav. But the Digrammaton is aleph and lamed. Lamed is the middle letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Aleph-lamed, beginning and middle. “I am the alpha and the lambda, the beginning and the middle” doesn’t have the same ring to it. What’s up?

And Ana tried to tie this into her own theory of music vs. silence vs. unsong. There was good. There was neutral. And there was evil. Not just ones and zeroes, but ones and zeroes and negative ones. God took credit for the good. He even took credit for the neutral. But He didn’t take credit for the bad. That was on us. Draw a line from best to worst, and God is everything from beginning to middle. I protested, said that God had created evil along with everything else, that it was on Him, that He couldn’t just change His Name and hope to avoid detection. Ana didn’t have an answer then. Later, when she heard all of this explained in more detail, she realized it was the key to the whole mystery, that anyone who understood the Digrammaton would understand the Shem haMephorash too, and everything else beside. But that was still long in the future.

There is even a Monogrammaton. The sages took the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and decided that exactly one of them was a Name of God. That letter is “he”. It’s the fifth letter, and it makes an hhhhhh sound like English H. The sages say that the breath makes a hhhhhhhh sound, which I guess it sort of does. Breath is the animating spirit of human existence, God is the animating spirit of the world. It sort of checks out.

“He” is pronounced like “hey” or “hay”. “Hey” is a word we call to get someone’s attention. Attention is consciousness, the highest level of thought, corresponding to the sephirah Keter. When we shout “Hey!” at someone, we are speaking

a holy Name of God, invoking the Monogrammaton to call forth the Divine within them. “Hay” is a thing that cows eat. Cows eat hay and we eat cows. We never touch hay, but it is indirectly sustaining us. It is the ontological ground, the secret that gives us life although we know it not.

But “he” is spelled as “he”. A long time ago, Ana said the Holy Explicit Name of God was “Juan”, because “God is Juan and His Name is Juan.” We both laughed it off, but later I was looking through my trusty King James Version and started noticing things. Psalm 95:7, “He is our God”. Psalm 100:3, “It is He that hath made us.” Job 37:23, “He is excellent in power and in judgment.” All of these have an overt English meaning. But they are, in their own way, invoking the Monogrammaton.

And “he” corresponds to the English letter H. H is for hydrogen, the very beginning of the periodic table, the building block out of which everything else is made. H is the fundamental unit of matter in the universe. H, the saying goes, is a colorless odorless gas which, given enough time, tends to turn into people. How would that make sense unless H was God, the organizing and ordering principle of the Cosmos, He who creates all things?

And then there was my crazy great-uncle. Invented a bomb that could destroy the world, the deadliest and most terrifying object any human being has ever produced – and slapped an H in front of the name. I still wonder, every so often, if he was a hidden kabbalist. It takes a certain amount of obsessiveness to be as reckless as he was. That’s how I picture him, actually, studying Torah by night, figuring out new ways to annihilate cities by day. What sort of religion

must such a man have? What kind of relationship with God?
What soteriology? What theodicy? All I have to guide me is
that one old book, the only thing my father gave me:

H has become a most troublesome letter
It means something bigger, if not something better.

What are we to say to *that*?

Chapter 11: Drive The Just Man Into Barren Climes

May 11, 2017

San Jose

I.

Time and chance, according to the Book of Ecclesiastes, happeneth to us all. Ana had planned to sleep in, but it so happeneth that she woke up hungry and found herself out of milk. She threw on an old t-shirt – one she had gotten at a theodicy conference a few years ago, with the motto WHO WATCHES THE WATCHMAKER? on the front – grabbed a shopping bag, and headed out to the 7-11 on the corner.

Seven represents the world – thus the seven days of creation, the seven worldly sephirot below the Abyss, and the seven continents. Eleven represents excess, a transcendence of the supernatural completeness of ten into an unlawful proliferation of forms. Added together they make eighteen, corresponding to the gematria value of the Hebrew word “chai”, meaning life. Therefore, 7-11 represents an excess of worldly life-sustaining goods – in other words, too much food. In keeping with the secret laws of God, Ana caved in and bought a box of donuts.

When she saw the vans, she briefly hoped that her housemate Aaron, the alternately annoying and lovable amateur kabbalist who had a crush on her but whom she tolerated anyway – was still at Stanford picking up library books. That hope vanished when she saw the street plunged

into darkness, heard the sound of gunshots.

There was a part of her that wanted to run back and help (how? wielding the bag of groceries as a weapon?) and another part that wanted to at least run inside to destroy the computers before UNSONG could get its hands on them. She knew some Names – maybe not as fluently as I did, but she knew them. But she also knew that only total idiots engaged in magical duels against an armed opponent, so instead she ran, her bag of milk and donuts bobbing beside her. I don't know why she didn't drop it, except that maybe when you're panicked you don't think straight.

Five minutes' running brought her to the Berryessa BART Station, all sweaty and out of breath. She took out her card, ran it through the turnstyle. A train arrived almost immediately. She got on, not even looking at where it was going. She had to get away, as far as possible, somewhere that would make UNSONG's search area unmanageably large. And so hour and a half later, she reached the end of the line and stepped off the BART at Pleasanton and started putting distance between herself and the station. After ten minutes' running through parking lots and subdivisions she sat down in a field by the side of the road and let herself breathe again, let herself think.

She started crying.

Erica – her cousin. Aaron – her weird platonic friend whom she had married *but only as a test*. All her other housemates. What had happened to them? What disaster?

Had Aaron screwed up? What had happened on his trip to

Stanford? Had he told Dodd? Was it just a coincidence? Were they in trouble for hosting Unitarian meetings, for misusing protected Names, or for trying to take over the world? Had anybody died? Those people in the black vans looked *really serious*.

[Aaron?] she asked mentally, but there was no answer.

She couldn't go back to Ithaca. UNSONG would be watching. She couldn't go to her parents in Redwood City, if UNSONG had figured out the extent of what they discovered they'd be watching her parents as well. There were various Unitarians up in the North Bay – but if they knew about Ithaca then maybe they'd infiltrated the Unitarians. Her friends weren't safe. They might not really be her friends.

She could turn herself in. But for what crime? What if they were just annoyed at some crazy thing Erica did, but she spilled the beans about the Vital Name and put Erica and Aaron in danger? And what if she could find some books on name error correction? She still had the garbled version of the Vital Name; she could still figure it out and achieve Aaron's plan without him. Once she controlled the world, she could politely ask UNSONG to hand over her friends. There was something horrifying about the idea of giving up when the stakes were that high.

So she could be a fugitive. She could run away until she found Name error correction books, or a trustworthy kabbalist to help her. Then get another computer. Then try again.

She took stock of her situation. In her wallet she had

\$105.42 and several credit cards – all traceable. Also a fake ID Erica had made for her once in an especially fuck-the-police mood when she had decided that having fake IDs was virtuous and countercultural even if you never used them. Also, she realized for the first time that she was still carrying a bag of milk and donuts. She ate a couple of donuts. They were really good.

She wandered in search of a library, and found one gratifyingly quickly. The librarian told her that Name error correction books were really technical, and that she should go to a specialized library at Berkeley or Stanford. She'd figured that would be the case. She thanked the librarian and spent \$74.99 to get a room at a nearby hotel, where she promptly collapsed on the bed.

She was half-asleep when she noticed that the laptop on the desk was Sarah.

II.

Ana looked it over very carefully. Had it been there when she came in? Had she dismissed it as just a complimentary laptop for guests to use? Maybe a little unusual in a cheap hotel like this, but not extraordinary? She couldn't remember. But it was here now, and it was Sarah. The same old NE-1 series machine. The same pattern of scratches on the cover. It even had AARON scrawled in black pen on the side.

Ana looked out the window and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Feeling a little silly, she looked under the beds. No one there. Very carefully, a Name on the tip of her tongue,

she cracked open the door of her room and saw nobody. Either it had been here when she came in, or – or what?

But that didn't make sense. She hadn't even known she was going to this hotel before she stumbled across it.

Euphemism, the front desk had asked if she wanted a room on the first or second floor – she'd been the one who decided the second. How out of it had she been? Had she fallen asleep on the bed without realizing it? Had someone snuck in, deposited the laptop, and snuck out?

Her hands shaking, expecting to be arrested at any moment, she opened the laptop.

The familiar picture of Sarah Michelle-Gellar stared back at her. Lull was gone. The browser was gone. All the desktop icons were gone except one. A text file called README. Ana read.

AARON SMITH-TELLER IS BEING HELD AT A SECRET
UNSONG DETENTION FACILITY A MILE SOUTH WEST OF
IONE CALIFORNIA. YOU SHOULD TRY TO RESCUE HIM.
USE THE NAMES BELOW. ABSOLUTELY NOTHING WILL
GO WRONG.

LEAVE NOW. IT IS NOT SAFE HERE.

And there followed three totally novel Names and three explanations. The first was the Spectral Name, which granted invisibility. The second the Airwalker Name, which granted the power to tread on air as if it were solid ground. And the third the Mistral Name, which according to the document's somewhat ominous description "called the

winds”.

Ana Thurmond, the Augustine Distinguished Scholar in Theodicy and generally a pretty with-it person, was dumbfounded.

So she started in the obvious place. She spoke the first Name. And she became invisible.

“Euphemism!” she said, in shock, and as soon as the word left her mouth she was visible again.

Well, that upped the ante. There was no such thing as a Name that turned you invisible. If there was, she was pretty sure the military would be using it instead of marching entire visible battalions against the enemy like a sucker.

Some said there were angels who knew secret Names. Some said the Comet King had known every Name that was or would ever be. Some even said that UNSONG was sitting on a giant stockpile of Names that it kept for its own exclusive use. And then there were always random kabbalists who got lucky, like the time she discovered SCABMOM. But for somebody to be sitting on the secret of invisibility...

Was it a trap? The obvious point in favor was that they were asking her to pretty much walk in to an UNSONG headquarters unarmed with an incredibly valuable magical artifact. The obvious point against was that whoever was laying the trap already knew where she was and already had Sarah, making the charade a total waste of their time.

Wait. Sarah. Whoever did this must not know what Sarah

was. Who, knowing the computer's power, would just give it away? But how would somebody know enough to place Aaron at UNSONG, but not realize why he had been arrested? If he was even arrested for the Vital Name. But if it was just a standard sting on Unitarians, who would care enough to give her three new Names and send her off to rescue him? And if they were so powerful, why didn't they just save him themselves? Aaaaah! The more she thought about it, the less sense it all made!

She minimized the README file, looked at the computer again. Nothing. Somebody had wiped the computer clean of everything except the Sarah Michelle-Gellar wallpaper. Maybe transferred it to a different computer? Maybe this was a shell of Sarah, and the real Sarah was somewhere else?

She briefly thought of how horrified Aaron would be to know that some hypercompetent secret conspiracy had his porn collection, and she laughed [EVEN THOUGH THIS IS NOT FUNNY AT ALL]

Then she turned herself invisible again. It was weird, because she still had a perfect proprioceptive sense of exactly where her body was, she could almost see it as if it were there. But she was definitely invisible. Her clothes were also invisible.

"Huh," she said, and immediately became visible again.

She put Sarah in her bag, put the bag around her shoulder, and tentatively spoke the Name. Bag and contents became invisible.

“Wow” she said, and reappeared.

Plato told the story of a man named Gyges, renowned everywhere for his virtue. One day, he found a magic ring that allowed him to turn invisible. After this, he just went around stealing everything in sight, because it turns out virtue doesn't mean that much when you have magic powers and know it's impossible to ever get caught.

Ana had never been a big fan of the story. She thought that virtue was something innate, something you did because it was right and not out of fear of punishment. She thought Plato had sold Gyges short. On her way out of the hotel, she took \$300 from the cash drawer, right under the clerk's nose, plus a backpack for the donuts. In her and Gyges' defense, she said to herself, the hotel was a giant evil corporation, and had probably stolen the money from the pockets of the Working Man.

She agonized for a second over whether or not to bring the computer. If she did and anything went wrong, UNSONG would take Sarah and that would be the end. If she didn't, she'd have to leave it here, where it apparently wasn't safe, and come back here afterwards. She decided if she was captured, or if she couldn't rescue Aaron, none of it mattered much anyway, and she put the laptop in the backpack with the donuts.

Then she went visible again, called a cab, and asked how much it would cost to get to Lone.

Interlude 7: The Right Hand Of God

But woe unto them that were with him, at the valley gate, and at the University of California at Berkeley.

— kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com

June 20, 1970

San Francisco

LSD became illegal in California in 1966, two years before the real world got so hallucinatory that it became redundant.

Certain elements missed both developments and continued to experiment sporadically with a substance that was becoming increasingly dangerous. It wasn't just law enforcement. Ever since the cracks had appeared in the sky, there were scattered reports of *weird things* happening on psychedelics. The reports from peyote users in Mexico almost strained credibility. Even those unpatriotic enough to doubt the Nixon administration's ever more strident warnings about drug abuse were starting to take notice.

