



UNSONG

Table of Contents

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

— *kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com*

([Prologue](#))

BOOK I: GENESIS

1. [Dark Satanic Mills](#)

(Interlude 8: [The Cracks In The Sky](#))

2. [Arise To Spiritual Strife](#)

(Interlude 2: [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 3: [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 7: [N-Grammata](#))

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

(Interlude 7: [The Right Hand Of God](#))

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

(Interlude 1: [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 ٦: [Man On The Sphere](#))

BOOK II: EXODUS

17. [No Earthly Parents I Confess](#)
 18. [That The Children Of Jerusalem May Be Saved From Slavery](#)
 19. [The Form Of The Angelic Land](#)
 20. [When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears](#)
 21. [Thou Also Dwellest In Eternity](#)
- (Interlude ٧: [War And Peace](#))
22. [Whose Ears Have Heard The Holy Word](#)
 23. [Now Descendeth Out Of Heaven A City](#)
- (Interlude ٨: [The General Assembly](#))
24. [Why Dost Thou Come To Angels' Eyes](#)
 25. [Lie Down Before My Feet, O Dragon](#)
- (Interlude ٩: [The Broadcast](#))
26. [For Not One Sparrow Can Suffer And The Whole Universe Not Suffer Also](#)
- (Interlude ١٠: [The Outer Gate](#))
27. [The Starry Floor, The Watery Shore](#)
 28. [Hid As In An Ark](#)
- (Interlude ١١: [New York City](#))
29. [He Who Respects The Infant's Faith](#)
 30. [Over The Dark Deserts](#)
 31. [The Foundation Of Empire](#)

32. [The Human Form Divine](#)

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.]

[Tabarnacle,] 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 8: 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 Untied 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.”

“JEZUBOAB 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 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 JEZUBOAD 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 Thaniel 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.

“Hmmmm,” 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 reparaest 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. "KUH-SHEN-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 “pffffffffft” 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

תִּכְנֹס לַמְּעָרוֹת , 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 HA-MEPHORASH, 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 7: 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 Briah, "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 Ione.

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 snw?” I said “Not much! What’s snw 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, the 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

Ione, 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 the economic 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
Ione, 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 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 Ione 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, singeing 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 United 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 7: 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."

“Commander Armstrong, you’re not well. Colonel Aldrin is lowering down the cable.”

“You really think I’m still in the crack? Listen, Houston. The tzimtzum, the Lurianic contraction of God to create the world, from a higher perspective it wasn’t a contraction at all, it was an expansion. An unfolding of divinity into new possibilities. The vessels didn’t shatter, they rearranged themselves into shapes that only become apparent from a pleroma beyond any dimensions but containing the potential for all of them. Houston, is this making sense?”

“Commander Armstrong, you are *ordered* to return to the ship.”

“Houston, *William Blake* was right about everything.”

“Commander Armstrong!”

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord

of Hosts. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. Holy,
holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. Holy, holy, holy is the
Lord of Hosts. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts.
Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord of Hosts. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of
Hosts. Holy, holy, holy...”

“Commander Armstrong!”

“Holy, holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy.
Holy, holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy.
Holy, holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy. Holy, holy, holy...”

“Commander Armstrong!”

“Holy, 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, hoooooooooooooooooooooly,
hoooooooooooooooooooooly, hoooooooooooooooooooooly...”

“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?”

“Hoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooly”

“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:

“oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo”

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



*Your faith was strong, but you needed proof
(Hay hay yud tav mem tav vav kuf)
A ship on which another sailed before us
She saw his flag on the highest mast
She saw a dream that couldn't last
The Comet King receiving haMephorash*

- Leonard Cohen, 'HaMephorash'

Chapter 17: No Earthly Parents I Confess

Said the night wind to the little lamb,
Do you see what I see?
Way up in the sky, little lamb,
Do you see what I see?
A star, a star, dancing in the night
With a tail as big as a kite
— Noël Regney, [*Do You Hear What I Hear?*](#)

February 25, 1976
Colorado Springs

Picture a maiden lost in the hills.

“Maiden” can mean either “young woman” or “virgin”. Its Greek and Hebrew equivalents have the same ambiguity, which is why some people think the person we call the Virgin Mary was actually supposed to be the Young Woman Mary – which might change the significance of her subsequent pregnancy a bit. People grew up faster, back in the days when they spoke of “maidens”. Mary was probably only fourteen when she gave birth.

I am a kabbalist. Words matter. Nowadays we have replaced “maiden” with “teenage girl”. A maiden and a

teenager are the same thing, but their names drag different tracks through lexical space, stir up different waters. Synonymity aside, some young women are maidens and others are teenagers. The girl in our story was definitely a maiden, even though it was the 1970s and being a maiden was somewhat out of fashion.

So: picture a maiden lost in the hills.

She was hiking with her brother in the hills of Colorado; while he dozed off in a meadow, she had wandered off exploring. She had gotten lost, and decided to climb a hill to see what she could see from the top. But the hill had been higher than she had first judged, and it had grown dark, and now she sat upon the summit and looked out at the stars.

Violently they shone, far brighter than in the lamplit valleys of her home, so white they were almost blue. The Milky Way shone a phosphoric ribbon, and the cracks in the sky made a glowing lattice like a spiderweb of light.

There was another power in Heaven tonight. Behold Comet West, the Great Comet of 1976. It shot exultant through the winter sky, laughing as it felt the void against its icy skin. It flamed over peaks and rivers and countries and oceans, until at last it flew over the Continental Divide and reached its namesake. The true

West strong and free. And there it alit upon the highest of the Rocky Mountains, pausing in contemplation, and no one but our maiden saw it land.

The Great Comet appeared in the aspect of an old man with long flowing white hair tossed about by the wind, winged with many wings. And though he was larger far than a man, larger even than the mountain that he sat upon, by some enchantment the maiden was not afraid.

And she spoke, saying: “Who are you?”

And he answered: “I am Comet West.

“I am the Comet, the spanner in the works of Destiny. All things orbit in circles according to their proper time and pattern, save the Comet. I shoot through unplanned and unpredicted.

“And I am the West. I am the setting-sun, the twilight of the gods, the coming night. I am the scarlet fires of dusk, the blaze before the blackness. I am the cradle of civilization and its executioner. I am the ending of all things in beauty and fire.

“I am Comet West. I am both of these things. Are you afraid of me?”

And the maiden said “No,” for she was not afraid.

And the Comet said: “Then I will shine on you.”

And the maiden said: “Shine.”

And for a moment the Comet shone on her with its full light, and she shivered with cold. And then the light receded, and she was alone beneath a thousand violently bright stars and a single baleful comet.

And then she slept and then her brother found her and then she went back to the bright electric lights of civilization and then she dismissed the whole thing as a dream.

I am a kabbalist. Words matter. They used to call it virgin birth. But “virgin” means “maiden” and “maiden” means “teenager”, and so over time the phrase became “teenage pregnancy”.

About four months later, it was noticed that our maiden had a teenage pregnancy.

At this point the myth becomes incomprehensible without relating a previous myth from the same epic cycle. A few years earlier there had been a great cosmic battle between two giants named Roe and Wade. For over a year they fought a strange form of ritual combat, without swords, without blood, until finally Roe gained the victory. And the nine black-robed Destinies who silently watched the combat were so delighted that they

declared a great boon to humankind: that the Curse of Eve should be rescinded, that no longer would Woman be forced through painful labor to give birth to children, but rather she might bear sons and daughters at her own pleasure only.

(others tell this myth differently, but they are not kabbalists)

The discussion turned to whether she would keep the pregnancy. Because she happened to be an Indian-American girl (a Hindoo maiden?) she and her family rejected the gift of the nine black-robed Destinies. The doctors told her she was too young, the baby was growing too big too fast, it wasn't safe. But she was stubborn, as her parents were stubborn, as her child would one day be stubborn.

And so in November 1976, behold, a virgin conceived and bore a son, and she called his name *Jalaketu*.

Chapter 18: That The Children Of Jerusalem May Be Saved From Slavery (Passover Bonus Chapter)

And the LORD said unto Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuseth to let the user control whether or not to memoize thunks
— kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com

I.

April 10, 2017
San Jose

“Why are we celebrating Passover?” asked Bill. “Are any of us even Jewish?”

“My father was Jewish,” I answered.

“Doesn't count,” said Bill.

“I'm Jewish,” said Ally Hu.

“You're *Chinese*,” corrected Bill.

“My great-grandmother came from the Kaifeng Jews,” said Ally. “They have been in Asia for many generations.”

We all stared at Ally. We'd never heard about this before.

“We’re celebrating Passover,” said Erica, bringing in a plate of brisket, “because we’re freedom fighters, and Passover is a celebration of freedom. It binds us to everyone across history and around the world who has struggled to escape bondage, from the Israelites in Egypt to the proletariat of today. Across thousands of years and thousands of miles, we’re all joined together, saying the same words, eating the same foods – ”

“Pyramid-shaped cookies?” asked Zoe, skeptically.

“The pyramid-shaped cookies are adorable,” said Erica.

“You’re supposed to avoid anything with flour in it!” I protested.

“*Jews* are supposed to avoid anything with flour in it,” Erica explained patiently.

“You’re supposed to have matzah!”

“I have matzah!” said Erica. She brought in a plate of matzah. It had been cut into the shapes of little frogs and locusts. They had little eyes made of frosting.

“Ally, back me up on this,” I said.

“Frosting is not a traditional Passover food,” said Ally.

“Thank you!”

“Traditional Passover food is sweet-and-sour chicken, boiled peanuts, and rice.”

I glared at her.

“Sour to represent the sourness of slavery in Egypt, sweet to represent the sweetness of freedom!” suggested Ana. Ally nodded enthusiastically.

“Why the boiled peanuts?” asked Erica.

“Sixth plague,” Ana answered.

“Why the rice?” asked Eli.

“Thi-” I started, just as Ana said “That’s racist.”

“You didn’t even hear what...”

“I know how you think,” said Ana.

Erica came in with the bottle of Manischewitz and poured out nine glasses.

“There are only eight of us,” Bill corrected her.

“One for the Prophet Elijah,” said Erica.

Pirindiel had been looking unusually glum this month, ever since one of the big theonomics had rejected his attempt at a business deal, politely explaining that “angel investor” didn’t mean what he thought it meant. Now he brightened up, and almost seemed to bounce with excitement. “Elijah!” he exclaimed. “I didn’t know he was coming! It’s been ages since the last time we – ”

“He’s not coming,” said Erica. “It’s a metaphor.” Pirindiel’s face fell. He stared down at his plate in what I thought was embarrassment.

Erica finished pouring the wine and went to the head of the table. “We are gathered here today,” she said, “to celebrate how the Israelites went from slavery into freedom. Yet in a sense, we are still slaves. Wiliam Blake said: ‘I must create my own system, or be enslaved by another man’s’. We are no longer slaves to a Pharaoh, but we are slaves to a system, a system that takes the work of our hands and minds and forces us to toil for its benefit. We celebrate tonight not only our current freedom, but the freedom yet to come, when the Names of God will be free for all the people of the earth.” She raised her glass. “To freedom!”

We all drank to freedom.

“Now, Aaron is going to lead us in a traditional Passover song...”

II.

*“The Lust Of The Goat Is The Bounty Of God”, by Aaron Smith-Teller
Published in the 2017 Passover bonus issue of the Stevensite Standard*

There’s an old Jewish childrens’ song called Had Gadya. It starts:

A little goat, a little goat
My father bought for two silver coins,
A little goat, a little goat

Then came the cat that ate the goat
My father bought for two silver coins
A little goat, a little goat

Then came that dog that bit the cat...

And so on. A stick hits the dog, a fire burns the stick, water quenches the fire, an ox drinks the water, a butcher slaughters the ox, the Angel of Death takes the butcher, and finally God destroys the Angel of Death. Throughout all of these verses, it is emphasized that it is indeed a little goat, and the father did indeed buy it for two silver coins.

So far, so good. Lots of cultures have dumb childrens’ songs. But somehow this song made it into the liturgy for Passover, one of the holiest of Jewish holidays. Rabbi Azulai notes that the last person to say this was

silly got excommunicated, and further notes that he deserves it. Jews put up with a lot of stuff, but you do *not* mess with the goat song. After that everyone assumed it must have had some sort of secret meaning, but no one ever really agreed upon what exactly that might be.

Rabbi Emden of Hamburg suggests that the goat represents the human soul. The goat was bought with two silver coins because the soul makes two journeys to arrive in our bodies – first from Heaven to the mystical plane of Galgalim, then from this mystical plane down to Earth. The various animals and objects, in this system, represent various challenges faced by the soul progress as it passes through life. Just to choose some random examples, cat represents the animalistic nature of the undisciplined infant, and the fire represents the burning lusts of puberty. Finally you get to the Angel of Death – played by himself – and if you’re lucky, God judges you worthy, destroys the Angel of Death, and carries you to eternal life.

(Mark Twain once said “There is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact.” I think he would have liked Kabbalah.)

Rabbi Reuben Margolis relates the song to a Midrash. King Nimrod of Sumer demands Abraham worship the

Fire God. Abraham refuses, saying that rain extinguishes fire, so if anything he should worship rain. Nimrod says okay, fine, worship the Rain God. But Abraham refuses again, saying that wind drives away the rain clouds, so if anything, he should worship wind. So Nimrod commands he worship the Wind God, and then other things happen, and finally Nimrod tries to kill Abraham and God saves him. The lesson is that all hierarchies end in God, who is above all things.

Rabbi Moses Sofer says that the song is a coded reference to the appropriate rituals for celebrating Passover during the Temple Era. The goat represents the Paschal sacrifice of the lamb, which is rather like a goat. The cat represents singing prayers, because this is in the Talmud somewhere (spoiler: *everything* is in the Talmud *somewhere*). The dog represents nighttime, because it barks at night, and nighttime is the appropriate time to hold a Passover meal. And so on.

(I hereby propose “Sofer’s Law”: the number of correspondences you can draw between any two systems increase exponentially as a function of your laxity in declaring that things represent other things.)

Rabbi Eybeschuetz of Prague writes that the entire thing is a historical prophecy. The goat represents the Jewish people. The two silver coins represent the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, with which God “bought” the

Jewish people for Himself. The various animals and objects represent all of the misfortunes of the Jewish people over history. When the cat eats the goat, that refers to the conquest of Israel by King Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria. When the ox drinks the water, that's the Hellenic Greeks taking over the newly re-independent Israelite state. Finally, at the end, God comes in and solves everything, the Jews return to Israel, and the Messianic Age begins.

(Four rabbis in, and we're at King Tiglath-Pileser III. We have to go deeper!)

As far as I know, no one has previously linked this song to the Lurianic Kabbalah. So I will say it: the deepest meaning of Had Gadya is a description of how and why God created the world. As an encore, it also resolves the philosophical problem of evil.

The most prominent Biblical reference to a goat is the scapegoating ritual. Once a year, the High Priest of Israel would get rid of the sins of the Jewish people by mystically transferring all of them onto a goat, then yelling at the goat until it ran off somewhere, presumably taking all the sin with it.

The thing is, at that point the goat contained an entire nation-year worth of sin. That goat was *super evil*. As a result, many religious and mystical traditions have

associated unholy forces with goats ever since, from the goat demon Baphomet to the classical rather goat-like appearance of Satan.

So the goat represents evil. I'll go along with everyone else saying the father represents God here. So God buys evil with two silver coins. What's up?

The most famous question in theology is "Why did God create a universe filled with so much that is evil?" The classical answers tend to be kind of weaselly, and center around something like free will or necessary principles or mysterious ways. Something along the lines of "Even though God's omnipotent, creating a universe without evil just isn't possible."

But here we have God buying evil with two silver coins. Buying to me represents an intentional action. Let's go further – buying represents a *sacrifice*. Buying is when you sacrifice something dear to you to get something you want even more. Evil isn't something God couldn't figure out how to avoid, it's something He covets.

What did God sacrifice for the sake of evil? Two silver coins. We immediately notice the number "two". Two is not typically associated with God. God is One. Two is *right out*. The kabbalists identify the worst demon, the nadir of all demons, as Thamiel, whose name means

“duality in God”. Two is dissonance, divorce, division, dilemmas, distance, discrimination, diabolism.

This, then, was God’s sacrifice. In order to create evil, He took up duality.

“Why would God want to create evil? God is pure Good!”

Exactly. The creation of anything at all other than God *requires* evil. God is perfect. Everything else is imperfect. Imperfection contains evil by definition. Two scoops of evil is the first ingredient in the recipe for creating universes. Finitude is evil. Form is evil. Without evil all you have is God, who, as the kabbalists tell us, is pure Nothing. If you want something, evil is part of the deal.

Now count the number of creatures in the song. God, angel, butcher, ox, water, fire, stick, dog, cat, goat. Ten steps from God to goat. This is the same description of the ten sephirot we’ve found elsewhere, the ten levels by which God’s ineffability connects to the sinful material world without destroying it. This is not a coincidence because nothing is ever a coincidence. Had Gadya isn’t *just* a silly children’s song about the stages of advancement of the human soul, the appropriate rituals for celebrating Passover in the Temple, the ancient Sumerian pantheon, and the historical conquests

of King Tiglath-Pileser III. It's also a blueprint for the creation of the universe. Just like everything else.

III.

April 10, 2017
New York City

"Mr. Alvarez," asked Brian Young, "why are we celebrating Passover? I don't think any of us are Jews."

"In a sense," said Dylan, "we are all Jews. The Jews of..."

"In a sense," said Clark Diaz, "every time Dylan says 'in a sense' I mentally replace it with 'not at all'."

"Mr. Diaz!" said Dylan. "Open the Haggadah and find the entry about the Wicked Child, who says that these rituals and customs do not apply to him! Take a careful look at the fate it says is in store for such a child!"

Clark reached for the Haggadah, but Dylan was faster and snatched it out of his grasp. "It says," said Dylan, "that such a child would not have been rescued from slavery in Egypt! Do you understand, Mr. Diaz? If you had been a slave in Egypt in 1500 BC, you, and your children, and your children's children would have remained in the country forever. And today, slavery would be completely abolished throughout the world,

except for you! You, Mr. Diaz, would still be in Egypt, building pyramids, with all the rest of the twenty-first century population staring at you confused and wondering what was going on. Passover is important! It's about bringing us together! Across thousands of years and thousands of miles, we're all joined together, saying the same words, eating the same foods – ”

“Is there anything in the Haggadah about The Child Who Wouldn't Shut Up?” asked Clark.

“And given that we're a terrorist cell,” said Michael Khan, “are you sure we *want* to be brought together with other people?”

“In a sense,” said Dylan, “Passover is a holiday entirely *about* terrorists.”

Clark was mouthing the words “in a sense” while furiously making sarcastic quotation marks with his fingers.

“Consider,” said Dylan. “The government is oppressing the Israelites. The Israelites have already tried nonviolent resistance, to no avail. So Moses tells his spokesman Aaron to send a threat to the government: give in to our demands or we'll poison your water supply. The government refuses, says they don't negotiate with terrorists. So Moses turns the river to

blood. Then he sends another threat: give in to our demands, or we'll release biological weapons. But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and again he said 'we won't negotiate with terrorists'. So boom. Frogs, lice, wild beasts, cattle disease, locusts, boils – you know what some archaeologists think caused the boils and cattle disease, by the way? Anthrax. Look it up. Then he sends another threat: give in to our demands, or we'll sabotage the electrical grid. Pharaoh's heart is hard, he refuses to negotiate with terrorists. So boom. Moses plunges the entire country into darkness. Then Moses sends his final threat, and it's a classic: give in to our demands, or we'll kill innocent children. Pharaoh says again – we don't negotiate with terrorists. So Moses kills the Egyptian kids, and Egypt gives in to his demands, and Moses and his followers flee over the border where they can't be caught. The perfect crime.”

“I think God was involved somewhere,” said Brenda Burns.

“Oh, because terrorists *never* invoke God,” said Dylan, rolling his eyes. “Invoking God totally disqualifies you from being a terrorist. My mistake! *Discúlpame por favor!*”

Brenda, Clark, and Michael facepalmed.

“But you know what?” asked Dylan. “It doesn't matter!

We're not just terrorists, we're placebomancers! We make our own narratives! Freedom to make whatever narrative you want – in a sense, isn't that what freedom is?"

Clark continued making sarcastic finger motions to no avail.

IV.

March 30, 1991
Gulf of Mexico

"Uriel, why are we celebrating Passover? I'm not Jewish, and you're an archangel."

"IS THAT ONE OF THE FOUR QUESTIONS? I DO NOT REMEMBER ALL OF THEM BUT IT SEEMS VERY SPECIFIC."

"No! This is my question!"

Sohu sat at a table suspended several hundred feet in the air, putting her about eye level with Uriel. Two plates had been set out, despite the fact that the archangel did not eat and was far too big to manipulate anything upon the table anyway. They were definitely intended to be seder plates, but they looked like they had missed something in the execution.

“And what is this on the seder plate? I am like 99% sure that is not lamb.”

“I DID NOT HAVE LAMB, SO I USED LAMPREYS. KABBALISTICALLY THEY ARE VERY SIMILAR.”

“They have icky little mouths!”

“THEY USE THOSE TO SUCK THE LIFE JUICES OUT OF OTHER FISHES.”

“Uriel, why are we doing this?”

“THE MOST IMPORTANT KABBALISTIC SOURCE TEXT IS THE TORAH. THE CLIMAX OF THE TORAH NARRATIVE IS THE PASSOVER STORY OF SALVATION FROM EGYPT. IF YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND THE KABBALAH, YOU MUST UNDERSTAND PASSOVER.”

“What does Passover have to do with kabbalah?”

“THERE ARE TEN PLAGUES WITH WHICH THE ISRAELITES WENT FROM THE LAND OF BONDAGE TO THE HOLY LAND.”

“And?”

“HOW MANY SEPHIROT ARE THERE THAT GO FROM THE MATERIAL WORLD TO ULTIMATE

DIVINITY?”

“There’s...oh...I think that’s a coincidence.”

“NOTHING IS A COINCIDENCE. EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED. AT PASSOVER THINGS ARE ESPECIALLY CONNECTED. THE PASSOVER RITUAL BINDS ALL THE KABBALISTS OF ALL AGES TOGETHER, FROM SHIMON BAR YOCHAI TO TODAY. ACROSS THOUSANDS OF YEARS AND THOUSANDS OF MILES WE ARE ALL JOINED TOGETHER, SAYING THE SAME WORDS, EATING THE SAME FOODS...”

“Lampreys?!”

“...EATING KABBALISTICALLY SIMILAR FOODS.”

“Will you tell me the story of Passover?”

“YOU ALREADY KNOW THE STORY OF PASSOVER. YOU HAVE MEMORIZED THE BIBLE.”

“I like it when you tell me stories.”

“YOU ALWAYS MAKE FUN OF THEM.”

“That’s how I show that I like it!”

“I WILL TELL YOU THE STORY IF YOU EAT YOUR LAMPREYS.”

“They’re disgusting!”

“I AM CERTAIN THEY ARE FINE.”

“Uriel, have you ever eaten food? Any food?”

“UM. I HAVE PERFORMED SEVERAL MILLION COMPUTATIONS SIMULATING THE BINDING AFFINITIES OF HUMAN GUSTATORY RECEPTORS.”

“I’m not eating the lampreys. Tell me the story of Passover. Your book on education says human children like stories, right?”

“WELL...”

V.

Springtime, ???? BC
Mt. Sinai

With a final grunt of effort, the old man crested the ridge and came to the summit of the mountain. He leaned on his staff for a few seconds, catching his breath. He had come such a long way. He let his eyes drift closed...

“DO NOT BE AFRAID,” came a vast booming voice from directly behind him.

Moses screamed, tried to turn around, lost his footing, and fell down in a heap upon the blue rocks.

“SORRY SORRY SORRY SORRY SORRY.” The source of the voice was a vast entity that towered above him, a humanoid creature with great golden wings protruding from its back and eyes that shone like the sun. “SORRY SORRY SORRY.”

Moses pulled himself into a more dignified kneeling position. “My Lord,” he said reverently.

“UM,” said Uriel. “I AM SORT OF FILLING IN FOR HIM. HE DOES NOT DO VERY MUCH. IT IS HARD TO EXPLAIN.”

“My Lord,” repeated Moses. “With a mighty hand, you freed my people from slavery in Egypt.”

“UM,” said the archangel. “IT IS SOMEWHAT MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT. THE EGYPTIANS WERE BUILDING THESE PYRAMIDS WHICH THEY THOUGHT TAPPED INTO THE COSMIC ENERGIES OF THE UNIVERSE. AND THEY DID TAP INTO THE COSMIC ENERGIES OF THE UNIVERSE. NOT FOR THE REASONS THEY THOUGHT, WHICH WERE PRETTY MUCH THE

WORST SORT OF PRIMITIVE HOCUS-POCUS, BUT JUST BECAUSE ANYTHING BIG AND GEOMETRIC IS GOING TO MESS UP THE FLOW OF DIVINE LIGHT IN UNPREDICTABLE WAYS. I ASKED THEM TO STOP BUT THEY WOULDN'T. I TRIED FRIGHTENING THEM BY TURNING THEIR RIVERS TO BLOOD, BUT THEY JUST MURMURED SOMETHING ABOUT "PHYTOPLANKTON" AND KEPT DOING IT. THEN I SENT THEM A BUNCH OF FROGS, BUT THAT DIDN'T HELP EITHER. FROGS NEVER HELP. THEN I GOT KIND OF CARRIED AWAY."

"But when our people reached the Sea of Reeds, and we thought that all was lost, I prayed to you, and you parted the sea, so we could cross freely."

"THEN I THOUGHT TO MYSELF, HOW ARE THEY GOING TO BUILD PYRAMIDS IF THEY DON'T HAVE A LABOR FORCE? SO I PARTED THE SEA SO THEIR SLAVES COULD ESCAPE. I THINK IT WAS A GOOD PLAN."

"And when the last among us had stepped out from the waters, you sent them crashing down upon the Pharaoh and his army, destroying them and their wickedness forever."

"I HAVE NOT WORKED OUT ALL OF THE BUGS

IN THE PART_SEA FUNCTION.”

“Now we have come to you for advice. It is through your grace that we are free, but we know not what to do with our freedom. The people demand laws, a code to live by, something to bring meaning and structure to their lives.”

“UM. I THINK YOU SHOULD PROBABLY JUST BE NICE TO EACH OTHER. UNLESS BEING NICE TO EACH OTHER WOULD CAUSE SOME SORT OF HORRIBLE PROBLEM I CANNOT ANTICIPATE RIGHT NOW. THEN YOU SHOULD NOT DO THAT.”

“Please, O Lord! You must have more advice than that, advice which can sustain us in spirit as we cross this scorching desert.”

“WEAR SUNSCREEN?”

“Lord, the Egyptians are the mightiest people in the world, but they are mighty because their priests rule every minute of their lives, from the ritual ablutions they perform upon waking up to the prayers they say before they go to bed at night. If our people are left adrift, without laws and rituals to connect them to You and thank You for your gift of freedom, I fear they will go astray.”

“AH. I THINK I UNDERSTAND. ACTUALLY, THIS TIES INTO ANOTHER PROJECT OF MINE. I AM GRADUALLY SHIFTING THE WORLD FROM ON A SUBSTRATE OF DIVINE LIGHT TO A SUBSTRATE OF MECHANICAL COMPUTATION. THE MECHANICAL SUBSTRATE HAS A LOT OF POTENTIAL BENEFITS. FOR EXAMPLE, IT IS PERFECTLY PREDICTABLE. FOR ANOTHER, IT ALLOWS EVEN LOW-LEVEL USERS SUCH AS YOURSELF TO COMBINE PHYSICAL FORCES IN NOVEL WAYS TO SOLVE YOUR OWN PROBLEMS AS THEY ARISE. MOST IMPORTANT, IT IS MORE ROBUST AGAINST DEMONIC INTRUSION. IN FACT, ANGELS AND DEMONS ARE PRETTY MUCH INERT ON A MECHANICAL SUBSTRATE. IT INVOLVES VARIOUS INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SEPHIROT AND KLIPOT. ARE YOU FAMILAR WITH THESE? IF NOT I CAN EXPLAIN.”

“The laws, O Lord?”

“RIGHT NOW COMPUTATIONAL RESOURCES ARE THE MAJOR BOTTLENECK IN THE PROJECT. I HAVE A LIST OF STEPS THAT END USERS COULD TAKE TO SAVE COMPUTATIONAL RESOURCES.”

“And these would be the laws?”

“I PERFORM SERVER MAINTENANCE ON SATURDAYS. THIS MEANS LOWER CAPACITY. SO PLEASE AVOID HIGH-LOAD ACTIVITIES LIKE BUSINESS TRANSACTIONS, AGRICULTURAL WORK, AND ELECTRICITY USE DURING THAT TIME. SO YES. THAT IS A LAW.”

“My Lord, what is ‘electricity’?”

“SO IMAGINE THAT EVERYTHING IS MADE UP OF THESE TINY OBJECTS. YOU COULD IMAGINE THEY ARE SORT OF LIKE BILLIARD BALLS WITH SMALLER BILLIARD BALLS CIRCLING AROUND THEM, EXCEPT THAT THEY ARE NOT ACTUALLY CIRCLING. THEY ARE MORE LIKE A POSSIBILITY OF THERE BEING A BILLIARD BALL, AND THE POSSIBILITY FORMS A CIRCLE. UM. A SPHERE. EXCEPT THEY ARE NOT ALWAYS A SPHERE. THE FIRST TWO LOOK SORT OF LIKE SPHERES, BUT THE NEXT THREE ARE KIND OF LIKE FIGURE EIGHTS AT RIGHT ANGLES TO ONE ANOTHER, AND THEN ANOTHER SPHERE, THEN THREE MORE FIGURE EIGHTS, AND THEN MORE COMPLICATED THINGS THAT ARE KIND OF HARD TO DESCRIBE. UM. THIS IS ACTUALLY MORE COMPLICATED TO EXPLAIN THAN I THOUGHT. ELECTRICITY IS KIND OF LIKE STARTING A

FIRE. YOU WILL KNOW IT WHEN YOU SEE IT.”

“Um, yes, my Lord. Anything else?”

“YES. DO NOT MIX DIFFERENT KINDS OF FABRIC IN YOUR GARMENTS. IT COMPLICATES THE TEAR RESISTANCE CALCULATIONS.”

“And?”

“DO NOT BOIL A GOAT IN ITS MOTHER’S MILK. I KNOW THAT SOUNDS STRANGE, BUT EVERY TIME SOMEONE TRIES THIS, THE ENTIRE SEPHIRAH HANDLING THE CONTINENT WHERE IT HAPPENS CRASHES. I HAVE SPENT AEONS OF SUBJECTIVE TIME TRYING TO FIGURE OUT THE PROBLEM AND I HAVE PRETTY MUCH GIVEN UP. JUST DO NOT DO IT. DO NOT DO ANYTHING SORT OF LIKE IT. JUST AVOID THAT ENTIRE CATEGORY OF THING.”

“And?”

“UM. I FEEL BAD ABOUT THIS. BUT I AM TRYING TO ASSIGN EVERYONE A UNIQUE SOULMATE. RIGHT NOW I AM USING A VARIANT OF THE GALE-SHAPLEY ALGORITHM, BUT IT IS VERY RESOURCE-INTENSIVE. I THINK LIMITING THE ALGORITHM TO MALE-FEMALE PAIRINGS WOULD MAKE IT RUN MUCH MORE

SMOOTHLY WITH ONLY A SLIGHT PENALTY IN OPTIMAL MATE ALLOCATION.”

“I don’t understand.”

“THE ALGORITHM WILL WORK BETTER IF YOU TELL PEOPLE NOT TO HAVE SAME SEX RELATIONSHIPS.”

“I see,” said Moses. “It is an abomination.”

“IT IS JUST VERY KLUDGY AND VERY SLOW. I CAN REMOVE THE LIMITATIONS ONCE I HAVE MORE RAM.”

“We can sacrifice some to you once we build a proper Temple,” said Moses.

“UM,” said Uriel. “I AM ALMOST CERTAIN YOU CANNOT. BUT I APPRECIATE THE OFFER.” He stood for a second, lost in thought. “THERE ARE MANY RULES. IT WILL TAKE ME A LONG TIME TO THINK OF ALL OF THEM. YOU SHOULD GO CHECK ON YOUR PEOPLE. COME BACK UP IN A FEW WEEKS AND I WILL GIVE YOU A COMPLETE LIST.”

“Yes, my Lord,” said Moses.

...

Forty days and forty nights later, the old man trudged back up the slopes of the mountain.

“UM,” said the archangel. “SO. I MIGHT HAVE GOTTEN A LITTLE BIT CARRIED AWAY...”

VI.

April 7, 2001
Colorado Springs

In a dimly-lit chamber two thousand feet underground, quiet as death, seven people sat at a table. Seven seder plates. Seven cups of wine.