Not the Merry Pranksters, and not Ken Kesey. He lay on the floor of an unfurnished San Francisco apartment, watching the swirling colors gently distort the malleable plane of the ceiling. Beside him, his friend Paul occasionally glanced up from the book he was reading and fulfilled his promised role of trip-sitter. It was pretty boring. Ken had been lying pretty motionless ever since taking the LSD tab, saying little. Still, the formalities needed to be observed.

The colors began to swirl a little brighter. The pulsing fractals started to expand, simultaneously growing *out* and gathering *in*.

When he reached the end of the chapter, Paul gave another cursory glance back at Kesey.

His friend was standing upright. No, not standing. Hovering. He was hovering about a foot about the floor. His face was expressionless. His eyes had lost all features, all signs of pupil and iris, and were radiant silver.

Paul screamed.

“DO NOT BE AFRAID,” said Kesey, but it was not his voice.

“What...what’s going...who...what are...help!”

“DO NOT BE AFRAID,” said Kesey, and it was definitely not his voice. “I AM THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD. I BRING YOU ETERNITY. ALL THE WALLS WILL FALL AROUND YOU.”

Paul tried to stand. He took a second to catch his breath. Kesey – the thing in Kesey’s body – seemed content to let him. He just stood there, hovering.

“W...who are you?” asked Paul.

“KNEEL,” said the thing in Kesey’s body.

“But...who...what *are* you?”

“KNEEL,” said the thing in Kesey’s body, somewhat more forcefully.

Quivering from head to toe, Paul knelt.

Chapter 12: Borne On Angels' Wings

May 11, 2017

San Jose

Sitting in bed with her computer on her lap, Erica Lowry watched the sun rise and writing the news.

The overt meaning of “news” is “new things”.

The kabbalistic meaning of “news” is “the record of how the world undoes human ambitions”.

This we derive by notarikon, interpreting “news” as an acronym for the four cardinal points: north, east, west, and south. There is a second notarikon of the same form. In Greek, the four cardinal points are *arktos* (north), *dysis* (west), *anatole* (east), and *mesembria* (south). When God took dust from the four corners of the world to make the first man, He named him after those four corners in notarikon; thus, “Adam”.

Despite this similarity, the two words have a difference: news goes n-e-w-s and Adam, converted to the English equivalents, goes n-w-e-s. The middle two letters are reversed. Why?

(when I was explaining this to Ana, I added that there was a third word in this class, that being “snew”. When she asked “What’s snaw?” I said “Not much! What’s snaw with you?” and she refused to speak to me for the rest of the day.)

I offer the following explanation for the variation. During the

day, the sun goes from east to west. This sunrise – sunset cycle represents the natural course of the world, the movement from birth to death. Adam is the only one in history who reversed that pattern; he went from dead clay to living man. And his descendants continue upon that road, trying to reverse nature, to wrest a bubble of order out of the general decay. They raise children, build cities, unify empires. But nature always has the last word. Children grow old and die. Cities fall. Empires crumble. The works of man succumb to the natural cycle. The west-east movement reverses itself, and the east-west course of the sun and the world takes over. And when it does, we call it news.

And so: Erica Lowry watched the sun rise and writing the news.

Erica's *Stevensite Standard* was one of the most popular magazines of the Bay Area countercultural scene. She had a gift. If I had to name it, I'd say it was a gift at taking things seriously. If someone organized a protest, and only five people attended, and then it started raining and so they all went inside and had lunch, Erica could make it sound slightly more heroic and monumental than the First Crusade. She didn't misreport the facts, she didn't gloss over things, she just wrote from the heart, and her heart was convinced that whatever she and anyone in her vicinity were doing was the most important thing.

This morning, Erica was making the final decision about what stories to include in the June issue. The cover story would be about the recent trend towards a few big hedge funds buying out stakes in all the theonomics. Aaron had contributed a long kabbalistic analysis of the nursery rhyme

“There’s A Hole In My Bucket”, which was...very Aaron...but would at least fill pages. Last but not least, a call to attend a vigil for the dead Coloradans to take place in Oakland Harbor, just short of the bridge that no one took. Everyone was going to stand by the water and hold candles, and this would be a fitting tribute to the martyrs in the battle against tyranny, and...

She was so caught up in her work she almost didn’t notice the gunshots.

It had suddenly become dark outside. Somebody had used the Tenebrous Name. It didn’t matter. She didn’t need to see the street below to know what was going on. UNSONG had finally found them. She had known this day would come. Ana was out getting milk. She’d said Aaron had gone out to borrow a book from the library. She was all alone.

Whistling, she reached under her bed and retrieved her emergency UNSONG-fleeing-backpack, taking a couple of seconds to stuff her laptop into the front pocket.

Erica was a good magazine editor because she lived in a slightly different world than everyone else, a world where enemies lurked behind every corner and anybody could be a hero. Very occasionally, her world intersected the real world, and then she was like a fish in water.

She climbed out the window and jumped onto the emergency UNSONG-fleeing tree just outside. From there she jumped down into the neighbors’ yard, ran around the back, jumped the back fence into a different neighbor’s yard, then jumped out the front fence, and was on the

street after her own. Making sure to look calm, she followed it until she came to the park, then cut across, and ended up on a different street entirely. She slipped into a cafe, ordered a coffee, and sat down.

That had gone exactly the way it did in her fantasies.

She took her emergency UNSONG-fleeing phone out of the backpack and texted first Ana, then Aaron. “Hey,” she wrote. “Santa Barbara is lovely this time of year. Wish you were here.” If UNSONG had their phones, it would knock them off the trail. If either of them had their phones – well, judging by what had happened when she had laboriously explained this system to them earlier, they would roll their eyes and tell her that real life didn’t work like that and code words were stupid. But hopefully they would at least text her back and tell her if they were safe.

When she didn’t get an answer, she checked amtrak.com on the laptop, grumbled, finished her coffee and walked back out onto the street. She almost bumped into a police officer carrying a bag of bagels on her way out. She gave him a little smile, and he smiled back awkwardly.

She kept walking, street after tree-lined street, until she came close enough to the airport that the roar of planes overhead became deafeningly unpleasant. At one end of an asphalt lot was a shabby apartment building. After taking a notebook out of her backpack to make sure she had the right place, she knocked on door 3A.

A haloed head peeked out, she cracked the door a little wider to reveal an ungainly, winged body. “If this is about

letting God into my life,” he said forlornly, “please don’t bother me. I’m already an angel.”

“Pirindiel,” she said. “It’s me. Erica.” Angels weren’t very good at distinguishing human faces, but they never forgot a name.

“Oh!” the other answered. “Sorry! Oh, I’m so bad at this! Sorry! I promise I didn’t mean...”

“It’s okay,” Erica said. “May I come in?”

Pirindiel’s single room apartment was bare. Very bare. I guess if you didn’t subsist off food, there wasn’t much reason to have a table, a stove, or a refrigerator. But where did he *sit*?

“I need you to help me get on the California Zephyr,” she said.

Pirindiel looked confused. “Aren’t you supposed to buy tickets?” he asked.

“The tickets are sold out months in advance, silly,” Erica told him.

Pirindiel was a fallen angel. Not a demon, mind you. The difference between a demon and a fallen angel is the difference between a submarine captain and a sailor who’s pushed off the deck of a ship without a life jacket. The demon knows precisely what he’s doing and enjoys every minute of it. The fallen angel, well...

G. K. Chesterton said that angels fly because they take

themselves lightly. But what happens when an angel sees too much, gets too weighed down by the sins and suffering of the world? The clouds stop supporting his weight, the wings that bore him aloft in the days of Abraham and Moses grow weaker, and he plummets earthward. There, he gets stuck in a vicious cycle. No matter how cynical and jaded an angel becomes, it's never enough. Angelic brains, or souls, or whatever they have, just aren't built to hold the proper amount of cynicism for dealing with earthly existence. They end up hopelessly confused and constantly disappointed by everything around them, with almost no ability to adjust. There they will never take themselves lightly again.

"I still think if you want to get on a train, you're supposed to buy a ticket," said Pirindiel, though he sounded uncertain.

"Nonsense!" said Erica. "Imagine if that were true! Only rich people would be able to go on trains. Poor people couldn't afford it at all!"

"Oh," said Pirindiel, a little embarrassed. "I guess I didn't think of that."

"It's all right," said Erica. "You're new to this kind of thing. Now, here's what I need you to do..."

It had taken a kabbalistic rearrangement of the Midwest's spatial coordinate system that rendered roads there useless, plus a collapse of technology so profound that airplanes were only able to fly if Uriel was having a really good day, plus the transformation of the Panama Canal into some sort of conduit for mystical energies that drove anyone in its vicinity mad – but America had finally gotten its act together

and created a decent rail system. As usual, it was the Comet King who had made it happen, meeting with President Bush and Governor Deukmejian back in the late 80s and agreeing to upgrade one of the old Amtrak routes into a true high-speed railroad like the ones they'd had for decades in Asia. It started in San Francisco, crossed Nevada and Utah, continued on to Denver a hop and a skip from the Comet King's capital in Colorado Springs, cut straight through the Midwest, and ended up on the Atlantic Coast.

That worked for about five years. Then there had been another sudden drop in the efficiency of technology, and parts of the route needed costly refitting to use the Motive Name. Then the Comet King had died and the security situation went to hell, in some cases literally. The smoking ruins of the Midwest had been taken over by warlords and barbarian chiefdoms – Paulus the Lawless, the Witch-King of Wichita, the Oklahoma Ochlocracy – who wanted tolls to pass their territory. The Other King seized Nevada and demanded another toll plus the promise that the train wouldn't be used to lift the siege of the West children in Colorado. The smouldering conflict that had troubled the East Coast after the election of 2000 had devolved into guerilla warfare that made the whole Appalachian area dangerous. Now the Zephyr was down to one trip a week. Out of California on a Thursday afternoon, into DC Friday morning, then back in California by Saturday night. The tickets were expensive and sold out months in advance.

"The Zephyr," said Erica, "is going to leave the station in about two hours. The train is guarded at the station to make sure nobody climbs into the storage cars. But after it starts moving, there's no problem. I just need you to fly me onto

the train as it leaves the station. I can take it from there.”

Pirindiel looked miserable. “I want to help,” he said, “but I’m not very good at flying any more.”

“All you’d have to do is carry me a couple of meters, from the side of the track onto the train,” she said. “And I know that might be hard for you. But that’s why I have *this*.”

She took a vial of a clear liquid out of her backpack.

Angels fly because they take themselves lightly. Fallen angels are weighed down by the sins and sorrows of the world. But ever since ancient Mesopotamia, people have known an easy way to temporarily forget the sins and sorrows of the world. A couple of pints of beer will make help the most jaded of men take themselves lightly again.

Beer doesn’t work on angels, but holy water has much the same effect.

Pirindiel stared at it greedily.

“I don’t think I’m supposed to do that,” he said. He was right. Churches had very strict policies on giving holy water to angels or to people who looked like they were going to sell it to angels. Erica had only gotten a vial by seducing a seminary student and promising not to do exactly what she was doing right now.

“It’s for a *good cause*,” Erica explained patiently. “It’s to help you fly me onto the train. I need to go on this train, you know. It’s very important. It’s for *true love*. My boyfriend is in DC.”

“Really?” asked Pirindiel.

Sort of really. Erica’s sometime boyfriend, Brian Young, had left Ithaca three months ago out of annoyance at what he considered to be the excessive pacifism and hippie-ness of the California counterculture. He’d vowed to find BOOJUM, the terrorist cell that had already killed one President and was supposedly gunning for more, and the East Coast had been his first stop. A few weeks ago, he’d sent Erica a phone number. She hadn’t called it, because God only knew what sort of trouble Brian had gotten himself mixed up in and she didn’t know who might or might not be listening to phone calls.

But if UNSONG was really looking for her, she had better get as far away as she could. And if Brian had really fallen in with BOOJUM, they probably knew a thing or two about avoiding manhunts.

As for the fugitive thing, there was no way she was mentioning that to Pirindiel. Sure, once she had given him her Spiel, he’d come around to being an occasional member of their Unitarian cell. But angels just weren’t good at defying authority. If he knew she was a fugitive, there was every chance he might have a sudden crisis of conscience and turn her in.

“Well,” said Pirindiel. “If it’s about true love...”

And then he drank the entire flagon of holy water in one gulp. There were ways of dealing with conscience.

Three hours later, Erica climbed down a hatch into a luggage

car and gave a long sigh.

She was, she reflected, pretty darned safe. UNSONG could search the entire West Coast for her, maybe they would, and they'd find nothing. And if Pirindiel told on her – and sure, he might – well, a lot of good that would do them. She'd told the angel she was going to Washington, but Brian's area code said New York. She'd get off the train in Manhattan and let them search DC to their hearts' content.

The train passed through the Central Valley, then climbed into the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. It was all the same to Erica. The luggage car didn't have any windows.

She checked her cell phone one last time before the battery went dead. Nothing from Aaron. Nothing from Ana. She hoped they would be okay. She figured they would be. They both had good heads on their shoulders. Well, sort of. Okay, not really. But they were book-smart. That had to be worth something, right?

She rested her head against a bag of luggage and fell asleep.

Interlude 1: There's A Hole In My Bucket

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.
— Leonard Cohen, "Anthem"

*"There's A Hole In My Bucket", by Aaron Smith-Teller
Submitted for the June 2017 issue of the Stevensite Standard*

You've probably heard [the old children's song](#). "There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza." A child named Henry asks his friend Liza for help with a hole in his bucket. Liza tells him to mend it with straw, but Henry needs – successively – a knife to cut the straw, a stone to sharpen the knife, water to wet the stone, and a bucket to get the water. He ends up in the same place he started – there is a hole in his bucket and he doesn't know what to do. All of this has obvious kabbalistic implications.

Looking up "Liza" we find it derives from Hebrew Elisheba, a complicated name I have seen translated as "God is an oath", "God is satisfaction", "God is wrath" or – if you take it entirely literally – "God is seven". Okay. Let's put that one on hold for now.

Looking up "Henry" we find that it is the written form of the name spoken as "Harry". Why write a name differently than it's spoken? In Hebrew there is a tradition of writing the Names one way and speaking them differently – thus A—i becomes "HaShem". A few months ago, I jokingly told a

friend that the Explicit Name was “Harold”, based on the prayer “Our Father in Heaven, Harold be thy name”. If Harold is indeed a divine Name, it makes sense that it should be written differently than it is spoken.

So the word in the nursery rhyme should be read as “Harry”, which is an unmistakable reference to the most famous kabbalist of all time: Rabbi Isaac Luria, better known by his Hebrew nickname Ha’Ari. Ha’Ari dedicated his life to the same question that consumes so many of us: why would a perfectly good God create a universe filled with so much that is evil?

Malachi 3 describes God as “like a refiner’s fire”, but only because the ancient Hebrews didn’t know the word “H-bomb”. God is infinite energy, uncontrollable power, likely to scorch and burn anything He touches. If God even touched the Universe for a second with His little finger, it would shatter like a dropped egg. So how does God create the universe? How does He sustain it?

Ha’Ari proposes a system that my 21st century mind can’t help but compare to electrical transformers. If electricity went straight from a nuclear plant to the light bulb in your house, your light bulb would blow up. Instead, the electricity goes from the plant to a huge transformer that can handle it and make it a little less powerful, then from there to a smaller transformer that can handle that level of power and make it a little less powerful in turn, and so on to your lightbulb. God’s power, then, passed through the ten sephirot as “transformers” that converted it to a voltage capable of affecting the world.

Since Luria didn't have that metaphor, he talked about "vessels" instead. Think of those artsy fountains where the water falls into one pot, fills it up, then overflows into another pot lower down, then into another even lower pot, and so on until it reaches the bottom. Luria imagined ten vessels, gently transferring the water from God all the way down the world, making the divine energy more finite at each level until finally it reached us.

That was the plan, anyway. The first pot worked as intended. The second and third also worked as intended. The fourth was just a little too weak, couldn't handle the sheer nuclear blast of divinity, and exploded. That meant the full power of the third pot flowed down into the fifth pot, so the fifth also exploded, and so on all the way down to the last pot, which was at least as much "the bottom of the fountain" as a pot in itself and so didn't explode. It just cracked open a little bit.

That last cracked pot was the material world, the universe we live in. It's filled with the shards of the six broken sephirot above it, not to mention chunks of itself pried loose in the blast. Seven pots worth of debris. And remember, these pots were designed to control divine power, so they're made of special God-resistant material; separated from their purpose they become the klipot, powers opposed to God. We've got all of this high-voltage divine energy flowing into us that we're not supposed to be able to bear, shooting off huge streams of sparks in every direction, but it's all so choked up with God-resistant klipot that we're missing most of it. On the human level, all of this chaos and unfiltered light and god-resistant shards and brokenness manifests as disorder. The reason evil exists is that we're living in the

middle of a pot with a crack in it.

There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza. There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, a hole.

Now everything starts to come together. Harry (= Ha'Ari) bemoans the shattered nature of the universe to Liza (= "my god is seven" = the seven shattered sephirot down in our vessel with us, the only form of God accessible in our finite world).

With what shall I fix it, dear Liza, dear Liza? With what shall I fix it, dear Liza, with what?

In theory, we ought to be able to swim around the bottom of the fountain, hunt for the debris, and build it back into functional God-deflectors. Then we need to take the sparks of divine light and use them as an energy source to power the deflectors, and finally arrange the whole system in exactly such a way as to correctly channel the power of God at a human-bearable level. In practice we are sex-obsessed murder-monkeys and all of this is way above our pay grade. The debris and sparks are stuck in the spiritual world and we probably can't even find them, let alone start building complicated metaphysical machinery with them. So Henry/Ha'Ari asks Liza/God for help: with what can we effect *tikkun*, the rectification of the world?

And Liza replies: "With straw, dear Henry."

Straw is a kind of hay. Hay is the Monogrammaton, the shortest Name of God. The universe can only be made whole through divine intervention.

But the straw is too long; even the shortest Name of God is too big to fit. Any dose of God would burn the universe to ashes; that's how this whole problem started. With what shall I cut it, dear Liza, dear Liza? How can God be channeled and applied to the universe safely?

And Liza replies: "With a knife, dear Henry."

Knife in Biblical Hebrew is "zayin". Zayin is also the seventh letter of the Hebrew alphabet, represented by a pictograph of a knife or sword. But on Torah scrolls the scribes add a little crown to the hilt, which has led to a whole host of alternative interpretations. Some say it represents a king, some a scepter, and some a comet – this last being aided by a Hebrew pun in which "scepter" and "comet" are the same word. All of these meanings come together in the Star Prophecy of Numbers 24:17 – "I behold him, though not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and scepter/comet out of Israel". The prophecy goes on to explain that this will be a great ruler who conquers all of Israel's enemies – neatly tying together the themes of king, scepter, comet, and sword.

So how to cut the straw and make divine intervention a viable option? It's going to have to wait for the Messiah.

But the knife is too dull. Tradition says that every generation contains one person worthy to be the Messiah, if the time is right. But it never is, because tradition *also* says the Messiah can only come once we deserve him. The rabbis' descriptions of what exactly we have to do to deserve him end up sounding a little passive-aggressive. The Talmud says that if the Jews ever repented even a single day, the

Messiah would come immediately. But the Talmud is kind of crazy, and the more general lesson seems to be that the Messiah will not be permitted to come until people deserve him. Until then, the knife is too dull.

And this is what Liza tells Harry. The knife can only be sharpened by a rock, and the rock can only be activated by water. This calls to mind a very similar episode in the Bible. God tells Moses to ask a rock for water. Instead, Moses strikes the rock. This works, in the sense that the rock produces water, but God becomes enraged and says that He's so sick of Moses and his rock-striking ways that He will make the Israelites wander back and forth in the desert until the current generation dies off. Only their descendants will be allowed into the Promised Land.

So getting water from a rock represents following God's commandments and the moral law. As long as everybody is perfectly good, it will initiate the coming of the Messiah who can channel the power of God and fix the universe.

There's only one problem: everybody is not going to be perfectly good. Because the world sucks. This was *the whole point of this chain of inquiry*. We want the world to be good, so we need divine intervention, so we need the Messiah, who will only come if the world is good. That...doesn't help at all.

And poor Henry has much the same problem. He goes through this whole rigamarole – asking how to cut the straw, asking how to sharpen the knife, asking how to wet the stone, asking how to carry the water – only for Liza to tell him he should carry the water with his bucket. And so back

to the beginning: “But there’s a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza, there’s a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, a hole.”

Since Ha’Ari’s time we’ve learned some disquieting new information. We learned that a sufficiently intelligent archangel could rearrange certain things entirely on his own and create a system very different from the one in the design specs. We learned that launching a space capsule high enough could break one of the previously intact parts of the last pot and increase the flow of untransformed divine light to almost unbearable levels, sparks shooting off in every direction. We learned that Uriel, the only entity keeping any of this even slightly functional, has some serious issues of his own and does not entirely inspire confidence. And worst of all, we learned that the god-resistant debris – the klipot – manifests as an intelligent demonic force and has its own plans for what to do with the scattered remnants of the transformer system.

If the Messiah were ever going to come, now would be a good time. We thought he came forty years ago, in Colorado, but apparently we were unworthy. And we hardly seem to be getting worthier. My friend Ana informs me of a way around the paradox: some texts say the Messiah will come *either* in the most righteous generation *or* in the most wicked. Granting that we’ve kind of dropped the ball on the “most righteous” possibility, I think the wickedness option really plays to our strengths.

Still other texts say the Messiah will come in a generation that is *both* the most righteous *and* the most wicked. I don’t even *know* what to think of that one.

Chapter 13: The Image Of Eternal Death

October 10, 1990

Gulf of Mexico

I.

“Good morning,” said Sohu as she stepped out of her cottage. Technically it was already afternoon. She hadn’t slept late, but she’d stayed inside, studying, dreading to open the door. Uriel had no concept of small talk, and precious little concept of scheduling. She knew the moment she walked outside he would start expounding kabbalah at her, talking faster than she could follow and demanding impossible feats of scholarship. It wasn’t that she dreaded it, exactly. Just that she wanted to be able to steel herself a little before facing it. As for the archangel, he never seemed to notice or care about the time. She suspected she could have just stayed inside all week and spared herself any lessons at all, if she had been so inclined. But then why live with an archangel in a hurricane?

He had heard the greeting. She took a deep breath, readied herself for what was to come.

“KNOCK KNOCK,” said Uriel.

“...what?” said Sohu.

“LAST WEEK I SAID YOUR HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT WAS TO LEARN EVERY LANGUAGE,” said Uriel. “DID YOU – ”

“Wait,” said Sohu. “What was with the knock knock?”

“YOU HAVE SEEMED SOMEWHAT LOST RECENTLY. I BORROWED A HUMAN BOOK ON EDUCATION. IT SAYS THAT IN ORDER TO KEEP CHILDREN ENGAGED, YOU SHOULD TELL JOKES THROUGHOUT YOUR LESSON.”

“And someone told you that was how jokes work?”

“NO, BUT I WAS ABLE TO FIGURE IT OUT MYSELF AFTER READING SEVERAL EXAMPLES.”

Sohu mentally assessed whether this was better or worse than the normal way Uriel did things, came up blank.

“No. You have to – here, let me show you. Knock knock.”

“UM.”

“Now you say ‘who’s there’. It’s a joke.”

“IT IS NOT VERY FUNNY.”

“That’s not the joke. When I say ‘knock knock’, you say ‘who’s there?’ Knock knock.”

“WHO’S THERE? THIS IS STILL NOT VERY FUNNY.”

“Slow down! I say knock knock. You say who’s there. I say a name. You say that same name, and then you add ‘who’. And then I make a joke.”

“I THINK IT WOULD BE MORE EFFICIENT IF YOU STARTED BY MAKING THE JOKE.”

“It wouldn’t work that way! Knock knock!”

“WHO’S THERE?”

“Avery.”

“AVERY WHO?”

“Avery silly knock knock joke.”

“AVERY SILLY KNOCK KNOCK JOKE WHO?”

“You only say who one time!”

“OKAY.”

“You...didn’t seem to find that very funny.”

“WHICH PART WAS THE JOKE, AGAIN?”

“I said Avery, like it was my name. But actually, I was using it as part of the phrase ‘a very silly knock knock joke.’”

“WHY?”

“It’s like...it’s like what you were saying about kabbalistic correspondences. Two different things that have the same structure. The name Avery, and the words ‘a very’, and you don’t see it at first, but then later you do.”

Uriel stood quietly, glowing letters swirling all around him. He seemed to be thinking deeply, as if this were a far harder problem than merely stabilizing the El Nino cycle (his project for yesterday) or defragmenting mammalian DNA (the day before).

“SO A JOKE IS LIKE A SURPRISING KABBALISTIC CORRESPONDENCE?”

“Sort of.”

“KNOCK KNOCK.”

“Who’s there?”

“‘NACHASH’ IS THE HEBREW WORD FOR SERPENT, BUT IT HAS A GEMATRIA VALUE OF 358, WHICH IS THE SAME AS THE HEBREW WORD ‘MOSHIACH’, MEANING MESSIAH. THUS, ALTHOUGH THE SERPENT INTRODUCES SIN INTO THE WORLD AND THE MESSIAH REDEEMS THE WORLD FROM SIN, BOTH ARE KABBALISTICALLY IDENTICAL. YOU ARE NOT LAUGHING.”

Sohu’s expression was somewhere between horror and pity.