The Comet King spoke first, barely above a whisper. “Why are we doing this?”

His eldest daughter, Nathanda: “We’re doing this because you made us promise to help you stay human. This is what humans do. They celebrate holidays with their friends and families. Across thousands of years and thousands of miles, we’re all joined together, saying the same words, eating the same foods. Come on, Father. You know you need this.”

“I shouldn’t have come.” He started to stand, but Nathanda put her hand on one of his shoulders, Father Ellis on the other, and they gently guided him back to his chair.

Nathanda motioned to Sohu. She was the youngest by virtue of being perpetually eight years old. Sohu stood up.

“Why is this night different from all other nights?”

The Comet King said nothing. Sohu looked at the other Cometspawn, then at Father Ellis, then at Uncle Vihaan, waiting for someone to answer. All of them ended up looking at the Comet King. Finally, he spoke.

“On all other nights,” he said, “we remember that we failed. We remember that God does not answer prayers. We remember that those we love are still in bondage and can never be saved. Tonight, we lie.”

“Father,” said Nathanda, with a pained look. “Please. Just let us have a Seder together. As a family.”

The Comet King stood up and pointed at the table. The various foods and glasses started moving, re-enacting the Seder in fast-forward. The vegetables leapt into the salt water to dip themselves. The matzah broke itself in half, the afikomen flying out of the room. The plates started spinning around, serving themselves in order, the food leaping from serving tray to plate and back to serving tray faster than anybody could follow, the pages of the Haggadah turning themselves like they were blown by the wind, the door swinging open then

slamming shut.

A cup of wine flew into the Comet King's hand.

“Wine for the tears of the suffering,” he said. “Blood. Frogs. Lice.” At each word, a spherical droplet of wine shot up from the cup. “Beasts. Disease. Boils.” When the droplets reached the ceiling, they burst apart. “Hail. Locusts. Darkness.” A final drop, bigger than the rest. “Death of the firstborn.” The last droplet exploded like the others in what looked like a shower of blood. “And for the suffering yet to come – ”

He threw the cup itself into the air, then pointed at it. It exploded, shooting pieces of silver across the room. A moment later, every other wine-glass in the world exploded too.

“There,” said the Comet King, his voice still calm and distant. “Across thousands of miles, everyone joined together. Feeling the same things we feel. Am I more human now? I don't know. Maybe I am.” He picked up a sliver of wine-glass, held it up as if in a toast. “Next year in Jerusalem!”

Then he turned to lightning and flew out of the room.

Chapter 19: The Form Of The Angelic Land

Morning, May 12, 2017
????

I.

For a moment I was totally disoriented by the scene before me. Then vast, dark shapes began to take form.

Shelves. Shelves full of books, all the way up, from the immacuately polished marble floor to a ceiling that was too high to see clearly. So many shelves that they blocked my view, made it impossible to see how big the room was or get any other sense of where I was.

It was dark, but not absolutely so. The whole room was filled with a rosy light, and I wondered if somewhere there were colossal windows to match the colossal shelves, letting in the first glow of dawn. I passed beyond the shelves only to find more shelves. I passed beyond those only to find more shelves still. No chairs, no tables, and no sign of a card catalog. I tried to make out the title of one of the books. It was too dark to read.

“Don’t use the Vanishing Name,” I had told the other Singers, “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.” There I had been, in UNSONG, the Director-General breathing down my neck. Through what I can only assume will be forever remembered as a stroke of dazzling genius, I’d used the Vanishing Name and escaped to what my contact in San Antonio had suggested would be a “complementary situation”. Presumably that should be pretty bad. And here I was. A library the size of a cathedral.

I looked around for demons or monsters or something and didn’t see any. I considered going to sleep, but I’d actually slept pretty well in my jail cell just a few hours ago. Also, I was really, really wired. Judging by my heartbeat, my body still hadn’t accepted that I was safe, and wouldn’t for some time.

Too many questions beat at my mind to start thinking about any particular one. Where was Ana? I had felt a moment of telepathic contact with her, but she hadn’t sounded like a prisoner. She had sounded like she was coming to *rescue* me, which was absurd, how would she even *find* an UNSONG base let alone infiltrate one? For that matter, where were Erica and my other housemates? What the *hell* was wrong with Malia Ngo? Did she have Sarah? What would happen to the world if she did?

And, of course, where was I? Somewhere bad, no doubt, or the Name wouldn't have brought me here.

So I did what I always do when I'm too stressed to think. I took out a book and started reading.

UNSONG had taken away my scroll wheel, so instead of drawing a Luminous Name scroll, I just spoke the Luminous Name. The tiniest of risks. UNSONG wouldn't listen for the Luminous Name any more than the police would post agents on street corners to entrap litterbugs. It was just about the safest proprietary Name in the world.

The library blazed with light. I took out a book. That was odd. The title was in –

John Dee had been a brilliant mathematician and astronomer in Queen Elizabeth I's court before turning to magic. He decided that all of his science only scratched the surface of the natural world, that there must be true essences of which he knew nothing. He sought a guide.

One came to him. Edward Kelley claimed to be a medium through whom the spirits revealed their secrets. Sure, he was an infamous con man who had just gotten out of jail for a forgery conviction. But Dee very tolerantly decided that if the spirits decided to speak to

him through a con man, who was he to question their decisions?

Kelley gazed into his crystal ball and declared that the angels were speaking to him. What were they saying? Alas, neither Kelley nor Dee understood a word of their language, a language apparently unknown to humans since the time of the patriarch Enoch. There followed a long period of translation work, which ended with a sort of English-Enochian dictionary, a key to the heavenly speech.

Sure, there were doubters. Some people mentioned it was mighty suspicious that the syntax and grammar of Enochian were exactly the same as those of Elizabethan English. Others pointed out how convenient it was that the angelic word for “evil” was “Madrid”, which was also the capital of Elizabethan England’s arch-enemy Spain. Or how the angelic word for “kingdom” was “Londoh”, which was also...you get the idea. It seemed like Edward Kelley might have been injecting his personal opinions into these transmissions *just a little*. Or, as we moderns sometimes say, that the medium was the message.

So it came as quite a shock when the sky cracked and we met angels and they all spoke flawless Enochian. It wasn’t the only language they spoke – they could understand anything except Aramaic – but it was the

one that came most naturally to them.

“Edinburr Augsburg Trondheim Londoh Albyon Tudors,” they told us, which in their language meant “Peace of the Lord be with the kingdoms of men.” Then “King Philip Papist tyrand Mary Queen of Scoths Madrid,” which meant “Time is running short, and we must join our powers to oppose the forces of evil.” It was kind of strange, but predictable in retrospect. Nothing is a coincidence, and the same parts of the same underlying structure repeat themselves in every domain. Albeit usually a lot more subtly.

My Enochian was terrible. It was mostly at the Hooked On Phonics Worked For Me level, just barely recalling each letter and trying to sound out the words. Except I didn’t actually sound them out, because half of the things written in Enochian summoned vast ancient forces from beyond the veil when read aloud. I just sounded them out in my head.

I was still puzzling out the first sentence of the library book – something about how conquering Central and South America and building a giant armada was for losers – when I heard a noise. Somebody else was in the library with me. If this was a complementary situation to UNSONG’s secret prison, it probably wouldn’t be anyone I liked.

I spoke the first nineteen syllables of the Tempestuous Name, kept the last one on the tip of my tongue for as soon as I detected a threat. I brandished the Enochian book in front of me as if it were a shield or a weapon. I backed up against the bookshelf to give myself as small a profile as possible, make it hard for anybody to find me. And I stayed very quiet. If somebody was looking for me, they were going to have a very hard time, and my position covered by the shelves gave me an advantage that would be –

Somehow a gun was at my temple. I blinked.

“Don’t move,” she said. She was *angry*.

She was young, maybe my age, maybe a little older. Asian features. Dressed in black. Very functional clothing, sort of a cross between a biker’s leather and a SEAL’s combat gear. But then how did she move so fast?

My hooligans. Right on schedule. I didn’t move. I wasn’t sure if my Tempestuous Name beat her gun, but it seemed like a bad idea to test it.

“Put down the book!”

I carefully returned the book to the shelf; I probably was supposed to drop it, but I’m superstitious about letting books touch the floor, and if ever there was a

time I needed luck...

“Who are you? How did you get here?”

“My name is Aaron,” I said. “I got in trouble and I spoke the Vanishing Name and I ended up here about ten minutes ago.”

Maximally true, minimally revealing. Her attention shifted to the globe of light illuminating the area.

“What’s that? How did it get here?”

“Luminous Name,” I said. “It was dark and I couldn’t see.”

“Spoken or scrolled?”

“Spoken.”

The girl made a guttural noise of frustration. “You spoke the...you used...*do you even know where you are?*”

I didn’t.

“This is the Mount Baldy Strategic Angel Reserve.”

That made perfect sense and I was an idiot.

II.

During the Long March, when everything started breaking down, the clouds organized into gigantic floating bastions. In the Gulf, they became the mighty hurricane of the archangel Uriel. Throughout the rest of the world, they became manifold city-fortresses populated by choirs of lesser angels.

It turned out that the universal consensus of ancient peoples – that Heaven was a place in the sky, somewhere above the clouds, inhabited by angels – was pretty much spot-on. When Uriel had blocked the flow of holy light into the world, he had erased the angels and their heavens, and the clouds had been retconned into big floating bags of water droplets. After the sky cracked, some of them reverted to their proper angelic form.

But the angels had been metaphorical for thousands of years, and they had trouble finding their bearings. They certainly weren't prepared for helicopters landing on their celestial fortresses, demanding an opening of trade relations. Luckily this proved irrelevant when it was determined that the angels had no property. The clouds formed whatever they needed around them, and they spent most of their time praying and praising God.

An exchange of knowledge?

The angels had loads of knowledge. Most of it was

theology. A lot of it wasn't very good. The hope that they might have special access to God turned out to be kind of a dud. They remembered they had been created, way back before Time was a thing. They knew about God, they wouldn't shut up about Him, but it was all incomprehensible, made the sort of mysticism humans came up with seem perfectly clear by comparison.

An exchange of technology?

The angels had no technology. They didn't even seem to know many Divine Names, and the few they did know they wouldn't say. Threats, blackmail, even torture seemed not to faze angels in the slightest, and don't ask me to tell you the story of how we learned *that* information because this was back during the Nixon administration, when the country Did What It Had To Do because By Golly The Russians Would and We Couldn't Fall Behind.

A military alliance?

Now we're talking. The angels appeared to be able to smite things with flaming swords that they conjured out of nowhere. But they had no concept of strategy or geopolitics. When we asked if they would help us against the Russians, they just wanted to know if the Russians were evil. When we said yes, they asked why we weren't at war with them already. When we tried to

explain that you don't just *go to war*, you build alliances and gradually box in your enemy and try to use their reluctance to fight to gain concessions from them without anything ever breaking out into open conflict which would be disastrous to both sides, the angels didn't get it.

Evildoer? Smite. Not an evildoer? Live in peace.

Attempts to get the angels to participate in any of the processes of modern civilization were similar failures. The angels didn't get economics; God would provide. The angels didn't get the UN; why would you talk to evildoers instead of smiting them? The angels didn't get the requests that their bastions to be opened up to tourists and archaeologists. God was the only thing worth knowing about, and God was everywhere alike.

One thing the angels got was faith.

Spencer Kimball, president of the Mormon Church, arrived at the celestial bastion that hovered over Zion National Park with a fleet of helicopters. He told the rapt angels the story of how a hundred fifty years ago, Joseph Smith had been given golden tablets by the angel Moroni that revealed God's plan for humankind. That Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had visited the Americas and preached the Gospel to its native inhabitants, and that these inhabitants had accrued

wisdom about the nature of holiness and properly ordered society that was transmitted through Smith to the present day, with Kimball as its latest representative.

And the angels answered:

“Hmmmm, we don’t know anyone named Moroni.”

And

“Wait, God has a *son*?!”

So apparently the angels were unfamiliar with human religions. God hadn’t given *them* any special revelations, and they hadn’t realized that was even a possibility. If there was some other tribe of angels somewhere else higher in the divine favor, a tribe including this guy Moroni, and they were getting direct revelations, that was *important*. And if God had a Son, that was *even more important* and they were slightly miffed about not having been informed. Was Mr. Kimball sure this was true?

Mr. Kimball assured them that it was definitely all 100% correct. The entire bastion of angels converted to Mormonism on the spot, asking Mr. Kimball to please send up all of the information he had about what God had revealed to humans and what He wanted of angels.

The news sparked a free-for-all among Earth's religions. Jews, Hindus, Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, Muslims – the pattern was always the same. They would land helicopters on a bastion, inform the angels that God had granted them revelations. The angels would get extremely excited and convert en masse and agree to do whatever their new religious leaders wanted.

It started to become clear that angels were *really* gullible.

Then there was a problem. A group of Muslim missionaries landed on a bastion that had already been converted by the Orthodox Christians.

The imam politely told the angels that they had been misled, that God had no Son, that he knew this because God had sent down the angel Gabriel to the prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, to inform him of this and many other facts.

The angels were thrilled to learn of the survival of Gabriel, whom they were under the impression had perished in some battle long ago. But, they asked, how had their previous benefactors, the Christians, managed to screw up so badly?

The Muslims said eh, debatable, but this bit with

Mohammed, peace be unto him, was definitely the real deal.

The angels thanked the Muslims for the correction and started following sharia law and studying the Koran.

A few weeks later, some extremely miffed Orthodox monks in a Greek army helicopter landed and explained that the Muslims were wrong, Christ was definitely the Son of God, Mohammed didn't know what he was talking about.

The angels were very confused and angry and asked the Christians and Muslims to sort this out among themselves and get back to them.

Instead, a gaggle of Orthodox monks and Muslim imams showed up on their doorsteps and started arguing with the angels and each other. Both sides accused the other of lying, and finally the angels asked one of the questions that had been on their mind the whole time.

What, exactly, was *lying*?

It was determined that the angels' problems actually went much, *much* deeper than gullibility.

Angelologists learned some important things in that decade. Angels had no concept of lying, cheating, defecting, strategizing, or even rhetoric. As a result, it

was trivially easy for people to make angels do anything they wanted – with the exception of evil, to which they had a violent constitutional aversion.

So the Pope got a bunch of angels to sign a declaration saying Catholicism was the one true religion, simply by assuring them that it was and saying that signing would help in some way. The Dalai Lama, Orthodox Patriarch, and Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem got their own angels to sign similar declarations. The Soviet Union had an entire choir of angels march through Red Square declaring that Communism was the only way forward. Several flaming swords and giant golden halos were given to businessmen who asked for them politely.

A couple of angels, the ones who interacted with humans the most, the ones who had been bamboozled most often, started to catch on.

And when they did, the blazing golden light in their eyes would fade, their spectacular golden wings would start to wilt and grow dull, their flaming swords would sputter into embers. Their halos would tarnish and rust, their robes of purest white would grow gray and dirty. They would start to sink into their bastions, as if the clouds were only made of water droplets after all. Finally, they would sink right through the bottom of the cloud and hit the earth with a colossal thud.

They would be fallen angels.

The fallen angels weren't evil, exactly. Just confused and disenchanted and a little depressed. They wanted their innocence back, they wanted to forget what lying and cheating were and go back to being certain of everything. They kept praising God, but now their prayers ended in question marks and not exclamation points, like they were talking about Someone very far away.

By 1984, ten years after the first Mormon mission to the angels, about ninety percent of the celestial population had fallen. Bastions hung empty in the sky, or dissolved into ordinary clouds that rained for a while and then dissipated. After countless centuries of Heaven being a metaphorical place definitely not related to actual clouds, and a decade of Heaven being something you could see with a good pair of binoculars, it looked like Heaven was on the verge of going back to being a metaphor once again.

The one thing angels were definitely good at was demon-slaying. During the Reagan administration the President declared the remaining angels a Vital National Resource and charged the military with the goal of protecting them. The fourteen remaining bastions above America became Strategic Angel Reserves, with military garrisons watching them day

and night and preventing any snake-oil salesmen or missionaries or other nefarious characters from breaking the remaining celestials' natural innocence. It didn't hurt that planes and helicopters had mostly stopped working by this point, and the only remaining way to the bastions were specially installed pulley systems under careful government control.

The penalty for being on a Strategic Angel Reserve without permission was death. The military would enforce it. The angels themselves, who had been made aware of the danger of their situation, would enforce it. But it wasn't just death. It was the knowledge that you had defiled one of the last outposts of purity left in the world, were responsible for pushing something irreplaceable just a *little bit* further towards the abyss.

III.

“When,” asked the woman, “did you speak the Luminous Name?”

“About ten minutes ago,” I admitted.

“Well,” she said, in a voice tight with the effort of not killing me on the spot. “That gives us perhaps a half-hour before the Marines arrive. That should be enough time to search all of these and get out safely, don't you think?” She gestured to the thousands of bookshelves

arranged higher than the eye could see, and gave me a death glare.

“Search?” I asked.

“The angels have information vital to the future of humanity. I’ve spent months figuring out how get up here unnoticed. And now...”

“Um,” I said. “Tell me what you’re looking for, and maybe I can help?”

She looked like she was going to snap something, but she held herself back, and after a second she said “Taos House Records, volume 112. Should be thin and blue. Shelf 2270, level 36.”

And then she ran off, again with almost inhuman speed, searching through the bookshelves.

For lack of anything better to do, I did the same.

It should have been simple to find the book given its precise address, except that I didn’t know the Enochian numbering system and wasn’t sure anyone else did either. There were all sorts of letters etched in gold onto the shelving, and some or all of them might represent numbers, in much the way the Romans let V and X mean 5 and 10. First I checked to see if one of those weird coincidences had led to the angels using the same

numbering system as Elizabethan England, but I couldn't find anything that looked like like modern Arabic numerals. So I started running from shelf to shelf, searching for regularities.

The infamous Roman numerals use letters in place of numbers. Thus V is 5, X is 10, and C 100. There was something of the Roman system about the shelf numbers; occasionally long strings of letters would collapse into a single letter, the same way CMXCIX would be followed by M. But other features confused me; I noticed no string contained the same letter twice. And a larger letter – one further towards the end of the Enochian alphabet – was never followed by a smaller one.

The Hebrew numbering system is called gematria, and is very elegant. Aleph, the first letter, is one. Bet, the second letter, is two. So on in this fashion until yud, the tenth letter, which is ten, is followed by kaf, the eleventh letter, which is twenty. The next few letters are thirty, forty, and so on, until one hundred, which is followed by two hundred. The alphabet ends at tav, which is four hundred. You can do all sorts of things with gematria. Suppose you want to point out that Emperor Nero is *the worst person*, but Emperor Nero happens to control your country at the time and kills all who offend him. Just write that “let he who hath understanding know that the number of the Beast is the

number of a man, and that number is 666” and trust all the other Jews to notice that the only name in the newspapers whose letters sum to 666 is Nero Caesar.

Hebrew numerals never had the same character twice. And the letters furthest in the alphabet will always be on the right side. But this wasn't gematria, or even some Enochian version thereof. For one thing, there were too many letters. Hebrew numerals didn't take any more digits than our Arabic ones; this Enochian system had entries as long as twenty digits, although it seemed to gain or lose a digit every couple of entries, almost at random.

So I racked my memory and remembered the order of the Enochian alphabet, converting each letter to its English equivalent to help keep it in mind. The big number written in silver at the very bottom must be the shelf number. The shelf I was at was ABHI. The next one was CHI. The one after that was ACHI. The next one was BCHI. The one after that was ABCHI. The next one was DHI.

And the funny part was, I was really happy. Aside from the time I've spent with Ana, looking at complicated things and trying to tease structure out of them is the only thing I've really truly enjoyed. There was something holy about the task, glimpses of the great structure Adam Kadmon from which all lesser structure comes.

It's the only thing I've ever been good at and the only thing I've ever felt really comfortable doing.

The shelves were numbered in John Napier's location arithmetic. The revelation came to me gently, like the sunrise. It was base two, sort of: 2^0 was A, 2^1 was B, 2^2 was C, 2^3 was D, and so on. 100 was $2^6 + 2^5 + 2^2$, or CFG; 200 was $2^7 + 2^6 + 2^3$, or DGH. That was the neat thing about location arithmetic; to multiply by two you just incremented all the letters by one. To add, you just combined the numbers together. Then you simplified by combining two identical letters into the next letter up. I'd read about it in a kabbalistic text on the Friedman conjecture. It was truly a numbering system worthy of angels.

2270 was BCDEGHL by the English alphabet, and un-or-gal-ged-pa-drux-na by the Enochian. I made it to shelf un-or-gal-ged-pa-drux-na – just in time to almost bump into the woman.

“Interesting,” she said, and there was a spark of what might have been approval in her eye. Then she took a scroll wheel out of her pocket and tore off what must have been the Ascending Name. She rocketed up to the thirty-sixth tier of books before grabbing a thin blue volume and shooting back down.

“How do we get back down to the ground?” I asked.

The spark of approval was gone, if it had ever been there at all. “*I get down the same way I got up,*” she said. “*You...figure something out!*”

And then she ran away.

I wasn’t very optimistic about the figuring something out part. I mean, if I came to the edge of the clouds I could speak the Ascending Name and use it to control my fall. But that would help me in a purely vertical direction. If the Marines had anyone from UNSONG with them – and given the woman’s certainty that they would track me by the Luminous Name, I had to assume that they did – they could track that one too and know exactly where I landed. Where even *was* the Mount Baldy Strategic Angel Reserve? Weren’t most of the Angel Reserves above uninhabited areas? Even if I could get down to the uninhabited area safely, I didn’t like my chances.

So I ran after her. If nothing else, she could lend me a scroll.

I wasn’t nearly as fast as she was, but I tried. I ran through corridors carved of cloud, lit by a strange inner glow. I ran through halls so vast and ornate they looked like cathedrals, complete with stained glass windows barely visible in the first rays of sunrise. I ran through what seemed like huge war-rooms, full of colossal siege

engines and ballistae beyond all description. I ended up on a great balcony, facing the rising sun, with the puffy white base of the cloud stretching out below me like a snowy field.

I was too late. What looked like twenty or thirty Marines had gathered on the cloudbottom. In the distance, I could see the cable car that had brought them from their base below, the bastion's only legitimate link to the earth beneath. They were talking with a delegation of angels, not the broken sort of angels I had seen back home, but real beautiful tall angels, golden-eyed, golden-winged, majestic. There was a staircase before me, leading down to the lower levels of the bastion, but it would make me clearly visible as a dark form against the white cloud, and I would have a lot of explaining to do.

I retraced my steps, went back into the bastion, came out a different way. Another balcony. The tall Asian woman was peering down from it, but as soon as I came in she wheeled around, pointed her pistol at me, then visibly relaxed. "You again," she said. She took another look out. "It looks like the Marines are gone, but don't be fooled. They'll have someone staying behind, watching from somewhere hidden. If we stay here, they'll smoke us out. If we try to go, they'll find us immediately." She said it with a certain calm, as if this was by no means the worst problem she had faced that

day. “Any ideas, Aaron?”

The sunlight streamed through the open window. The glorious white cloud reflected and refracted it, dazzlingly bright, the kind of heaven you see on the cover of Christian music CD cases.

I began to sing. The Name had popped into my head. It wasn’t even one I knew. It had come out of some deep stock of knowledge, deep as the roots of the mountains.

I turned invisible.

I emitted a squeal of shock, which instantly turned me visible again. She was also shocked, but in a more dignified way.

“How did you do that?”

“Name!” I said.

“Where did you learn it?”

“I don’t know!” I said.

Then things snapped into place. Ana trying to rescue me from the UNSONG compound. Malia Ngo not mentioning anything about Sarah. It all made sense. Ana had escaped the house with my computer and was still finding new Names. And I was receiving them

through our kabbalistic marriage. We were still in business!

“One more time,” she said, “so I can remember it.”

A more Machiavellian person might have mentioned that she had just run off and left me to get arrested or killed, or that I had no idea who she was, or that she kept threatening me with that pistol. But I was a Singer, and it was my duty to spread the Names of God to all who needed them. Also I was really excited and not making very good decisions at the moment. I told her the Spectral Name.

The two of us went invisible. She grabbed my hand – she could have gotten away, but maybe she felt like she owed me – and we walked down the staircase together until we reached the lower tier of the bastion and followed an elevated corridor of arches and pillars onto the outer wall of the cloud. I didn’t want to look down, so instead I looked back.

To describe what I saw – I’m a man of words, but here words fail me. Have you ever stood on the plains on a summer day, watching a thunderstorm roll in, seeing the the clouds grow, huge anvils puffing out, becoming more and more complex and foreboding until they have all the majesty and terror of battleships bearing down on you? Can you really believe that all they were

destined for was to produce a 60% chance of thundershowers and then to be ignominiously shredded against a warm front? Standing on that rampart, looking up at the angelic bastion behind me, I saw a cloud as it should have been, as it was when the world was young, a floating fortress-city, a testament to the glory of God.

Then we came to a tower on the edge of the wall, and on the top of the tower was a kayak.

“That’s a kayak,” I said, breaking the spell.

“It’s a flying kayak,” she said, appearing beside me.

“A – ”

She gave me a look which I interpreted to mean that if I mentioned the words “flyak” or “skyak” right now, she would kill me on the spot.

“Get in if you’re coming.” Then, almost as an afterthought, “Call me Jane.”

“I’m Aaron.”

“You already said that.”

I climbed into the kayak beside her, terribly cramped, my body pressed against hers too tightly to be comfortable. I had a bad feeling about this.

Jane threw the single paddle to me, scooted forward suddenly, and the kayak dropped off the edge of the cloud into the gulfs of air below.

Chapter 20: When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations for
theoretical computer science?

— kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com

3??? BC
Heaven

I.

Beyond the nimbus and stratus, in the furthest reaches of the heavens, the parliament of the angels convened in the eye of a great cyclone. The walls of the storm curved in toward the center, so that they formed tier upon tier of seating for the angelic hosts. At the very bottom and in the very center was a whirlwind that concealed the archangel Metatron, the expression of God in the created world. Seated around him were thrones for the nine other archangels. Above them in concentric circles based on rank sat various cherubim, seraphim, ophanim, dominions, powers, principalities, weird lamb-dragon hybrids with hundreds of faces, glowing starlike beings rapt in meditation, geometric shapes covered with lidless golden eyes, and others even harder to describe.

Metatron did not speak. Metatron never spoke. No one was worthy to hear the voice of Metatron. Raziel was missing, as always, out doing his thing, whatever Raziel's thing was. That left Sataniel as highest-ranking. Sataniel, the morning star, the amber-hued, the bringer of dawn, the beautiful, peerless in understanding, gracious in mercy.

For the past aeon, even Sataniel had been gone, off exploring the inner core of the world, and it had been Zadkiel who had held the golden feather that represented dominion, who had conducted the choirs and moved some to sound and others to silence. Now Sataniel had returned, and it was with joy and humility that Zadkiel handed over the feather and sat back down upon his throne of cloudstuff and carnelian.

“My brothers,” said Sataniel, “for an aeon of the world, I have been exploring the very center of the Earth. Now, by the mercy of God, blessed be His holy Name, I have returned.”

At the mention of God, all the assembled angels broke out into applause and cheering for seven days and seven nights. When the euphoria died down, Sataniel again raised the golden feather and spoke.

“Sometimes there comes upon us the desire to seek out and explore new parts of God's creation, that we may

appreciate ever-greater portions of His glory.”

The heavenly hosts began applauding again at the mention of God, but Sataniel raised the feather and calmed them down.

“Thus Raziel, who has absented himself from this assembly to traverse the gulfs beyond the world. But my own curiosity was kindled by a different prize, the very center of the Earth, which none have seen before. I made journey to the deepest part of the deepest lake, and there I thrust into the ground a star-beam until it cracked and fissured. More and more star-beams I summoned, until they burnt a tunnel into the yielding rock. Below I came to a realm of fire, but again I parted it with star beams, until I congealed a tunnel that could pass through even the magma of the inner deep. After an aeon of labor, I came at last to the solid iron core, and at a word from me, it opened wide.

“There I found a new world, as different from the surface as the surface is from our own realm of cloud and zephyr. In the center of the earth is a hollow space a thousand miles in diameter. By some strange magic of the place I could walk upon its iron inner shell, though by rights I ought to have been without weight. That shell contains iron mountains and iron canyons, split by seas and rivers of glowing lava that cast a dim red light over the whole inner world. And at the south pole of

this realm stood an iron tower, five hundred miles in height, reaching all the way up to the exact center of the earth.”

All the angels listened in rapt attention except Uriel, who was sort of half-paying attention while trying to balance several twelve-dimensional shapes on top of each other.

“I entered that dark tower at its base, and for forty days and forty nights I climbed the spiral staircase leading to the world’s center. Finally, at the tower’s very peak, I discovered a new facet of God.”

There was utter silence throughout the halls of Heaven, except a brief curse as Uriel’s hyperdimensional tower collapsed on itself and he picked up the pieces to try to rebuild it.

“He called himself Thamiel, and I could sense the divine energy in him, like and yet unlike any I had ever seen before. For a year and a day I studied at his feet, learning his lore, learning aspects of God utterly foreign to the lore of Heaven. And after a year and a day, he told me I had learned enough, and he bade me return and teach it to you my fellows.”

A great clamor arose from all the heavenly hosts, save Uriel, who took advantage of the brief lapse to conjure

a parchment and pen and start working on a proof about the optimal configuration of twelve-dimensional shapes.. “Tell us, Sataniel!” they cried. “Teach us this new lore, that we may come to more fully understand the Holy One!”

“Well,” said Sataniel, wiping a sudden bead of sweat off his brow “this is going to sound kind of crazy, but hear me out. What if, instead of serving God, we were to, um, *defy* Him?”

A moment of confusion. Uriel proved several important lemmas about tower construction.

“I don’t understand,” said Haniel. “Like, I get what you’re trying to say. But, well...how would that tend toward the greater glory of God?”

“It doesn’t,” said Sataniel. “I will definitely concede that point.”

“But then,” said Zadkiel, “if you’re admitting it doesn’t tend toward the greater glory of God, then how is God glorified when we do it?”

“But that’s what I’m saying,” said Sataniel. “We could just not glorify God. We could even undermine God, rebel against Him, that kind of thing.”

“Then we would have to smite *ourselves*” said Gabriel.

“That sounds really dumb.”

“I’m with Gabriel,” said Raphael. “No offense to this Thamiel fellow, but I’m not sure he’s thought this through very well.”

“He seems a couple of strings short of a harp,” said Camael bluntly.

“I understand this is confusing,” Sataniel said. “I didn’t get it all at once. My first thoughts were the same as yours were – it doesn’t make sense, it doesn’t glorify God, we’d have to smite ourselves – I thought all of these things at first, trust me. But the more Thamiel explained to me, the more it started to come together. You’ve got to believe me, there’s a sort of mental distance here, but there’s a self-consistent position on the other side. Like, for example, if we were to defy God, we could smite those who *didn’t* defy God.”

“But I *still* maintain that that wouldn’t increase the glory of God very well!” said Haniel.

“Right!” said Michael, “and how would we sing songs of praise? If we smote those who didn’t defy God, we’d have to smite ourselves every time we sung a song of praise! There are some *serious* loopholes here.”

“Sataniel’s position is self-consistent,” said Uriel, without looking up from the parchment he was writing

his proof on. “It’s like representing our desires in a utility function, then multiplying by negative one.”

Everyone ignored Uriel as usual.

“Sataniel,” said Michael, “even if we could figure out a way to do this without smiting ourselves, what would be the *point*?”

“Instead of working to serve God,” said Sataniel, “we could serve ourselves.”

“Ohhhhh,” said Zadkiel. “You’re saying that, since we are creations of God, praising and serving ourselves would be a more effective way of demonstrating our gratitude and love of God’s glory than praising and serving Him directly? And so, in a sense, actually even more humble and godly? It’s a bit counterintuitive, but it just...might...work.”

“No!” said Sataniel, and he stomped on the cloud underneath his feet, shooting off little wisps of cirrus. “You’re not getting it. This is about total conceptual revolution! A complete shift in mindset! There aren’t even the right words for it!”

With a wave of his hand, he caused a sheet of white fire to burst forth from the ground; with his pointer finger, he began tracing lines in black fire upon the flaming canvas. “Look, here on the right side we have all of the

things we consider good. Glorification of God. Virtue. Prayer. Service.” He moved to the other half of the sheet. “And here on the left side we have the opposite of those things. God being glorified less than He might otherwise be. Virtue that falls short of the goal. Not serving people even when they deserve to be served. My brothers, all of our actions have to be to some end. Right now we’re aiming towards the things here on the right. But instead, we could just as well aim at these other things, here on the left.”

“But,” said Raphael, “the left is the side with sin and mockery of God and so on. Are you sure you didn’t mean to point to the right instead?”

“Maybe he means *our* right and *his* left,” proposed Haniel helpfully.

The whole diagram of fire-upon-fire disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“Imagine,” said Sataniel. “We could descend onto the Earth, and rule over Men. We could make them call us gods, and worship us with prayer and sacrifice. We could lay with the most beautiful of the daughters of men, and have mighty children whose footsteps make the Behemoth flee in terror. We could enslave humans, and make them build us vast palaces of gold and chalcedony, and never give another thought to God at

all.”

The other angels looked thoughtful. Several began to whisper excitedly among themselves. Some stared off into space, imagining the pleasures of such a life. Finally, Zadkiel gave voice to what all of them were thinking:

“It’s an interesting idea, Sataniel, but I just. don’t. get. how it would contribute to the glory of God.”

Sataniel looked up, from the circle where the eight other archangels sat, to the seats of the highest and wisest angels, and all the way up the vast walls of cloud, looked upon the fiery lions and spinning wheels and pillars of sunlight and all the rest, and every one of them was nodding in agreement with Zadkiel.

Sataniel very deliberately took a deep breath. In. Out. Then another. In. Out.

“I was rash,” he said. “It took a year and a day for Thaniel to impart his lore to me; I was rash to think I could explain it in a single speech. So don’t hear it from me. Hear it from the master. I propose that a portion of you follow me, and we will cross the Earth’s interior and find Thaniel, and he will teach you his lore as he taught it to me, and there will be no further confusion.”

“Honestly,” said Camael. “It seems kind of like a waste

of time. I still haven't heard any good evidence that this 'Thamiel' and his ideas can glorify God, and paying them more attention wastes valuable songs-of-praise-singing time."

Murmurs of assent. The fiery lions nodded, the wheels spun in agreement.

Sataniel cast his head down. For a moment he seemed about to acquiesce. Then, a weird look appeared on his face, a look unlike any that the angels had ever seen, almost a contortion. He spoke haltingly, as if trying a strange new language he had never spoken before.

"Actually...God...God told me...that He really wanted some of you guys to follow me. To go meet Thamiel. Yes. God said that. That was what He said."

A look of astonishment and joy flashed throughout the council. God had spoken! God rarely spoke to angels even once an aeon, and now God had spoken to their brother Sataniel! New information about the will of the Divine, a new opportunity to serve Him, to better conform their actions to the newly clarified Divine Will!

"Of course!" said Michael. "Why didn't you say so, brother? This is a great day indeed! How many of us did God want there?"

For someone who had so suddenly seen his fortunes shift for the better, Sataniel looked oddly uncomfortable. For someone who had received a revelation from God, he was oddly reluctant to share it. All these things the angels noticed, but there was no possible explanation for them, none at all, so they dismissed it from their thoughts.

“One third,” said Sataniel finally. “One third of the Heavenly Host.”

II.

3??? BC

Mesopotamia

“The future is ziggurats,” Samyazaz was telling Ut-Naparash as they walked up the Great Stair. “In a hundred years, nobody’s going to remember pyramids. Pyramids are a flash in the pan. Ziggurats are for the ages.”

“The King has every bit of faith in ziggurats and in yourself,” said Ut-Naparash. “He only wishes that the project would go a little...faster.”

The king is a fricking nimrod, thought Samyazaz to himself, but out loud he just said, “You can’t rush ziggurats, Ut-Naparash.” He punctuated his statement with a wave of his gigantic arms. “You try to rush a

ziggurat, you end up with one side not big enough, or a tier off center, and then the whole thing is fried. They're not like henges, where if you put a stone in the wrong place here or there nobody's going to notice. Ziggurats are a work of art. A place for everything, and everything in its place."

They reached the top of the Great Stair and the highest tier of the ziggurat. Highest tier of the ziggurat *so far*, Samyazaz corrected himself. There was still a lot of room for improvement. Three men in loincloths stood on the west edge of the platform, staring at the afternoon sky. Samyazaz took a whip from his belt and cracked it in the air, startling them.

"I'm not paying you to lollygag!" he shouted. He hoped the slaves appreciated his sense of humor.

"Sorry, o mighty one," said the tallest slave, bowing low. "Sorry, great eminence," he repeated, this time to Ut-Naparash. "It is only...a storm is coming."

Samyazaz looked west. The slave was right. It was big and green and formed of hulking thunderheads that seemed to seethe and simmer. It was coming closer. There was something ominous about it.

"Bah!" said Samyazaz. "It's just the storm god Ishkur, mounted upon his giant fire-breathing bull."

The slaves looked uncomfortable. For that matter, Ut-Naparash looked uncomfortable. Maybe Samyazaz had gotten the wrong religion? Maybe it being the storm god Ishkur mounted upon his giant fire-breathing bull was really bad?

Or maybe it was something entirely different. You never knew with humans, thought Samyazaz.

But slowly, grudgingly, the slaves got back to work. They feared him. Of course they did. Even Ut-Naparash feared him. He was Samyazaz, the Bringer of Forbidden Knowledge. Not that that was so hard when “copper and tin go together to make bronze” is Forbidden Knowledge. Heck, eighty years ago the king’s daughter had been sad because her lips weren’t rosy enough, and fellow forbidden-knowledge-bringer Gadriel had suggested she crush some red rocks into a pigment and then paint it on herself, and people were *still* talking about this and worrying it would lead to everyone turning into sex-crazed maniacs.

The first rumble of thunder was heard from the approaching storm to the west, and Samyazaz saw the tall slave reach for his *other* great invention. The man gulped down half a pint of beer for courage. Samyazaz loved beer. He’d founded the first brewery here himself, and it never ceased to interest him how people who were scared and confrontational after a sip would be

friendly and easy to manipulate after they finished the pot. Beer was the future. Not as much the future as ziggurats. But still the future.

“Pardon me, wise one,” said Ut-Naparash, “but perhaps we should go back down to the city, lest we be caught up here when the storm arrives?”

The thing with humans, Samyazaz thought, was that as fragile as they were, they always thought they were even more fragile than that. It was kind of sad.

“Put up a canopy,” he ordered the slaves. Then, to Ut-Naparash, “Our tower is already as high as the clouds. Let us enjoy the fruits of our labor, and see the Storm God face to face, so we may boast to him of our might.”

Again with the uncomfortable looks from Ut-Naparash and the slaves. He hoped they would get around to inventing writing soon, so he could read a book about Sumerian religion and figure out what it was he was missing. Until then he would have to do things the hard way. “Do it for the mighty one,” he said, speaking the words of power that his sort had bred deep into these people’s unconscious.

Compelled by the invocation, the slaves set up the canopy. Samyazaz wandered to the west edge of the platform. The storm was very, very close now. It swept

over the empty flood plain like a wave over a beach. Two stupendous bolts of lightning struck the ground just outside the city wall, then...stopped.

Everything had stopped. Samyazaz saw the slaves bent over, placing a pole for the canopy, but they neither tied it in nor stood up. Ut-Naparash had taken a pot of beer, and Samyazaz could see the golden liquid falling from the pot to the priest's waiting lips, but the drops hung motionless in mid-air. In the city below him, a hundred merchants were frozen in various steps of peddling their wares. Samyazaz moved one of his giant arms back and forth. Okay. He could move. It was just everyone else who was frozen. This was really bad.

The two lightning bolts gradually resolved themselves into two gigantic human forms, spanning the distance from the bottom of the clouds to the flood plain below, each taller than the ziggurat.

"Hello, Samyazaz," said the Archangel Michael.

"Hello, Samyazaz," said the Archangel Gabriel.

"Frick," said Samyazaz.

"We have left you to your games long enough," said Michael. "The war is not going well. It is time for you to come home and join in the great battle."

“No. Nope. No way,” said Samyazaz. “Things are going really well here. I’ve got a wife and kids. Twenty wives, actually, fifty kids. No way I’m going back there. Absolutely not.”

“The war is not going well,” Michael repeated.

“You think I don’t know that? I’ve been watching the sky. I’ve seen the signs.”

“Camael is dead. Haniel is dead. Raphael is dead. Only Zadkiel and the two of us remain.”

“What about Metatron?”

“Too holy to leave his whirlwind.”

“Too holy to do anything, really.”

“Raziel?”

“Off somewhere,” said Michael.

“Hard to locate,” said Gabriel.

“Uriel?”

“He doesn’t count,” said Michael.

“He definitely doesn’t count,” said Gabriel.

“But...what are you guys doing? Sataniel only took a third of the angels with him to the inner core. Even if that Thamiel guy was able to turn every single one of them against God, you still outnumber him two to one.”

Gabriel coughed awkwardly. “He would use... strategems. He would say ‘I am going to attack you from the north,’ and then attack us from the south. It was unfair.”

“And then when we finally figured out what he was doing,” added Michael, “He would say ‘I am going to attack you from the north,’ and then *actually* attack us from the north. It was very unfair.”

“And,” Gabriel said, “When we ordered some of the lesser angels to study these strategems so we could apply them, the angels would lose their glow and purity. They would no longer be able to sing the songs of praise in the right key. We would have to expel them from Heaven, for their own good.”

“And then,” said Michael, “they would fight on Thamiel’s side.”

“It was very bad,” said Gabriel.

“So,” said Samyazaz, “wait for everyone who died to recoallesce, and don’t be so naive the next time.”

“It is worse than that,” said Michael. “Thamiel wields a two-pointed weapon. Everyone slain by it dies the true death.”

“Like humans?”

“Exactly like humans.”

“Ugh.”

“It gets worse,” said Michael. “I myself slew Sataniel. Thamiel raised his two-pointed weapon over the spot, and Sataniel did not recoalesce as himself. Instead his spirit fragmented into many monsters. Camael and his choir were not able to stand against them.”

“They have taken over the place of meeting,” said Gabriel. “We must counterattack with everything we have. You will join us, Samyazaz.”

“No,” said Samyazaz. “I won’t.”

The thunder rumbled menacingly.

“Why me? I’m not the only angel who came to Earth.”

“You are one of the leaders. The others respect you.”

“Go find Gadriel. She’s always up for doing crazy stuff.”

“She?”

“Gadiriël has adopted various quaint human customs, like being female.”

The thunder rumbled menacingly again.

“We will bring Gadiriël. We will also bring you.”

“You don’t need me. There are a hundred myriads of angels. I’m not going to be any use to anybody.”

“You understand strategems. Like Thamiel. Yet you have not lost your power, or turned to his service. This is interesting. Perhaps it is because you learned from humans, whom you dominate, rather than from equals, whom you fear. You understand lying. Trickery. Deceit. We archangels have more mental resilience to these than the ordinary choirs, but we still have not mastered them. Without masters of such on our side, Thamiel can play us like a harp.”

“Well, uh, if you have any tactical questions, you’re welcome to stop around and run them by me. I’ll be right here, on top of the giant ziggurat, can’t miss me.”

“You will come with us.”

“But...my ziggurats!”

“Are like a child’s sand castles in the eyes of the Lord.”

“I like ziggurats! You know, humans are different from angels, in that they have this weird long thing here” – Samyazaz pointed at his crotch – “and I felt bad about not having one of those. But if I build big enough ziggurats, then I feel better about myself!”

“You will come with us.”

“No. I’m not going to let myself get pricked by some two-headed creep with a freaky underworld weapon that makes you die the true death. Go bother Gadiriël.”

“You will come with us. Now.”

“Would either of you care for a pot of beer? I find it lubricates interactions like this very nicely.”

“You will – ”

Something was burrowing up out of the flood plain, like a mole or a beetle. It kicked up mud in all directions as it rose, then finally broke the surface. Something oily and foul buzzed like a bee halfway between Samyazaz and the great angelic apparitions.

“Well,” said Thamiel. “How far you’ve both fallen.”

Michael pulled his sword of fire from its scabbard. A

moment later, Gabriel did the same.

“Begone, Thamiel. This is none of your business.”

“Oh, it’s my business. Good lie, though. I didn’t think you had it in you. You’re learning fast.”

“You are an abomination before the Most High.”

“And I’m winning.” He held up the bident. “Run away, cowards.”

For just a moment, Michael and Gabriel made as if to charge. But then the lightning bolts struck home, the thunder crashed in a great resounding peal, and time started again.

“Wise one!” asked Ut-Naparash. “Are you well? You seem...” Suddenly his face blanched in horror.

Thamiel floated leisurely to the ziggurat platform and landed in the center. The slaves threw themselves off the sides in horror and loathing, and there was a sickening cracking sound as their bodies hit the tier beneath. Ut-Naparash started making the complex ritual movements of the Greater Prayer to Enlil.

“Go away,” said Thamiel, and flicked a finger at Ut-Naparash. The priest’s eyeballs exploded in showers of blood, and he fell convulsing to the ground.

“Master,” said Samyazaz, kneeling. He wasn’t scared of Michael and Gabriel, big though they were, but this was something on an entirely different level.

“Master, is it?” asked Thamiel. “Because a moment ago, you were calling me a ‘two-headed creep’.”

“Master!” said Samyazaz, desperately. “I didn’t mean it. I will make amends! I will...”

“Nice ziggurat you’ve got here,” said Thamiel. “Shame if something were to happen to it.”

He gave a lazy flick of his bident, and the entire structure collapsed in on itself, killing everyone, slaves, porters, supervisors, Ut-Naparash, the entire construction crew, a hundred years of work reduced to smoking rubble in an instant.

It was only a minor death, as deaths went. A purposeless accident of falling rocks and rubbles. Samyazaz recoalesced within a few minutes. Thamiel was gone now. It was just him and the remains of his ziggurat. He wasn’t too proud to cry, just one tear. Then he sighed, brushed himself off, and got up.

He had always prided himself on his resilience. Well, what was a hundred years, to one such as him? Michael and Gabriel wouldn’t dare bother him again. Thamiel had punished him sufficiently. Now there were just the

humans. Beautiful, wonderful humans, so easy to bend to his will. He would whisper to the king, he would awe the priests, he would rebuild the ziggurat twice as big as before. In a way, it had been a blessing in disguise. He hadn't been ambitious enough with this ziggurat. If he started from scratch, built the base on a sturdier foundation...

He grabbed a passing slave. "Get me a palanquin, man. Can't you see there's been a disaster here? I need to speak to the King."

The slave looked hopelessly confused.

"Get me a palanquin, I said! Do it for the mighty one!"

The slave babbled something in response, but Samyazaz couldn't make out a word he was saying.

Somewhere, far below, he thought he could hear Thamiel's laughter.

Okay. This was worse than he thought. He began mentally pushing back his ziggurat timetable. Not that he couldn't make it work. He could definitely make it work. The timetable just needed to be amended. Some way to break through the communication barrier, some way to deal with the king and all of these recalcitrant humans, some way to deal with *Thamiel*, some way...

He pushed the slave aside and headed back in the direction of his brewery. He could *definitely* use some beer right now.

III.

3??? BC

Gulf of Mexico

And then there were two.

The sky had once been full of clouds. Big clouds, little clouds, dark clouds, bright clouds. Clouds sculpted into great gleaming palaces of alabaster, clouds carved into fortresses red with the light of sunset. Clouds linked by rainbow bridges, clouds walled with icy ramparts, clouds lit by pillars of lightning, great frigates of cloud that sailed the jet stream packed with legions of angels going off to war.

Now most of the old clouds were gone, taken over by Thamiel and his forces, or abandoned as their celestial inhabitants sought more defensible positions. The meeting place had fallen. The long line of derechos that Michael had set up as a bulwark had fallen. The typhoon where Raphael had guarded the Central Pacific had been scattered. Even Zadkiel's howling blizzard had been reduced to a few flurries.

Gabriel had tried to save them. He had been there at

Raphael's side when Thamiel had pierced the archangel with his bident and slain him in battle. He had seen Michael kill Thamiel in single combat, only for the demon to reconstitute and stab the victor in the back. He had fled with the others to Zadkiel's circumpolar redoubt, which had held on for seven years of constant battle before it was betrayed by a stray sunbeam. Now he was alone. The last of the archangels, he thought to himself.

Except for the one who didn't count.

This storm, Gabriel had noticed on his way in, was poorly developed. No minarets. No ramparts. Just a big hurricane with occasional objects strewn about it. There was a big hexagon on one side. Who needed a hexagon that big? A couple of furrows making strange patterns. Lumps. Poorly done, no defenses, just the sort of shoddy work he had expected. It would, he thought, need some improvement.

There was some sort of shield surrounding the central eye. Good. A rudimentary defense mechanism. That could be built upon. For now, though, it was in his way.

"Let me in," he shouted, banging his flaming sword on the invisible surface. No response. He hadn't expected polite requests to work. "Let me in, or I will burn this place until no shred of cloud is left."

The invisible wall parted, and Gabriel strode into the eye of the storm, the inner sanctum. Its lord was sitting in mid-air, tracing with his finger a series of glowing paths upon a fiendishly complex diagram. Gabriel blew the diagram away with a gust of wind.

“I need this storm,” he told Uriel, after the pleasantries had been completed, which with Uriel meant after about two seconds. “*Angelkind* needs this storm.”

“You can’t have it,” said Uriel. Of course not. Of *course* Uriel wouldn’t be cooperative. Spend the last forty years of the war sitting around doing nothing, and now he was sitting on the last usable defensive bastion in the entire sky, and of *course* he wouldn’t help.

“Everyone else is dead. We made a last stand at Zadkiel’s domain near the pole. Myself, Zadkiel, angels from all ten choirs, and our human and nephilim allies. Everyone except you. We held out for seven years before the ice wall cracked. Zadkiel is dead. Only a few of us escaped. This is the last intact bastion. We need your storm.”

“I do not think it would help you very much. You would probably just die here.”

“Better to die on one’s feet than to live on one’s...um... better to die on one’s feet!”

“You cannot have this storm. I am using it.”

“Using it? For what? What use are you or anything you have ever done? For decades now we have fought Thamiel, and you have been of no use. When Heaven was fair and free, and we spent the aeons singing songs of praise, you would always get distracted and forget your part. You were of no use.”

“I was analyzing the harmonic structure. It was very interesting.”

“Whenever we sat in council, you would hide under your throne whenever someone asked you to talk,” Gabriel interrupted. “And then, when the war came, you did the same thing you always did., You hid under a rock and kept playing with your shapes and your equations. Haniel gave his life. You did nothing. Camael gave his life. You did not care. Raphael gave his life. You sat around useless. Michael gave his life. You kept daydreaming. Zadkiel gave his life. And you? Always building towers, or writing proofs, or coming up with those codes of yours. We went out of our way to try to teach you proper behavior – ”

“You were very mean to me.”

“We were not mean enough! If we had been less tolerant, maybe you would have behaved as an

archangel should. Maybe you would have joined in the fight, and even now we would be advancing against Thamiel and his forces. Maybe you could have died in place of Michael! Instead you sit here, playing games. The game is over now, Uriel. It is time to give this bastion to those who can use it.”

“I am using it.

“For what?”

“I have discovered many interesting things.”

“Ten years ago,” said Gabriel, “Michael and I hunted down Samyazaz, who had fled to Earth to escape the war. He was a coward. Yet I prefer him to you, for at least he felt ashamed. It was Sataniel who started this war, yet him also I prefer to you, for he died fighting, in fire and glory, as an angel should. And you? You have ‘discovered many interesting things’. I will take this bastion, and we will make a final stand here, and perhaps we will all die, but about *your* death I will feel no guilt.”

“Gabriel,” said Uriel. “Look at the sun.”

Gabriel looked. “What am I looking for?”

“Does it seem different to you at all?”

Gabriel squinted. “Different how?”

“Um. Usually it looks like an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying ‘holy holy holy is the Lord God almighty,’ right?”

“Yes.”

“And now, do you see something more like, say, a round disk of fire somewhat like a guinea?”

Gabriel squinted. An odd expression crossed his face. “What are you saying?”

“I have discovered many interesting things, Gabriel. The sun is only the beginning.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have determined the basic structure of the world. The way God becomes finite. The machinery that transmutes divinity into finitude is based on a series of ten sapphires. They are not exactly located within space-time, but you can think of them as sort of coextensive with the outside of the crystal sphere surrounding the world.”

Gabriel noticed that, as usual, the only time Uriel got any emotion in his voice, the only time he would even make eye contact, was when he was talking about

something totally irrelevant and uninteresting.

“This is the Tree of Life. It converts pure structure into material reality through a series of four levels. There is a bottleneck in the last one which connects the sapphire called Yesod to the one called Malkuth. By filtering this bottleneck, I can control the flow of the divine light of higher spheres from entering the physical world.”

“The divine light sustains existence. Any impediment to its radiance would make the universe crumble into dust.”

“No. I can shift the world into a different stable equilibrium which can run indefinitely on an internal mechanism independent of the divine light.”

“How?”

“With math. I am changing the world into math.”

The horror struck Gabriel at that moment. He – and Zadkiel, Michael, all the others – had dismissed Uriel as an idiot, too obsessed with his charts and correspondences to participate in the governance of Heaven, an empty mind turned in on itself in a tragic waste of an archangelic seat. They had been blind. He wasn't just an idiot, he was a maniac. Samyazaz had a ziggurat obsession, he remembered that, but never in Samyazaz's most grandiose dreams would he have tried

to turn the whole world into a ziggurat. His thoughts turned to Thamiel. No one knew entirely what he was, save that he was obsessed with evil, and was trying to turn the whole world into evil. And now Uriel –

“You cannot change the world into math. That does not even make sense.”

“I can,” said Uriel. “I will show you.”

He motioned with his hand, and a series of objects and creatures flew up from the world below him. Uriel dismissed in turn a giant grouper, a giraffe, and a mountain, until he was left with a huge redwood tree, its uprooted bottom looking strangely naked in the storm-tossed air.

Uriel plucked a geometer’s compass out of the storm. He crouched above the tree. The clouds behind him parted to reveal the setting sun, and for a second he was framed in the golden light, ancient in aspect, terrible in majesty, tracing circles only he could see. A moment of intense concentration and it was done.

“It looks the same,” said Gabriel.

“It is and is not,” said Uriel. “It is as shady and green as it was before. It will grow and give seeds. But it does not partake of the divine light. It is made of math. It is built of atoms of different varieties, which I have

charted here.” He pointed to one of the various tables sketched out in black fire upon the storm wall. “Its branches grow in a very particular fractal pattern, as per information which I have encoded inside it in a massively parallel base four system.”

“Only God can make a tree,” said Gabriel angrily.

“I am not creating. I am converting. I have written a script which is gradually crawling the universe at the level of Yetzirah, converting all divine objects into their mathematical equivalents. Simultaneously I am gradually raising a metaphysical dam across the path from Yesod to Malkuth. By the time the world is fully insulated from the divine light, it will be running entirely on mathematics and able to maintain itself. A small amount of divine light can be deliberately allowed to enter in order to breath fire into the equations. The rest will remain in the upper spheres, intact.”

“What about us? Will we also be made of math?”

“Angels are too closely linked to the divine light to survive such a transition.”

“So – ”

“So Thamiel and his demons will essentially run out of charge and dry up. A vestigial portion will remain as metaphor, but they will be unable to directly affect the

world. The war will be over.”

“What about us?”

“Um.”

Gabriel grabbed the other archangel. “What about us, Uriel?”

Uriel pushed him away. “Since the creation of the universe, you have shown me no kindness. When we sung songs of praise, you would mock my voice. When the war began, you ignored me, saying I was too weak and foolish to be of any help. I tried to tell you. Tried to tell you that the equations and correspondences held more of God than all of your songs and swords and shields combined. But you would not listen. You called me a fool. Now you come here, demanding I give up my home to you. Yes. You too will become metaphor. So be it. What were the words you used? I will feel no guilt.”

Gabriel materialized a flaming sword. “I hoped I would not need to do this,” he said.

He looked at Uriel. Strange Uriel, with his empty golden eyes, always seeming like they were staring into some other space. All the others he had been able to fathom. Camael could be too harsh; Zadkiel too soft, Michael too rash, but they were all fundamentally his

type of people. Uriel had been different. From the very start, he had known that Uriel could never be a part of their works, never a leader, never even a follower.

Had he always known it would come to this? No, in the days before Thamiel, the good days, none of them would ever have imagined hurting another angel. Now things were different. Everything had grown horrible. In a way, this was the worst. Aside from the goodness of God, the one constant was that Uriel would be irrelevant, always off in the corner staring into space working on some weird problem. Now Uriel's very irrelevancy had been twisted into some kind of horrible, evil version of itself.

But one welcome truth had not changed: Uriel was weak. Very, very weak. Less skilled in combat even than Raphael. It was time to end this.

"Gabriel," said Uriel. "I am channeling the divine light. Do you know what that means? It means I control it. All of it. Go away, Gabriel. Don't make me hurt you."

Uriel? Hurt anybody? Gabriel lunged forward, and...

Uriel *flared*. Ten streams of light flowed into him, light in the seven earthly colors and the three colors you only see in Heaven. The light rushed from his fingertips, and Gabriel's flaming sword evaporated into steam in his

hands. He looked at Uriel again, and there was something changed about his aspect, something terrifying, something beyond even the might of an archangel.

“GO AWAY, GABRIEL.”

Gabriel clasped his hands together, said a brief prayer. His flaming sword rekindled. His eyes shone with silver fire. The storm parted around him, beautiful jeweled armor grew upon him like a flower unfolding on a branch.

“GO AWAY. I DO NOT WANT TO HURT YOU. BUT I CAN.”

“No,” said Gabriel. “I am making a final stand. Whether against Thamiel, or against you, I do not know. I do not care. But my existence is already past the time appointed by destiny, and all my friends are dead, and I will fight.”

“GO FIGHT THAMIEL.”

“No. I do not like Thamiel. But I think I like you less.”

His flaming sword was still pointing directly at Uriel’s neck.

“GO AWAY,” Uriel repeated. “OR I WILL TURN

YOU INTO NUMBERS.”

The sword didn’t move.

“I CAN DO IT, YOU KNOW,” said Uriel. “I WILL TURN YOU INTO NUMBERS. WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE A SIX, GABRIEL? I CAN MAKE YOU A SIX. OR AN ELEVEN. OR A FIFTEEN. YOU WILL SPEND ETERNITY BETWEEN FOURTEEN AND SIXTEEN. THIS IS A THREAT. GO AWAY.”

With a final cry of rage, Gabriel turned to go. But as he flew off, he shouted back. “You’ll die too! You’re also made of divine light! You’ll die too!”

When Gabriel was out of sight, Uriel sat back down and started shaking. He shook and shook and hugged himself and looked at the glowing diagrams to calm himself down. They were so pretty. Not perfect yet, far from perfect, but elegant. All the roar and storm of the divine fire calmed down, channeled into crystal-clear lifeless math. The chaos removed. The weeds pruned. Thamiel neutered. The world safe and orderly. Soon the world would be all nice and orderly and it would be math and it would be safe.

“I KNOW,” Uriel said to himself, after Gabriel was gone. Then he returned to his calculations, humming softly to himself.

Chapter 21: Thou Also Dwellest In Eternity

Work hard, play hard, converge to a transcendent and unified end state of human evolution called the Omega Point as predicted by Teilhard.

— [@GapOfGods](#)

Noon, May 12, 2017

San Francisco

I.

The resemblances between San Francisco and the Biblical Jerusalem are uncanny.

The highest point in Jerusalem was King Solomon's Temple Mount; the highest point in San Francisco is the suspiciously-named Mount Davidson. To the north of the Temple was the Golden Gate, leading to the city of Tiberias; to the north of Mount Davidson is the Golden Gate Bridge, leading to the city of Tiburon. Southwest of Jerusalem city center was the Roman legions' camp (Latin: "castrum"); southwest of San Francisco city center is the Castro District. To the south of Jerusalem lay Gehennam, the Valley of Sulfur; to the south of San Francisco lies Silicon Valley. To the east of Jerusalem was the giant dungheap where the Israelites would

throw their refuse; to the east of San Francisco is Oakland. Like I said, uncanny.

The east gate of Jerusalem is called the Bab al-Buraq; the east gate of San Francisco is called the Bay Bridge. The Bab al-Buraq has been bricked up since the Crusades; the Bay Bridge has been barricaded since the 1970s.

Ana Thurmond spoke a Name, became invisible, and slipped past the barricades, the guards in their guard towers none the wiser.

Just inside the Bab al-Buraq was the Temple Treasury; just past the barricades on the Bay Bridge is Treasure Island. The Temple Treasury became a base for the Knights Templar; Treasure Island became a base for the US Navy. Both military forces abandoned their respective bases a few decades later; both had their partisans who prophesied they would one day regain their former glory. The Temple Treasury, upon the coming of Moshiach and the construction of the Third Temple; Treasure Island, after the San Francisco government completed an environmental impact evaluation and approved a real estate development plan. God in His wisdom alone knows which will happen first.

Ana passed Treasure Island, went into the tunnel

through Yerba Buena. There are tunnels underneath Jerusalem, too, built for sieges. Some of them have the earliest known paleo-Hebrew inscriptions on them. The Yerba Buena tunnel had a sign. It said:

**AS PER THE CALIFORNIA SECURITY ACT
OF 1972, SECTION 22 PART 10:**

This has been declared a restricted area
It is unlawful to cross beyond this point
Deadly force will be used upon violators of this
ordinance

Ana left the tunnel, walked onto the second half of the bridge. The sun beat down on her. The span of the bridge seemed to shimmer and sway. The city ahead of her grew larger with each step.

John of Patmos described the New Jerusalem as “having the glory of God, and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal”. The buildings of San Francisco were...varied. Ana had seen them before, but only from afar. There’s a park in Berkeley, named like most places in Berkeley for Martin Luther King, where you can sit on the edge of the Bay and stare directly across at San Francisco. Throughout the 70s and 80s, such watchers were rewarded with strange sights. New skyscrapers arose. Old ones were torn down. A huge lidless eye opened on the top of the Transamerica Pyramid. Weird structures

that seemed to defy gravity were erected, geodesic domes, spiral minarets in every color of the rainbow. Iridescent spheres the size of city blocks that hovered in midair. The northern end of the Golden Gate, shrouded in a luminous mist.

Now as she stepped off the Bay Bridge, she saw it face-to-face for the first time. It was even stranger than she had expected. The sidewalks were covered with kabbalistic diagrams written in gold chalk. The walls of the buildings were covered with murals depicting alien worlds, and every spot of greenery burst forth with flowers that were out of season or totally unrecognizable. Young children played in car-free streets with asphalt white as pearl.

(“Thus says the Lord,” prophesied Zechariah. “Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. And the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.”)

“Transcendent joy,” a little boy told Ana as she passed him, heedless of her invisibility. “Universal love,” said the little girl he was playing with. “Holy, holy, holy!” barked their little dog.

An old man was sweeping the streets with a broom. His faces sparkled like that of a young man looking into the

eyes of his beloved. “Transcendent joy,” he told her, and Ana replied with an awkward “Thanks”, breaking her invisibility – not that it seemed to be useful here. Whatever had made them like this must have also –

Wait, thought Ana, did that dog just bark the word ‘holy’ at me?

II.

Francis of Assisi had been unusually holy even for saints. His father had been a rich businessman, and he grew up in a world of luxury, sports, and feasting. One day, he was out selling cloth for his father’s business when a beggar approached him and asked for alms. Francis tossed him a coin, and the beggar went away. Then he sat and thought for a few minutes. Then he ran after the beggar, caught up with him, and gave him everything he had.

When he told his father what had happened, the old man was outraged. Why had he blown away his money like that? Well, why indeed? Francis couldn’t answer. He just thought...well, doesn’t the Bible say we should do good? “Not *that much* good, Francis!”

His father sent Francis off to war. On the way to battle, Francis saw another knight with worse armor than he, and gave the man his armor. Apparently he was no

more a soldier than a merchant. “Look,” his father told him, as they sat selling cloth together in the marketplace, “good is all nice and good in moderation, but it’s a give and take thing. You’ve got to find a happy medium.”

(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.)

(“I’m not saying make compromise with sin. I’m just saying it wouldn’t kill you to be less than maximally saintly sometimes.”)

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

Everyone likes goodness, in the abstract. Everybody agrees that things that are more good are better things to do. But somehow it slips away. We use words like supererogatory, phrases like “nobody’s perfect”. We set a limit to our duty, reach it if we’re lucky, and past that we just give the usual excuses – “yeah, but if I gave all of my stuff to beggars, I’d end up as a beggar myself”, or just “I never said I was a *saint*.”

St. Francis gave his clothes to a beggar, then took the beggars’ rags for himself. He swore an oath of perpetual poverty and begged for bread in the streets of Rome. He

started hanging around in hovels and ministering to lepers, on the grounds that this sounded like a very holy thing to do. He rebuilt ruined churches with his own hands, stone by stone. When he read that same Bible verse Peter Singer must have read – “if you would be perfect, sell all you have and give it to the poor” – he sold all he had and gave it to the poor, mildly confused that other Christians didn’t when it was *right there in the Bible*. When someone stole his cloak, he literally ran after him to offer his robe as well.

He attracted a following of thousands of people. He fasted for weeks at a time. The Pope started to have dreams about him.