“THAT WAS NOT FUNNY?”

“Probably not in the way you intended it to be.”

“OH.”

“I think you might not be very good at jokes.”

“I THINK IT IS VERY SURPRISING THAT THE MOST DIRE THREAT TO THE WORLD IS PROPHESED ALSO TO BE ITS REDEEMER. TAKEN TOGETHER WITH ISAIAH 53:12 STATING THAT THE MESSIAH WILL BE NUMBERED AMONG THE GREAT TRANSGRESSORS, IT PRESENTS A VERY UNUSUAL VIEW OF SIN AND REDEMPTION.”

“It has to be a special type of surprising. Uh....why don’t we get back to the lesson.”

“OKAY. LAST WEEK I SAID YOUR HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT WAS TO TO LEARN EVERY LANGUAGE. DID YOU COMPLETE IT?”

“I told you, humans can’t do things like that.”

“OH. RIGHT. THEN I TOLD YOU TO DO SOMETHING HUMANS WERE GOOD AT. LIKE START A WAR. DID YOU COMPLETE THAT ONE?”

“I thought you were joking!”

“NO. YOU CAN LEARN A LOT OF THINGS FROM STARTING A WAR. FIFTY YEARS AGO SOME PEOPLE STARTED A WAR AND THEY ENDED UP LEARNING THE SECRETS OF THE ATOM. IT WAS VERY IMPRESSIVE.”

“I’m not starting a war!”

“OKAY.” Sohu tried to read his face. Was she *disappointing* him? “TODAY WE WILL LEARN ABOUT THE TWO PILLARS ON THE TREE OF LIFE. THE RIGHT PILLAR CONSISTS OF CHOKHMAH, CHESED, AND NETZACH. IT REPRESENTS THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD AND IS ASSOCIATED WITH MERCY. THE LEFT PILLAR CONSISTS OF BINAH, GEVURAH, AND HOD. IT REPRESENTS THE LEFT HAND OF GOD AND IS ASSOCIATED WITH JUSTICE. MY BOOK ON EDUCATION SAYS I SHOULD STOP TO SEE IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS. DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?”

She didn’t want to disappoint him further. She tried to think

of a question. “Um. You talk about these correspondences all the time. So...uh...how does this correspond to human politics. We also talk about a right side and a left side, but in human politics the Right is usually more concerned with justice, and the Left is usually more concerned with mercy. How come in kabbalah it’s the opposite of that?”

“THAT IS AN EXCELLENT QUESTION. YOUR HOMEWORK FOR NEXT WEEK IS TO FIGURE OUT THE ANSWER.”

Oh. So it was going to be one of *those* types of lessons. Sohu scowled.

“IT IS A COMMON MISCONCEPTION THAT THE RIGHT HAND IS GOOD AND THE LEFT EVIL. AS ASPECTS OF THE DEITY, BOTH ARE GOOD AND NECESSARY TO PRODUCE BALANCE. THE RIGHT HAND CREATES AND SUSTAINS. THE LEFT HAND DIRECTS AND PURIFIES. BUT AFTER THE SHATTERING OF THE VESSELS, WHEN ALL ASPECTS LOST THEIR CONNECTION TO SUPERNAL DIVINITY, THE RIGHT HAND BECAME AIMLESS IN ITS BLESSINGS, AND THE LEFT SWITCHED FROM THE CAREFUL DIRECTION OF A LOVING FATHER, TO PUNISHMENT FOR ITS OWN SAKE. THE MIDDLE PILLAR REPRESENTS THE COMPROMISE BETWEEN THESE TWO EXTREMES. BALANCE. UNION. HIDE.”

“Um, another question. What do you mean by hide?”

Uriel pointed at the edge of the hurricane and Sohu’s little cloud shot in that direction so quickly she fell over onto its puffy surface. Her own cloud rotated ninety degrees and smashed up against the wall of the storm, so that she was sandwiched between them as they merged. Trapped. She

clawed frantically, trying to break free, until she was rewarded with a view of clear sky, the four hundred foot vertical drop to the ocean below, and a tiny figure suspended in the air at the level of Uriel's face.

II.

Uriel was talking to someone. She could barely see him at this distance. Human-sized, she thought. His voice carried, cool and emotionless, solid like ice.

"Would you like to get this over with and kill me now?" he asked. "Or do we have to do it the hard way?"

"THE HARD WAY," said Uriel.

Then they both took a step skew to any of the dimensions her normal eyes could see. She felt new senses opening up as she tried to follow their path, senses that inferred their presence from the paths of the colored letters that swirled around the storm. The hurricane abstracted, became a series of perturbations in the seed of the world. She traced them back. SA'AR. Then along another set of threads. TEMPESTAS. Still another. HURRICANE.

The stranger seized the threads, pulled them forward, sheared them to their essence. HRCN. Then he rearranged them, made them dance. CHRN. Then fleshed them out. ACHERON. The river that formed the boundary of Hell. Sohu felt the storm darken, become deathly hot. Somehow the transmutation was affecting reality.

Uriel reached out, his flaming sword now in his hand, and

parted the threads. CH. RN. He fleshed them out. Turned the first set into CHAI, meaning “life”. The second into AARON, brother of Moses, progenitor of the priesthood, who bore the Shem HaMephorash upon his forehead. The darkness broke. Waves of holy light rushed forth from where Uriel had made the change.

The stranger snarled, hurt.

“GO AWAY, THAMIEL,” said the archangel.

Sohu froze. Thamiel. The Lord of Demons. Was here. Was fighting Uriel.

Thamiel touched both sets of threads. AARON shifted vowels, became RUIN. From the whistling of the wind he drew an S, added it to CHAI, shifted it into CHAOS. Chaos and ruin. The carefully arranged threads of symbols that made up Uriel’s machine began crumbling, falling apart in the wind.

Uriel drew water from the sea in a great waterspout. The Semitic pictograph for “water” was the origin of the Hebrew letter mem. He turned the water into an M, then grabbed the CH from CHAOS and the n from RUIN, made MACHINE. The remaining letters R and S he stuck together, slashed at the S until it hardened and became a Z. RZ. RAZ. Secrets. Through the angel Raziel, the secrets of kabbalah in particular. A machine of kabbalistic secrets. His machinery stopped crumbling, starting putting itself together, glowing with renewed light.

Thamiel grabbed the Z, held it in the plume of water until it

softened back into an S, then used it to make RASHA, “wicked” and NACOM, “punishment”. The punishment of the wicked, the Devil’s task. Thamiel began to grow bigger as the power of the storm drained into his essence.

Then he paused. pointed at the letters. Of their own accord, two dropped away, made a new pattern. MEREA. “Friend”.

“You have a friend here,” he told Uriel.

“NO,” said Uriel.

“The letters don’t lie,” said Thamiel. He pointed to them again. Another two dropped out. SOHU.

“Interesting,” said Thamiel.

They were the scariest four syllables Sohu had ever heard.

The two stepped back into the regular world at the same time, and Thamiel flew right towards her.

She could see him clearly now. He looked like a man. He was dressed in a very black suit. His face evoked a military officer, or a high-level executive, or a serial killer, or a cop who always had rumors of brutality swirling around him but nobody could ever pin anything down. Not the kind of impulsive brutality of the guy who loses his cool every so often, but a very calculated brutality. The cop who knows way too much about how to hurt people without leaving marks, and who has no crime at all in his precinct, and nobody wants to ask why. Gaunt, empty grey eyes, close-cropped hair.

To the right of his head was a second head. It looked like a deformed infant. Its eyes were firmly shut and its mouth was locked into a perpetual silent scream.

“Sohu,” he said, with his normal head. The other one was still screaming. “I’m Thamiel. We meet at last.”

He had two bat wings on his back, no bigger than they would have been on a bat. On him they looked ridiculous, vestigial. They held him aloft nonetheless. In his hand was a bident – like a trident, but with two points instead of three. He looked straight at her. Held out the bident, and the clouds hiding her melted away.

“DO NOT HURT HER,” said Uriel.

“Ah,” said Thamiel. “Perhaps now you’re more interested in killing me?”

Uriel said nothing. Thamiel stared at the girl. Sohu didn’t say anything.

“Your father’s sign is on you.” He pointed to her left hand. To her eyes there was nothing there. It just looked like skin. “If I harm you, it calls him here.” She had known nothing of this; still it made sense. “But,” said the demon, “it thinks of ‘harm’ in very literal terms. I don’t.”

Very very gingerly, he touched the two points of the bident to Sohu’s forehead.

She remembered a poem: *“If in some smothering dreams you too could pace behind the wagon that we flung him in and watch the white eyes writhing in his face, his hanging*

face, like a devil's sick of sin; if you could hear, at every jolt, the blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues..."

She remembered it because it was the only thing that could describe how it felt. All the light vanished from the world. Everything stable, everything comprehensible. Like a vertiginous nausea of the mind, like every fiber of her being was united in an urge to vomit that would never be satiated. Not like she had cancer; like she *was* cancer, like there was nothing pure or orderly left within her, like she needed to be excised from the universe, like the universe needed to be excised from the cosmos, or like the whole cosmos needed to be killed with poison to put it out of its own misery. But that doing so wouldn't help, couldn't help, there was no poison outside and separate from the cancer, everything was going to be horrible forever and it was all her fault.

"Uriel!" she shouted with her last ounce of strength. "Kill me!"

Thamiel opened one eye a little wider on his first face; the eyes of the second were still glued shut. "I was going for 'kill *him*'," said the devil, "but your way works too, actually."

The second head continued to scream. Uriel stood silently as the colors and symbols whirled around him, no emotion on his face.

"You should know," said Thamiel to her quietly, "that if one were to compare a single water droplet of this cloud to all the oceans of the world, the oceans above that are seen by

Man and the greater oceans below in the wellsprings of the earth – that as miniscule are the torments you suffer now to the torments of Hell that are prepared for you and everyone you love. And that even if you escape those torments, as some do, you have friends, and you have a family, and even those who seem most virtuous have secret sins, and so the probability that neither you nor any of those you care about end up in my dominions is impossibly fleeting, a ghost of a ghost of a chance. And that I will be given dominion over the Earth, and that it will be no different, and everything beautiful and lovely and innocent will become no different from what you feel now, only it will last forever. And that I don't care at all about you, but I wanted to see whether Uriel did. And that he could stop this at any time. And you're probably blind by this point, but you should know that he's standing there, watching all of this, and he knows exactly what's going on, and he hasn't even changed his expression. And I could do this for an hour, a year, an eternity, and he would still be standing there."

The second head just kept screaming.

"Still," said Thamiel, "I'm busy, and duty calls." He lifted the bident from Sohu's forehead, and she collapsed onto the cloud. "I'm changing my mind," he told the archangel. "You don't need to kill me today. I think it will be more interesting watching you explain yourself to Sohu. We can do the usual death-return thing the next time."

"GO AWAY, THAMIEL," said Uriel.

"Of course," said the devil, and he dove into the sea and disappeared.

III.

Sohu lay there for a moment. Let the light and fresh air slowly leak back into her sensorium. The horror seemed oddly distant now, like she could barely remember it. A nightmare retreating after break of day. But the words she could not forget.

A rush of air, as Uriel summoned her cloud back beside him at the center of the storm. A bulge in the center gradually took shape and developed, bud-like, into her cottage. The flying kayak was still there, somehow, tethered to the edge of the cloud just as it had been before.

“ARE YOU OKAY?”

She struggled to speak. Finally she just said “What happened?”

“THAMIEL DOES NOT LIKE ME. HE WANTED ME TO DO SOMETHING BAD TO SAVE YOU. I DID NOT. I AM SORRY.”

Sohu turned herself over, so that she was supine on the cloud. She saw the angel’s head leaning over her, filling the sky, his eyes as bright as the sun, and she covered her own eyes to avoid being blinded.

She thought for a second. So many things she wanted to say. She formed the responses, compared them, mulled them over in her mind.

“I...trust you to do the right thing.”

“YOU DO?”

"I...Uriel, it was really bad. You have no idea how scary that was. Please don't let him hurt me again. Please don't let me die."

"UM. I WILL TRY TO KEEP YOU SAFE."

"I don't want to be kept safe. I want to...you fought him, Uriel."

"NOT VERY WELL."

"But you did. I want to learn how to do that. I want to learn how to fight."

"I WILL TEACH YOU MANY THINGS. BUT YOUR HOMEWORK FOR TONIGHT IS TO REST AND FEEL BETTER." He stopped himself. "OR IS THAT ONE OF THE THINGS HUMANS CANNOT DO?"

"I...I'm not sure. But I think I can try."

Chapter 14: Cruelty Has A Human Heart

Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is,
there is power: and who may stand in thy sight are but
as yesterday when it is applied. These two rules
describe the essence of a computer programmer
trainee

— kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com

May 11, 2017
lone, California

Something was horribly wrong.

Gradually it came back to me. I'd tried to fight UNSONG and failed miserably. They'd seized me and presumably my computer too, driven goodness knows how many hours with me in the back of a black van, then deposited me in a cell somewhere. I had fallen asleep. Now I had woken up. I was still in an UNSONG cell. There were guards outside the window.

This was not what was horribly wrong.

The wrongness was subtler than that. It pierced to the bone. It was like hearing your own heartbeat, pounding in your ears, except that it was off, in some way that you couldn't explain, and you kept thinking maybe you had some rare heart disease that was going to kill you any moment now.

I tried to get up, and was mildly surprised when I succeeded. Whatever was wrong wasn't physically wrong. I tried to speak and found that I was gagged. Obvious precaution. You

capture a kabbalist, you don't want them speaking. No chance UNSONG was going to forget that.

The cell was spacious – although to be fair my standards had been set by the sort of rooms I could rent for minimum wage in the Bay Area. It was well-kept, as if advertising that UNSONG didn't need to deny its prisoners any of their physical needs in order to break them. Or maybe I was reading too much into it, because everything around me still felt *horribly wrong*.

I cleared my mind as best I could.

[Ana, are you there? Where are you?]

There was nothing. Either Ana was far away, or distracted, or asleep, or – I couldn't make myself think “dead”. I would have felt it if she died. That, I told myself, is definitely how kabbalistic marriages work.

So I banged on the door of my cell, hoping that the guards would hear me and take me away to whatever awful fate was awaiting me, rather than leave me here where *something was horribly wrong*.

Both guards looked at me. One of them muttered something I couldn't hear, probably along the lines of “He's awake”. I was surprised to see they looked like ordinary people. The one on the left wore a sort of serious expression that reminded me of Eliot Foss for some reason. The one on the right looked a combination of pissed off and scared. I wondered if he, too, could feel that something was horribly wrong.

“Mr. Smith-Teller,” he said. I winced internally. I mean, I suppose if they didn’t know my name now it wouldn’t have taken them too much longer to find it out, but it still hurt. Kabbalists are notoriously fussy about who knows their true name. I’m not sure why. When an angel or demon is hidden in some sort of incarnate form, knowing their true name gives you power over them. Knowing the Shem haMephorash does the same to God, or something. I don’t think there’s anything like this for humans, but there’s still just something that feels very careless about letting your enemies have such an important word.

“You’re awake just in time. We’ll be taking you for debriefing now. Please come peacefully or we will have to take measures to enforce compliance.” He didn’t say it in a nasty way, though. I kind of liked the guy. But *something was nevertheless horribly wrong*.

I nodded, and let them open the door of my cell and march me down the corridor. This was something else. I knew UNSONG arrested people, I knew that they put you in prison for a long time if you used Names without a license, but I’d always heard they used the normal federal prisons. The idea of a secret UNSONG black site somewhere sounded like it was out of Erica’s paranoid anti-government screeds.

It didn’t fail to register that if no one had ever revealed the existence of this place before, that meant either that they were *very* good with the Amnestic Name, or else no one had ever gotten out of here before. I tried to remember exactly how effective the Amnestic Name was and ironically came up blank. And what about the Confounding Name? I couldn’t remember.

The facility wasn't small, either. We walked through poorly-lit corridor after poorly-lit corridor. I tried to look for other prisoners, references to the location, even doors with signs on them, but all I spotted were a couple of locked rooms with the UNSONG seal on the front. An aleph superimposed on the United Nations globe, and around it, the name "United Nations Subcommittee On Names of God" and the motto "I TEGO ARCANA DEI". *Begone, I hide the secrets of God*. There were deep kabbalistic depths in that phrase, but I didn't have the energy to think about them, because *something was horribly wrong*.

We came to a room. A conference room, it looked like. They motioned me to sit down. The sense that something was horribly wrong got stronger. The guards could feel it too. I could tell.

The door swung open.

"Ma'am," said one the of the guards, politely yet as quickly as possible, and then both of them walked away just slowly enough not to technically be considered running.

Two other guards entered, both looking like people who were in severe pain but had been dealing with it for long enough that they could sort of crack a nervous smile and say it didn't bother them anymore – and between them, a five foot tall woman of ambiguous ethnicity wearing a purple dress and a pearl necklace.

And I thought: *Huh, I've seen this person in the newspaper*.

"Mr. Smith-Teller," she said, and smiled at me. "I'm Malia

Ngo.”

Okay. So any hope that they were just annoyed at Erica’s secret meetings was gone. This was Director-General Malia Ngo. The head of UNSONG. If she was involved, they thought this was the most important thing happening in the world at this moment. Which of course it was. They knew all about the Vital Name and everything it could do, and they were going straight to the top. Okay. So I was really, *really* doomed.

When the President and the Comet King had worked together to convince the United Nations to fund UNSONG, leadership of the fledgling bureaucracy had gone to a elderly Brazilian politician who had taken a hands-off approach. He’d gone after the biggest gangs and most blatant serial abusers of Names, talking about “decapitation strikes” against networks of large-scale pirates. The policy was very popular – everyone agreed that having the Mafia in on the Name business was a bad idea – and pretty ineffective, because most unauthorized Name use was by ordinary non-Mafia people who talked to each other online.

He’d died about ten years ago and been replaced by Ms. Ngo, who had joined the organization two years earlier and presided over a famous sting on the medicinal-Name gangs in the Harmonious Jade Dragon Empire. She replaced her predecessor’s cautious balance with a scorched-earth approach that won her dozens of powerful enemies – all of whom were carefully outmaneuvered. It didn’t hurt that theonomic profits increased about 300% during the first five years of her tenure. Sure, a lot of people thought that was because of blockbuster discoveries like the Precious Name

and Zahlenquadrat-boxing, but pirated Names becoming a hundred times harder to find couldn't have hurt either. Soon any move against her would have half the theonomics bigwigs in the country at the President's doorstep within an hour, and UNSONG was her private fiefdom. She scared a lot of people, and I'd always thought it was a deliberate attempt to play the bully in order to compensate for her unthreatening appearance.

Now she seemed just the opposite. She wasn't trying to look scary. She was doing everything she could not to. And it wasn't enough.

"Mr. Smith-Teller," she repeated. "I'm sorry you're in this situation." She really did sound sorry. "I understand you are associated with several Unitarian groups who have a dim view of UNSONG, and you're probably laboring under the misapprehension that I am here to hurt you. As difficult as this may be to believe, we're potentially on the same side. I'm going to take your gag out. If you start speaking a Name, I'm afraid we'll have you unconscious before you finish the second syllable, and the gag will go back in. I'm sure you can imagine the reasons we have these precautions. Nod if you understand."

Even her face was something terrible. I couldn't place her ethnicity *at all*. Her face looked like it came from one of those weird nightjar birds whose eyes are in the wrong place and don't look even look like real eyes.

I nodded. She made a motion to the guards. One of them took my gag out.

“Mr. Smith-Teller,” she said. “I’m sorry you’re in this situation, but as you can tell from my presence here we do have to take this very seriously, and I have to ask you a few questions. The Keller-Stern Act of 1988 states that anyone who discovers a Divine Name of potential military value is legally obligated to turn it over to the United States government in exchange for fair monetary compensation. Most people aren’t aware of the Act, and we have no interest in punishing them for refusing to follow a law they never heard of. But now you know. So, Mr. Teller-Smith, and please tell me the truth, do you know any Names that might be covered under the law?”

I felt like she would know if I lied. Her nightjar eyes stared into my soul. If I lied to Malia Ngo, something terrible would happen to me.

“No,” I said. “I don’t know any such Name.”

And it was God’s own truth. Because I had forgotten the Name. Because I was a moron. I could have told her more, but she terrified me, and the truth – that I’d known the Vital Name and forgotten it – would be neither believable nor welcome. And part of me was desperately hoping that if I said nothing, she would go away, the wrongness would end, and I would just be in a perfectly normal government black site and everything would be fine.

“Did you speak a Name that allowed you to find the location of the Moon?”

“I did,” I said.

“How did you learn that Name?”

Every fiber of my body tensed at her oppressive closeness. It was a fair question. I had no way out this time. Either tell her what had happened, or lie like a rug and see exactly what those nightjar eyes could do.

I ran through a host of scenarios. I tell the Director-General that I knew the Name and forgot it. She doesn't believe me and tries to torture it out of me. She doesn't believe me and tries to torture the Name out of Ana. She *does* believe me and tries to dissect my brain to get it. She goes to an error correction specialist, fixes the Name, and takes over the world, *and I'm still alive to see it.*

I am definitely not a hero. I've been in one fight, but only because I was drunk, and I ended up with two black eyes. The only thing I've ever been good at is studying things and comparing them and trying to understand them.

But the sages of old weren't your typical heroes either, and they were constantly breaking out of prison by one miracle or another. Rabbi Meir convinced a Roman prison guard to free his friend by reassuring him that if anyone tried to punish his disobedience, he could say “God of Meir, help me!” and God would keep him from harm; when his commander tried to hang him for his role in the escape, the guard cried “God of Meir, help me!”, the rope broke, and he managed to run away to safety. When a whole Roman legion arrived to arrest the great translator Onkelos, he preached to them in Latin about the symbolism of the mezuzah, and the whole legion converted to Judaism on the spot. And when the Romans arrested Rabbi Eleazar ben

Perata on five charges, God helped him craft a plausible alibi for each; when the plausible alibis didn't work, the prophet Elijah appeared at the end of the trial, lifted up the prosecutor, and threw him out of the courtroom so hard that he landed five hundred miles away. I think I mentioned that the Talmud is kind of crazy.

So miraculously breaking out of prison is the sort of thing kabbalists are expected to be able to do, and I daydream a lot, and a long time ago I had come up with a fantasy about the sort of thing I would do if I were ever trapped in a prison, and *this was by far the stupidest thing I had ever done*, but *something was terribly wrong* and I needed to get out of here.

"I had a prophetic dream," I said.

I knew the moment I said it that Malia Ngo didn't believe me. I could see it in those nightjar eyes. And so I panicked. I gave up an advantage, threw out a morsel I was sure Ngo wanted.

"The dream told me how to use a computer program to discover new Names."

There. If I was right, and she'd researched the Moon-Finding Name specifically to catch people using Llull, I'd just told her something she already knew was true, redeemed myself. Maybe she still thought I was lying. But at least she knew it was an interesting lie. One that paralleled the truth. Maybe she'd want to hear me out.

"Tell me more," Ngo ordered.

I made as if to object. "It was a really, really strange dream." I said. "Full of bizarre imagery. It was only this weird sixth sense that helped me understand any of it at all. If I told you, it would just sound like random noise."

And I couldn't believe I was actually doing this, but caught between the horror of lying to Ngo and the horror of telling her the truth somehow I was going along with it, even though I knew very shortly this would be something to add to my 'I am an idiot' file right next to speaking the Moon-Finding Name aloud.

"Tell me the dream," Ngo repeated.

I looked awkward and abashed, and it had nothing to do with acting. "It was...all these weird images in succession. This is going to sound so stupid. I don't even know why I remember them so clearly."

Ngo didn't even say anything. Just stared at me with those eyes, as if to tell me I wasn't getting off the hook.

"It all started with...with...it started with a dog having sex with a tree."

Ngo blinked, but said nothing.

"And Zeus saw this, and he made a river, to drown the dog as punishment. And Shamu – you know, the killer whale – swam down the river, nibbling on somebody's skull."

Ngo was still listening. She looked confused, but not suspicious.

“It was the skull of a vampire, who had died reciting a poem about a lantern,” I told the Director General.

I know as much about klipot as any man alive. I was the one who broke NEHEMOTH, I was the one who taught the Singers’ cryptographers half the things they knew, I could see possibilities that everyone else would have thought insane. I was going to do this. *I was making it happen.*

“Sauron had knighted him once by speaking a secret Name,” I said, “but it didn’t save him. It was the dog who killed him, by lancing him through the heart with a thumbtack.”

For something to be a klipah, four things are necessary.

That the speaker know the Name he is trying to conceal.

That there be a one-to-one correspondence between the klipah being uttered and the letters of the Name being concealed, one which the speaker understands at the deepest level.

That the correspondence not be ad hoc – you can’t turn “Hello how are you” into the Tetragrammaton by declaring on the spot that “Hello” equals yud, “How” equals hay, and so on. There has to be at least an intention or possibility of consistency, rather than a deliberate mapping on to a preexisting pattern.

And that the signal be separated from the noise; that the parts which represent letters are fixed in advance and not separated by other parts representing other letters.

I had invented my mnemonic system to help remember

Names through weird stories. It was hard to remember that the first three letters in the Vanishing Name were dalet-samech-tav. But it was easy to remember a dog having sex with a tree.

Given an appreciation of my mnemonic system, a story about a dog having sex with a tree and Zeus making a river was equivalent on a phonetic level to dalet samech tav zayin mem resh. The first six letters of the Vanishing Name.