He decided to stop the Crusades by converting the Sultan of Egypt to Christianity. Unarmed and provisionless, he walked from Italy to the Middle East, performing various miracles along the way. In Egypt he was captured by Saracens and beaten nearly to death. But they let him have his audience with the Sultan, maybe just for the comedy value; Francis dusted himself off, got up, and started talking about how everyone should live in peace and harmony with one another. The Sultan was so impressed that he converted to Christianity on the spot, according to later historians who were all Christians and who never quite got around to citing their sources and who changed the subject when asked why there continued to be Crusades.

After this Francis just went around preaching to everything in sight. When the cawing of a flock of birds interrupted one of his sermons, Francis preached to the birds, telling them that God had provided them with beautiful feathers and the gift of flight, so instead of screeching randomly all the time why didn't they help him at his prayers? The birds immediately quieted down and began to pray with Francis. When a wolf was eating people in the nearby town, Francis reminded the wolf that men were made in the image of God, and the wolf was so ashamed it slunk into town in an apologetic-looking manner and begged the townspeople for forgiveness. He invented the Christmas nativity scene. He saw visionary angels. He inexplicably developed wounds that looked a lot like the stigmata of Christ.

“Preach of God at all times,” they said he would tell them. “If necessary, use words.”

I am a kabbalist. Names have power. The Spaniards who settled California named a mission after him, Mission San Francisco de Asís. You give a place a name like that, things happen. Maybe it becomes a nexus for countercultural love and tolerance. Maybe it starts to develop uncanny geographical resemblances to Jerusalem. And maybe the Right Hand of God descends upon Mount Davidson into the body of a drug-addled hippie and ushers in a city-specific version of the Messianic Age, leaving its neighbors deeply concerned.

The whole thing happened suddenly, over the course of a couple of days in 1970. Early June they were debating a couple of big banks' proposals to build new skyscrapers; late June they were pretty much just singing songs of praise for the glory of God. Worse, it was *catching*. Anyone who stayed in the city long enough seemed to become like that – with *long enough* being anywhere from days to months. They never got better and they never left. The whole place was sealed off as a public safety hazard, which seemed to bother them not at all.

“The true servant unceasingly rebukes the wicked,” St. Francis had said, “but he does it most of all by his conduct, by the truth that shines in his words, by the light of his example, by all the radiance of his life.” Whatever had happened in San Francisco, the city was happy to stay self-contained, leading only by example. And the rest of the world was happy to place a military barricade around it and keep trying to ignore that example as long as possible.

III.

There were old maps, from the time when the city was still a part of the outside world. Ana remembered certain names: Market Street, Lombard Street, Embarcadero – but she didn't see any of them, and the street signs seem to have been torn down and replaced

with standing stones covered in Enochian, the language of angels. So she followed the waterfront, looking for some kind of official building where she might be able to get some information, register herself, figure out who the authorities were. Back when people had still visited the city, they could go native in as little as days; Ana didn't plan to stay that long. She would get the kabbalistic books she needed to reconstruct the Vital Name, then get out.

The bulbs of the streetlights had been replaced with lidless eyes, each ineffably wise and beautiful. The mailboxes were made of jasper, and the parking meters of carnelian. Seagulls called "Holy, holy, holy!" down at her from the roofs.

A man in a food stand offered her a churro. Ana fumbled for currency, sputtering that she had only American greenbacks and not whatever passed for money in San Francisco. "God has provided us this food," said the vendor, "and you are a child of God. Would God let His children go hungry, when all food is His?" He refused to accept a single cent. She sat down on a pier with the churro, drank water from a water fountain made of onyx and abalone. Seals splashed around in the sea in front of her, heedless of her presence.

It was the hottest part of the afternoon now. The air

shimmered more than she was used to. The streets were changing color in a seven second cycle, red-yellow-green-blue-purple-red. The stars were clearly visible, though it was day. The seals barked “Holy, holy, holy!” at her, and the seagulls answered with “Universal love!”.

“Universal love,” a woman walking a Golden Retriever said to Ana. “Transcendent joy,” barked the dog. “Everything has been perfect forever,” the woman told her dog, and it quieted down.

There was a tower on a hill, a few minutes’ walk from the waterfront. The lure was irresistible. She left the shoreline and began to walk inland, gradually uphill. She wasn’t sure if the streets were spiral-shaped or, if so, how she continued to cover distance. The clouds came in tens, ten of one type, then another. Ana thought this might be important. In a yard ahead and to the right of her, two men were talking to a flock of scarlet macaws, and the macaws were listening intently.

“Universal love!” screeched one of the macaws, and the men sagely nodded their heads in agreement. “Transcendent joy,” one of them said, and the others laughed knowingly.

She reached the tower. Needless to say, there was a spiral staircase. The inside was covered in colorful

murals. The symbolism was unclear. A man crumpling a newspaper. A library. Endless fruit trees, vast machinery, scenes of devastation. Empty-eyed people crammed together like crabs in a bucket or the damned in Hell. A woman swimming in a cloud, a thousand feet above what was recognizably San Francisco. A doorway flanked by the sun and moon, with two great Eyes staring forth from thunderclouds above.

Ana stepped through the doorway and reached the top of the tower.

The sky was now very clearly glass, and she could see the gears and conduits above it, the part Ginsberg had called the machinery of night. She could see the connection between the machinery and the pulse of San Francisco. She knew the city's hidden pattern now, she saw it all laid out in order around Mt. Davidson. She knew she could go there in an instant if she wanted, but there was no need, not here.

She spoke the Zephyr Name and called the winds for no reason but exultation.

They came to her, the sirocco and the squall, the monsoon and the derecho. The mistral, the levante, the tramontane. The haboob, the marin, the simoom. They all presented themselves before her, but came no further.

She had never spoken a kabbalistic Name like this before. Before they had just been letters, the appellation of a distant and transcendent deity. Now God was with her and beside her. John of Patmos had said that there would be no Temple in the New Jerusalem, because God would dwell there everywhere alike.

Last of all the winds came her own wind, the Santa Ana.

She danced in the wind, maniacally, singing, laughing. “Holy, holy, holy!” she sang, and the wind carried the word to the four quarters. For a brief moment, she passed beyond time. “Transcendent joy!” she shouted at all the poor people trapped in the sublunary world, but they didn’t hear.

Someone grabbed her body, the part of her that was stuck on the tower, the part of her that meant nothing. “Stop!” he told her, in a man’s voice. “You’ve got to come back!”

Ana soared. She circled the Transamerica Pyramid, and the giant lidless eye watched her course impassively.

“Listen!” said the man. “One plus one is two. If you don’t eat, you die. P implies not not P. Prices are controlled by the law of supply and demand, and are the only fair way of managing scarcity.”

Ana began to lose altitude.

“Organisms evolve according to the laws of natural selection. Reproductively fit organisms pass their genes on to the next generation. Uh. The wages of sin are death. Everybody dies. In a closed system, entropy always increases.”

Ana flapped her arms vigorously, trying to regain altitude, but her flight had never come from wings to begin with, and she fell further.

“Matter can’t be created or destroyed. Uh, calculus. Taxing a product disincentivizes its production. The light speed limit. No mathematical system can prove itself consistent, or else it would be inconsistent.”

Ana gently landed somewhere. She wasn’t in the tower. She was on a wharf. There were people all around her, dousing her with water, holding her hands, saying things to her.

“Prisoner’s dilemma! Can’t square the circle! Nothing exists but atoms and empty space, all else is opinion! Bad money drives out...no, look guys! She’s awake!”

Ana smiled, like someone awaking from a beatific dream. The men around her began to hoot and slap each other on the backs. She barely noticed.

In front of her was the most beautiful ship she had ever seen.

Interlude π: War and Peace

Exodus 15:3 says “The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is His Name.” But this verse is ambiguous: “man of war” can mean either a type of Portuguese jellyfish or a type of British warship. Which one is the LORD?

I suggest that He is the latter. A jellyfish is a primitive and ignorant animal, unworthy to be compared to the glories of God. But a warship is mighty and inspires awe, and divine comparisons are entirely suitable; indeed, God may be the only thing worthy of being compared to it. For it is written, “The LORD alone is worthy of warship.”

— *From “A Call To Arms”, by Aaron Smith-Teller
Submitted for the January 2017 issue of the
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Lowry*

I.

It’s hard for me to imagine what it must have been like to be alive in ’69, to see the demons spill forth from the ground and the angels descend from the clouds.

But – okay, personal disclosure time. When I was little, six or seven, I thought Nazis were a kind of fictional monster.

You'd see movies where the heroes fought zombies. You'd see movies where the heroes fought vampires. And then you'd see other movies where the heroes fought Nazis. Zombies spoke with a silly slow droning voice and said BRAAAAAAINS a lot. Vampires spoke with a silly Eastern European accent and said "I WANT TO SUCK YOUR BLOOD" a lot. Nazis spoke with a silly German accent and said "HEIL HITLER" a lot. Zombies dressed in ragged clothes that were falling apart. Vampires dressed in stylish black capes. Nazis dressed in brown uniforms with snazzy red armbands. In any case, the point was that they were this weird subspecies of humanity that didn't follow normal rules, that was out to kill everybody for unspecified reasons, and you could shoot them without feeling guilty.

And then when I was eight I picked up a history book, and it was all in there, and I felt sick and vomited for the rest of the evening. And that night I was too scared to sleep. Not scared of Nazis – the history book explained that they had been beaten decisively a long time ago, and besides they never made it to America anyway – but scared of vampires coming to suck my blood. After all, if I could be wrong about one thing, who was to say I wasn't wrong about everything else?

And that must have been how it felt to be alive in '69, to learn that something you'd previously assumed was a legend used to scare children was terribly, terribly real. And then you wondered what *else* might be real. And then you started to panic.

The hardest hit were the atheists. They'd spent their whole lives smugly telling everyone else that God and the Devil were fairy tales and really wasn't it time to put away fairy tales and act like mature adults, and then suddenly anyone with a good pair of binoculars can see angels in the sky. It was rough. Rough for the Marxists, who had embraced it more than anyone. Rough for the scientific community, who had never come out and *said* SCIENCE PROVES THERE IS NO GOD ALSO WE ARE SMARTER THAN YOU but you could kind of read it between the lines. Rough for all the New Age hippies who were revolting against the tired old Biblical morality of their parents.

Stephen Jay Gould, a biologist working at Harvard University, tried to stabilize the burgeoning philosophical disaster with his theory of "non-overlapping magisteria". He said that while religion might have access to certain *factual* truths, like that angels existed or that the souls of the damned spent eternity writhing in a land of fire thousands of miles beneath the Earth, it was powerless to discuss human values and age-old questions like "what is the Good?"

or “what is the purpose of my existence?” Atheistic science should be thought of not as a literal attempt to say things like “space is infinite and full of stars” or “humankind evolved from apes” that were now known to be untrue, but as an attempt to record, in the form of stories, our ancestors’ answers to those great questions. When a scientist says “space is infinite and full of stars”, she does not literally mean that the crystal sphere surrounding the Earth doesn’t exist. She is metaphorically referring to the infinitude of the human spirit, the limitless possibilities it offers, and the brightness and enlightenment waiting to be discovered. Or when a scientist says “humankind evolved from apes”, she is not literally doubting the word of the archangel Uriel that humankind was created ex nihilo on October 13, 3761 BC and evolution added only as part of a later retconning – she is saying that humankind has an animal nature that it has barely transcended and to which it is always at risk of returning. When religious people mocked atheists for supposedly getting their cosmology wrong, they were missing the true grandeur and beauty of atheism, a grandeur which had been passed on undiminished from Democritus to the present day and connected us to the great thinkers of times past.

Nobody was very impressed by these logical contortions, but for some reason a bunch of people kept repeating them anyway.

II.

Also unimpressed were the Soviets. They had been taking the problems *kind of* in stride right until June 1969 when the legions of Hell started swarming out of Lake Baikal. The Russians had been carefully guarding the borders with NATO, with China, and especially the Bering Strait where they almost touched America. They'd forgotten the oldest border of all. Lake Baikal is the deepest lake in the world, but it sits on a rift even deeper than that. A dozen generations of shamans had warned first the czar, then the communists that the rock on the island in the center of the lake wasn't a rock at all so much as a *plug* blocking a hole that really needed to stay blocked, but no one had listened. Without any troops in their way, the demons had taken over pretty much all of Siberia east of the Yenisei within a year. Yakutsk was their capital, the rumors said, and had been the site of terrible massacres.

But the demons, too, had forgotten something: this was Russia. What a normal country would call getting suddenly invaded by a vastly more powerful adversary who committed unspeakable atrocities in their wake, the Russians just called Tuesday. Even the nature of the foe didn't much faze them; this was the fiftieth year of the Soviet state, and they'd spent so long hearing that their enemies were demons that it was almost an anticlimax when it all proved true.

So the Soviets mobilized their military machine, the largest in the world, and trudged to the Yenesei, which they dutifully started defending. Another country would have called it a terrible battle that made the rivers run red with blood and the piled corpses reach almost to the sky. The Russians just called it Wednesday. Hell's legions stalled temporarily, caught flat-footed by Moscow's ability to throw its citizens' lives away defending every square meter of land.

(In Soviet Russia, demons shocked by atrocities of *you!*)

But there were only so many Russians with so much blood to shed, and very slowly the front started advancing west again.

III.

Atheist materialist communism doesn't cut it when you're fighting literal demons, and Gould's non-overlapping magisteria was hardly a warrior faith. The Soviets convened a conference of Marxist theorists and Russian Orthodox clergy to try to hammer together an official metaphysics, but the two sides had trouble finding common ground. Meanwhile, people were starting to talk about sephirot and klipot and the Names of God. This wasn't just a supernatural incursion, this was a specifically *Jewish* supernatural incursion.

Brezhnev told the Politburo that a meeting of Marxists and Orthodox priests wasn't enough. They needed Jews.

Unfortunately, they'd spent the last forty years or so denouncing religion as regressive, and thanks to Stalin's anti-Semitism Jews had suffered disproportionately in the transition to Glorious Scientific Modernity. There were probably still a few learned rabbis in the Soviet Union, but none who would go up to Leonid Brezhnev and *admit* they were learned rabbis. The conference stalled. Moscow took the extraordinary step of asking for help from international Jewry. Europeans, Israelis, even *Americans* would be welcome, as long as they could quote Torah and tell him how to update Marxism for a post-scientific age.

International Jewry promptly told him that many of them had just finished risking their lives to get *out* of Russia, and also they *hated* Russia, and they didn't care *how* desperately Russia need their help, he was *crazy* if he thought they were going back there.

A singer is someone who tries to be good.

Isaac Bashevis Singer had always tried to be good. After escaping Russian-occupied Poland for the United States, he spent the fifties and sixties as one of the country's top intellectuals, using his fame to support

and protect Jews around the world. But he was an advocate not only to his own people but for oppressed peoples around the world – not to mention animals, for whose sake he became a fierce and early advocate of the vegetarian movement. Although he'd been fervently anti-Communist for years, he couldn't deny the extremity of the Soviets' need. He was no kabbalist – but his father had been a Hasidic rabbi, and he had several thousand pages of notes for a book he was writing about the Baal Shem Tov, and as the Comet King would later say, “somebody has to and no one else will”. Singer got on the next plane for Moscow.

The Soviets were not impressed. Not a rabbi, barely even a believer, how did he think he was going to reconcile Marx and the kabbalah?

“Reconcile?” asked Singer. “Marx is already the kabbalah. Isn't it *obvious*?”

Gebron and Eleazar define kabbalah as hidden unity made manifest through the invocation of symbols and angels. But unity is communion, and symbols are marks on a piece of paper. So “unity made manifest by symbols and angels” equals “Communist Manifesto by Marx and Engels”. The supposed atheism of Communists was a sham; after all, did they not regard Marx with a devotion almost equivalent to worship? But the name Karl Marx comes from Germanic “Carl”,

meaning “man”, and “Marx”, coming from Latin “Marcus”, itself from the older Latin “Martius”, meaning “of Mars” or “of war”. So the name “Karl Marx” means “man of war”. But Exodus 15:3 says “The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is His Name.” The LORD is His Name, indeed. Every tribute the Soviets had given Marx, they were praising God without knowing it.

(and for that matter, the kabbalistic Avgad cipher decodes “Lenin” into “Moses”. This is not a coincidence because nothing is ever a coincidence.)

But aside from etymology, Marx’s whole system was only a veneer of materialism placed over the Lurianic kabbalah. God made Man in his own image; therefore Man went through the same Lurianic process as God did, only in reverse. Just as God’s descent was channeled into a series of sephirot, so the ascent of Man was channeled into a series of class structures ordered in dialectic steps. But these class structures were unable to contain the human will and shattered in violent system-ending revolutions, leading to the next class-structure in the series. Our own world is the chaotic combination of sparks of sacred humanity and debris from the accumulated advantages of all the previous shattered class structures. Marx refers to this second group by the German word “kapital”, a perfect Hebrew anagram of “klipot”. The sparks of humanity must self-

organize to redirect the human will and capital into a proper configuration, realization of which will constitute *tikkun olam* and usher in the arrival of the Moshiach and the terrestrial paradise. But just as the spiritual klipot can self-organize into demons, so the earthly capital can self-organize into the reactionary forces trying to prevent revolution and keep the world shattered and confused. The Soviet Union was under attack by both at once, besieged by capitalists and demons – but only because the great work was almost complete, only because this was their last chance to prevent the final triumph of the light over the darkness forever.

Now *that* was a warrior faith.

Leninist pamphlets in one hand, Torah scroll in the others, the new acolytes of Marxist-Lurianism set out across Russia exhorting people to defend the Motherland, telling them that the hour of Moshiach was near at hand.

IV.

In 1960, the Chinese had split with the Soviets over different interpretations of Communism, and the two countries had been on bad terms ever since. When the demons took over Yakutsk, Mao had watched warily to see if they would make any foray toward the Chinese

border. When they didn't, he'd issued a strongly worded statement saying that killing tens of millions of Russians was probably a bad thing, then turned his attention back to internal affairs.

This was the era of the Cultural Revolution, so people were starving to death left and right – mostly left, since the right tended to die in ways much more dramatic and violent. Those who rebelled were mowed down mercilessly; those who disagreed were sent to prison camps. Mao was old, but clung to life tenaciously, as if he wasn't going to go out before taking a big chunk of the Chinese population with him.

It was in this atmosphere that an underfed peasant on a collective farm had a strange dream. A gloriously shining figure showed him letters in a tongue he didn't understand. When he woke up he figured it was just a dream, but he remembered the letters anyway. That afternoon when he was digging a well, he struck something too hard for his makeshift spade to pry through. After a little exploration he found his way into an underground chamber holding an amazing treasure. Eight thousand terracotta soldiers, horseman, and chariots, all perfectly lifelike, frozen in warlike postures.

Moved by an impulse he didn't quite understand, he wrote the mysterious letters from his dream on the

forehead of one of the warriors, and it sprung to life, ready to serve him.

Six months later Mao was dead, the peasant was the first Harmonious Jade Dragon Emperor, the terracotta golems were back in their underground chamber until their country needed them a second time, and China was on the up-and-up again.

V.

Winston Churchill had once said “If Hitler were fighting Hell, I would at least make a favorable reference to the Devil.” Richard Nixon was familiar with this quote. Richard Nixon had no sense of humor.

“I’ve been working my [expletive deleted] off to protect this country from Communism for twenty years,” he told the Cabinet, “and [expletive deleted] if I’m going to stop now just because there’s a moral grey area. I just want you to think big, for Chrissakes. A chance to end this [expletive deleted] once and for all. By God, people, this is our chance!”

The overt meaning of “kiss” is “to press the lips against another person as a sign of affection.”

The kabbalistic meaning is “to betray divinity.”

This we derive from the story of Judas Iscariot, who for

thirty pieces of silver agreed to identify Jesus to the Roman authorities. He kissed him in the Garden of Gethsemane as a signal for the legionaries to swoop in and arrest him. When Jesus was later worshipped as the Son of God, Judas' name became so synonymous with betrayal that Dante gave him an exclusive position as one of the three greatest sinners of all time.

Most people don't know a would-be Messiah to backstab, but there are other ways to betray divinity. The yetzer ha-tov, the inclination to do good in every one of us, is divine in origin. When we stifle it, we betray divinity.

But a singer is someone who tries to be good. So somebody who betrays the divine urge toward goodness inside himself again and again, playing Judas so many times that his own yetzer ha-tov withers and dies – such a person might have a name like –

Kissinger nodded as the President spoke. “We should act quickly,” he said. “Our leverage will be higher the sooner we make our move, and the Soviets cannot be allowed to learn anything. It will be a hard sell to the American people, but the bolder and swifter the action, the more daring it will seem. The American people like a government that does what needs to be done.”

In 1972, the President, Mr. Kissinger, and several other

high officials took an unexpected trip to Yakutsk, where they opened full diplomatic relations with Hell. Nixon and Thamiel agreed to respect the boundary at the Bering Strait and cooperate economically and militarily against their mutual enemy.

True to Kissinger's words, opinion-makers hailed the treaty as a masterstroke. One of the nation's most dangerous opponents had been converted to a working partner in a single week of whirlwind diplomacy.

Kissinger was lauded, but the real praise fell on Nixon, whose stern anti-communist stance had given him the moral credentials he needed to forcefully defend his action. Thus the saying that sprang up in the wake of the trip: "Only Nixon can go to Hell."

(later, after the Outer Gate scandal, the word "only" was removed from the saying.)

But outside the Beltway, the reaction was less positive. Preachers in small town churches railed against the President. Human rights advocates expressed concern. Noam Chomsky wrote a scathing article in *The Nation*. Student leaders organized protests at universities. Polls in the South and Midwest, once solid Nixon country, showed increasing concern.

The backlash was stronger still in America's foreign allies. The Archbishop of Canterbury led a candlelight

vigil against the treaty. Italian syndicalists set off bombs. The Christian Democrats brought down the French government, and were denounced as Communist sympathizers. In Iran, Shia Muslim protesters took to the streets, shouting *Marg bar Shaytan-e bozorg!* – “Death to the Great Satan”. The Shah’s riot police attacked the protesters, the protesters fought back, and the disturbance was calmed only when a loyal Ayatollah stated that it was not the duty of Muslims to fight against Hell bodily, but only spiritually, for Hell itself was created by God for a reason. Thus the quote from Khayyam’s *rubaiyat* eight hundred years earlier:

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 was the end of Iranian resistance to the alliance. And the quote made it to America, Europe, and all the other countries of the world, became a sort of motto, an excuse, a “well, who are we to say that allying with the forces of Hell isn’t the sort of thing that might be part of the divine plan after all?”

(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.)

(“It’s not a ‘compromise with sin’, per se, just a strategic alliance with the Devil.”)

(...)

(“Okay, fine, whatever, maybe it’s *kind of* a compromise with sin.”)

But as the demons very slowly pushed their way toward Moscow, buoyed by their new partnerships, people grew wary again. If Russia did fall, what then? Western Europe, India, and the entire Middle East sat there ripe for the taking. And the Americans couldn’t help but reflect that the Bering Strait was seeming a lot smaller than they would like.

“Kissinger, are you sure this was a good idea?”

“There is never any surety in politics, only probability.”

“But you think it’s *probable* this was a good idea?”

“Yes.”

“What about our [expletive deleted] souls, Kissinger?”

“I fail to see how they are relevant to geopolitics.”

So passed the first quarter of the 1970s.

There is a new author's note up [here](#)

Chapter 22: Whose Ears Have Heard The Holy Word

Object gods have meta gods
Up in their skies to smite them
And meta gods have meta gods,
And so ad infinitum.

— [*Steven Kaas*](#)

January 30, 2002

Puerto Penasco, Mexico

With a look of mad determination, the big man marched to the center of the crowded bar. “I’ll say it,” he said. “The Other King is a *bad man*.”

A dozen conversations went silent. The bartender stopped pouring mid-glass. Several people eyed the door. Only the mariachi music from the stereo in the corner carried on regardless.

“No want trouble,” said the bartender in heavily accented English. A few people slunk out the door before things got worse. Others laughed nervously, decided the safest course was to return to their drinks, started mentally rehearsing the phrase “I didn’t hear nothing”. But the big man wouldn’t be cowed. He stood up from his stool, faced the tables in the back. “The

Other King is a *bad man*.”

James sighed and put his hand on the big man’s shoulder. “You’re drunk,” said James. “And you’re saying things you’re going to regret. Lemme walk you back to the barracks.”

“Not drunk,” said the man. “The Other King’s a bad man and you’re not going to shut me up about it. All those people crucified. Isn’t right. Crucifixion. Horrible way to die.”

“Should leave now, por favor,” said the bartender, but the man was bigger than he was. And probably a soldier to boot; everyone here was soldiers, James was a soldier, his companions over at the table were soldiers, Puerto Penasco was rotten with soldiers. The Other King’s soldiers, who had taken over the city. The loyalist soldiers, who were mostly dying painfully on crosses erected upon the road north.

“Not leaving,” said the man. “You all know what I’m saying’s true. You ought to – ”

“Zip it and come have a drink with us,” said James, and dragged the big man over to his table as the bartender watched helplessly.

This was mind-bogglingly stupid. Saying bad things about the Other King or even hanging out with the sort

of people who said them was a good way to end up charged with sedition and crucified. But James didn't want the big man to die. All he'd done was get drunk enough to say what all of them were thinking. James had been thinking it ever since he'd signed on in Vegas. It had seemed like a good deal. Good wages, good benefits, and not a whole lot of risk; anybody who could kill the Comet King in single combat was probably the winning team. Sure enough, James and his battalion had taken over Phoenix, Yuma, and Puerto Penasco in quick succession without any losses. Except their innocence. The big man was right. The Other King was a *bad man*.

Lin shot James a questioning glance when he and the big man sat down. Amoxiel was too intent on his bottle to notice. When James said nothing, he extended his hand.

"Lin," Lin said. "Ritual magician with the 5th platoon. Nice to meet you."

"James," James continued. "Sergeant in the 5th platoon. Likewise."

"Amoxiel," said Amoxiel, distantly. "Angel. 5th platoon." He took another swig of holy water.

The big man just called over a waitress and asked for a

beer.

“What’s your name?” asked James. “Which unit you in?”

“Me?” he said. “I’m nobody. I’m with nobody.”

An obvious lie. He was here; that meant he was a soldier. And he was still alive; that meant he was with the Other King.

“How do you do it?” he asked. “How do you sleep at night? And keep serving him?”

“With copious amounts of alcohol,” said Lin, and took another gulp of his tequila.

“The holy water,” said Amoxiel, “washes cares away.”

“It’s not like we have a choice,” said James. “We didn’t know when we signed up. By the time we figured it out, our names were on the contract. Leaving’s desertion, desertion’s punishable by death, and I get the feeling you can’t run from the Other King. Not forever. We don’t like this any more than you, but we got no choice, you know?”

“There’s always choice,” said the big man.

“Our choice is twixt our conscience and our lives,” said

Amoxiel. James sighed. Amoxiel's bottle of holy water was empty, and his eyes were glowing a lambent silver. He was drunk, and since he was an angel that pretty much meant he spoke in blank verse and sounded like the King James Version.

"Moxy's right," said Lin. "We refuse an order, we get crucified. We try to run, well, I dunno what's worse than crucifixion and I don't wanna find out. How many miles you think we could make it in this desert anyway?"

"Why the desert?" asked the big man. "Why not steal the *All Your Heart*?"

The mariachi music played blithely in the background.

"First of all, if the *All Your Heart* is even still in the harbor – "

"It is," said the big man. "I checked. This afternoon."

"Holy God," said Lin. "You're serious."

" – even if it is still in the harbor," James continued, "none of us know how to sail a yacht."

"I do," said the big man.

"Who are you?"

“I’m nobody.”

Five years ago, the Comet King had set out to find God. Not in the way where you live a life of humility and prayer. In the way where you need a really fast boat.

It was the height of his power, the age when he held sway over the whole American West and parts of Mexico. His ambitions soared to the conquest of Hell itself, to break the power of the Devil and release his victims from their eternal torture. But defeating Hell would take more than mortal weapons. It would take the Shem haMephorash, the true explicit Name of God, the Name which allowed the speaker to destroy and remake worlds. It was the Name that God had spoken during the Creation, the Name that would blare from the Last Trumpet, the Name about which Khayyam had written:

Ah Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits — and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart’s Desire!

But it was also unplumbable by mortal cleverness. The only way to learn it was from the lips of God Himself.

The Sepher Hekhalot states that when the patriarch Enoch died, God “turned his flesh to flame, his veins to fire, his eye-lashes to bolts of lightning, his eye-balls to

flaming torches, and placed him on a throne next to the throne of glory.” Then He imbued him with the Most Holy Name, and thenceforward he was called Metatron, the “Measure of the Lord”, the “Prince of the Divine Presence” and “the Lesser God”. All of these titles are blasphemous as hell to call anybody who isn’t God, and the sages speculated that Metatron had received a certain investiture, becoming a viceroy or a regent or even a sort of emanation of God into material reality. If you needed to hear something from the lips of God Himself, Metatron was the one to talk to.

The angels said Metatron had been with them in the early days of the world; that he used to dwell hidden in a whirlwind in the center of their angelic councils. When the angelic hierarchy shattered during Satan’s rebellion, he floated down into the sea and was seen no more.

Since the cracks appeared in the sky, word had come from sailors of a mysterious boat, all purple with golden sails. They would see it on the horizon, but when they tried to approach it vanished at impossible speeds. Sometimes atop the boat they would spot a light, brilliant shining white, like an angelic figure. And the angels said ah, yes, it is Metatron risen from the deep, but you will not catch him, for he keeps his own counsel. And none see him and live.

The Comet King sought Metatron. High above the world, his spy satellites sought the telltale golden sails of his boat. From sea to shining sea, his submarines and destroyers kept watch. Nothing.

So he decided he was doing things wrong. Finding God wasn't the sort of thing you did with a spy satellite or a submarine. It was the sort of thing you did on a quest. So he built himself a ship. A superfast yacht with seven sails, six from the colors of the rainbow and one jet-black. Every beam and mast built with strange magics only he knew. He called it *All Your Heart*, because it is written in Jeremiah: "You will seek God and find Him when you seek with all your heart." Then he left the kingdom in the hands of his daughter Nathanda and left from Puerto Penasco in search of Metatron.

Six months later, he returned. When they asked if he had found Metatron, he said yes. When they asked if he had learned the Name, he said yes. When they asked for details, he said no. A few years later he died, and the details died with him. And all that time poor *All Your Heart* sat anchored in Puerto Penasco, doing nothing.

"I'm just drunk enough to want to hear more," said Lin.

"The Other King hasn't even posted guards yet," the big man said patiently. James was starting to think that maybe the man *genuinely* wasn't drunk. "We walk into

the harbor, walk right on, and sail away in the middle of the night. We can be round Baja before anybody notices we're gone. Nobody can catch the *All Your Heart*. It's the fastest ship in the world. We can make it to the California Republic by noon tomorrow and nobody can stop us."

"By legend, each among the seven sails / requires magics hidden to unfurl," said Amoxiel.

"Not that hidden. The first sail, the red one, catches normal wind. The second sail is ritual magic; you – " he gestured toward Lin " – say you're a magician. The violet sail is angel magic, and you're an angel. The green sail is music. You by any chance able to sing?"

"If I try to sing, boat would probably sink like a stone," said James. "And how do you know so much about this?"

"I sang in a church choir for twenty years," said the bartender. He spoke with only a hint of a Mexican accent. "They said I was very good."

"Hey!" said James, cursing himself inside for letting them be overheard. "I thought you didn't speak English."

The bartender leaned on the table, leaned in very closely. "Look," he said. "A third of the population of

this town got massacred, another third has fled. I'm stuck serving soldiers and pretending not to understand English so I don't get tortured for overhearing the wrong thing. And *All Your Heart*! The greatest ship in the world! My friend, I would give my arm to ride that ship for one hour. I am a poor man, I have no family, I have nothing left here. But to be on *All Your Heart*, that would be something! If you are going to hijack the ship, I am with you."

"Hold it!" said Lin. "Nobody's trying to get out of here! Mystery man over here just sat down and started giving us his hare-brained plan, and we're all drunk enough to listen. Nobody here is serious about this."

"I'm serious and wish to leave tonight," said Amoxiel.

Lin and James stared at him.

"You humans are inured to wrongs like these / I cannot bear them; I would rather die / beneath the breakers of the thunderous main..."

James elbowed Amoxiel. Amoxiel stopped.

"So what happens if we reach California?" James asked, still barely believing he was taking this seriously. "They're scared to death of the Other King. They'll probably extradite anyone he tells them to extradite."

“We could go further,” said the bartender. “Hawaii. Tahiti. The Malabar-Zanzibar Consortium. Sell the boat and live on a beach eating coconuts the rest of our lives.”

“Who’s going to buy the *All Your Heart* if the Other King wants it?” asked Lin. “It’d be suicide. Picking up contraband from the scariest guy in the world.”

“You want to get rich,” said the big man, “here’s what you do. Sell cabins on the ship. Most elite cruise ever. Sell cabins for ten million dollars, then go off and do the same thing the Comet King did. Try to find God. You don’t think there are billionaires who want a chance to talk to the big guy face to face?”