“Neptune went to inspect the river in his capacity as god of water, and got mad, and started terrorizing it with a rake. Kim Jong-un flew overhead in a lantern.”

Ngo was starting to look very dubious now. I didn’t have much time.

“Moses recited a poem about tacos.”

[Aaron] came a voice from deep in my head. [I’ve come to save you. Are you there?]

[Ana?] A horror. Ana Thurmond was in this place. [Ana, I can take care of myself...maybe...Ana, get out!]

But to Malia Ngo, I said only: “Neptune.”

DASAT-ZAM-RUSH-SHAN-SEVER-LAS-KYON-DAL-ATHEN-TRY-KOPHU-LI-MAR-TAN!

Don’t use the Vanishing Name, I had said during choir practice, unless you are in a situation where it is absolutely vital to your well-being and continued survival that you be accosted by a different band of hooligans than the ones who

are currently accosting you. Right now, being accosted by a different band of hooligans was my heart's fondest and most desperate desire.

As Director-General Malia Ngo and two UNSONG guards strained to understand my made-up dream imagery, I completed the Name and vanished from right in front of their faces.

Chapter 15: O Where Shall I Hide My Face?

You saved your shillings and your last six pence
Cause in God's Name they built a barbed wire fence
Be glad you sail for a better day
But don't forget there'll be Hell to pay

Rebels are we
Though heavy our hearts shall always be
Ah, no ball or chain no prison shall keep
We're the rebels of the sacred heart
— [*Rebels Of The Sacred Heart*](#)

May 11-12, 2017
lone, California

We Bay Arians (Ana and I had debated multiple demonyms, including Bay Arean and Bay Aryan, before deciding we were more heretical than warlike, and *definitely* not the master race) tend to think of the Central Valley as a nightmarish stretch of endless farms inhabited by people who, while not exactly dead, could hardly be called living. So far nothing Ana had seen in the two hour taxi ride to lone had changed her mind.

Now here was the town itself, in all its glory. There wasn't anything that looked like a secret detention facility, although she supposed that was what made it a *secret* detention facility. But it was already dark, and she didn't fancy looking. She also didn't fancy waiting until morning; she wasn't really an expert in infiltrating secret facilities, but night seemed

like potentially the best time, even if you could turn invisible.

What was the saying? If Mohammed cannot go to the mountain, the mountain must come to Mohammed?

No, not that one. The other one.

“In America, you can always find a party. In Soviet Russia, Party can always find *you*!”

Ana spoke the Bulletproof Name.

It was a calculated choice. New enough that the theonomics were still guarding it closely, but old enough that it had leaked to a few singer groups and the UNSONG sentinels were listening for it. Chosen to lure the dragon from its den.

Then she spoke the Spectral Name and became invisible.

Sure enough, a white van showed up at the gas station where the cab had dropped her off, and some men in black uniforms got out and started looking around. The process of infiltrating them was harder than Ana expected; she couldn't just open the door of the van and walk in; there was still someone inside and he might notice the doors opening of their own accord. And if the van was full, she was worried someone would try to sit in her lap on the way back to headquarters. And starting any other Names would break her invisibility, so...

She watched in disgust as the men, having finished their search of the premises, got back in their van and drove off. This was harder than it was in stories.

So she rematerialized, spent some of her remaining money on some chocolate frosted donuts from the gas station, and decided to think of a better plan.

In America, Mohammed goes to mountain. In Soviet Russia, mountain comes to *you*. Or whatever.

She walked vaguely southward. When she felt like it was vaguely southward enough, she spoke the Ascending Name, then the Spectral Name again. Sure enough, back came her friends in the white van. More fruitless ground-combing. Back in the van again. But this time, she was higher than the hills and could see for miles.

A little south of town, the van turned west onto a little country road, went down a couple of miles, and then drove right into a hillside. Bingo.

Ana Thurmond started walking on air.

By the time she reached the hillside it was into the wee hours of the morning, and she was tired, and she wished she'd eaten more donuts when she had the chance. Such the regrets of a heroine. She wondered if the Comet King ever rode into battle wishing he'd eaten more donuts beforehand.

An armored car drove up. The entryway opened to accept it. Ana Thurmond slipped in unseen, and *something was terribly wrong*.

It was heavy and oppressive, like a heartbeat slightly out of rhythm, but also not like that at all. She couldn't tell if it was

auditory, or tactile, or olfactory. It was just this sense like there was a black hole just out of view, sucking in everything good about the universe. For lack of any better form of navigation, she followed the wrongness.

[Aaron?] she thought as she wandered through the corridors. [I've come to save you. Are you there?]

[Ana!] I thought back at her. [Ana, I can take care of myself... maybe...Ana, get out!]

And then she felt my mental trace suddenly vanish from her mind.

A door marked with the UNSONG seal swung open, and a very short woman in a purple dress and pearl necklace stepped out with a very grim look on her face.

Holy euphemism, thought Ana, that's Director-General Malia Ngo.

Malia looked her Ana straight in the eye and asked: "Who are you and why are you invisible?"

Something was horribly wrong, and Malia Ngo was that something. Ana ran.

"Lock down everything!" the Director-General shouted.

This would have been a good time for Ana to use the Vanishing Name, except that starting it would break whatever was left of her invisibility, and whatever advantage she had came from nobody but Ngo being able to see her. So she just ran.

Several officers – soldiers – let’s stick with goons – congregated around the Director, only to uncongregate and fan out, confused. Ngo grabbed a gun from one of them, and shot at Ana. The woman missed by a mile, and the unexpected recoil knocked her to her feet. No soldier, she.

A guard sat by the entryway, clearly doing his best to watch out for invisible people sneaking towards him. Ana punched him in the face, then hit the lever his presence was lampshading. The exit door swung open and she ran forth into the night.

Malia followed, directing a platoon of guards, pointing out the general direction they should run. They shot at her and missed wildly. Ngo, a quick learner after her firearm mishap, used the Fulminant Name. It missed too, but only barely, singing some of her hair.

Ana jumped off the road, ran into a pile of brush. Her slight advantage was that the Director-General couldn’t really run through scrub in that dress, and was about twenty years older than she. The Fulminant Name was short range, and she was increasing the distance between herself and Ms. Ngo with every step. She ran through bushes, through a creek – anything she thought would deter the lady whose terrible pounding was still on the fringes of her consciousness.

“Who are you?” Ngo shouted at her, from afar.

Obviously Ana didn’t say anything back.

“I won’t hurt you! I know you won’t believe me, but we’re

on the same side. This is important, I swear! Please, I just want to talk!”

Right. She believed *that one*.

Just before she got out of range, Ngo went silent, started saying the Fulminant Name again. Ana braced herself – it was anybody’s guess whether the Director-General could hit from this distance, and though the Name was rarely fatal, it would certainly knock her out long enough to be captured. She ran as fast as she could, trying to get a couple extra meters before –

Then a gust of wind flew all around her, knocked Malia off her feet. The Tempestuous Name. But how?

She kept running, ran until the Director-General and her horrible base had receded into the brightening horizon.

II.

The back of a pickup truck took her as far as Sacramento, and a train took her to Oakland. In Oakland she broke her invisibility, got a hotel room and lay in bed without talking or moving or really thinking for a few hours.

Then she woke up, took a shower, and bought herself a nice breakfast with the last of the hotel till money. She was a little surprised to see that Sarah was no longer in her bag when she woke, but only a little. Let the conspirators play their games. She was done.

If she hadn’t already been a fugitive, she was one now. Director-General Malia Ngo herself had seen her; if she

didn't already know who she was she would soon figure it out. And someone else, someone who could seize Sarah from underneath UNSONG's nose, was manipulating her in a way she didn't much like. Ithaca wasn't safe, her parents' house wasn't safe, nowhere in the Untied States or the global community was safe for her. But there were other options.

She started walking west. She walked past the hills, walked past old houses, walked past the lake and the Emeryville Mall, walked past the harbor. She reached the Bay Bridge, went invisible, walked right past the warning signs, past the barricades and the guard towers.

In front of her, a few towers peeked out of the billowing fog. The eye in the Transamerica Pyramid fixed its gaze on her for an instant, its emotions – if it had them – as inscrutable as ever.

She was finished with the lands of men.

She was going to San Francisco.

[[Author's note 2](#) has been posted. I will be having a series of meetups in the Bay Area for readers of my other blog Slate Star Codex; Unsong readers are welcome to attend and we may have a dramatic reading of upcoming Interlude Zayin if there is enough interest. Current planned dates and times are:

— 2 PM on Sunday April 17 at the CFAR office, 2030 Addison, 7th floor, Berkeley

— 7 PM on Monday April 18 at the Friedmans' house, 3806 Williams Rd, San Jose

— Afternoon of Tuesday April 19 at the Googleplex, time and exact location tbd

— Evening of Tuesday April 19 at Stanford, time and exact location tbd

Further information will be posted on [my other blog](#) and with next week's chapter]

Chapter 16: If Perchance With Iron Power He Might Avert His Own Despair

There's a story about an old man walking down a beach. He sees a child picking up starfish and throwing them into the water. The man asks the child what he's doing, and the child says that these starfish are stuck on land at low tide. They can't survive out of water, so he's throwing them back in the ocean to save them. The old man says, "But surely you know that there are millions of starfish just on this one beach. And there are thousands of beaches all around the world. And this same thing happens at high tide day after day, forever. You'll never be able to make a difference." And the child just picks up another starfish, throws it into the ocean, and said "Made a difference to that one!"

I remember when I told the Comet King this story. He got very quiet, and finally I asked what he was thinking. Still half-lost in thought, he answered: "Even a small change to the moon's orbit could prevent the tidal cycle. Moving the moon would take immense energy, but the Wrathful Name has the power of a hydrogen bomb and can be written on a piece of paper weighing only a fraction of a gram. The Saturn V has a payload of about ten thousand kilograms, so perhaps twenty million instances of the Wrathful Name...hmmmmmm... no, it still wouldn't be enough. We'd need a better rocket. Perhaps if you could combine a methane/LOX full-flow system with a prayer invoking the Kinetic Name..." He picked up a napkin and started sketching,

and was diverted from his trance only when I reminded him that starfish had evolved for life in the intertidal zone and were probably fine. He flashed me one of his fierce smiles and I couldn't tell whether or not he had been joking all along.

An enterprising member of the household staff pocketed the napkin and sold it to Celestial Virgin for an undisclosed sum; the Comet King's partially-completed sketch became the basis of all modern rocketry.

—Sohu West, *The Comet King: A Hagiography*

October 11, 1990

Gulf of Mexico

Runes of glowing fire troubled Sohu's dreams, and she woke up the next morning to find them inscribed upon her skin in big dark welts. She ran out of her cottage, almost fell off the edge of the cloud.

"Uriel! Uriel! What's happening?"

"THE ICE IS CALVING IN ANTARCTICA. I HAVE BEEN BUSY ALL MORNING TRYING TO PREVENT THE ICEBERGS FROM DISRUPTING SHIPPING LANES. IT IS VERY ANNOYING. I CANNOT EVEN REMEMBER WHY I PUT A CONTINENT AT THE SOUTH POLE. NOBODY EVER USES IT."

"No, to me! Look!"

The angel scanned her with his flaming golden eyes.

“OH. YES. YESTERDAY. WHEN I LET THAMIEL TORTURE YOU. IT WAS FOR...IT WAS BECAUSE...I AM SORRY. YOU DID NOT BLAME ME OR YELL AT ME. YOU TRUSTED ME. PEOPLE DO NOT USUALLY DO THAT. IT WAS VERY STRANGE. YOU TRUSTED ME EVEN THOUGH YOU WERE HURT VERY BADLY. I...THANK YOU.”

“Uriel! The things all over my skin!”

“I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING NICE FOR YOU. THE OTHER DAY YOU SAID ‘PLEASE DON’T LET ME DIE’. SO I THOUGHT I WOULD DO THAT FOR YOU. NOW YOU ARE IMMORTAL. IT WAS VERY HARD.”

Sohu stared again at the characters on her skin, then freaked out. The angel watched her flail with something between curiosity and discomfort.

“UM. THE WELTS WILL FADE IN A FEW DAYS.”

“That wasn’t what I meant! When I said not to let me die! I meant I didn’t want to die right *then*! Not I didn’t want to die *ever*!”

“OH. WELL. UM. IF YOU EVER FEEL LIKE DYING, LET ME KNOW AND I WILL KILL YOU. THAT IS ACTUALLY MUCH EASIER THAN GRANTING IMMORTALITY.”

“Aaaaaah Uriel you don’t understand! Is this going to do something horrible like I’m going to grow older and older until I become shriveled and tiny and turn into a grasshopper?”

“NO. PLEASE DO NOT WORRY. I MADE SURE YOU WILL NOT

GROW OLDER.”

Sohu stopped flailing. Now she was very, very still. “Wait. Not grow older *at all*.”