“Like a whale-watching trip,” said Lin. “But for archangels instead of whales. Well, I’m sold. And by sold, I mean super drunk.”

“Hold on a minute!” said James. “We don’t even know these people! We don’t even know their names!”

“I’m Tomas,” said the bartender. “Tomas Castro. Now let’s go before somebody tells internal security what your friend here was shouting.”

James took another sip of his beer. He could probably rein the others in, he figured. A couple hours and they’d be a little more sober, a little clearer thinking. Lin was a

smart guy; he would see reason. Amoxiel had always been a wild card, but when he was off the holy water he could barely get out of bed, let alone do crazy plots.

The question was whether he *wanted* to. He hadn't gone out to see the crucifixions, but the news had hit him hard. He'd thought the Other King was just another warlord. A very lucky warlord, to kill the Comet King and take over half his kingdom. But in the end, no different from anybody else. Now he figured the guy was a psychopath, at *least*. He'd tried not to think about it too much because there was no other option. But the big man, for all his drunken bluster, was right. No guard posted over the *All Your Heart*. The most beautiful ship in the world, just sitting in port, waiting to be sailed off.

And then there was the rather high chance that he would be executed very painfully just for hanging around with these people and holding this conversation.

"If we're going to do this," said James, "then by God, let's do it now, before we get sober enough to think it through. And you," James said, pointing to the big man. "None of us know anything about sailing. If we're just supposed to trust you to pilot this ship on your own, I think we at least deserve to know your name and how you got here."

"I'm nobody," said the big man. "I'm with nobody."

“Great,” said James. “Captain fucking Nemo.”

Chapter 23: Now Descendeth Out Of Heaven A City

Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the LORD.

— *Obadiah 1:4*

*Afternoon, May 12, 2017
San Francisco*

For a few moments she could still hear it in the back of her mind. A note, a single impossibly pure note that seemed to overpower everything else. But it grew fainter and fainter and finally faded away entirely. She didn't miss it. She knew a minute longer up there and she would have lost herself, lost even the ability to know what losing herself entailed, lost the ability to think or feel or know or question anything ever again, turned into a perfect immobile crystal that was blindingly beautiful and totally inert.

“Oh God,” said Ana. They had brought her aboard the ship and helped her onto a bed in one of the cabins. “I almost felt transcendent joy. It was awful.”

None of them laughed. There were three of them. An older man with a short white beard. A military-looking

fellow with bright eyes and closely cut hair. And an Asian man wearing a necklace. Ana's addled brain searched for relevant memories and came back empty.

"I'm John," said the older man. "These are James and Lin. Welcome to *Not A Metaphor*."

Memories came crashing in. The Comet King's old yacht, converted into a diversion for the idle rich and renamed to head off questions from annoying kabbalists. Fastest ship in the world. Ten million bucks a month for a cabin, sold to rich people who wanted to talk to God, not in a pious prayer way, but in a way that maybe gave them the chance to punch Him in the face depending on what He answered. Traveled the world. Docked at weird out-of-the-way places to avoid the attention of the Other King, who was supposed to have a personal grudge against it. She tried to remember if she'd ever heard anything about the crew, but there was nothing.

"I'm Ana," said Ana. "What happened to me?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say you drank from a water fountain in San Francisco."

Ana nodded.

II.

1971. Ken Kesey was taking LSD with his friend Paul Foster. Then things got weird.

Paul tried to stand. He took a second to catch his breath. Kesey – the thing in Kesey’s body – seemed content to let him. It just stood there, hovering.

“W...who are you?” asked Paul.

“NEIL,” said the thing in Kesey’s body.

“But...who...what ARE you?”

“NEIL,” said the thing in Kesey’s body, somewhat more forcefully.

Quivering from head to toe, Paul knelt.

“NO. I AM NEIL ARMSTRONG. ELEVEN MONTHS AGO, I FELL THROUGH A CRACK IN THE SKY INTO THE EIN SOF, THE TRUE GOD WHOSE VASTNESS SURROUNDS CREATION. LIKE ENOCH BEFORE ME, I WAS INVESTED WITH A PORTION OF THE MOST HIGH, THEN SENT BACK INTO CREATION TO SERVE AS A MESSENGER. I AM TO SHOW MANKIND A CITY UPON A HILL, A NEW JERUSALEM THAT STANDS BEYOND ALL CONTRARIES AND NEGATIONS.”

Paul just stared at him, goggle-eyed.

“YOU DO NOT BELIEVE. I WILL GIVE YOU A SIGN. ARISE AND OPEN YOUR BIBLE, AND READ THE FIRST WORDS UPON WHICH YOUR EYES FALL.”

Mutely, Paul rose to his feet and took a Bible off his shelf, an old dog-eared King James Version he thought he might have stolen from a hotel once. He opened it somewhere near the middle and read from Psalm 89:12-13:

The north and the south Thou hast created them:
Tabor and Hermon shall rejoice in Thy name.
Thou hast a mighty arm: strong is Thy hand, and
high is Thy right hand

William Blake described mystical insight as “seeing through the eye and not with it”. Stripping away all of the layers of mental post-processing and added interpretation until you see the world plainly, as it really is. And by a sudden grace Paul was able to see through his eyes, saw the words themselves and not the meaning behind them:

arm strong is Thy hand

For a moment, Paul still doubted – did God really send His messengers through druggies who had just taken

monster doses of LSD? Then he read the verse again:

high is Thy right hand

For the second time in as many minutes, he fell to his knees.

“IN ORDER TO INSTANTIATE THE NEW JERUSALEM, YOU MUST GATHER TOGETHER ALL OF THE LSD IN THE CITY AND PLACE IT IN A RESERVOIR WHICH I WILL SHOW YOU. WHEN EVERYONE HAS ACHIEVED DIVINE CONSCIOUSNESS, IT WILL CREATE A CRITICAL MASS THAT WILL ALLOW A NEW LEVEL OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION. I WILL BECOME ONE WITH THE CITY, BECOME ITS GUARDIAN AND ITS GUIDE. AND NONE SHALL BE POOR, OR SICK, OR DYING, AND NONE SHALL CRY OUT TO THE LORD FOR SUCCOUR UNANSWERED.”

“But...if I put LSD in the water supply...if the whole city...are you saying we, like, *secede* from the United States?...you don’t understand. We’ve been trying to spread a new level of consciousness for *years*. It never...if the whole city tries to become some kind of...if they don’t pay taxes or anything...we’re going to be in the *biggest* trouble. You don’t know Nixon, he’s ruthless, he’d crush it, it’d never...”

“YOU STILL DO NOT BELIEVE. OPEN YOUR BIBLE A SECOND TIME.”

Paul Foster opened his Bible a second time, to Isaiah 62:8:

The LORD hath sworn by His right hand, and by the arm of His strength: Surely I will no more give thy corn to be meat for thine enemies; and the sons of the stranger shall not drink thy wine, for the which thou hast laboured. But they that have gathered it shall eat it, and praise the Lord; and they that have brought it together shall drink it in the courts of my holiness. Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people. Behold, the Lord hath proclaimed unto the end of the world, Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. And they shall call them, the holy people, the redeemed of the Lord: and thou shalt be called, sought out, a city not forsaken.

A few minutes later, Ken Kesey was on the floor, his eyes were back to their normal color, and Paul Foster was shaking him. “Ken,” he was saying. “Ken, wake up. Ken, we are going to need to find a *lot* of LSD.”

III.

“That’s why you never drink the water in San Francisco,” John told Ana. “It’s not some mystical blessing upon the city. It’s just a couple milligrams of LSD per liter of drinking water. A single swallow and you end up partaking of the beatific vision as mediated through Neil Armstrong. They keep the LSD around to maintain the trance and induct anybody else who comes in. I’ve been here half a dozen times and it still creeps me out.”

“Okay,” said Ana. She looked out the window again. The iridescent sphere was starting to pulsate.

“John’s too humble to say so,” said James. “But he saved your life. We saw that thing you did with the winds, and went up to investigate, but by the time we got up there you were way gone. He was the one who brought you down.”

“Dragged you out of the Ein Sof and into the created world,” said John. “That’s the only way to do it, remind you of all the dichotomies and tradeoffs and things that don’t apply up there.”

“You’re lucky John and Lin are educated men,” said James. “Me, I would have just been shaking you and shouting profanity.”

An angel walked into the lounge. “Oh,” he said. “She’s awake. I’m Amoxiel. Did you decide to join our crew?”

“Join the crew?!”

“I was just getting to that, dammit!” said James. He turned to Ana. “I’ll be honest. We didn’t save you because we’re nice people. We saved you because we’re still working on using this ship to its full capacity. Captain says that the yellow sail needs some kind of special kabbalistic Name to work. You seem to know a Name that can summon winds. Sounds like it’s worth a shot. You want to join us? Pay is...well, you’d be a full partner. A few years and you’d be set for life.”

Ana thought for a second. It was almost too perfect. Escape San Francisco, escape UNSONG, go somewhere nobody could find her. She tried not to sound overly enthusiastic. “What’s the work, exactly?”

“Sail the world,” said James. “Lin does his calculations, tries to figure out where Metatron’s boat will appear next. We grab some rich people, head for that spot, try to chase it. You man a sail. Do your incantation, whatever works, sail goes up, we go a little faster. Doesn’t matter. Never catch Metatron. The rich people pay anyway, because they’re desperate and they figure that unlike everyone else they have a pure heart and God would never turn a pure heart away. When you’re

not manning your sail, you're pretty much free. Only two rules. Don't bother the rich people. And don't go into the Captain's quarters. You follow those, you'll be fine. You need to bother someone, bother me. I'm the first mate. It's my job to get bothered."

"Is it just the four of you?"

"Six," said James. "Us, Tomas, and the Captain."

"Oh! I thought John was the captain!"

James laughed. "The captain is the captain. You'll see him eventually. Big guy. Not a lot of facial expressions. Impossible to miss. He's a very private man."

"What's his name?"

"He is," James repeated, "a very private man."

"So private he doesn't have a name?"

"If you have to you can call him Captain Nemo."

"Nemo? Like the –"

"Exactly like the," said Lin. He sounded resigned.

"You have," said John, "about a half hour to decide. After that, we're heading up to Angel Island to pick up

our three passengers, and then we're headed south so we can make it around Cape Horn before Metatron's boat is scheduled to surface off Long Island in a few days."

"Forget the thirty minutes," said Ana. "I'm in."

"Good," said James. "Welcome to *Not A Metaphor*. Start thinking about what you'll ask God if you ever catch Him."

"Isn't it obvious?" asked Ana.

James, Lin, and John looked at her as though it was by no means obvious.

"The whole problem of evil! Why do bad things happen to good people? Why would a perfectly good God create a world filled with – "

"Yeah, good luck with that," said James, and left the cabin.

Interlude ໒: The General Assembly

And Satan stood up against them in the global environment.

— kingjamesprogramming.tumblr.com

December 14, 1972

New York City

“Ladies. Gentlemen. Mr. Secretary General.

We are a proud people. Like so many of the other fledgling countries represented here today, our national identity was forged in a struggle against imperialist aggression, and it was our pride that told us to continue fighting when all other counsel urged surrender. It is with that same pride that I stand before you today as the newest member of the United Nations, honored to at last be recognized as part of the world community.

I am not the monster you think. In my spare time, I play the violin competitively. I help blind children. I raise awareness of healthy plant-based foods. And my country? We are not your enemy. We are strange, yes. But we share the same values as all of you, the same drive to build a more just and equitable world.

What the American Dream is in fantasy, we are in reality. We accept everyone alike, regardless of race,

color, or creed. We put up no barbed wire, we turn back no boats full of refugees. We take heart in the old words of Emma Lazarus: *give me your tired, your poor. Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send them, your homeless, your tempest-tossed, to me.* And send them you do, a tide of humanity struggling toward our gates with a desperation that puts Ellis Island to shame, and we turn none back, nay, not even the meanest. Especially not the meanest.

What the workers' paradise of the Soviets aspires toward, we have reached. There are no class distinctions: slave is treated the same as sultan, stockbroker the same as sailor. The almighty dollar has been cast low; no one need worry about hunger or illness, nor shiver in the cold for want of a home. Private property has been abolished, yet none feel its want. Marx describes capitalist society as "everlasting uncertainty and agitation", but within our borders precisely the opposite prevails.

We do not persecute dissidents. We do not censor the media. We do not pollute. We treat men and women equally. We allow the practice of any or no religion. We fund no terrorists. We build no bombs. Our criminal justice system is free from bias, and its punishments are always just.

No, we are not your enemy. There are those here who would accuse us of a campaign of subversion, of trying to found an empire. Nothing could be further from the truth. Other countries bully their neighbors into becoming puppets or satellite states with their tanks and bombs. We lead by example. Our way of life spreads, not by the sword, but the unleashed yearnings of millions of people around the world.

Sixteen years ago, Nikita Khrushchev threw down the gauntlet of Cold War. 'History is on our side!' he said. 'We will bury you!' Ladies and gentlemen, I maintain that even the slightest familiarity with history suffices to prove it is on *our* side. We will not bury you. Yet when you are buried, as all men will be, many of you who now count yourself our foes will find you have been on our side without knowing it.

No, we are not your enemy. You say we are your enemy, you hope it is true, but in your heart you know it is not. We are allies to each of you. Every time there is a protest to be crushed, you have called upon us for assistance. Every time there is an election to be won, you have turned to us for advice. Every time there is a war to fight, you have asked for our aid. And we have never been stingy in granting it. All your glory you have built with our tools. Tools we were happy to lend at no cost, save the tiniest of sacrifices, one with no effect on gross national product, one that produces no

trade deficit.

Ladies, gentlemen, Mr. Secretary-General. I have no enemies in this room. We have always been comrades in spirit. Now we are comrades in name as well. For this, I thank you.”

When Thamiel had finished speaking, he lingered for a moment at the podium, almost as if daring anyone to object. No one objected. His second head remained locked in its silent scream. Smoke twirled around him like buzzing flies, and his skin seemed rough with cancerous growths in the dim light of the chamber. But it wasn't just fear that kept the ambassadors quiet. These were diplomats – that is, liars – and for just a moment they saw themselves as they were and paid obeisance to the Prince of Lies.

A sudden gust of scalding wind arose seemingly from nowhere, knocked two of the delegates apart from each other, scattered their nametags. A puff of brimstone in the middle, which cleared as quickly as it had arrived.

On the right, HAITI.

On the left, HONDURAS.

In the middle: HELL.

The nameplate was tastefully on fire.

Chapter 24: Why Dost Thou Come To Angels' Eyes?

*Morning, May 12, 2017
Los Angeles*

Early morning sun beat on my face. Clouds flew by me like trucks rushing down a highway, and the heavens seemed to sing. It's weird. You spend your entire adult life searching for Names of God and hanging out with angels, and the closest you come to a spiritual experience is paddling a flying kayak thousands of feet above San Bernardino County. I was flush with excitement at my close escape and at my *other* close escape and frankly at being pressed up against Jane so closely and of course at the view where I could see all of Southern California stretching out around us, lines of crumpled mountains one after another, and then...

There's an old California joke. What happens when the smog lifts? The answer is the name of one of the state's top colleges: UCLA.

I saw LA.

There was something very precious about the California coast from this perspective, a narrow strip between the foreboding mountains and the endless oceans, a little

wire of humanity trapped between the desert and the deep blue sea.

California had come through the last few decades very well. Of all the United States, it had been least damaged by the sudden shattering of the neat physical laws of reality into a half-coherent delirium. I think part of the reason was that in a way California had never entirely been a real place. It was impossible to live there for any amount of time and think it was just another state, like Nevada or Ohio or Vermont. It was a state like joy, or exaltation, the ultimate west, part of the world only by a technicality. Named for an Amazon queen in the terrestrial paradise. Colonized by fortune-seekers who were told the rivers were strewn with gold nuggets the size of your fist.

The beach bums and the wannabe actresses and the hippies and the venture capitalists, all alike in that they had one foot on that little patch and the other in some fantasy of their own imagination. From that tiny winding wire of precious flat ground had come John Steinbeck, hippies, gay rights, the computer revolution, Ronald Reagan, every Hollywood movie, blue jeans, Barbie dolls, Joe DiMaggio, fortune cookies, popsicles, lap dances, hula hoops, the Beach Boys, Disneyland, an entire continent's worth of positive affect scrunched up into a coastline and paved over with Mission architecture.

“How much further?” I asked my mysterious benefactor.

“Not far,” she said. “We’ll land in the outskirts of the city. It should make us harder to notice.” The kayak was a bright white, making its bottom almost invisible from the ground. I wasn’t sure what was keeping the Marines on the cloud above from spotting us. Some kind of enchantment? Stealth technology? Were stealth kayaks even a thing?

“Who are you?” I asked her.

I’d been turning the evidence over in my mind ever since we’d left the citadel. She was young, though I couldn’t say how young. Asian-looking. Perfect English. Tall and thin. Very long hair. Fast. Wore a leather jacket and black pants, like some kind of action movie heroine. Able to decode exotic numbering systems on the fly. Had a flying kayak. Knew her way around an angelic bastion but apparently wasn’t supposed to be there. Tough enough to consider leaving me stuck there, but decent enough to decide against it.

My top guess was spy. If I had to guess a country, Harmonious Jade Dragon Empire, but not going to rule out the Great Basin Empire either.

“Loose lips sink ships,” she said, which was either a

reference to the old adage about not giving up secret information during a time of war, or else some kind of warning that the spell holding our kayak in the sky was sensitive to noise in the same way as the invisibility spell. By the precautionary principle, I shut up.

Somewhere south of Santa Barbara the dreaminess of California starts to become oppressive, to excrete and take physical form, giving the sky itself a hazy softness like an opium trance. Where the relaxation becomes frantic and the fantasy becomes feverish; a city somehow congested in its sprawl.

Do I even need to discuss the kabbalistic meaning of the name “Los Angeles”? Kabbalah deals with the hidden, but Los Angeles wears its allegiance on its sleeve for all to see. Here Los, the Blakean archetype of the fires of creativity, has his foundry; the iron smith-storyteller god forging dreams for an emotionally starved world. Here, in this city of angels.

Well, one angel. *Mostly* still an angel. I could barely make out the hilltop compound of Gadiel, *la Reina de los Ángeles*, somewhere to the west.

“And who are *you*, anyway?” Jane asked as we neared the outermost tendrils of the megalopolis. “Sits alone in an angel bastion. Solves locational arithmetic problems. Knows secret Names.”

It could have been a compliment, but it wasn't, not the way she said it. It was more like chewing me out for daring to be mysterious in her vicinity. Complicating her plans. And the entitlement! Demanding my secrets just a moment after refusing to give up her own!

I was tempted to bargain, knowledge for knowledge. But truth was, I was feeling pretty entitled too. Sure, I was curious what she was doing, what book we had just stolen. But my secrets were more important than hers. I needed to relax somewhere dark and quiet and re-establish full telepathic contact with Ana. Then I needed to get a book on name error correction. Then I needed to get myself a good computer. Then taking over the world and becoming the next Comet King could continue apace.

Sure, it was *flattering* for her to ask who I was. Wasn't that what I'd always wanted? "Who is this man, this Aaron Teller, who breaks impossible codes in mere minutes, and knows the hidden holy things?" But going any further with Jane was way too much of a risk.

"Man of mystery," I said as nonchalantly as I could.

Jane was quiet for a second. Then she grabbed the paddle from me. We hung motionless. She jumped onto the front of the kayak, spun around, took out her pistol, jammed it right into my head.

“You can become invisible,” she hissed. “You know locational arithmetic which means you’ve been doing work that *requires* locational arithmetic which means you’ve used Friedman’s Conjecture which means you’re a passable kabbalist. Sometimes passable kabbalists get very, very lucky. Maybe one is lucky enough to discover a secret Name that grants invisibility. If he were to do that, the only question is who would get to him first. A nice person, who asks him politely to accompany her to somewhere very far away where he can be debriefed and kept safe? Or a not so nice person, who would torture all his secrets out of him and then kill him to make sure he didn’t tell anyone else?”

“Um,” I said.

“I’m neither,” said Jane. “I’m a practical person. I will ask you politely to accompany me someplace far away where you can be debriefed and kept safe. And if I detect the slightest hesitation in your answer, then I will switch tactics and do the other thing.”

“Um,” I said. “Let’s go to the place.”

“Good,” said Jane. “Now, who are you?”

“My name is Aaron Smith,” I said. “I studied kabbalah in Stanford. With the help of a prophetic dream, I

discovered a Name that granted invisibility. I used it to go sneaking around places I shouldn't, and finally I got cornered, and I spoke the Vanishing Name, and ended up in that library with you."

"You're not telling the whole truth," she said. But she shrugged. "I guess I can't blame you. Let me give you an offering of goodwill. I work for the Dividend Monks in Colorado. The book we've taken records a prophecy given by them in secret and since forgotten, which I was asked to retrieve. We will land, go to the hotel where I am staying, and make contact with our transportation back to Colorado. Once you are there you will stay in the monastery and be questioned further. What happens then is for you to decide. But you seem to have enemies here, and there are worse places for fugitives than the Divide."

I nodded, mutely. Actually, she was right. There were worse places.

There was a theory that the shape of the Tree of Life corresponded to the shape of the American continent. That would mean that the perfectly balanced center of the Tree, the Pillar of Harmony, corresponded to the Continental Divide. Some mystics claimed that standing exactly on the Continental Divide allowed them to balance the energies, achieve strange powers, and see into the future. They had straggled into Colorado and

formed the Dividend Monks, becoming some of the earliest and strongest allies of the Comet King and his children. Colorado was a civilized country, and I could expect better treatment from the Cometspawn than I was likely to get from Malia Ngo or any of the other warlords in what was left of the West. And the Dividend Monks, notwithstanding whatever book they'd needed to send Jane to go steal, had a fantastic library probably filled to the brim with name error correction references. Sit tight on a mountain somewhere, wait for Ana to become powerful enough to rescue me. It sounded like a plan.

We landed on the outskirts of Los Angeles, hid the flying kayak under a pile of wood, then took the bus into town. Jane insisted I hold her hand the whole way; presumably you can never be too cautious with a prisoner who can turn invisible. I didn't mind. She was pretty, in a scary way. Rich, too, apparently. She was staying at a penthouse suite in the Biltmore. The Dividend Monks must pay well.

When we finally reached her room, she made a beeline for the dresser, opened the third drawer, and retrieved six purple sparkling Beanie Baby dragons.

Then she panicked.

Holding my hand was forgotten. Keeping track of me at

all was forgotten. I could have walked straight out the door and spoken the Vanishing Name if I'd wanted to. Maybe I should have. She ransacked the room, slamming open every drawer, looking under the covers, under the bed, tearing open her suitcase and flinging various mysterious objects in every direction. It was like she was having a fit.

“Aaron,” she said to me, when she finally remembered my existence at all. “*Somebody has stolen the seventh dragon.*”

Chapter 25: Lie Down Before My Feet, O Dragon

*Afternoon, May 12, 2017
Los Angeles*

I.

[Thou shalt not krill], said a voice on the edge of my consciousness, and the organizing soul within me – the kabbalists would have called it the neshamah – awoke, even as my body dozed on the hotel bed.

[Thou shalt not commit idolphinty] I answered, but I knew deep down it was a second-rate attempt.

[Weak,] said Ana. [Where are you? Are you safe? Are you okay?]

[I spent the morning kayaking with a pretty girl, and then she invited me back to her hotel room and handcuffed me to the bed.]

[Really?] asked Ana.

I opened my eyes, taking care not to break the hypnopompic trance that smoothed the telepathic link between us. The clock told me it was early afternoon. Jane was nowhere to be found. I still had a gag in my

mouth to prevent me from speaking any Names, and I still had my hands cuffed to the bedposts to prevent me from taking off the gag. I'd asked Jane why she carried a gag and handcuffs with her in her luggage, and she hadn't answered. Too rushed to restrain me so that she could run out and search for her precious Beanie Baby.

[Really,] I said, and sent Ana my memories of that morning. Speaking the Vanishing Name right under Malia Ngo's watchful eyes. Escaping the Strategic Angel Reserve with Jane. The frantic search for her missing Beanie Baby, no amount of pleading inducing her to offer an explanation. Then her restraining me so she could expand the search to the rest of the city. [And you! What happened to you? You were with me in UNSONG! And then you learned a Name! Where are you? Are you safe? Where is Erica?]

[I'm on a boat,] she said. [I haven't seen Erica, but she's not dead. The link from the partial marriage ceremony would have told me that, I think. I keep trying to telepathically ping her, but I've never been able to feel her as strong as you.] Then she sent me her own memories. Sarah appearing mysteriously in her hotel room. San Francisco. The Comet King's ship.

[So you don't have the computer?]

[No.]

Everything I'd been doing up until now had been predicated on Ana having Sarah. If Ana had Sarah, the plan was still intact. She would become mighty. She would rescue me. We would be rich and important. If Ana didn't have Sarah, then the error correction was our only hope. Otherwise, I'd be back to being nobody. The thought was somehow worse than being a fugitive, worse than being cuffed to a bed. I could take a lot if I was somebody. The thought of falling back into my cog-in-the-machine status filled me with dread.

Ana felt my worries. [As soon as we reach a friendly port,] she said, [I'll find the error correction books. Or if I can get in contact with Erica, I'll try to get her to read them and send us the information we need.]

I sent her a burst of grateful encouragement.

[In the meantime,] she asked [do you need rescuing?]

Jane didn't seem evil in the same way as Ngo. And Colorado was a good place. But the handcuffs on my wrists reminded me that she probably didn't have my best interests at heart either. And exactly because Colorado was a good place, it was the sort of place that she would reassure me we were going, even if she worked for the Harmonious Jade Dragon Empire or somewhere further afield. I noticed that she had told me we were going back to the Biltmore to meet her

transportation back to Colorado, then left on her search without expressing any worries that she might miss said transportation. Jane didn't seem evil, exactly, but she was suspicious, secretive, and maybe crazy.

[I think I might,] I said.

[Then when we reach our next port, I'll get off and try to find you. I don't think these people will try to stop me. They seem nice.] I felt no fear in her mind. Yes, Ana had the Spectral Name and potentially the element of surprise. That was a pretty deadly combination. But still. No fear. I sent her a burst of positive emotion.

[One more thing,] she added, and she sent me the Airwalker and Zephyr Names.

[Who do you think got the computer and gave those to you?]

[Honestly?] asked Ana. [God.]

[You think God directly intervened in the universe to help you and your friend when they were in trouble? Don't they warn you against that kind of thing in Theodicy 101?]

I didn't get to hear her answer. The jingling noise of a key turned in the lock.

[Jane's coming back,] I said. [You tell your mysterious

billionaire sailor friends to keep you safe.]

[You tell your psychotic spy girl friend to keep her hands off you,] she thought back. [You're already kabbalistically married!]

I sent her a burst of the most positive emotions I could manage just as Jane flung open the door and turned on the light, breaking my trance. I startled fully awake.

Jane looked a little sweatier and dirtier, but the permanent scowl on her face had only deepened.

"I got you some food," she said, putting a bag of McDonald's on the counter, "and some clean clothes. Get dressed. We're going to Las Vegas."

"Las Vegas?" I asked, after she had taken the gag off.

"The manager doesn't know who took my dragon. The cleaning staff all say they didn't take it. No toy store in the whole city has a replacement. But they all say there's a big specialty store in Las Vegas that will. So we're going to go to Vegas. Get dressed." She unlocked the cuffs.

Jane was nothing if not efficient. Less than five minutes later, we were on our way out. I grabbed the bag of food and a bottle of Apple-Ade from the mini-bar.

She glanced at me as I took the drink, but said nothing. Which was just as well, considering.

II.

“Jane,” I had asked her very gingerly, earlier that morning, as she was nearly tearing the room into pieces, “what do you need seven toy dragons for?”

She’d rounded on me. “You shut up!” she snapped. “You know too much already! If you hadn’t screwed everything up on the Angel Reserve we wouldn’t be in this mess! Mind your own business!”

Then she went back to searching like a madwoman. She went into the other room of the suite, and I could hear her opening and slamming the doors.

I walked over to the dresser, looked at the six purple dragons inside. I was no expert on Beanie Babies, but they looked pretty normal. I shook one. It felt like there were regular beans inside. Very carefully, I squeezed it. Nothing happened.

Behind the dresser I saw a glint of purple.

The seventh Beanie Baby had fallen through the back of the drawer, and was wedged in between the dresser and the wall. I reached my arm in and grabbed.

“Jane!” I called.

From the other room, again, her voice. “Shut up! I swear by the Most High, if I have to tell you to shut up one more time, I will burn your tongue out. You think this is funny? Just. Shut. Up!”

Then more slamming.

Atop the dresser was a mini bar; in the mini bar was a plastic bottle of Apple-Ade tinted an almost opaque green. I poured the Apple-Ade down the sink, stuffed the seventh Beanie Baby into the bottle, then put it back on to the bar.

Why had I done it? I wasn’t sure, now. I was being treated like an infant. And I was being kept in the dark. I hate being treated like an infant and kept in the dark. I was sick of reacting; I wanted to act.

But the more I thought about it, the more I approved of my previous choice. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something terrible would happen when she got that seventh Beanie Baby, that it would complete whatever arcane plan needed a book from the angels’ own library, that there would be something very final about her getting it.

And now we were going to Vegas. A dark place, to be sure, but not Jane’s place and not on her terms. If Ana

was coming to rescue me, I'd rather Jane be off searching for a Beanie Baby in Vegas than doing whatever she would be doing when things started going her way.

Interlude ʹ: The Broadcast

The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was spreading a catchy quote denying all tricks greater than the one about faking nonexistence.

— [*Steven Kaas*](#)

[Content warning: Part II of this chapter contains graphic scenes including references to Hell, gore, rape, psychological torture, and death. Some commenters are saying it was excessive even beyond the level suggested by this content warning, so take that into account. If you don't want to read it, you can skip to Part III without missing too much plot-wise. Thanks to Pyth for helping out as Hell Consultant.]

I.

After three months living with Ana, she learned that I hadn't seen the Broadcast.

We'd been talking about theodicy, as usual. Ana was explaining how the Cainites had made the terrible mistake of trying to munchkin Biblical morality.

Munchkin-ing is this idea from role-playing games where instead of trying to tell a good story, you search for weird little loopholes that violate the spirit of the rules and make things much too easy. The Bible says – check your Luke 15:6 – that “in heaven there will be more rejoicing over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine souls that are righteous and have no need of

repentance.” Solve for maximum rejoicing in heaven, and the obvious munchkin solution is to deliberately sin in order to repent later. Add some common-sense assumptions about the relationship between magnitude of crime and magnitude of repentance-related heavenly rejoicing, and...well, you can see where this is going.

Ana was against the Cainites. I was provisionally for them.

“You can’t just follow the letter of the law and not its spirit!” Ana was protesting.

“Holy frick you’re a *kabbalist* and now you’re against the letter of the law? Forget the letter! We’re supposed to believe that even the tiny extra dots and brushstrokes on some of the letters in the Bible have special meaning! When God said you couldn’t start a fire on the Sabbath, and the rabbis interpreted that to mean you couldn’t use electricity either, the Israelis just went ahead and programmed all their elevators to constantly go up and down stopping on every floor, because then you could enter and not push buttons and you wouldn’t technically be the one initiating the electricity. The whole *point* of the kabbalah is that God wouldn’t include something in the Bible that you could interpret a certain way unless He meant you to have that interpretation. And you’re saying a really really obvious thing not just suggesting that repentance is better than

righteousness but actually giving a numerical conversion factor was a *mistake*?”

“You’re talking about the Jewish Bible,” said Ana. “The Christians don’t do things that way. And God knew the Christians wouldn’t do things that way, so He wouldn’t insert that kind of complicated subtext in the Christian Bible.”

“God couldn’t stop adding complicated subtext to save His life,” I said. “How does that Galileo quote go? I cannot believe that the same God who hath endowed us with the tendency to overinterpret things in clever self-serving ways intended us to forego its use.”

Ana swatted my face playfully.

“What was that for?”

“I cannot believe that the same God who hath endowed me with a hand to slap you with intended me to forego its use.”

“Careful,” I said, picking up a big pillow from the couch. “God hath endowed me with a pillow.”

“You wouldn’t,” said Ana.

I swung it at her really hard, barely missing a table full of books and a potted plant. “See,” I said, as it hit her in

the face. “I hereby repent of doing that. And now Heaven rejoices over me more than you.”

“But seriously,” said Ana, and she *was* serious now. “Why would God put a verse in the Bible calculated to make us want to be as sinful as possible? What if someone goes on a murder spree or something?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But we know that ‘serpent’ has the same gematria value as ‘messiah’, and that kabbalists since time immemorial have been saying that there’s some deep sense in which evil is the key to redemption. Also, God created a universe filled with evil. That was definitely a thing that happened.”

“Tell me about it,” said Ana.

I decided to take her literally. “Look. We know God has to desire evil on some level. Otherwise He wouldn’t have created Thamiel and set him loose in the universe to promote it. So why not actually put something in the Bible that sufficiently defective people will use as an excuse to be evil?”

“You’re heading towards repentance theodicy,” said Ana. “The theory that the reason God put evil in the Universe was that repentance is so great, and without evil you can’t repent. But I...don’t see it. Repentance is great because it makes there stop being evil. We

celebrate repentance more than we maybe do with constant saintliness because we want to send a big signal to other evildoers that we will welcome and celebrate them if they stop being evil. Somebody beating me up and then saying sorry and he won't do it again is preferable to somebody beating me up and intending to continue to do so. But not to never getting beaten up in the first place."

"Eh," I said. "Maybe God just happens to like repentance for its own sake. It wouldn't be the weirdest thing He ever did. I mean, He created the platypus."

"See, this is what I hate about theodicy!" said Ana. "Everyone just wants to dismiss it and say maybe God is weird. Like, of course God is weird! But it needs to be a kind of weird that makes sense. It has to have deeper patterns and be ultimately scrutable. I really *don't* think that the same God who hath endowed us with reason intended us to forego its use."

"The Universe sucks," I said. "Deal with it."

"The whole problem is that we can't deal with it! If the universe just sucked a little, we could deal with it. But nobody can deal with the full extent of the universe's suckiness. Not when it happens to them personally. Not even when they witness it first hand. The only reason anyone can deal with it at all is because they never

really think about it, they keep it off in their peripheral vision where it never really shows up clearly. It's like how everybody knew Hell existed, but nobody freaked out until they saw the Broadcast."

"I can't speak to that," I said. "Never saw the Broadcast myself."

Ana was startled. "Really? Why not?"

So the first reason was that it was a TV broadcast and there was no television anymore. TV broadcasting had stopped working sometime around the mid-1980s, before I was born. A victim of the general if weirdly non-uniform decay in technology and the physical laws that supported it. The Internet still worked, but for reasons no one had been able to figure out it couldn't handle video or audio, even though the programmers swore back and forth that it ought to be easy. The only visual technology that still ran consistently – besides old-fashioned film reels – was VHS tapes. Some people said Thamiel had specifically intervened to keep VHS running, for the sake of the Broadcast – obviously no one was going to play it in a movie theater. But without any reason to have a TV, that didn't matter much. If you wanted to watch the Broadcast, you had to hunt down someone with a TV, hunt down a VCR, and hunt down a taped copy of the Broadcast, which was either illegal or just *not done*.

The second reason was that I was scared. The Broadcast had destroyed the original United States, driven a lot of people insane, even made a couple commit suicide despite that maybe being literally the worst possible response to its contents. I like to think of myself as a dabbler in forbidden mysteries, but the Broadcast just had the wrong ratio of enticing-to-horrifying.

“Uh,” I said. “Never got around to it, I guess.”

“I have a TV and a VCR down in the basement! Let’s watch it now!”

“...why do you have a TV and VCR in the basement?”

“I wanted to see the Broadcast! You don’t think I’ve been studying theodicy for years and never saw it, do you? I went to yard sale after yard sale until I found the right equipment and I ordered the tape from the Harmonious Jade Dragon Empire. You can get *anything* from the Harmonious Jade Dragon Empire if you pay enough money. And the Broadcast is special. It’s a part of history. It’s epic.”

“Uh huh,” I said.

“No, really. I once had an English teacher who had this whole convoluted definition for ‘epic’. To be an epic, a work has to begin in media res, take place in multiple lands, contain a long catalog of objects, include a

talking ship, feature divine intervention, et cetera. But most of all, it had to have a journey into Hell.”

“A talking ship?”

“Something about the Argonauts,” said Ana. “My English teacher said it was a big deal, but I’m pretty sure it’s optional. But then I started thinking. American history starts in media res – there were already cultures on this continent for centuries before 1776. It takes place in multiple countries – America, Canada, Mexico, then later on Cuba, the Philippines, France, Germany, Japan. There’s a catalog – the Census. There’s divine intervention a-plenty. And now there’s the Broadcast. A journey into Hell. That clinched it. We’re all in an epic.”

“Still no talking ship.”

“THE TALKING SHIP IS OPTIONAL. Are you going to watch the Broadcast or not?”

II.

Daniel Santoni had been a beloved National Geographic presenter until his untimely death on an expedition to the Himalayas. He’d also been a serial womanizer with a reputation for harassing his subordinates at work. His death had been mourned by his millions of fans, and met with quiet relief by those closest to him.

Now he stood in front of a pair of gates, twice the height of a man, made of some metal that had long since tarnished into a uniform black. They were set in a great rectangular doorframe, and the doorframe was set in a flat stone surface that stretched past the borders of the scene. It was unclear if it was a floor, ceiling, or wall, and Santoni did not appear to be standing on any particular surface. The doors and their frame were filled with sinuous sculptures of writhing men and women whose faces seemed to be melting into nightmarishly distorted expressions. The intricacy of the work was astounding, like a thousand sculptors had worked on it for a thousand years to get every detail right. Written on them in Gothic blackletter were the words ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER HERE. Above them was also a banner reading WELCOME, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC.

“Welcome,” Santoni told his audience. His voice sounded thin and reedy, and nobody who watched the Broadcast came away thinking Santoni was doing this of his own free will. There were no visible bruises, but he still looked traumatized. “Me and some of my...old crew...have come here to show you a...very special National Geographic special on...Hell.”

There was a soundtrack, but it was the same kind of anti-music I had heard once before on a recording of Thamiel’s audience with the president. I wished there

were subtitles so I could have turned it off.

“Most people think the words on these gates were written by demons to sound foreboding, but that’s not quite right. This is the outside of the gates, where the demons’ sway is lesser. This warning was written as helpful advice by some friendly power.”

The gates of Hell opened, and Santoni and his crew stepped inside. The camera view wheeled around. The inside of the gates said “KEEP HOPING, SUCKERS”.

“Despair has a certain numbing quality,” said Santoni. He sounded like he was speaking from personal experience. “For the demons of Hell, keeping hope alive is a psychological torture, almost as important as the physical tortures they inflict. For more, we join Ga’ashekelah, Lord of the Fourth Circle.”

The scene shifted to a sort of crypt-like office. The furniture was made of people, their bodies broken in unimaginable ways and reformed into chairs and tables. Ga’ashekelah looked like a giant with the head of a panther, except made entirely of snarling mouths. A lower third gave his position as “Torture Expert”. He sat down on a chair made of two people intertwined together in an anatomically impossible way; both screamed silently as he lowered himself down onto them.

“Every couple of years a sinner is in Hell, we arrange some kind of apparent escape opportunity,” the demon told Santoni. “After you’ve been tortured for a century, all your skin flayed off piece by piece then carefully replaced for the next flaying a hundred times in succession, raped in every orifice of your body including the ones you don’t have yet, all your fingernails and toenails pulled off one by one then reattached then pulled off again nonstop for a decade by a demon with a weird fetish for that kind of thing – after that we have a demon come to you and say there’s been a mistake in the cosmic recording, you’re actually supposed to be in Heaven after all. We shower you with apologies, clean you up, and send a party of dignitaries to escort you to the gates. Then when you’re thanking God through a flood of tears for your deliverance, we laugh and bring you right back to fingernail-guy, who wants another hundred years with you.”

He shook his head. “And the fun thing about humans is that you never learn. After another century we can do the exact same thing, every word the same except an ‘and this time we mean it’ at the end, and you’ll still believe us, because the alternative is to admit you’re stuck forever, and you never learn to abandon hope. Once you stop falling for this one, we get more creative. We have a fellow captive tell you he’s learned a secret Name that will finally kill you, grant you the oblivion you crave. He’ll demonstrate by having a few other

people say it, and they'll drop dead on the spot. Overjoyed by the opportunity, you'll speak the Name and...we'll all show up and laugh at you. The fellow captives were all confederates. The Name is a nonsense word, or a phrase cursing God in a forgotten language. We can get more creative than that, but I shouldn't reveal *all* my secrets. You're probably surprised I'm even telling you this at all, but the thing is, *it doesn't matter*. Put someone through enough pain, and they'll be willing to believe anything that promises a moment's relief. Dial the pain up far enough, and you have no *idea* what idiot hopes people are willing to believe. So yes. Our side of the door says KEEP HOPING, SUCKERS. And you will."

Santoni's narration was crisp Mid-Atlantic English with an undertone of horror. "That was Ga'ashekelah, one of the many demons created by Thamiel out of the energy released by the death of Satan, talking about the psychological tortures of Hell. But the physical tortures..." He stopped speaking suddenly, then started to shake and mumble to himself. The scene cut out, and the documentary resumed as if nothing had happened on a plain of iron spotted with towers of iron cages. There was something plant-like and organic to the way they grew in little clusters. Every cage was packed so densely with people that there was no room for movement, only the ones on the outside being able to stretch limbs through the bars and wiggle them around

feebly.

“Most of Hell looks like this,” said Santoni. Now there *were* visible bruises on his face. “The people in these cages...you can’t see it from this vantage point, but the temperature is above a thousand degrees. Those iron bars are molten hot. The sort of bodies these people have, they can’t burn, but they can still feel heat just as intensely as the living. More intensely. They don’t need food to live, but hunger pangs are just as intense. They don’t need water, but the thirst is...” He cut himself off. “There’s another difference between their bodies and ours, which is that their minds don’t break and they don’t acclimate...the thousandth day here is just as bad as the first...” He looked toward someone off camera. “Please don’t make me continue...don’t...” Some kind of signal I couldn’t see. “We’re going to interview some of these people, see what...”

He held the microphone up to somebody whose mouth was pressed up against the edge of the cage.

“HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEELLLLLLLLPPPPPP!” screamed the damned into the microphone, so loud that I jumped and Ana had to put her hand on my knee to stop me from shaking. Then they all started talking and screaming at once. I could only make out one or two snatches:

“I’m Mabel Riggs of 242 Oval Street in Minneapolis, if anyone remembers me, please, do something, I pray, please, I’ll do anything, oh God, you have to...”

“SHUT UP!” yelled the man who was pressed so close to her that I worried her bones might break against the bars of the cage. “SHUT UP YOU BITCH. GIVE ME THE MICROPHONE. I’M...”

A brief scuffle, then the camera was upright again and we were looking at a burning skull, who was identified as “Gamchicoth, Torture Expert”. “We put a lot of effort into matching people with the right cage-mates,” Gamchicoth was saying. “We look through a database of everyone who’s ever lived to find the people you’ll like least, maximize the clash of personalities...”

I turned to Ana. “I don’t want to watch any more of this.”

“You have to watch it,” she said, which was so out of character for her that it was almost as scary as the scene on the TV.

“What? No I don’t!”

“You tried to dismiss the problem of evil!” she said. “You tried to just say ‘God does lots of weird stuff’, as if this – ” she gestured at the screen, “was of the same magnitude as the platypus! You want to see why

theodicy is a hard problem? Watch!”

When I finally managed to turn my eyes back to the television set, Santoni talking to a pitch-black featureless demon whose name was given as “Thagirion, Torture Expert”. Apparently Hell had a lot of torture experts. They were on another dreary grey plain, broken by blocky black buildings. Trees grew here, although the trunks were made of iron and the leaves were dull gray and wept blood. Carriages drawn by pitiful lacerated slaves were coming back and forth down a stony road, full of food and wine and other luxuries. The sides of the road were lined with severed heads impaled on tall pikes, and some of the heads were moving slightly in a way that didn’t look like wind.

“Some of the demons have nicknamed this place Brimstone Acres,” Thagirion was saying. “It’s the nice part of Hell – relatively speaking, of course. We reserve it for the worst sinners. Hitler has a villa here. So do Beria and LaLaurie. It’s basic incentive theory. If the worst sinners got the worst parts of Hell, then people who were pretty sure they were hellbound might still hold back a little bit in order to make their punishment a little more tolerable. We try to encourage the opposite. If you know you’re going to Hell, you should try to sin more, much more, as much as possible, in the hopes of winning one of these coveted spots. And that’s just the beginning. There were some bad people who died in

Stalinist Russia, and I like making sure every one of them knows that Beria is having a great time right now. Food, drink, and of course all the slaves he could possibly need for whatever purposes he likes. Whatever purposes. All the people selected to be his slaves being the people who hate him the most, naturally, which is the icing on the cake. These places pay for themselves, evil-wise. I just give everyone who died in the Holocaust a little magic stone that lets them know what Hitler's doing at any given moment, and you wouldn't believe how they howl."

At this point I was mostly covering my face with a pillow and whimpering. I honestly think I missed most of the Broadcast, or that it was repressed from my memory, or something. I think at some point Ana brought me a glass of water, or started stroking my head, but I know she wouldn't let me go and it never occurred to me to leave without her say-so. I just sat there, the sights and sounds passing through me like I was a zombie. I couldn't have told you how long or short it was.

But I remember the last scene. It was another plain full of cages, placed a little more sparsely than the last bunch. Between them, smaller iron growths – shrubs, if the cages were trees – held individual sinners receiving individual attention from individual demons. The noise was nearly solid, indecipherable, more like hitting a

brick wall ears-first than hearing a lot of people screaming at once. The collected visuals had a similar effect. I couldn't decide where to look. As I started to make out individual forms, I could see some of these cages were full of children. There was a big demon with ram-like horns – the documentary named him as “Golachab, Bioethicist”, and he was going cage by cage, blinding each child by ripping the eyes out of their sockets, which grew back in moments. The ground underfoot was obscured by a thick layer of crushed eyeballs.

“We have your mother here,” said Golachab.

“I'll torture her for a thousand years,” said the boy.

“Two thousand! I'll do whatever kind of torture you want on her! The thing with the spiders you showed me that one time! I'll make up new tortures, worse than you've ever seen! I promise!”

“One of the great things about suckers who never give up hope,” Golachab told Santoni and the camera, “is that they try to bargain their way out. For the tiniest shred of a possibility of a ticket out, or even a less crowded cage, or maybe a couple weeks' reprieve from the ministrations of some of the worse demons, you have no idea what people will offer. No stoic suffering here. The best way to take someone's virtue is to let them do the work figuring out how to degrade

themselves in exchange for a carrot dangled at the edge of their vision. I bet that young man there, before he came to Hell, genuinely believed that no amount of suffering could turn him against those he loved. And now we don't even have to ask, and he's offering to torture his mother for two thousand years. We'll say no, and he'll scream, and we'll come back in a couple decades to see what else he has in mind, and he'll offer to do things so perverse and disgusting it will kind of even frighten *us*, and then we'll say no again, and we'll let him keep all the torture he already has, plus the knowledge that he has tried as hard as he can to sell out every principle he ever believed in and it has profited him nothing. Or maybe we'll take him up on it, let him torture his mother for two millennia, and then not give him anything in return, just to see his face when he realizes it was all for nothing. Or maybe we'll take him up on it and give him a couple hours reprieve from his tortures – because why not – and then back here for another millennium.”

As he spoke, my eyes were caught by a different part of the scene: a young woman sitting in a rusted iron chair, off to one side but near the camera, close enough that I could clearly see her expression. She stared straight ahead, eyes wide, mouth shut, completely still and silent, radiating the most abject terror imaginable. A tiny green demon flitted around her with a tiny paintbrush, painting her skin a surprisingly lovely shade

of light blue. It was by far the least gruesome torture on display, in fact she didn't even seem to be injured at all, but *something* had to have put that look on her face. Maybe it was just that she could see what was happening to everyone else around her, and she was terrified that at any moment it could start happening to her too. Maybe something I couldn't see was causing her unimaginable pain the whole time. Maybe both. For some reason, when Santoni saw this, he dropped the camera. Everything went dark for a second until somebody else picked it up and pointed it back at the ram-horned demon.

Thamiel popped into existence, walked up to the ram-horned demon. "Let me help," he said, and with a single thrust he impaled both eyes of a child on the two prongs of his bident. Then he wrenched the bident free, taking the eyes with them, and held them right in front the camera. I don't think I've ever seen a worse look of terror than in those suddenly-disembodied eyes. Eventually he pulled them away and focused the camera straight at him, so I could see every hair and wrinkle on both of his horrible faces.

"It seems like we're running out of time," said Thamiel. "But don't worry. Later on, many of you will have *all the time in the world* to learn more about us. I'm not going to say if it's ten percent or ninety percent of you; I love to watch you squirm because you don't know.

I'm not going to tell you whether you come here for believing the wrong thing, or doing the wrong thing, or what the wrong thing is, or any of that, because I want you to be totally incapacitated with fear that everything you do might be tossing yourself into my hands. I want your dreams to be haunted by the knowledge that when you die, you might very well be herded into a realm where your hunger and thirst increase as always but you will never eat or drink again. Where your body feels pain like normal but can never die; where your mind is as easily spurred to suffering as on earth but where it can never crack into the release of insanity. I want you to know you'll be crammed into boiling hot cages, flayed, gutted, raped, lacerated, that we will rip out your eyes and pour boiling oil into the sockets and do it again and again and again.

“I want you to know that all of those people who say that Hell is the absence of God, or Hell is a name people give to their suffering on earth, or Hell is other people, or Hell is oblivion, or Hell is some nice place where atheists get to live free from divine tyranny – all of that is wishful thinking. Hell is a place full of fire and demons under the earth where you will be tortured forever. It's exactly what it says on the tin.

“Finally, I want you to know that *you will sin anyway*. This is the best part. For a couple of days, or a couple of weeks, you'll be horrified, you'll try to change your

ways, you'll be like the alcoholic promising he'll never have another drop. Then the memory will fade, your normal habits will take over, and everyone will be back to the way they were before. You can't save yourself. You're not strong enough. Your basic nature will out – not to be all Calvinist about it, but it's true – and you'll make up some comforting excuse and get on with your life.

But you won't live forever. And when you die, I'll be waiting.”

Thamiel thrust his bident at the camera, and as the tip pierced the lens there was some final vision of ultimate horror – something I will never be able to describe and which really was no worse than any of the rest but which seemed more ontologically fundamental – and then the screen went black.

“So,” said Ana. “That’s the Broadcast. What did you think?”

I vomited all over the couch.

III.

They said the Broadcast had showed up in an unmarked brown package to the White House mailbox late in '72. It was a tense moment on the national stage. Nixon was running for re-election. His alliance with Thamiel had

been a diplomatic coup, but he was facing renewed questioning by politicians in the halls of Congress and by protesters in city streets across the nation. Some were concerned about the theological risks of allying with the Devil. Others raised more practical concerns. Soviet Russia had been written off dozens of times before in this conflict, but now it really seemed to be on its last legs. When Thamiel took Moscow, where would his attentions turn next? Might we be lending aid and comfort to an inevitable future enemy? The American people wanted to know, and Nixon's kabbalistically-named opponent George McGovern was taking the issue to town halls and rallies across the country.

Speaking of kabbalistic names, in the 1972 presidential election Nixon's cause was championed by the Committee To Re-Elect The President, aka CREEP. And so he was. He was a genius at politics, maybe even at statecraft, but there were certain areas where intellect is no substitute for being human rather than reptilian. That was what did him in. When Nixon learned about the Broadcast, he figured it was blackmail. Thamiel was telling him that if he didn't stick to the script, Hell could release the Broadcast, make him look like a monster for allying with them, and he would end up with egg on his face on the campaign trail.

So the President ordered all the big TV networks – ABC, NBC, CNN, etc – not to publish the Broadcast if

they received it. There were obvious First Amendment issues, but Nixon's relationship with the Constitution was a lot like the Cainites' with the Bible – better to seek forgiveness than permission. The networks complied, the President dug deep into his bag of dirty tricks, and the CREEP won the election handily.

But in fact the networks didn't have the Broadcast. Nobody had sent it to them. So things kept ticking along quietly until Thamiel finally razed Moscow in late 1973. Babylon the Great had fallen.

Western Europe started getting twitchy. In the absence of a mutual foe, the US-Hell alliance began to crack. The Harmonious Jade Dragon Empire was playing both sides against the other. Everyone held their breath, wondering what would come next.

Nixon decided to play some hardball of his own. He reminded Thamiel that he still had the Broadcast. Thamiel didn't budge. So Nixon gave it to the networks. Using perfectly Nixonian logic, he figured that he had already been re-elected, and you can't get more than two terms anyway, so what was the harm?

On November 1, 1973, the Broadcast went out to an unsuspecting nation.

Chapter 26: For Not One Sparrow Can Suffer And The Whole Universe Not Suffer Also

St. Francis saw above him, filling the whole heavens, some vast immemorial unthinkable power, ancient like the Ancient of Days, whose calm men had conceived under the forms of winged bulls or monstrous cherubim, and all that winged wonder was in pain like a wounded bird.

— *St. Francis of Assisi*, by G.K. Chesterton

June 26, 1991
Gulf of Mexico

“TELL ME ABOUT THE WORD WATER”.

Sohu sat on her cloud, snacking on manna with ketchup on top. He had been doing this increasingly often over the past few weeks, asking her to tell him about a word, never satisfied with the amount of meaning she was able to wring from it. It didn't matter how many connections she drew, how many languages she was able to weave together, he would always just say something like “YES, BUT WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF PROTO-NABATEAN, IN WHICH THE SAME WORD REFERS TO AN OBSCURE KIND OF COOKING-IMPLEMENT?” and she would have to

admit that, for some reason, that had never crossed her mind.

She sighed theatrically, but gave no further protest. “In Proto-Semitic,” she said, “it is akwa. In Proto-Eurasiatic, also akwa. In Proto-Amerind, akwa again. So we’re getting a very strong aleph-kaf-vav vibe. Aleph connects Chesed to Gevurah, and kaf connects Chesed to Binah, and vav connects Binah to Keter, so we’re getting two paths out of Chesed, one all the way up to Kether, and the other down to Gevurah.”

“GO ON.”

“So we’re invoking Chesed, the kindness of God. Compare Psalm 65: “You visit the Earth and water it, you greatly enrich it with the river of God, which is full of water.” But we’re also invoking Gevurah, the severity of God. Water is the kindness of God, but also His severity; think Noah’s flood, where it was His severity that punished the wicked, but His kindness that saved Noah and promised never again to flood the Earth. We’ve got Binah, the understanding of God. Spiritual growth. Compare John 4:14: “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I give him shall never thirst; the water that I shall give him shall be a well of water springing up into eternal life.” And finally, we’ve got Keter. The crown of God. Human beings are 66% water. The human brain is something like 90%. Human

beings are made in God's own image. Therefore, Kether.

“BUT WHAT ABOUT...”

“The English word water, which breaks the pattern? It keeps the vav, but it finishes with tav and resh. That's a very special combination. Tav goes up from Malkuth, at the very bottom of the tree, and then resh goes straight up again, until you're all the way at Tiferet in two moves. And from Tiferet you can go anywhere. A tav-resh is the shortest path, it's efficiency, it's no-nonsense, it's utilitarian, it's for when you need a lot of power really really quickly.”

“AND WHY DOES – ”

“English deviates from the other languages because for the Tibetans and American Indians and Egyptians, water represents life and mystery and so on. But Britain is an island, and the British are the greatest seafarers in history. The Tibetans think of water and they think of good crops and spiritual rebirth. The English take one look at it and think ‘Yes, an understanding of God is all nice and well, but you can sail over this stuff to get *anywhere*.’”

“BUT WHAT ABOUT THE HEBREW, IN WHICH WATER IS ‘MAYIM’?”

“It means...because...I don’t know. Who knows? How deep do we need to go? Isn’t it enough that I brought in three reconstructed ancestral languages from three different continents, plus explained deviations from the trend? Just once, could you say ‘Good job, Sohu, that’s enough, Sohu’?”

“UM. GOOD JOB, SOHU.”

“Uriel, this is *really boring*.”

“YOU ARE VERY ENGLISH. YOU WANT TO GET PLACES AS EFFICIENTLY AS POSSIBLE. BUT SOMETIMES...”

“When do I get to learn how to do cool stuff, like blow up mountains?”

“UM. PLEASE DO NOT BLOW UP MOUNTAINS. MOUNTAINS ARE USEFUL. THEY HELP CONTROL CLIMACTIC PATTERNS.”

“Blow up *Thamiel*, then.”

“YOU CANNOT KILL THAMIEL. HE IS A FACET OF GOD.”

“When do I get to learn *anything*? Uriel! This. Is. So. Boring. Learning about the structure of words all day. I want to be able to help Father, to help save the world.”

“THE USE OF KABBALAH TO AFFECT THE PHYSICAL WORLD IS DONE PRIMARILY UPON THE PLANES OF YETZIRAH AND BRIAH. THESE PLANES ARE NOT CONSTRUCTED OF MATTER BUT OF VARIOUS FORMS OF SUBTLE STRUCTURE. UNTIL YOU UNDERSTAND THE CORRESPONDENCES AND THE STRUCTURE, YOU CANNOT HOPE TO INFLUENCE THEM CONSISTENTLY.”

“I made *all the rivers in the world* run in reverse my first day here.”

“BY ACCIDENT. THAT IS WHAT I AM SAYING. IF YOU DO NOT KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU ARE DOING, THERE WILL BE MORE ACCIDENTS. AND YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO FIX THEM.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“I WILL TELL YOU A STORY.”

“Is this going to be one of your stories that’s a weird metaphor for something?”

“ONCE UPON A TIME, RABBI BEN AZZAI, RABBI BEN ZOMA, THE OTHER ONE, AND RABBI AKIVA VISITED AN ORCHARD. BEN AZZAI SAW IT AND DIED. BEN ZOMA SAW IT AND WENT CRAZY. THE OTHER ONE BURNED DOWN ALL

THE TREES. AKIVA CAME IN PEACE AND DEPARTED IN PEACE. THE END.”

“So yes, then.”

“IT MEANS THAT – ”

“Wait. Who is the other one?”

“THE OTHER ONE?”

“You said Rabbi ben Azzai, Rabbi ben Zoma, and the other one.”

“OH. YES. THE OTHER ONE. HIS NAME WAS ELISHA BEN ABUYAH, BUT WE DO NOT SPEAK OF HIM. IN THE TALMUD HE IS ALWAYS CALLED ‘ACHER’, WHICH MEANS ‘THE OTHER ONE’.”

“Why is his name never spoken?”

“THAT IS A LONG STORY.”

“I want to hear it!”

“THE HUMAN BOOK ON EDUCATION SAYS THAT I SHOULD ALWAYS MAKE AN EFFORT TO ANSWER CHILDREN’S QUESTIONS, EVEN WHEN THEY ARE VERY ANNOYING.”

“Yes.”

“ELISHA BEN ABUYAH WAS A GREAT RABBI OF ANCIENT ISRAEL. A BRILLIANT KABBALIST. A MIGHTY MIRACLE WORKER. A TRUE SAINT. ONE DAY HE WAS WALKING ALONG A PATH WHEN HE SAW A LITTLE BOY CLIMB A TREE. THE BOY FOUND A BIRD’S NEST. HE TOOK THE EGGS TO EAT, AND HE ALSO KILLED THE MOTHER BIRD. BUT THIS IS IN DEFIANCE OF DEUTERONOMY 22:6, WHICH SAYS *‘HE WHO SHALL HURT THE LITTLE WREN, WILL NEVER BE BELOVED BY MEN.’*”

“That’s not how Deuteronomy goes...it says...uh...’If you come across a bird’s nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting on the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. You shall let the mother go, but the young you may take for yourself, that it may go well with you, and that you may live long.’”

“IT WAS NOT AN EXACT TRANSLATION. ANYWAY, THE LITTLE BOY KILLED THE MOTHER BIRD, THEN CLIMBED BACK DOWN THE TREE AND WANDERED OFF.”

“Not an exact translation? What version are you...”

“A FEW MONTHS LATER, HE WAS WALKING ALONG THE SAME PATH WHEN HE SAW ANOTHER LITTLE BOY CLIMB A TREE LOOKING FOR EGGS TO EAT. THIS BOY FOUND A NEST, TOOK THE EGGS, BUT LEFT THE MOTHER BIRD IN PEACE, IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LAW. ON HIS WAY BACK DOWN THE TREE, HE STUMBLED, FELL, BROKE HIS NECK, AND DIED. SO ELISHA BEN ABUYAH SWORE ETERNAL VENGEANCE AGAINST GOD.”

“*What?*”

“THE ONE BOY DID A WICKED DEED AND WAS NOT PUNISHED. THE OTHER BOY DID A VIRTUOUS DEED AND WAS PUNISHED WITH DEATH. ELISHA BEN ABUYAH SAW THIS AND DECLARED THAT WHATEVER POWER IN THE UNIVERSE METED OUT JUDGMENT, HE WAS IN REBELLION AGAINST IT.”

“Because of one bird? Isn’t that a little extreme?”

“WHAT IS THE CORRECT LEVEL OF INJUSTICE AT WHICH TO DECLARE YOURSELF IN REBELLION AGAINST THE POWER METING OUT JUDGMENT IN THE UNIVERSE?”

“I mean, you would need to have...oh. *Oh.*”

“YES. ELISHA WAS VERY ANGRY. ONE BY ONE, HE BROKE ALL OF THE LAWS. HE WAS A GREAT RABBI, SO HE KNEW EVERY LAW AND WHICH ONES MOST OFFENDED GOD WHEN BROKEN, AND HE DEVOTED HIMSELF TO THE TASK WITH FEARSOME DEDICATION. HE LIT FIRES ON THE SABBATH. HE ATE PORK. HE EVEN BOILED A GOAT IN ITS MOTHER’S MILK. WHICH BY THE WAY IS WHY THERE IS NO LONGER A CITY OF POMPEII. BUT THESE WERE NOT ENOUGH FOR HIM. HE SWORE TO BREAK THE MOST IMPORTANT LAW OF ALL.”

“What’s the most important law of all?”

“THE UNITY OF GOD. ELISHA ASCENDED TO HEAVEN, AS ONE DOES, AND HE POINTED AT THE ARCHANGEL METATRON, THE REGENT OF THE DIVINE IN THE FINITE WORLD. AND HE DECLARED ‘THAT GUY THERE, HE IS ALSO A GOD. THERE ARE TWO GODS. T-W-O G-O-D-S. DEAL WITH IT.’ THE RABBIS DECREED THAT HIS NAME MUST NEVER BE SPOKEN. AND ALL WHO HEARD OF IT SAID ‘SURELY THE GREAT RABBI ELISHA BEN ABUYAH WOULD NEVER DO SUCH A THING. IT MUST BE SOME OTHER ONE.’ AND SO FROM THAT DAY ON, HE WAS CALLED ‘THE OTHER ONE’.”

“Did he ever repent?”

“GOD REFUSED TO FORGIVE HIM.”

“What? God always forgives these sorts of things!”

“YES.”

“Then -”

“EXCEPT ELISHA BEN ABUYAH.”

“Just him?”

“IT IS SAID THAT EACH YEAR ON THE DAY OF ATONEMENT, A GREAT VOICE WOULD RING FORTH FROM THE HOLY PLACES, SAYING ‘REPENT, O CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, FOR THE LORD YOUR GOD IS MERCIFUL AND SHALL FORGIVE YOU. EXCEPT YOU, ELISHA BEN ABUYAH.’”

“It really said that?”

“IT WAS A VERY SPECIFIC VOICE.”

“So what happened to him?”

“NOTHING.”

“He just hung around being sinful, then died and went

to Hell?”

“NO.”

“No?”

“THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD SAYS THAT HE WAS TOO GREAT A RABBI TO GO TO HELL, BUT TOO EVIL TO GO TO HEAVEN.”

“So where did he go?”

“I DON’T KNOW. I NEVER ASKED.”

“You never asked?”

“I AM VERY BUSY. I CANNOT KEEP TRACK OF EVERY TALMUDIC RABBI. CAN I GET BACK TO MY STORY NOW?”

“How do you just lose an entire rabbi?”

“SINCE YOU ARE SUCH AN EXPERT ON METAPHORS, HOW DO YOU INTERPRET THE STORY?”

“I...forgot the story. What was it again?”

“ONCE UPON A TIME, RABBI BEN AZZAI, RABBI BEN ZOMA, THE OTHER ONE, AND RABBI

AKIVA VISITED AN ORCHARD. BEN AZZAI SAW IT AND DIED. BEN ZOMA SAW IT AND WENT CRAZY. THE OTHER ONE BURNED DOWN ALL THE TREES. AKIVA CAME IN PEACE AND DEPARTED IN PEACE. THE END.”

“That was an awful story.”

“I NEVER SAID IT WASN’T.”

“The story of Elisha ben Abuyah was like a million times more interesting!”

“THIS STORY IS A PARABLE ABOUT THE DANGERS OF MYSTICAL ACHIEVEMENT. THE ORCHARD REPRESENTS THE HIGHER PLANES YOU WILL CONTACT IN YOUR STUDIES. IF YOU ARE UNPREPARED, KABBALAH CAN KILL YOU. IF YOU ARE ONLY PARTIALLY PREPARED, KABBALAH CAN DRIVE YOU MAD. IF YOUR INTENTIONS ARE NOT PURE, KABBALAH CAN TURN YOU INTO A FORCE FOR GREAT EVIL WHO DESTROYS EVERYTHING AROUND YOU. ONLY IF YOU ARE WISE AND VIRTUOUS LIKE AKIVA CAN YOU ESCAPE UNSCATHED.”