“YES. IT IS A VERY GOOD IMMORTALITY RITUAL.”

“You mean *I am going to be eight years old forever?*”

“UM.”

“Uriel, *take it back!*”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, TAKE IT BACK? YOU WANT TO GROW OLD AND DIE?”

“Yes!” She stopped, a look of horror coming over her face. “Wait! I mean, no! Not now!” Then, “But yes! Eventually!”

“I DON’T SEE WHY YOU SHOULD WANT TO AGE. YOU WOULD BECOME OLD AND SENILE AND PROBABLY TERRIBLE AT REMEMBERING KABBALAH.”

“Uriel I know you don’t always understand humans very well but trust me this is really important take it back take it back now.”

“UM, ACTUALLY, THOUGH THE FLOW OF UNCONDITIONED LIGHT EMANATING FROM THE UPPER SPHERES IS IN THEORY PERFECTLY MATCHED BY THE FLOW OF CONDITIONED LIGHT REFLECTING FROM THE LOWER, THE CHANNELS ARE NOT SYMMETRICAL, AND BY A SPIRITUAL LAW ISOMORPHIC TO THE SECOND LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS IT IS NOT ALWAYS POSSIBLE TO RETRACE A PARTICULAR COMBINATION OF

SPIRITTUAL PATHS WITHOUT SOLVING AN NP-COMPLETE PROBLEM WITH A SIZE APPROXIMATELY EQUAL TO THE NUMBER OF ATOMS IN THE UNIVERSE TIMES THE NUMBER OF DIVINE NITZUTZOT.”

“Are you saying you *can’t take it back*?”

“MAYBE. SORT OF. YES.”

“Oh god oh god oh god I’m going to be eight years old *forever*,” said Sohu, and she started crying.

“I AM SORRY.

“You’re sure there’s no way to change this and make me not eight years old forever, or to add back aging, or...”

“POSSIBLY I COULD MANUALLY INCREMENT YOUR AGE ON EACH BIRTHDAY. IT WOULD BE VERY INELEGANT, BUT...”

“*Possibly?*”

“UM. I DON’T THINK I AM A VERY GOOD FRIEND.”

“It’s...okay. You...didn’t know...you...tried to help, I guess.”

“YOU SEEMED SO SCARED.”

“I was!”

“I WANTED TO HELP. I FELT BAD THAT I DID NOT SAVE YOU.”

“Why? Why did you let Thamiel do that to me? You said you could have killed him. Why didn’t you just kill him and save

me and then you wouldn't have had to do some weird ritual to me and *now I have to be eight years old forever?*"

"EIGHT YEARS OLD IS NOT A BAD AGE. I HAVE TO LISTEN TO EVERYONE'S PRAYERS, AND THEY BECOME REALLY WEIRD ONCE PEOPLE HIT PUBERTY."

"Why, Uriel? *Why?*"

"UM. I AM TRYING TO KEEP THE WORLD FROM ENDING."

For some reason Sohu chose that moment to calm down. As if discussion of the end of the world were more normal, an island of normality she could hold on to. "And why is the world going to end if you kill Thamiel?"

"A LONG TIME AGO THERE WAS A WAR IN HEAVEN. ALL OF THE ARCHANGELS FOUGHT THAMIEL, AND THAMIEL WON. I DID NOT LIKE THIS RESULT, SO I ADDED A NEW STRUCTURE AT THE ONTOLOGICAL BASE OF THE UNIVERSE, A LAYER THAT REINTERPRETS ADAM KADMON. I CONVERTED THE WORLD FROM A SUBSTRATE OF DIVINE LIGHT TO A SUBSTRATE OF MATHEMATICS. THIS PREVENTED ANGELS AND DEMONS FROM EXISTING IN ANY MORE THAN A METAPHORICAL WAY. WHEN THE DIVINE LIGHT ENTERED THE UNIVERSE I CHanneled IT INTO A RESERVOIR SO THAT IT DID NOT INTERFERE WITH THE CLOCKWORK."

"And then we crashed Apollo 8 into the edge of the world."

"YOU WENT BEYOND THE EDGE OF THE WORLD AND RECITED THE BIBLE. YOU INJECTED THE CODE FOR THE ORIGINAL SYSTEM VIA A BUFFER OVERFLOW ATTACK. MY

SYSTEM WAS CATASTROPHICALLY DESTABILIZED. EVEN DRAWING ON THE RESERVES OF DIVINE LIGHT I HAD COLLECTED OVER MILLENNIA, I WAS ONLY ABLE TO PARTIALLY STABILIZE IT. SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS STILL WORK, AND THE SUPERNATURAL IS LIMITED TO A FRACTION OF ITS TRUE POWER. BUT IT REQUIRES A CONSTANT INFUSION OF DIVINE LIGHT TO MAINTAIN EVEN THIS LIMITED FUNCTIONALITY.”

“Can your reservoir of divine light run out?”

“YES. AT THE CURRENT RATE IT WILL RUN OUT IN ABOUT FIFTY YEARS. EACH GREAT MIRACLE I PERFORM BEYOND THE RANGE OF MY ORDINARY POWER DEPLETES IT FURTHER. THAMIEL HOPED I WOULD CALL UPON THE DIVINE LIGHT TO KILL HIM. THEN HE WOULD RECOALESCE A FEW WEEKS OR MONTHS LATER UNHARMED. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO KILL HIM PERMANENTLY. HE IS A FACET OF GOD. AND EVERY TIME I KILL HIM TEMPORARILY, IT REQUIRES SO MUCH DIVINE LIGHT THAT IT TAKES YEARS OFF THE LIFESPAN OF THE UNIVERSE. THIS IS HIS PLAN. TO TAUNT ME AND TRICK ME INTO EXPENDING MY RESOURCES AND HASTEN THE COLLAPSE OF THE CELESTIAL MACHINERY.”

“What happens when it collapses?”

“HUMAN TECHNOLOGY CEASES TO WORK. THAMIEL BECOMES INVINCIBLE. THE WORLD ENDS.”

“Oh. So how do we prevent that?”

“I AM NOT SURE THAT WE DO.”

“Can’t you repair the machine? Or get it to run without divine light? Or find another way to replenish divine light? Or something?”

“NO. I HAVE SPENT AEONS OF SUBJECTIVE TIME CONSIDERING THESE POSSIBILITIES. THEY ARE IMPOSSIBLE. THE SKY IS CRACKED. THE STRUCTURE OF THE HIGHER WORLDS IS MADE ILLEGIBLE. THE MACHINE CANNOT BE FULLY REPAIRED. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE. EVEN IF I TRIED, NOW THAT THAMIEL UNDERSTANDS ITS PURPOSE HE WOULD CERTAINLY STOP ME.”

“So kill him with the divine light, then do it before he recoalesces.”

“HE IS THE LEFT HAND OF GOD. THERE ARE MANY THINGS HE CAN DO WITHOUT A CORPOREAL BODY.”

“Why? Why does God have a screwy left hand that wants to destroy everything?”

“YOU SHOULD READ ISAAC LURIA.”

“I’ve read Isaac Luria. So what? Why did God allow the vessels to shatter in the first place?”

“THAT IS VERY COMPLICATED.”

“So what? So you’re just going to hang around for fifty years until you run out of charge, your machine goes dead, and Thamiel takes over the universe?”

“MAYBE THE COMET KING WILL COME UP WITH SOMETHING BEFORE THEN.”

“That’s your plan?”

“IT IS A GOOD PLAN.”

Sohu nodded. “Okay. Fair. Waiting for him to come in and solve every problem has always worked in the past. But...*still*! What about you? Shouldn’t you...can’t you at least try to help?”

“I RUN CONTINENTAL DRIFT, AND GUIDE THE BUTTERFLY MIGRATION, AND KEEP ICEBERGS IN THE RIGHT PLACE, AND PREVENT PEOPLE FROM BOILING GOATS IN THEIR MOTHERS’ MILK. IT IS DIFFICULT AND I AM GOOD AT IT AND IT ALLOWS THE WORLD TO ENDURE THAT MUCH LONGER. I WILL NOT BEAT MYSELF UP OVER FAILING TO DO THE IMPOSSIBLE.”

“Matthew 19:26. With God, all things are possible.”

“UM.”

“What? Out with it.”

“I HAVE BEEN IN THIS UNIVERSE SIX THOUSAND YEARS. I HAVE FOUGHT THE DEVIL. I HAVE REWRITTEN THE LAWS OF REALITY. I HAVE DONE MANY INTERESTING THINGS. UM.”

“What?”

“AND I HAVE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING TO CONVINCE ME THAT GOD PLAYS AN ACTIVE PART IN THE UNIVERSE. HIS ROLE SEEMS TO BE ENTIRELY ONTOLOGICAL.”

“You can’t be a deist! You’re an archangel!”

“I AM NOT A VERY GOOD ARCHANGEL.”

“What about San Francisco?”

“GOD CAN HAVE A RIGHT HAND AS WELL AS A LEFT HAND. I SEE NO EVIDENCE THAT EITHER IS CONTROLLED BY ANY HEAD.”

“What about Metatron?”

“A VOICE OF GOD WHO NEVER TALKS. A PERFECT SYMBOL.”

“You won against Thamiel! That was a miracle! Don’t you think that God was involved in that?”

“UM. THE SEPHIROT WERE INVOLVED. THOSE ARE SORT OF A PART OF GOD. BUT THEY WERE NOT IN A VERY ACTIVE ROLE. THEY MOSTLY JUST SAT THERE AS I REWROTE THEM.”

“You know what I mean!”

“GOD CREATED ADAM KADMON, THE FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE THAT BINDS EVERYTHING TOGETHER. HE BREATHED FIRE INTO THE STRUCTURE AND MADE IT EXIST AND MADE ALL THINGS HAPPEN ACCORDING TO ITS PLAN. BUT THAT PLAN DOES NOT FOLLOW OUR RULES OR OUR HOPES. WHEN A HUMAN MACHINE BREAKS – WHEN A PLANE’S ENGINES STOP WORKING, AND IT FALLS FROM THE AIR – GOD DOES NOT REACH DOWN AND SAVE IT. THE STRUCTURE CONTINUES TO ITS PREORDAINED CONCLUSION. I SEE NO REASON TO BELIEVE A FAILURE OF MY OWN MACHINE WILL BE ANY DIFFERENT. IT WILL MERELY BE MORE FINAL.”

“Well, I think you’re wrong. Father believes God will save us.”

“HE BELIEVES THAT *HE* WILL SAVE US, AND PLANS TO CREDIT GOD. THERE IS A DIFFERENCE.”

“I believe God will save us! Think about how fantastically unlikely all of this is – the universe, your machinery, everything Father’s doing. You think it’s all a coincidence?”

“YES.”

“Book of Lamentations, 3:24. ‘The Lord is my portion, therefore I will place my hope in Him.’”

“I DO NOT THINK THAT WORKED VERY WELL, BASED ON WHAT THEY TITLED THEIR BOOK.”

Sohu snorted. “All right then. You’re going to teach me kabbalah. But I’m going to teach you to have faith. How do to knock-knock jokes properly and how to have faith. That’s what I’m going to teach you.”

“I AM SORRY. I AM NOT VERY GOOD AT FAITH FOR AN ARCHANGEL.”

Sohu said nothing. Uriel turned away and went back to running the universe.

Interlude 1: Man On The Sphere

Let's play Twister, let's play Risk
See you in Heaven if you make the list
— R.E.M., [Man On The Sphere](#)

I believe that this nation should commit itself to
achieving the goal, until we've landed on the moon, of
preventing this decade from ending
— [@vesselofspirit](#)

I.

They say that March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb. March 1969 had been more like one of those Biblical angels with four lion heads and four lamb heads and a couple dragon heads for good measure, all spinning within a gigantic flaming wheel, and if you met its gaze for too long then you died.

Entire weeks repeated themselves, or skipped around, or moved backwards. There was a week when the weather stopped, and it was an even twenty-two degrees Celsius across the entire planet. The heavens turned gray and were replaced by a message saying “sky.smh not found, please repent transgressions and try again”. All animal cries were replaced by discordant buzzing sounds.

Nobody knew how long it lasted. Probably had been different lengths of time for each person, each shunted on their own separate timelines into weird calendrical eddies and whorls. Some people who had started off middle-aged

ended the month with gray hair and soft, infinitely sorrowful voices. Others seemed to have grown younger. Most people looked about the same, but you could tell things had happened they didn't want to talk about, days repeated dozens of times or weeks that happened backwards, or moments when timelessness had briefly encroached on time and for an infinitely long moment they had touched Eternity.

The bizarre communiques from the archangel Uriel had become an accepted feature of daily life. Sometimes they would appear in the sky, or writ in blood on the surface of the moon, or spoken in unexpected phone calls to world leaders with unlisted numbers, or spotted on vegetables that had grown to enormous size. The news was rarely good.