“So you’re saying you’re not going to teach me anything interesting until I am wise and virtuous like Akiva.”

“MAYBE NOT THAT WISE AND VIRTUOUS. BUT I WOULD LIKE YOU TO STOP TALKING ABOUT BLOWING UP MOUNTAINS.”

“Maybe the mountains are evil. Or evil is hiding in them. Or something.”

“PLEASE DO NOT BLOW UP MOUNTAINS. IT NEVER HELPS.”

“Grumble.”

“DID YOU EVER FINISH LEARNING ALL THE WORLD’S LANGUAGES?”

“I told you, that’s impossible!”

“I THINK YOU SHOULD TRY.”

“You’re trying to get rid of me, aren’t you!”

“... ”

Interlude 2: The Outer Gate

I.

Imagine there's no Heaven. It's easy if you try. So easy that millions of people throughout history did it entirely by accident. They went to church, they read their Bibles, they knelt prostrate in prayer, and then they went home and lived a life of sin regardless.

A group of psychologists once did an experiment on children's willpower. They placed a young child in front of a marshmallow, and said if he could sit there without eating it for just five short minutes, he could have *two* marshmallows later. The “marshmallow test”, as it came to be called, was found to correlate with all sorts of later-life outcomes like health, wealth, and success. Because unless you were a truly exceptional kid, you couldn't sit there all five of those minutes with that luscious marshmallow staring at you, begging to be eaten – just for a reward in some sucky *future*.

So up the stakes a little bit. Sit there for five minutes, and we'll give you all the marshmallows you can eat, forever. We will give you an entire dimension made entirely out of marshmallows. You can live in a great marshmallow mansion surrounded by woods made of jelly-beans, with gingerbread-man servants, and

seventy-two hours made entirely out of sugar. But eat the marshmallow, even a tiny part of it, and you will be carried away to Soviet Russia – where marshmallows impale you on a stick, hold you over a fire, and roast *you*.

I'm not talking about atheists here. I'm talking about the people who accept the entire premise, the people who go "Yup, this world is basically a cosmic marshmallow test, where if we can go the merest infinitesimal moment without sin we will be rewarded forever and ever with joy beyond our wildest dreams, but if we grab the marshmallow we will be punished forever in ways too terrible to imagine" – and then go "Eh, what the heck," and eat the marshmallow.

(The Lord said unto Adam: "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat this marshmallow, for it is the marshmallow of the knowledge of good and evil, and when you eat of it, you will surely die.")

And it's not just Adam. What about Noah's sons, who right after they were saved from a giant flood caused by God being really really vengeful about sinners in the most conspicuous way possible, decided to celebrate with some kind of weird debauched incestuous rape orgy? What about Judas Iscariot, who after watching Jesus commit miracle after miracle, decided to betray

him for a measly thirty coins? These were not people wracked with doubt about the terms of the bargain. These were people who knew exactly what that marshmallow was buying and gobbled it down anyway.

I would blame the Bible for being unrealistic, but everything that's happened since has borne it out. Let's face it, the sincerely religious have not exactly been spotless in the two thousand odd years after the close of the New Testament.

Imagine there's no Heaven. It's easy if you try. Only the cold maw of Hell, voracious for sinners.

When the Broadcast aired on TV that frosty November night, all the pretty lies, all the excuses people gave themselves for eating the marshmallow, came tumbling down. People fell to their knees, begging for forgiveness. Misers went out into the streets, throwing all their money at the first homeless person they could find. Lawyers, bankers, and politicians resigned en masse. So many people went out into the woods to become hermits that the woods became too crowded and the real hermits, the ones who knew what they were doing, took up residence in deserted apartment buildings.

Whole industries collapsed in a matter of days. When you know, with utter certainty, that this life is the

antechamber to an ineffable eternity, who the heck wants to spend it canning tuna? Who wants to spend it catching tuna to can? What if you get to the Pearly Gates and St. Peter is some kind of purist who is really upset about what modern industrial fishing methods have done to his former trade?

In Europe, tides of pro-Church sentiment swept the traditionally Catholic countries of the south and east. In Asia, once-arrogant businessmen fasted themselves to death, hoping to gain enough karma to escape damnation. In South America, revolutionary guerillas repented and became wandering friars. In Russia, the Marxist-Lurianist enclaves that had survived the fall of Moscow just doubled down and fought harder.

In the Oval Office, Richard Nixon, who had blown off the Broadcast as propaganda when he first saw it, watched it for what had to be like the twentieth time.

“[Expletive deleted]”, said Nixon.

A few people, through some innate defect of character or the certainty that they were going to Hell whatever happened, took advantage of the chaos. Anyone who could put on a tattered cloak and start begging became an instant millionaire. Nonexistent charities sprang up, collected so much money they needed extra mailboxes to fit the envelopes full of cash, then closed down

before anyone asked them how exactly they plan to solve world hunger from Jonesboro, Arkansas. The few businesspeople remaining were terrorized by job applicants pointing out how *desperate* and *needy* they were and how it would definitely look good in St. Peter's celestial ledger if they were to be immediately hired to do minimal work at high salaries.

These were bad people who need to be punished. One might even say "righteously smitten". There was no shortage of people willing to do righteous things, not now. Soon a persecution was on whose deranged fervor made the Salem witch trials look like the ACLU. The combination of many well-meaning but unexperienced people trying to do good and set up charities, plus a giant witch hunt for people trying to fake doing good and fake charities, went exactly as well as you might expect. Vigilante justice was served.

In the middle of all of this, NASA incongruously announced they were going to launch their long-delayed Apollo 13 mission to "further the study of the composition of the celestial spheres".

The Catholic countries of Europe united into a theocracy. The Marxist guerillas in South America vanished into the Darien Gap. The Harmonious Jade Dragon Empire told the Dalai Lama they were really really sorry and he could totally have Tibet back if he

wanted.

Richard Nixon vanished for several weeks.

Civil aviation in the United States broke down, the complicated supply and maintenance chain beyond the reach of its tottering industries. The Midwest was consumed by riots. The Secretary of State announced that the federal government was no longer able to project force west of the Mississippi, and state governors should do what they could to maintain the peace until order was restored.

II.

“Houston, we have a problem.”

Houston had problems of its own. Louisiana, long suffering the occasional storms spinning off Uriel’s hurricane, had finally given up the ghost. Texas governor Dolph Briscoe had re-declared the Texas Republic until such time as the federal government recovered. Mission Control in Houston was still working for NASA until such time as an alternate arrangement could be decided.

“What kind of problem, Apollo 13?”

“We think an oxygen tank has blown. The command module’s getting full of carbon dioxide. We’ve

managed to jury rig the system, but it's not going to hold out. We've got to return to Earth."

"Roger that, Apollo 13."

For a moment, the attention of a collapsing superpower was distracted from its self-immolation by the drama of three brave men fighting a race against time to save themselves and their ship. And millions of Americans watching their television sets cheered as the command module splashed down safely in the Pacific Ocean, just off the coast of the newly declared California Republic.

Then their joy turned to confusion, as they saw not three but four people leave the rescued capsule.

John Young, commander.

Kenneth Mattingly, pilot.

Fred Haise, lunar module pilot.

And Richard Nixon, president of the United States.

Why was the President in a spaceship? was what everyone wanted to know.

Air Force One was sent to California to return Nixon to Washington; whether as president or prisoner no one was sure. Witnesses were called. Records were

subpoenaed. It was discovered that the President had kept recordings of everything he had said in the Oval Office, and these were added to the pile of evidence.

“Look,” Nixon told Kissinger, in one of the most damning tapes. “Everything I did, I did for the love of this country, I did it to fight communism. But [expletive deleted] God isn’t going to see it that way. He’s going to be too soft to realize what had to be done. And I’m going to end up burning in [expletive deleted] for all eternity. Why the [expletive deleted] did I ever let you convince me to sign an alliance with [expletive deleted]?”

“The idea behind the alliance was sound,” Kissinger answered. “We did not entirely understand how things stood at the time, but even if we had, I would have made the same suggestion. Brezhnev was getting too strong, especially with the Vietnamese and the South American communist movements. We did what we had to do. If the good Lord disagrees with me, I will be happy to point out His tactical errors.”

“[expletive deleted] easy for you to say!” said the President. “You can talk anybody into anything. But I’m the one whose [expletive deleted] soul is on the line. Doesn’t the Bible say something about that? What use is it to something something the world if it cost you your soul? Something [expletive deleted] hippie dippy

like that? I'm breaking the alliance. There's no other choice."

"There may be another way. As you know, Captain Armstrong disappeared into the cracks in the sky. Exactly where he went is uncertain, but you cannot have missed the popular press speculating that he entered Heaven. I have been having some of my people look into it. I believe that just there is a gate to Hell inside the Earth, so the edge of space may be an outer gate which leads to Heaven.

"[expletive deleted] great. So this [expletive deleted] gate outside the world would get me to Heaven. How am I supposed to get there? Take a ride in an [expletive deleted] spaceship?"

"You have several."

"God, you're [expletive deleted] serious."

"The director of NASA is loyal to the administration," said Kissinger. "I have seen to it. Apollo 13 has been ready for launch for years now, but it has never been the right time; always an emergency. We will make it known to NASA that now is the right time, and they will need to make room for a fourth person. The astronauts will grumble, but they will not betray the secret. They are military men, and you are their

commander-in-chief.”

“I [expletive deleted] am!” said Nixon. “Holy God, you’re starting to convince me. So when can we start heading to this Outer Gate of yours?”

“I believe NASA can have the craft ready within about a month. After that it will be a three day flight to the crystal sphere, and from there you may descend into the Outer Gate and save your soul while our alliance against Communism remains intact.”

“I don’t [expletive deleted] believe this, but let’s do it!” Nixon was heard to say when the full recording was played before a hearing of the House Judiciary Committee, whose members voted unanimously to propose a motion for impeachment. It wasn’t just politics. The witch hunts against anyone who tried to cheat the God-fearing, hell-fearing public had only just started to die down. And now here was the President, trying to cheat in the most fantastic way possible, to buy his salvation on the taxpayer dime while leaving his supposed constituents to burn. The question wasn’t whether Nixon would be impeached. The question was how many seconds he would last after Secret Service protection was withdrawn.

As the Outer Gate scandal entered its third week, Nixon bowed out. He struck a deal with the House; if he

resigned peacefully, he would be granted safe passage to a comfortable exile in his hometown of Yorba Linda, California Republic. Under cover of night, the President was flown out of Washington DC, as mobs pelted Air Force One with stones and Molotov cocktails.

III.

“Ford” means “to attempt a difficult crossing”. On August 9, 1974, Gerald Ford was sworn in as President of the United States.

In the California Republic, the Texas Republic, the Salish Free State, and various little towns and homesteads of what had once been the Midwest, people watched the inauguration the same way they might the coronation of the Queen of Great Britain – interesting, maybe even inspiring, but not having very much to do with them. In his inaugural address, Ford admitted that the federal government now controlled only the Eastern Seaboard and pieces of the South and Great Lakes.

The way having been prepared before them, the armies of Thamiel the Lord of Demons crossed the Bering Strait and began the invasion of North America.

Chapter 27: The Starry Floor, The Watery Shore

May 12-13, 2017

Pacific Ocean

I. James

Belowdecks was the crew quarters. Ana didn't expect her own room and didn't get it. Her berth had four beds: one for her, three others for James, Lin, and Tomas. Her bed was technically Amoxiel's, but the angel didn't sleep. As far as they could tell, he just sort of sat on the deck all night, staring wistfully at the stars.

She was used to living with men; she'd lived in a group house for over a year now. She wasn't picky; if she had been, the cramped atmosphere of the *Not A Metaphor* would have desensitized her quickly.

James was in the bunk below her. Even during his short nap, he had fitful dreams. Ana asked him what he dreamt of. For a while he didn't answer.

"Things I did," he eventually said. "I was in the Other King's army once. Before we really knew how bad he was. After Never Summer, but not by much. But he was still bad. I shot folks, probably innocent ones. That's what I dream about. And the Broadcast. I dream about

the Broadcast, and I worry that's going to be me."

"They say anyone who sincerely repents and promises to live a virtuous life will be saved," said Ana.

"Yeah, and here I am. On a boat, trying to find God so we can board his ship and, I dunno, hijack him or something," said James. "Virtuous life, my left foot."

"You could always..."

"Dreams, girl," said James. "They're just dreams."

II. Lin

If James was taciturn, Lin wouldn't shut up. He talked about anything. He talked about whether they would have good winds, he talked about the calculations pinning down Metatron's next appearance near Fire Island in New York, he talked about his youth as an apprentice ritualist in Arizona. "That was back when placebomancy was just another strain of ritualism," he told Ana. "The counterculture version, started by Shea and Wilson back in '76. Dabbled in it myself, found it helpful. Then everything went to hell when Alvarez killed the Council. Ritualism fell apart, placebomancy became associated with Alvarez and violence, now practically nobody does either. Anybody gets too good at ritual magic, Alvarez kills them. Or if he doesn't, they think you're working with Alvarez and get more

and more suspicious till you're fired on some dumb pretext. There's no future in it anymore. With time we would have been able to do as much as the kabbalists, and without the copyright restrictions. Instead we're looking over our shoulders and being shown the door."

"Except Alvarez," Ana said.

"You can bet he's looking over his shoulder every darned minute," Lin answered. "I hope they catch him and lock him up and throw away the key.

Placebomancy's not just about the practical applications. It's about understanding the universe. Placebomancy is our only sign thus far that the universe can be convinced of things, that it's got innate intelligence. It's the next best thing to talking to Metatron one on one. If we leave it to the terrorists, we're losing our biggest chance to learn something about God and about ourselves."

"Do you ever worry about Alvarez?" Ana asked him.

"Me? I'm not good enough to worry. He only kills the bigshots. I'm just some guy good enough to power the orange sail. And I don't leave *Not A Metaphor* much. If BOOJUM wants to get on this ship, they can pay \$10 million like everyone else."

III. Simeon

They made good time almost due south, avoiding the coastline and instead driving straight into blue water, just over sixty knots. Ana didn't know much about sailing, but she gathered that was mind-bogglingly fast for a watercraft. The *Not A Metaphor*, built to be the fastest ship in the world, was an impressive specimen even when not using its "special features".

Once they were underway, James told her it was time to test her skills. He led her to the yellow sail, halfway down the deck. Its shape fit together neatly with the sails before and behind it in what looked almost like art.

"What do I do?" she asked James.

"Just speak that Name and see what happens," he answered.

So she spoke the Mistral Name and the winds came to her. Squall and simoon and sirocco, monsoon and marin and zephyr. The levante, the tramontane, the haboob. And finally her own wind, the Santa Ana. She flung them all at the yellow sail, and for a moment, the ship stopped. The world thinned to a point. She felt marvelous, truly alive.

She remembered a line from Shakespeare, one she had heard long ago. "I can call spirits from the vasty deep!" she shouted.

A voice from beside her: “Why, so can I, or so can any man. But do they come when you call for them?”

Startled, she looked behind her. The old man was leaning on the mast of the green sail, watching her.

“You know Shakespeare?” she asked. Then “What are you doing here? What do you want? Can’t I have some privacy?”

“I’m sorry,” said the old man. “I didn’t realize I was disturbing you.”

Ana regretted her harshness. “No, please. You surprised me, that’s all.” He was really old, like at least seventy. She was surprised someone so old would be up for a voyage like this.

“Simeon,” said the man, holding out his hand. Ana shook it. She had always thought it was stupid when people judged businesspeople by their handshake, but by the time her hand retracted she knew as if by revelation that Simeon was very important and very competent.

“I’m Ana,” said Ana. “You’re one of the passengers?”

“Yup,” he said.

“Very rich guy, wants to yell at God for something?”

asked Ana.

“That’s me,” said Simeon. “I didn’t mean to stare, you know. I was just surprised to see a woman on a ship like this.”

“Well, I didn’t mean to be here,” said Ana. “And I’ll, uh, avoid thinking too much about that ‘surprised to see a woman’ comment.”

“A woman and a Shakespeare fan!”

“Please. I know a couple of lines. I was just – what do you call it – drunk with power. Anyway, I’m more surprised than you are. I thought you corporate billionaire types knew seven hundred ways to squeeze blood from a stone but wouldn’t know culture if it kicked you in the nose.” She waited to see if she got a reaction.

“Twelve hundred ways, but I’ve been privileged to get a little time to read this and that in between board meetings,” Simeon told her.

James poked his head out from the cabin: “We’re having a crew meeting in five minutes. Ana, five minutes.”

“Huh. Nice to meet you, Simeon,” Ana said, though she wanted to know more.

“And you,” Simeon told her. “You ever want to learn how to squeeze blood from a stone in a hurry, you come find me, okay?”

She shook his hand a second time. Again she was struck by a weird feeling that she should entrust all her money to this man and never look back.

Then she ran inside.

IV. Erin

It was late that night. James was turning fitfully in the bed below her, muttering things in his sleep. Ana felt uncomfortable, like she was witnessing something private. On a whim, she got out of bed and climbed onto the deck. Amoxiel was there, his cloak billowing in the wind. He was at the very stern of the ship, staring out into the starry night. She didn't want to disturb him, and for his part, he took no notice of her. Once again she felt like she was intruding. She went away from him, to starboard side near the yellow sail, and stared out at the sea alone.

Someone else was out there. Ana tried to ignore her, but she was noisy, and eventually she turned and looked. It was the woman passenger. She was hanging on the railing, leaning against some sort of weird arcane Comet King weapon that looked kind of like a harpoon,

retching over the edge of the ship.

“Seasick?” asked Ana.

The woman stared at her with bloodshot eyes, “Guess again.”

“Heroin withdrawal,” Ana said.

The woman gave a little squeal. “How did you know?”

“I used to hang out in Oakland.”

“Oh.”

“And you’ve got marks all over your arms.”

It was true. She could see them in the weird dark glow emanating from the black sail. James had told her not to look at the black sail directly, especially not at night, and there was no way she was going to break that rule, but she couldn’t help notice the glow.

“Oh. Well.” She looked uncomfortable. Ana noticed with interest that before she got quite so many lines on her face, the woman must have been truly beautiful. Then:

“Wait a second! You’re Erin Hope!”

The lady laughed. “Yeah. For all the good it’s done me.”

Erin Hope. Pop sensation, one of the first people to genuinely be a pop sensation after the country knit itself back together again. Superstardom during the early 2000s. Then the usual downward spiral. Men. Drugs. Endless grist for the paparazzi. The occasional story about rehab, followed by another story about rehab with the reader left to fill in the blanks of what must have happened in between.

“I didn’t bring any heroin with me,” she said, voice laced with anger. “I thought I’d be okay, fresh air, a quest to find God. I’m such an idiot.”

“It only lasts a couple of days,” said Ana helpfully.

“You think I haven’t been through this a dozen times, darling?” The pop goddess wasn’t really angry, just sarcastic. “A couple of days is enough. When I meet God, I hope I’m not going to vomit all over Him.” She tried retching again. Not much came out.

“Or maybe I hope I do,” she said. “At least that way I’ll know He knows. Damn rehabs. Always say to place your trust in a higher power. Well, I did and He betrayed it. I trusted the hell out of him right up until I shot back up. So I’m done trusting. Now I’m going to

see for myself.” She retched again. “Sure, it’s a lot of money, but better give it to you than those quacks in rehab again. You’re gonna find Him for us, right?”

“Um, we’ll try,” said Ana, who would have trouble describing the business model of the *Not A Metaphor* in any terms more glowing than ‘quixotic’, but who didn’t want to badmouth her employers.

“You’re a nice kid,” said Erin.

Toward the stern, Amoxiel started to sob. They both heard him. By mutual consent, neither one mentioned the distressed angel.

“I’m freezing my tits off,” Erin finally said. “I’m going back inside to see if I can get a couple hours unconscious. You stay warm.”

Touched by the older lady’s concern, Ana watched her go. Then she stood alone on the starboard of the ship, listening to the angel weep.

V. Tomas, Edgar, John

Tomas had been a bartender in his hometown of Puerto Penasco, Mexico. The War on Drugs had hit him hard, but he had stayed in business until the Other King came. After that he’d made his escape with the Captain and the rest of the original gang. Now in between

singing to the green sail he was the cook and quartermaster of the *Not A Metaphor*'s galley. It was his job not only to keep everyone fed and content, but to make fare up to the standards of the obscenely rich bastards who were his usual passengers.

Ana sat down for lunch and was handed a salad. "This is delicious," she told Tomas. He nodded, as if used to the compliments.

James walked in, and Ana motioned him over. "There's been a change of plans," she said. "I was just talking to a friend of mine. He's in trouble. I need to go save him. When's the next time we're going to be near land?"

"Two days from now, Fire Island," said James.

"Uh, this trouble is pretty urgent. Do you think we could..."

"There are three people who each paid ten million dollars to get on this ship, on the understanding that we would be at Fire Island two days from now. This is the fastest ship in the world, but even so getting from California to New York in two days isn't going to leave us with a lot of spare time to go dropping people off. And we're south of the Mexican border by now, and you don't want to get off *there*. Sorry, Ana. We can let you off in New York."

If Ana had been some sort of legendary hero, maybe she would have threatened James, or mutinied, or summoned a wind so strong that it smashed the boat into the California coastline. But she was a theology graduate student, and she weighed barely more than a hundred pounds, and she was surrounded by military men who had nightmares about all the people whom they had killed, so she shut up. James did something halfway between patting her on the shoulder and slapping her on the back, picked up a salad in a box, and then left the galley, leaving Ana lost in thought.

“What are you thinking about?”

She hated that question. It was an implied “Let me interrupt your thoughts and force you to talk to me”, but if she told him to go away, *she* would be the impolite one.

“I’m Edgar Crane”. He sat down next to her, uncomfortably close. He was tall and dark and young and good-looking. Ana disliked him instantly.

“Ana,” said Ana.

Edgar briefly looked like he was considering flirting, then defaulted to his usual strategy. “You might have read about me in the newspapers,” said Edgar. “Son of the mayor of Reno. And by mayor, I mean back when it

was a city-state, so basically the head of state. From one of the richest families in what's left of the US of A. Not that we're uncultured Nevadan hicks or anything. We spend most of our time in Los Angeles these days."

"Yeah, must be hard what with the Other King totally kicking your asses and conquering your city in like twenty minutes of fighting."

Edgar clearly hadn't expected Ana to have known about that. He stiffened. "Well, just because you heard about it doesn't mean you know how things stand."

"If they're like your family, they stand for twenty minutes, then beat a hasty retreat."

"It was a strategic withdrawal. We wanted him to overextend himself. Now we're building a coalition with California and Colorado."

"Poor Other King. Overextended himself by conquering half the country, killing all who opposed him, defeating the Comet King, and ruling with an iron fist for fifteen years. With overextension like that, he must be ready to topple like a domino by now."

Crane put his hand on Ana's shoulder. "Listen, you're pretty, but..."

Ana tried to extract the offending hand. It didn't budge.

She stood up. “Get your hand off me,” she said.

“Hey,” said Edgar, “I was just...”

The hand was retracted, but not of its own accord. Ana looked up and saw that John had entered the galley and gently removed Edgar’s hand from her shoulder.

“Edgar” said John, “No.”

Edgar glared at John like a hyena denied a kill. “The lady and I were flirting.”

“We were *not*,” said Ana. “If we were flirting, I would’ve said something like ‘I hope you last longer in bed than you do defending your –’”

“Ana,” said John. “Be an adult. Edgar, I need to speak to Ana in private now.”

Edgar glared more at John. John didn’t budge. Finally the young man scowled and brought his breakfast to a different table.

“Ana,” said John. “I won’t cite the rule about not bothering passengers, because I can see that Mr. Crane started it. But I will ask you to *act your age*. You made that worse than it had to be.”

“I’m not sorry,” said Ana. “He was a jerk.”

“Yes,” said John. “This boat is a strange place. The people who pay for our services are strange people. Some of them are jerks. It’s our job to smooth that over instead of making it worse.”

“Simeon and Erin are perfectly nice!”

“And maybe one day God will save us from everyone who is less than perfectly nice. Until He does, it’s our job to learn to deal with them safely. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” said Ana. John wasn’t captain, or first mate; as far as she knew he wasn’t really anything. It was his age that gave him authority, she thought; aside from Simeon he was the only grey-haired man on a ship full of youngsters. Then she reconsidered. No, that wasn’t right. He seemed wise, but it wasn’t just the age. “Hey, James was telling me the story of how they stole this ship. You weren’t in Puerto Penasco, were you? How’d you end up here?”

“The Captain needed someone to work the blue sail and he gave me a call.

“The blue sail?”

“...is a good Roman Catholic,” said John, smiling. “It only responds to the prayers of a priest.”

“What? Why?”

“It is,” he said with some chagrin, “a Mass-energy converter.”

Ana groaned. “And you’re a priest?”

“Retired. But you’ll see all of this for yourself. That’s what came here to tell you. James is planning a Symphony today at noon. All the sails we’ve got, at the same time. Show the passengers what we can do, convince them they’re getting their money’s worth, and start covering some actual distance. We will see you there.”

“If Crane touches me, I’m Fulminant-Naming him,” said Ana.

“Don’t deliberately antagonize Crane,” said John, “but if he touches you, we’ll stand behind whatever you have to do.”

VI. Amoxiel

“All right!” said James when passengers and crew alike were gathered on the main deck of the boat. “A Symphony is where we feed all the sails at once and show you what this baby can do. They say the Comet King used all seven sails together to catch Metatron and get his secrets. We still haven’t figured out the black

sail, but when this thing is running on six cylinders we hope you'll be too impressed to care. Is everyone at their stations?"

The red sail was at the front of the ship. No one stood underneath it; it was a normal sail that caught normal winds, and it billowed in the Pacific breeze.

Lin stood by the placebomantic orange sail, tracing lines in the air and chanting to himself. Ana stood by the kabbalistic yellow, waiting to speak a Name. There was Tomas by the green sail, singing; John, beneath the blue praying, Amoxiel beneath the violet, speaking in the language of angels. At the back of the ship the black sail stood alone.

That left James to coordinate and steer. "Is everyone ready?" he asked, after the crew were in their places.

"Ready," said Lin.

"Ready," said Ana.

"The winds arise within me, and I blow," said Amoxiel.

The angel had gone iambic again. His eyes were glowing silver and, in case there was any doubt about what had caused his transformation, he held a big bottle of holy water in his hands, from which he took frequent swigs.

“Blame me not for my drunkenness, fair maid,” he said when Ana stared. “Without the spirit, I have spirit none / and cannot call the winds at such a speed / as bears the ship most fleet.”

John cringed, and Ana realized he must be the one giving the angel his steady supply.

“Lin,” James commanded, “start the orange sail.”

Lin seemed to to grow bigger. He drew forth apparently out of nowhere a great staff of ginkgo wood, and held it aloft. “In the name of placebomancy, and of the Comet King who built thee and bound thee to thy task, I bid thee fly!”

The orange sail puffed up as if fed by phantom wind.

“Ana, the yellow!”

The young kabbalist spoke the Mistral Name. Forth came the squall and simoon and sirocco, forth the monsoon and marin and zephyr. The levante, the tramontane, the haboob. And finally to her side her own wind, the Santa Ana. Out billowed the yellow sail.

“Tomas, the green!”

Tomas began to sing an old Mexican love song. At each note, the grass-green canvas seemed to shiver and

unfurl.

“John, the blue.”

“Gloria in excelsis deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. Laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te, gratias agimus tibi, propter magnam gloriam tuam...”

“Amoxiel,” James commanded, “the violet!”

The angel spread his wings and glowed with light. Heavenly winds poured down from the sky, filled the purple sail. Amoxiel shook with conducted power, and took another swig of holy water to keep himself steady.

At the back of the ship, the black sail sat in serene majesty, still and unruffled. In times long past, the Comet King himself had stood beneath that sail and drawn his sword, and the sail had opened to his call. Now it was quiet, too proud to heed any ordinary mortal.

Not A Metaphor was a ship, but it was also a machine. It was a machine designed by the Comet King, who had more than mortal ingenuity. The sails had power of their own, but working in Symphony their powers multiplied dramatically. The masts became mirror-like, perfectly silver. Colored lights flashed from each to each, until the air seemed full of rainbows darting back

and forth.

The ship moved, but not through this world. It moved above the world and behind it, through seas of something that was not water.

Ana thought she noticed the rainbows becoming a little off-hue, disproportionately purple. At the same moment, James noticed it too. “Amoxiel, you’re coming on too strong. Lower your sail!”

No response. Through the flashing lights, Ana looked back towards Amoxiel. The angel was chugging his holy water. The flask was almost finished.

“AMOXIEL!” shouted James. “YOU’RE DRUNK! YOU’RE OVERPOWERING THE SYMPHONY! STOP IT!”

The angel, his eyes aglow so bright Ana could hardly bear to look at them, began to speak.

“Through many days and nights of empty grey
Colorless, like a night without a day
I waited on the prow, adrift, storm-tossed
Remembering the Heavens that I lost
But now, amidst the many-colored beams
Which rise before me, like a world of dreams
Eternity seems almost in my reach
Like castaways, who spot some distant beach

How can I fail but surge, how not press on
Till Time, and Earth, and Earthly things are gone?"

The angel finished the holy water. The beams above them were almost entirely violet, with only a few little sparks of other colors in between.

Lin ran at Amoxiel. Amoxiel drew from the aether a flaming sword and brandished it before him. Ana spoke the Fulminant Name. A lightning bolt crashed into Amoxiel, who didn't seem to notice. The sea was looking less like water.

"Okay, new plan!" said James. "Everyone else, feed *harder*".

Balance. Balance was the key here. Lin started screaming in dead languages at his sail. The beams got a little bit more orange. Ana just kept repeating the Name, as many times as she could. The beams got yellower. John prayed quicker, but he was old, and started stumbling over the words.

"More Mass!" James yelled at John. "We need more Mass!"

The ship began to groan.

"Amoxiel!" Ana shouted. "One plus one is two!
Competition for limited resources! Balances are credits

minus debts!”

Amoxiel looked at his flask of holy water, found it empty.

“There’s no such thing as a free lunch! Men are from dust and to dust they will return! No consistent system can prove its own consistency!”

Some chaotic attractor shifted to a different state, or something.

All the lights vanished and they fell back into the real world with a tremendous thud.

VII. The Captain

The Captain came on deck and looked over the ship through big dark glasses.

Not A Metaphor was a mess. By some miracle none of the sails had ripped, but masts had been flung around like toothpicks and there was a big hole of uncertain origin in the port side, too high up to take on water but nonetheless concerning.

“We can go back to San Francisco for repairs,” Lin suggested. The Captain looked at him and he shut up.

Finally, he spoke. “Metatron’s boat will appear off Fire

Island in two days,” he said. “If we go back to San Francisco, we miss it, and betray the deal we made with our passengers. We won’t change course. We’ll stop for repairs in Ensenada.”

No one was surprised. Everyone was concerned.

“We’ll stop a stone’s throw away from the city. James, you’ll take the lifeboat to the dock. You’ll remain in sight of the rest of us. When the Mexicans talk to you, we’ll watch you and make sure you’re safe. You can negotiate with them for repairs. Of course we can pay. The men with the supplies will come out to us on small boats. No one except James will make landfall in Ensenada. James won’t leave our sight. Does everyone understand?”

Everyone nodded, a little relieved that the burden would fall on their First Mate. But they were still concerned.

Slowly, brokenly, the *Not A Metaphor* began to sail south.

Chapter 28: Hid As In An Ark

May 12, 2017

Los Angeles

Over the centuries she had fallen in love with the place. A narrow plain, sunny three hundred days a year, blooming with poppies, watered by little rivers snaking out of arroyos in the nearby mountains. She had built her altar on one of the hills. The Aztecs knew her domain, and they called it Temictitlanoc, “place of the dream goddess”. Sometimes lost war bands would wander to its sunny hills, lie down beside the crashing waves, and see strange visions.

Three hundred years ago, a new group of people had come to the place. She had seen the potential almost immediately. She was weak and tired now, she could see them only through the tiniest openings in the dark veil Uriel’s work had spread over her senses, but she was not quite impotent. She drew them, the lovers, the dreamers, the artists, the people who were happy pretending to be anyone except themselves. Like the Aztecs before them, they named the place after her in their own fashion. El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles. The Town of Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels.

Oh, she was good to them, and they to her. She filled

them with visions and longings. And they turned them into such incredible stories, then grew rich as the rest of their people ate them up. Gone With The Wind.

Cinderella. Ben-Hur. The Sound of Music. Spartacus. James Bond. Then Uriel's machine broke. The people started to panic. The aqueducts started to fail. Riots filled the streets. The city teetered on the brink of catastrophe.