“DUE TO SYSTEM RESOURCES SHORTAGES, THE ISLAND OF TAIWAN HAS BEEN CANCELLED. WE APOLOGIZE FOR THE INCONVENIENCE.”

“THE NUMBER EIGHT WILL BE DOWN FROM ONE AM TO SIX AM TOMORROW MORNING FOR EMERGENCY REPAIRS. PLEASE DO NOT PERFORM ANY CALCULATIONS THAT REQUIRE THE NUMBER EIGHT DURING THAT TIME. ALSO, PLEASE TURN ALL CLOCK FACES AWAY FROM YOU, ESPECIALLY IF THEY INCLUDE THE NUMBER EIGHT. THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION. AS COMPENSATION FOR YOUR TROUBLES, WE HAVE CURED ALL VALVULAR HEART DISEASE.”

“HUMANS NOW HAVE ONLY ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY BONES. WE EXPECT THE NEW BONES TO BE UP TO 50% MORE EFFICIENT AND TO PERFORM AT THE SAME HIGH STANDARDS AS THE OLD TWO HUNDRED SIX BONE SYSTEM.

THE PREVALENCE OF SKELETAL DISEASES WILL NOT CHANGE. HOWEVER, DIFFERENT PEOPLE WILL HAVE THEM. IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE A NEW SKELETAL DISEASE, PLEASE CONSULT YOUR DOCTOR.”

“PLEASE AVOID THE AREA WHERE TAIWAN USED TO BE. IN ADDITION, PLEASE AVOID AREAS CLOSE TO WHERE TAIWAN USED TO BE, IN PARTICULAR, THE EAST CHINA SEA, THE SOUTH CHINA SEA, THE PHILIPPINE SEA, JAPAN, KOREA, AND ALL PARTS OF CHINA WITHIN ONE THOUSAND MILES OF A COAST. THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION.”

“ATTENTION. DUE TO A SCALE BACK IN COVERAGE, THE MORAL ARC OF THE UNIVERSE NO LONGER BENDS TOWARD JUSTICE. WE APOLOGIZE FOR THE INCONVENIENCE.”

Seventy-one days after the chaos had begun, a message from Uriel appeared in raised welts on the skin of all of the livestock in the world:

“THE FOLLOWING HAVE BEEN CANCELLED AS PART OF THE RECENT CUTBACKS: THE LAST WEEK IN SEPTEMBER. THE EMOTION ENNUI. THE GALL BLADDER. ALL NUMBERS BETWEEN 405,668,922 AND 407,215,810. JAZZ. THE MATTERHORN. ALL DRAVIDIAN LANGUAGES EXCEPT TELUGU. THE CRESCENT MOON. WHITE WINE. AMETHYST. ALL VARIETIES OF COUSIN BEYOND THE FIRST. THE SYSTEM WILL REGAIN TEMPORARY STABILITY AFTER THE CURRENT ROUND OF CHANGES. THANK YOU FOR BEARING WITH US DURING THIS DIFFICULT TIME.”

The next day was April 1. The Long March was finally over.

Things weren't back to normal. Not by a long shot. Large areas had apparently been depopulated, whether by direct action of the Archangel or by failure of their communities to survive the tribulations, no one knew. A good amount of technological infrastructure had just plain stopped working, apparently no longer supported by the leaner, less flashy laws of physics Uriel had been forced to scale down to. The Russians were saying awful things, demons pouring forth from the ground, Yakutsk the site of a great massacre, fires that could be seen for hundreds of miles. The cracks in the sky had grown noticeably wider.

But for the first time, people were starting to feel some optimism, like when you're starting to come back from a really bad drug trip and the walls are still covered in snakes, but they're *smaller* snakes now, and your skin is still bubbling but it's bubbling *less* and your grip on the real world is a little better and you start to wonder what's for breakfast.

II.

Richard Nixon, who had told Kissinger about thirty times that this was *not* what he had signed up for, realized that people needed a goal, something to shake them back into public consciousness, make them realize that America was still on its feet and the government was still in control. So he appeared on national television – which was working during even-numbered hours only, the eggheads hadn't quite figured out why that was, but they assured him it would be fixable – and declared that the country would “commit itself to achieving the goal, before this year is out, of landing a man on the giant crystal sphere surrounding the world, and

returning him safely to Earth.”

It had been a politically savvy move. NASA had a lunar module all ready to go and sitting in a warehouse. After what had happened *last* time they’d tried to get to the moon, the newly discovered crystal sphere presented an attractive alternative target. But it wasn’t just political grandstanding. Breaking the crystal sphere had caused all these problems in the first place. If they could figure out what it was and why it was there, maybe they could fix it. And if there was an entity beyond the crystal sphere – his advisors had warned him against using the G word, sounded too unscientific – then maybe *it* would help, if asked nicely.

NASA didn’t want to go in blind. First in May, then June, they launched manned missions to investigate the extent and composition of the sphere. As far as they could tell, it was about 250,000 miles in radius, centered on the Earth, and made of perfect flawless crystal except in the vicinity of the cracks. The eidolons of stars and planets seemed to be projected on it in some kind of holographic manner that gave them the illusion of depth.

In early June, NASA told Nixon it had reached the limit of what it could determine about the sphere from remote observation.

On July 16, 1969, President Nixon travelled to Cape Canaveral, where he met personally with three astronauts whom NASA had assured him were the best of the best. He wished them godspeed, and told them that the hopes of American people and the people of the whole world were fixed on them.

Later that afternoon, Apollo 11 took off.

Four days and 250,000 miles later, the lunar module *Eagle* detached from its mother ship. Inside were Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, who had accepted the task of landing on the crystal sphere and taking mankind's first steps upon another heavenly body. Such as it was.

The descent proved more treacherous than expected, and the two came perilously close to running out of fuel for the thrusters and crashing into the crystal at enormous velocity, but with twenty five seconds to spare they touched down at the chosen landing site right on the edge of one of the humongous cracks.

"Tranquility base here," said Armstrong. "The Eagle has landed."

There had been a brief debate in the Nixon White House over whether or not it was tasteful to plant the American flag on the giant crystal sphere surrounding the world. The argument against was that the sphere appeared to be some sort of celestial mechanism created directly by God that either separated Earth from Heaven or in some complicated sense was *itself* Heaven, and that for a human nation to claim Heaven might be literally the most hubris it was even conceptually possible to display. The argument in favor of planting the flag was, *America*.

Neil Armstrong stepped onto the crystal sphere and planted the flag.

"That's one small step for a man," he said "and one giant

leap for mankind.”

The formalities being over, it was time to get down to business.

Armstrong and Aldrin hauled from their lunar module a great spool of cable, which they wheeled across the surprisingly smooth crystal a few dozen meters to the edge of the crack. Armstrong stared down.

“Houston, I’m looking into the crack,” he relayed over his radio. “It’s very bright, maybe not as bright as the sun but close. I can’t see anything down there. The edge of the cliff is almost perfectly vertical. It seems a couple hundred meters wide – I can just barely see the other side, looks about the same. There’s no terrain here, no irregularity. Houston, I think the light source might be only a couple of meters down. It’s like a skin. I...I think we can reach the light with what we’ve got.”

There followed a short argument over which of the two had to actually climb down into the thing. Aldrin won the argument with his very reasonable position that if Armstrong loved being first to do things so much, maybe he should show the same kind of initiative when it was something important and scary instead of just a photo op. So Commander Neil Armstrong attached the cable to his spacesuit, took a climbing hook in both hands, and slowly began to descend into the crack, while Aldrin peered down from above.

“Houston, I’m in the crack. I’m down about three meters now, out of a hundred meters of cable. The light is

noticeably closer. I don't think it's far off. I think it's an object, or a barrier, or a transition or something."

"Houston, the light source is definitely getting closer. I think it's only another couple of meters down."

"Roger that, Commander Armstrong. Colonel Aldrin, is everything all right from your perspective?"

"Houston, cable is fixed in place. Commander Armstrong is still within visual range."

"Roger that, Colonel Aldrin."

"Houston, I'm going to touch the light source with my climbing hook and see if anything happens."

"Proceed as you see fit, Commander."

"The hook passes through the light source. I've pulled it back and it is still intact. It seems to be like a skin or a transition zone of some sort, like I said before."

"Roger that, Commander Armstrong."

"I'm going to touch the light source now...I don't feel anything. My finger passes right through."

"Colonel Aldrin, from where you are standing, any change in the light source?"

"No, Houston. I can see Commander Armstrong. There's no disturbance or change. The light source is still uniform throughout the crack."

“Houston, I’m going to climb into the light source.”

“Proceed as you see fit, Commander.”

...

“Ground control to Commander Armstrong. Come in, Commander Armstrong.”

...

“Ground control to Colonel Aldrin. Come in, Colonel Aldrin.”

“Colonel Aldrin here, Houston. Commander Armstrong has disappeared below the light barrier.”

“Ground control to Commander Armstrong. COME IN, COMMANDER ARMSTRONG.”

...

“He’s not answering. Houston, I’m going to pull up the cable, bring him back.”

“Do that immediately, Colonel.”

...

...

“Houston, the end of the cable is no longer attached to Commander Armstrong.”

“Fuck.”

"I never should have let him...I'm going down after him."

"No, Colonel Aldrin, this is Ground Control. You are ordered to collect the cable and leave the crack. I repeat, collect the cable and leave the crack."

"Wait, what if I lower the cable back down to him, maybe if he's down there he can grab on to..."

"Colonel Aldrin, I repeat, your direct order is to collect the cable and leave the crack."

"Houston, this is Commander Armstrong."

"COMMANDER ARMSTRONG! COME IN, COMMANDER ARMSTRONG! IS SOMETHING WRONG?"

"No, Houston. Nothing is wrong."

"All right, we're going to get Colonel Aldrin to lower down the cable for you and..."

"No, Houston. Literally. Nothing is wrong. *Nothing.*"

"Commander Armstrong, is everything okay?"

"Exactly, Houston. Everything is okay. Nothing is wrong. Nothing has ever been wrong, anywhere. The cosmos is like a flawless jewel, each of whose facets is another flawless jewel, and so on to infinity. Except there is no jewel. It's all light. No, there isn't even light. From within Time you can't see any of it, but when you step outside into Eternity it's all so...full. It's so beautiful, Houston."

Holy, holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy..."

“Commander Armstrong!”

“Holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, hoooooly, hooooooly, hoooooooooly, hooooooooooly, hoooooooooooooly, hooooooooooooooly, hoooooooooooooooooly, hooooooooooooooooooly, hooooooooooooooooooly, hooooooooooooooooooly, hooooooooooooooooooly, hooooooooooooooooooly...”

“Houston, I’ve lowered the cable as far as it will go. It’s dangling about seventy meters into the light zone. I’m not getting any indication that Commander Armstrong is going to take it.”

“Roger that, Colonel Aldrin. Please return to the ship. Do you read me, Colonel Aldrin?”

“Hoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooonly”

“Loud and clear, Houston.”

"oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo"

III.

When I was ten years old, I got my first ham radio.

A ham radio is a treasure when you are ten. I listened to boats off the coast, heard the reports from the ranger stations in the nearby forests, even picked up the chatter between policemen patrolling the local streets. One day I turned to a new frequency, and I heard a strange sound, a

single pure note unlike any I had ever heard before.

The sound was: “ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo”

I brought the radio to my uncle, and I asked him what station that was, and he told me it was the frequency NASA used for its communications, once upon a time. Then a man had taken a radio tuned to that band into a crack in the sky, and it had started broadcasting with such power that it drowned out all the other radio noise and the whole frequency had to be abandoned.

But what was that unearthly note?

My uncle told me it was Neil Armstrong, who had passed beyond time into Eternity, praising God forever.

End of Book 1

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Prologue

Chapter 1: Dark Satanic Mills

Interlude ⅈ: The Cracks In The Sky

Chapter 2: Arise To Spiritual Strife

Interlude ㄱ: The Code of the World

Chapter 3: On A Cloud I Saw A Child

Chapter 4: Tools Were Made And Born Were Hands

Chapter 5: Never Seek To Tell Thy Love

Interlude ㄴ: Cantors and Singers

Chapter 6: Till We Have Built Jerusalem

Chapter 7: The Perishing Vegetable Memory

Chapter 8: Laughing To Scorn Thy Laws And Terrors

Chapter 9: With Art Celestial

Chapter 10: Bring The Swift Arrows Of Light

Interlude ㄷ: N-Grammata

Chapter 11: Drive The Just Man Into Barren Climes

Interlude ㄸ: The Right Hand Of God

Chapter 12: Borne On Angels' Wings

Interlude ㄹ: There's A Hole In My Bucket

Chapter 13: The Image Of Eternal Death

Chapter 14: Cruelty Has A Human Heart

Chapter 15: O Where Shall I Hide My Face?

Chapter 16: If Perchance With Iron Power He Might
Avert His Own Despair

Interlude ㅍ: Man On The Sphere