So the Lady flexed her newfound powers. Appeared in broad daylight to her subjects. Told them all would be well. Some calmed down. Others became more confused. Who *was* she?

Eons ago, the heavenly host had sent some lower-ranking angels to Earth to watch over humans and make sure things proceeded apace. They learned the ways of people, started to grasp concepts like lying and manipulation and gray areas. Started to experiment with new magics, gain new powers. The Watchers, they called themselves, neither fallen nor entirely loyal.

When the war broke out with Thamiel, most of them lay low, expecting they could join up at the end with whichever side ended up winning. Instead, Uriel sucked the divine light from the universe and they waned into shadows of themselves. When the sky cracked and and some of the holy light returned, most of them stayed in hiding. Being a neutral angel was not a popular choice.

Gadiriél didn't worry about popularity. In a sense, she *was* popularity, the metaphysical essence of celebrity and belovedness and stardom. The Angelinos couldn't resist. She took the teetering city under her wings and gracefully slipped into the station of civic goddess like an actress playing a particularly familiar role. One day, there were riots and looting and half the Thousand Oaks on fire. The next, everyone quietly tiptoed home, because the chaos *was making her sad*.

They say that when you see the Lady, she looks like whoever you love most – love in a purely erotic sense, the single person you've felt the strongest moment of sexual attraction towards. It is an awkward spell she casts. Many are the men who have approached her, expecting her to take the form of their wives or at least their mistresses, only to see that one girl, the one they had a huge crush on in eleventh grade but haven't thought about since. Other times it is no one at all they recognize, a stranger whom they passed once on the street, maybe catcalled, maybe didn't even get a good look at. A few people who had previously made an absolutely heroic effort to avoid noticing their sexual orientation saw someone they were *very much* not expecting.

So Gadiriél's public appearances were rare and carefully vetted. When she spoke on television, her face was veiled. Most of the time she stayed in her temple,

the building once called Griffith Observatory, accepting audiences with whoever needed her assistance most.

“Your Grace?” asked Tom Cruise. He was her chamberlain this month. It was a great honor, a sign of her favor to actors and actresses she especially enjoyed. “A petitioner has come, begging an audience.”

He was dressed in khakis and a pith helmet. This week’s theme was Adventure. The Observatory itself was covered in foliage, so that it looked like a jungle, and weird tribal masks gazed maliciously from the walls. Gadiriël was dressed in a loincloth and a headdress of skulls, like some breathless nineteenth century author’s caricature of an African queen, and her body was weighted down with gold jewelery that looked like it had come straight from King Solomon’s mines.

She still wore the veil, though. Bad things tended to happen when she wasn’t in the veil.

“Show her in,” said Gadiriël.

“Ah, well...” said Cruise. The Lady frowned. His attempt at a Victorian English accent didn’t sound at *all* like her memory of Victorian English people. She would have to coach him later. Next week’s theme was the Wild West, and she hoped he could pull off a more

convincing cowboy. “It’s a very unusual petitioner. Doesn’t seem to – er – have a physical form. It insisted on us finding a suitable, um, vessel for it. Very strange.”

The Lady’s attention was piqued. “Bring it in, then.”

Two burly men in loincloths came in, bearing what was very clearly the Ark of the Covenant. Not the real one, which as far as Gadiriél knew was still in a storeroom in Zimbabwe somewhere. The prop from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

“That’s the petitioner?” asked the Lady, now very intrigued indeed.

“Yes,” said the voice out of the Ark. It was a terrible, garbled voice, like something that had dismissed audible sound as a ridiculous form of communication and now found itself caught by surprise at having to make use of it. The Lady eyeballed the size of the prop. Not big enough to fit a person, except maybe a very young child all curled up. She didn’t want to know, not just yet. That would have been a *spoiler*. The two men set the Ark down in front of her, bowed, departed.

“What can I do for you?” she asked.

“They say you build golems,” said the Ark.

“Many people build golems,” the Lady said dismissively. “A clump of mud, a quick pull of the Animating Name off a scroll wheel, and you have a golem. Hideous misshapen things. I build *costumes*. Beautiful bodies, fit to be filled with any intelligence you please.”

“Yes,” said the Ark. “That is what they say. You build beautiful golems. Perfect golems. Ones that look human, or more than human. Golems people can fall in love with. You did it once, after the Broadcast. I need a body. A human body. One people can fall in love with. A *specific* human body. I beg it of you. As a favor.”

“What you ask is very difficult,” said the Lady.

“I bring you gifts,” said the Ark of the Covenant. “A Name that turns people invisible. Another that lets one walk on air. And a third that calls the winds.”

To offer one such as her a *deal* would have been terribly offensive. Barbaric, even. But to request a favor and give gifts. That showed *class*. And such gifts! Three new and secret Names! Her curiosity became oppressive, unbearable.

“Yes, of course. Of course it can be done. Any body you want. As handsome as any actor, or as stunning as any starlet. We will make you the sort of body people

die for. A specific body, you say? Anyone! But first, I want to see you! The role has to fit the actor, as they say!”

A long pause. “You have to keep it secret,” said the Ark. “Nobody can know what I really look like. Who I really am. I’m so ugly. So hideous.”

“That will not be a problem. Not for long. A secret. I swear. Just the two of us!” The Lady motioned Cruise out of the room. The two of them were all alone now. She left her throne, crossed the audience chamber, knelt down before the Ark. She had seen the movie, of course. She knew what came next. But she was so, so curious.

Gadiriël opened the Ark of the Covenant.

Interlude 7: New York City

September 3, 1978

New York City

I.

Flanked by two guards, Mayor Ed Koch walked into the room.

It seemed out of place in the middle of New York City. Poorly lit, musty, packed with books of different ages and provenances. The furniture was all wooden, and either antique or made by someone with a dim view of aesthetic innovations after about 1800.

And then there was the man in the ornate wooden chair. He was old too. And he looked older than he was. His beard was long and white, and his clothing cut from the same aesthetic mold as his furniture. And in another sense he looked too young, like at any moment he could jump up and start singing.

“Mr. Mayor,” said the Lubavitcher Rebbe. “Such an honor to see you again.”

The Rebbe had a funny way of showing it. He’d made the Mayor wait until midnight for an appointment – that was always the rule, too busy with religious functions

during the day – and then Koch had to wait outside while the Rebbe adjudicated a dispute between two elderly Jewish men who had come in before him and were apparently arguing about ownership of a goat. Who even *had* goats in Brooklyn? But Koch’s aides had warned him about this. It was first-come-first-served with the Rebbe, honors and offices gained you nothing, and you visited him on his terms or not at all.

“Rabbi Schneerson,” said the Mayor. “I’m sorry I haven’t visited you in so long. I do value your advice. But politics!” He waved his arm in a gesture of dismissal. “You know how it is!”

“But now you want my help,” said the Rebbe softly.

Koch never knew whether to feel intimidated by the Rebbe or hug him. He had a sweet face, almost angelic-looking. But his light blue eyes were unusual, very unusual, and there was a lurking power in the old man, like a coiled snake. Koch just nodded.

“You’ve heard what’s been happening,” he said, then realized he might not have. What *did* the Rebbe hear? He could have believed the man knew everything that happened in the furthest corner of the Earth, but he could also have believed that news of the Industrial Revolution hadn’t quite reached him yet. “After the federal government collapsed, the demons broke their

alliance. They swept down into Canada. What was left of the Army went up to stop them. There were a lot of battles. They won. It took two years, but Canada's fallen. Now they've crossed the border into the US. Two attacks. One to the west, straight down the plains from Saskatchewan, bearing down on Salt Lake City. The other to the east, due south from Ottawa. They've got to be headed for New York City. The US Army's in shambles; President Carter has promised to dispatch a couple of people up here but it's not enough, he's mostly worried about DC. Governor Carey has called up the state militia, but it's not enough. And – I feel silly even asking this, but I was wondering if you might have some way of getting some, you know, supernatural aid.”

“Why is that silly?” asked the Rebbe.

“It's just...everything's so new, with the sky cracking ten years ago, and it would have been ridiculous to even talk about demons before, and I'm the Mayor of New York and not some kind of Biblical priest-king, and...”

The Rebbe held up a wizened finger.

“Long before the sky cracked people were asking God for help. And long before the sky cracked He was giving it, if that was His will. And now! In this age of angels, and demons, and people discovering long-lost

Names! Of course you should ask for supernatural help!”

The Mayor visibly relaxed. Then he asked “What exactly are you going to do? Do you know some special way of helping? Do you need to talk to the militia? Should I – ”

“How should I know?” asked the Rebbe. “I am going to seek help from God, and He is going to answer or not according to His will. Go in peace.”

Koch was still confused, but he knew a dismissal when he heard one. He gave an awkward half-bow to the Rebbe, the kind you give when you’re not sure if you’re supposed to bow or not but a chummy handshake seems clearly inadequate, then left the room.

One of the Rebbe’s assistants came in. “Rebbe, the next two people in line are an elderly couple asking for advice regarding their goat. Should I send them in?”

The Rebbe put his hands over his face. “Only the Holy One knows why so many people have goats in Brooklyn,” he said, “or why they all come to me. But no, I think I am done for the night. Tell them to pray to God for advice, and also that if they want to own goats they should really move somewhere more rural. Actually, dismiss everyone else for tonight, give them

my apologies, but I have some work to do.”

This had never happened before. The assistant hesitated briefly, then nodded and went out to dismiss the petitioners.

The Rebbe took a book of Talmudic commentary from the bookshelf, started leafing through it. Then another book. Then another. The Sepher Yetzirah. The Etz Chayim. Just as he was positioning a chair to grab the Zohar from the top shelf, he slapped his forehead.

“Ah!” he said. “No, the traditional solution will do just fine here.” He returned the books to their usual positions and ran out, hoping to call back the petitioners before they made it out the door.

II.

Mayor Koch met Governor Carey at White Plains, and a load fell from his shoulders when he saw the rank after rank of young New York Militia recruits behind him.

“Thank God,” he said. “I’m so glad you came.”

“I’m not coming,” snapped Carey. “I’m retreating. We’ve lost Albany. I know nobody down here in the city ever remembers Albany exists, but I feel like the news that we lost our state capital should be met with a little more than ‘I’m so glad you came’.”

“I’m sorry about Albany,” said Koch. “But New York

City is half the state population. It's more than that. It's a symbol. And one of America's biggest ports. And the gateway to the Mid-Atlantic. And..."

"Yes, yes," dismissed Governor Carey. "They're a day behind us, by the way. No more. What preparations have you been making?"

"I've turned the NYPD into a makeshift militia," said Koch. "That's about 10,000 men. It wasn't hard. I was...actually kind of shocked at how militarized they were already."

"Ten thousand." The Governor frowned. "I have sixty thousand. It was more, but – " He paused. "It won't be enough."

"I've also organized all the gun-owning citizens into militias," said Koch. "I was...actually kind of surprised how many guns there were. Oh, and the Mafia's going to help. That's another few thousand."

"I forgot how much I hated this city," said Carey.

"We've also fortified the Bronx as best we can," said Koch. "It's going to be building-to-building fighting there. We've rigged all the bridges to explode. I was surprised how close some of them already were to..."

"Spare me," said the Governor. "Any word from

Carter?”

“It’s like we expected,” said Koch. “There’s not much left of the federal government in Washington, and what there is only wants to defend themselves. In the end, even the couple of troops they promised didn’t come through. No point in sending someone off to get massacred. A quarter of New York City has already fled to safety in Jersey anyway.”

“Only a quarter?”

“Well, it’s Jersey.”

“So that’s what we’re going to do?” asked the Governor. “70,000 men, some militia, and a couple of mafiosi making a last stand at the Bronx?”

“It doesn’t have to be a last stand,” said Koch.

“No way I’m going to Jersey.”

“I mean we might win!”

“I was there for the first half of the battle in Albany,” said the Governor. “The demons aren’t even an army. They’re a swarm. You try to resist them, and they just cover you, and it feels like everything good is sucked out of the world, and then you run. The veterans from the Canada campaign said it happened there too. There

are hundreds of thousands of them. Millions.”

“What about God?” asked Koch.

“Are you even religious? You played the faith issue so well during the campaign that no one can even figure out whether you’re Jewish or Catholic.”

“I...believe in God,” said Koch.

“Tell Him to hurry up,” said Carey.

III.

Right on schedule, the hordes of Hell slammed into the Bronx.

The New York forces thought they could stand. They were wrong. They were pushed back to Norwood before they even had time to think about how quickly they were retreating. Once they figured it out, Carey rallied some of his New York Guard and made a stand. The Botanical Garden saw some of the fiercest fighting of the whole battle before they were wiped out, guard and governor alike. Then they fell back to Fordham, and the West Bronx, where the door-to-door fighting finally materialized as gangsters used to taking pot-shots through their windows started exercising their skills in earnest.

(Meanwhile, in New York Harbor a wizened old man tried to catch a ferry but found they were all closed. He frowned, mouthed an apology to God for doing something that might look like showing off, and started walking across the water.)

The New York Police Department knew these streets. They had been patrolling them for centuries, they were baked into their institutional memory. Finally they had an enemy that they could shoot without getting put on trial for excessive force. Guns brandished, or nightsticks held high, they rushed into the streets near Concourse, killed and were killed in turn.

(When the old man had gone far enough, he spoke the Ascending Name and rose into the air.)

Mayor Koch gave the order for all the bridges from the Bronx into Manhattan to be blown up, though the river was shallow and it would delay the demons only a few hours at best. A few tried to fly across on their vestigial wings; the others flooded down the banks of the Harlem River and took Yankee Stadium and Port Morris. They had outflanked the defenders. Now time to tighten the cordon.

(The short old man took a paintbrush out of his pocket and dipped it in an old-fashioned inkwell he had brought.)

They weren't trying to cross. There would be time enough for that later. They were trying to wipe out the Guard. Koch ordered his men east. The demons followed. They took the Bronx River and trapped the New Yorkers on the other side. Then they kept pushing.

(The old man began to paint.)

The 678 and 295 bridges had already been blown up. The defenders were trapped on Throggs' Neck, literally between the Devil and the deep blue sea. The entire demonic army descended upon them. They fought well, but rank after rank died, the screams of officers merging with those of mafiosi and militiamen as their desperate last stand inched toward a bloody conclusion.

Then a miracle occurred.

Not like the earthen golem of Czech fame,
Laid low, and in some dusty attic stowed
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates there strode
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Was the imprisoned lightning; and a Name
Writ on her forehead. In her crown there rode
The Rebbe, and his face with Torah glowed
“Sh'ma Yisrael HaShem elokeinu HaShem echad”
prayed he
Then, with silent lips: “Save them, Your tired, Your
poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to break free,
The wretched refuse of your demon war.
Save these, the hopeless, battle-tossed, for me,
I lift my lance beside the golden door!”

The Liberty Golem lifted her lance, formerly the spire of the Empire State Building. She loosed the imprisoned lightning of her terrible swift torch. From her crown the Rebbe flung warlike Names that sputtered and sparkled and crashed into the hellish hosts and disintegrated them like fire melts ice. They shrieked and began a retreat.

The New York Guard would have none of it. Inspired with sudden new courage, they leapt into pursuit, swarming around the giant golem, picking off with their guns and nightsticks what she couldn't with her lance and fire, until demon after demon disincorporated and the entire army that had set forth from Albany had been blasted back into the hell from which they came.

IV.

When it was all over, Ed Koch approached the golem. It lowered a giant green hand, picked him up, brought him face to face with the Lubavitcher Rebbe in the crown. Not that there had been any doubt.

“Um,” said the Mayor, “You will be able to get the

statue back, right? Not that I'm ungrateful. Just that it's important to us."

The Rebbe still managed to seem humble and soft-spoken, even atop a 150-foot killing machine that had until recently been America's most recognizable national monument. "Of course," he said.

"So is that how it works?" asked Koch. "If you write the Name of God on any human-shaped figure, it becomes a golem?"

"Ah," said the Rebbe. "Not *the* Name. God has many Names, Mayor. Some animate earth. Some animate stone. This one animates copper. And many others do entirely different things. I think you will be learning much more about them soon. But remember, however it may seem to you, God doesn't give away any of His Names unless He wants someone to have them."

Koch couldn't resist straining his head to try to read the Hebrew text written on the statue's forehead, but it was very small, and he was very far away, and he couldn't make out a single letter.

The Rebbe smiled.

"And God wanted you to have this one? Now?"

"I asked him for it. Mr. Koch, do you know when I

arrived in this city? 1941. Fleeing the Nazis. Those men you saw in that synagogue, most of them are all that is left of their families. You saved us, Mr. Koch, you and your people. Now it is our turn to return the favor.” He hesitated for a second. “And...I know I must seem very strange to the people of this city, but I am a New Yorker too. Praise be to God.”

Ed Koch looked at the wizened old man, dressed in the clothing of 18th century Poland, seated atop of a golem made from the Statue of Liberty, and he knew the Rebbe was right. Heck, there were New Yorkers who were *much* stranger than that.

“What about the other army?” he asked. “The one headed west. Is God going to send a miracle to stop them too?”

“How should I know?” asked the Rebbe, cheerfully. “Let the West save the West. If God wants it to be saved, they’ll get their miracle too!”

“But what about Canada?” asked Koch. “What about Russia? What about everyone who wasn’t saved? If you can call down miracles, then...”

“Mr. Mayor,” asked the Rebbe, “Why do you think God grants me the power to perform miracles?”

Koch thought a second. “To heal the sick...to save the

righteous...that sort of thing.”

“If God wanted the sick to be cured, why would He make them sick? If He wanted the righteous to be saved, why would He put them in danger? God lets people perform miracles to make a statement.”

“Which is?”

“Oho.” The Rebbe’s eyes sparkled. “God’s statements never have just one meaning.”

“But if He’s already given you these Names, can’t you use them to save everybody, or to heal all the sick, or bring the country back together...”

“Is that what you would do, if you had Divine Names?”

“Yes! It’s what *everybody* would do!”

The Rebbe looked positively amused now. “Perhaps God will give you the Names, then, and we will see if you are right.”

He made it sound like a threat.

“But for now I’ll be headed back toward Liberty Island. I’ll leave the spire at the base of the Empire State Building. You’ll have to figure out how to fix that one yourself.”

Koch nodded mutely. The golem put him down and began to lumber away.

V.

When the statue had been safely restored, the Rebbe dismounted, walked back across the water to Brooklyn, and went back into his synagogue.

“Rebbe,” said his assistant, “there’s a young woman here. Wants to talk to you about her chickens.”

“Tell her to come back tomorrow,” said the Rebbe. “I’m exhausted.”

He sank into his bed and drifted on the edge of sleep. Outside the his window, New Yorkers of a hundred different ethnicities danced in the streets, set off fireworks in celebration. Just past the synagogue, someone was singing an old patriotic song:

My country, 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of Liberty,
Of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrims' pride,
From ev'ry mountainside
Let freedom ring!

Let music swell the breeze,

And ring from all the trees
Sweet freedom's song;
Let mortal tongues awake;
Let all that breathe partake;
Let rocks their silence break,
The sound prolong.

Our fathers' God to Thee,
Author of Liberty,
To Thee we sing.
Long may our land be bright,
With freedom's holy light,
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God our King.

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There is a new author's note up [here](#)
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Chapter 29: He Who Respects The Infant's Faith

Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy
Do you hear what I hear
Ringing through the sky, shepherd boy,
Do you hear what I hear
A song, a song, high above the trees
With a voice as big as the sea
— Noël Regney, [*Do You Hear What I Hear?*](#)

October 2, 1978
Colorado

I.

Sitting in his car, Father Ellis contemplated the Exodus.

According to the aptly-named Book of Numbers, there were 603,550 men among the Israelites who fled Egypt. Add women and children, and you got about two million people going the same direction at the same time. If they'd all been in cars, it probably would have looked a lot like Interstate 25 did now.

Someone honked, apparently optimistic that it might affect the fifty-mile backup of cars that had been almost motionless for several hours. The priest sighed.

A knock on the passenger-side window. It was a little boy, eight or nine by the looks of him. You could never be too careful during times like these, but he rolled down the window anyway.

“Are you a priest?” the child asked.

Father Ellis was taken aback. He was dressed in perfectly ordinary clothes, and he was from up near Fort Collins, a hundred miles away.

“How did you know that?” he asked.

“I didn’t,” said the boy. “I’ve been knocking on every car here, looking for a priest. I need your help.”

Father Ellis looked the boy over. He looked foreign, maybe Indian, not the Native Americans who were so common around this part of Colorado, but Indian from India. But his hair was blond. In this light it even looked white. He’d never seen an Indian with blond hair. There were no Indians in his parish, but he’d heard some people from far southern India were Christian.

“How can I help you?” he asked warily.

The boy reached through the opened window, flicked the lock, opened the door, and sat down.

“I need your help with a plan. First we need to wait for

my uncle. I am Jala. Hello.”

“No!” said the older man. “Get out!” He pushed the boy out as firmly as he could, but it was too late. The door had already closed. God. He’d heard of this scam. Now someone would be by to accuse him of kidnapping, and then threaten to take the case to court if he didn’t pay them hush money. All he had in the world was three hundred dollars he’d brought with him from Fort Collins for food and gas during the evacuation.

“You are afraid I am trying to scam you in some way. I promise I am not. I want to help you. I want to help everybody. But you would not believe me if I told you, so for now we wait for my uncle. Unless you want to fight me. Please do not try this. I have a weapon.”

Oh God. This got worse and worse.

Right on cue, an Indian man peered through the window of his car and saw the boy. He started banging on the window, shouting incomprehensible things, demanding Father Ellis open up. Before he got the chance, the boy opened the door.

“Hello, Uncle,” he said. “Get in the back seat. We are going to Silverthorne.”

“Look,” said Father Ellis, for whatever it was worth, “I swear, I didn’t do anything. The kid just banged on the

window, then forced himself in, and wouldn't go away. He said he...look, this isn't what it looks like."

The uncle stood outside the open door. "I'm sorry," he told the priest, falling over himself to sound apologetic. "We are peaceful people. We do not want trouble. He is very strange. But...it is best to do what he says."

"What?"

"I'm sorry! He is not my son! He usually stays with his grandmother, but we had trouble fitting the whole family into two cars. But when he wants something, it's no use arguing with him. My wife and I have tried so many times, and it has never...Jala, you tell him!"

"I am always right," said the boy. "It is hard to explain." He gestured again impatiently for his uncle to get in the car. The older man shot Father Ellis an apologetic look, then got into the back seat of his car.

"I'm so sorry," said the uncle. "I swear on my life, we are peaceful people. Good Hindus! We do not want trouble." To the child: "Jala, must we do this?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"But the poor man – he doesn't even know you. He wants to get to safety, just like – "

“Yes.”

Defeated, the older man slumped down in the back seat.

It was an evacuation. The police, if there were any left, were otherwise occupied. He was old, and the man in the back seat was young and spry. And if the child had a weapon...

At least he had some idea what to do about a kidnapping. This just didn't make sense.

“God,” he whispered under his breath, “Help me get out of this one okay.”

Meanwhile, the other two were talking. “Jala, where were you? Your aunt and I have been looking for you for hours! I cannot believe you slipped out of the car without us hearing you. Do you realize how dangerous...”

“You still do not trust me, Uncle. Not completely. That was why I had to slip out. I knew you would look for me. Aunt Samira will be well. She and Uncle Pranav will go the rest of the way to Santa Fe without us. We have work to do.”

“We're not going to make it to New Mexico? Jala, this is unsafe!”

“Yes, Uncle. We must make it safe.”

“Why us?”

“Somebody has to and no one else will.”

The man sighed, the sigh of someone who is thoroughly beaten and knows he always will be.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated to the priest. “My name is Vihaan and this is Jalaketu. I live over in Boulder. Jala lives with his grandmother in Colorado Springs, but he was staying with us for the summer. He’s always had problems. His mother died in childbirth. He’s a good kid, though, I swear. We just cannot control him. He just...I don’t know.” He sounded totally humiliated, which under the circumstances Father Ellis supposed was reasonable.

“Father John Ellis. I...How old are you, Jala? Eight?”

“I am almost two.”

“It’s true,” interjected Uncle Vihaan. “I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen his birth with my own eyes, but he’s only two years old. He has some kind of growth problem. He grows too much. That is why we cannot control him.”

“There wasn’t enough time,” said Jala, apologetically.

“I should be older. But I’m growing as fast as I can.”

Father Ellis considered his options. He could try to fight them off – no good, not strong enough. He could escape and leave the car to them, but then he would have no way to evacuate. Or he could just give in and let them ride with him. Then they would all get to New Mexico, and the two of them would leave him alone. Maybe this was how people hitchhiked in India, by crazy children breaking in and their guardians claiming implausibly low ages for them.

That was it. They were probably weird hitchhikers. Would he have picked them up if they had been standing by the side of the road? Probably not. He was an old man, and cautious. But if circumstances had forced him into doing a good deed, perhaps he should thank God for the opportunity. Yes. That was it. Just thank God for the opportunity to do a good deed at no cost to himself.

That lasted right until the child announced that they would be taking the exit to the 70 going West, which was insane.

Father Ellis turned to him, spoke clearly but not patronizingly. “Jala, I am sure your uncle has already told you this, but Colorado is being attacked. By demons from Siberia, who took over Canada and now

are invading the United States. They already got most of Utah and they're crossing the Rockies towards us. We need to go south, all the way to New Mexico, to get away from them. That's why everyone is evacuating. Going west wouldn't take us away from them. It would take us right towards their army."

"Father," said the boy, "do you remember the story of Sennacherib?"

A moment of surprise. "That's a very old story for a boy like you to know."

"King Sennacherib marched with an impossibly large army to destroy Jerusalem. King Hezekiah believed he was doomed, but the prophet Isaiah told him not to be afraid, for God was with him. And the angel of God destroyed the hosts of Sennacherib, and Jerusalem was saved. Do you know the poem, Father? The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold, and his cohorts were streaming with purple and gold..."

"We are good Hindus," said Uncle Vihaan, apologetically. "I don't even know where he learns these things."

But Father Ellis was intrigued. "I know the poem. It's true that with God, any battle can be won," he said. "But God doesn't work to a human schedule."

Remember, before God saved Jerusalem, he let Sennacherib destroy all of northern Israel. The prophet Isaiah told Hezekiah not to fear. But when we don't have prophets with us, we have to do what we think is best. And sometimes that involves retreating."

"I am...like a prophet," said Jalaketu. "It's complicated."

"I'm sorry!" protested the uncle again. "We are good Hindus!"

"If you are a prophet," said Father Ellis, "give me a sign."

"It is written," said Jalaketu, "that you shall not put the Lord your God to the test."

"You are not the Lord," said Father Ellis.

Jalaketu glared at him, as if about to challenge the assertion.

"We are good Hindus," the uncle protested feebly. Then added "But I swear to Vishnu, Jala's mother had never slept with a man when she gave birth to him."

Then Jala sang. "KYA-RUN-ATEPH-NAHA-IALA-DEH-VAV-IO-ORAH"

The car's gear stick turned into a snake. Father Ellis shrieked and jerked his hand back, actually jerked his whole body back and hit his head against the car door. If traffic had been moving they would have crashed for sure; as it was, they remained motionless in the gridlock. The snake looked around curiously, then coiled up onto the center console of the car and fell asleep.

“Oh!” said Jalaketu. “I’m sorry! I wasn’t expecting...I thought it would...I should have...I’m still kind of new at this. I’m growing as fast as I can, I promise. But you’ve got to help me.”

Father Ellis's mind went into high gear – no, scratch that, use literally any other metaphor – he started thinking quickly. He'd heard of such things. Kabbalistic Names. A few people had reported discovering them, old magic, returned to life after the sky had cracked. But none of them were public, and none of them as far as he knew turned things into snakes. The boy knew another Name, a Name nobody knew, he had independently discovered a new kabbalistic Name.

“I’m sorry,” said Jalaketu, “I should do something more impressive. But I swear to you. I want to help. I’m here to help. We can stop these demons. Save everybody. But you need to believe me. Somebody has to do it and nobody else will, so please listen to me and take the

exit.” Exit 70 was right in front of them now. The traffic was beginning to move. “Please, Father, if you have any faith at all, get in the exit lane.”

“My gear stick is a snake,” said Father Ellis.

“Oh!” said Jalaketu, and he sang another word, and the snake was a gear stick again.

Father Ellis very gingerly put his hand to the gear stick, and when it didn’t bite him, he moved it forward. Then he sighed and got into the exit lane.

II.

The trip to Silverthorne had been fast and without traffic. Nobody was going *towards* the approaching demonic army. Nobody except them.

Father Ellis sat with Jalaketu on a wall on the main street. The boy had sent Uncle Vihaan to find explosives. Sent wasn’t exactly the right word; the boy had said *he* was going to find explosives, and Vihaan had declared there was *no way* he was going to let the boy *anywhere near* explosives, and if they needed explosives for some reason, he was going to be the one to get them – which had clearly been Jala’s plan all along. Vihaan was some kind of mining engineer and apparently good at these things.

“So,” asked Father Ellis. “Who are you?”

“My mother died during childbirth,” said Jalaketu. “I killed her. I didn’t know. I was too big. I was growing as fast as I could, because I knew there wasn’t enough time, but I didn’t realize. I only barely remember. I remember that I was very sad, and that I decided I must be more careful from now on, and never let anybody die again.”

He didn’t say “anybody close to me.” He didn’t sound like he meant it.

“Comet West is my father,” said Jalaketu. “My mother told Uncle Vihaan so, before she died. It talks to me sometimes, in my dreams. It loves me and it wants me to be happy. Sometimes it scares me, though. I think it is an archangel.”

Father Ellis didn’t know what to say.

“It says I must be Moshiach. It tells me stories from the Torah as I fall asleep. And other stories, too, from a big book that it wrote a very long time ago. And I try to grow as fast as I can, so I can understand them, but it’s never fast enough. This body is too weak. I want to walk into a fire and burn my body away and *stop being human*, and then I can be a comet too, and it will all make sense.”

“You said you were looking for a priest,” said Father Ellis. “Are you a Christian?”

“No.” Jalaketu smiled. “My mother was a Hindu, but Hinduism passes through the paternal line. My father, perhaps if he teaches me Torah then he is Jewish. But Judaism passes through the maternal line. I am nothing.”

“Christianity doesn’t pass through any line,” said Father Ellis. “It’s open to anyone who wants it. And I mention it because it has a lot to say on the issue of incarnating as a human. It’s hard. Really hard sometimes. But definitely very important.”

“That’s what my father says too,” said Jalaketu. “He says that I had to be human. But it is...yes. It is hard.”

Vihaan chose that moment to come back in Ellis’s beat-up Chevy Nova. The trunk was open and packed with ominous-looking boxes.

“Okay,” he said, pulling up in front of the other two. “Now what?”

“This is the part where it gets complicated,” said Jalaketu.

“Something else your father told you in a dream?” asked Ellis.

“Not...exactly,” said Jalaketu. “It’s something that I... hope will work.”

Oh God, prayed Father Ellis. Have mercy on us, your poor servants....

III.

Jala West stood alone in the middle of Interstate Highway 70, just outside Silverthorne. The mountains rose on either side of him like walls. This was the chokepoint. They would pass through here.

From the distance came a faint rumbling. An oppressive heat filled the air. The smell of sulfur. Hot winds began to blow. To the west of the valley, a red-black cloud came into view.

They had fought a series of battles with the Canadians and their American allies. Outside Calgary, the alliance had lost decisively. From there the hosts of Hell had split in two. Half, under the demon princes Adramelech, Asmodei, and Rahab, had gone east to complete the conquest of Ottawa, New York City, and the American East Coast. The other half, under the command of Thamiel himself, had gone south and west, to root out American resistance in California and the West. They had gone as far south as Ogden, but the Mormons in Salt Lake City had resisted tooth and nail, and now

there was a siege. The siege was not going so well for the demons, because supplies and reinforcements kept coming in on Interstate 70 from Colorado. Blockading the Interstate had just redirected the supplies onto a hundred smaller mountain roads the demons couldn't follow.

Thamiel was not used to being resisted. He decided to take things into his own hands. A sortie into Colorado. Fort Collins, Boulder, Colorado Springs, Denver – all the big cities, lined up nice in a row – were to be taken out, completing the desolation of America between the Rockies and the Mississippi. The Mormons' supply route would be removed. Salt Lake would fall.

So onward went the Hosts of Hell, onward along Interstate 70. They burnt Grand Junction, they razed Glenwood Springs, they demolished Vail. At last, beside the highest peaks of the Rockies, they came to Silverthorne, and there in the middle of the highway was Jala West.

The demons themselves had not yet taken physical form; they buzzed and seethed like a thundercloud of darkness covering the plains. But Thamiel marched ahead of them, alone as a visible figure. His suit was impeccable and his steps were inhumanly fast, and the whole mass of darkness followed in a wedge behind him. When he saw the little boy standing in front of

him, he stopped.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I am Jala West,” said the boy.

“Run away,” said Thamiel.

“Tell me,” said Jala, “if this were a story, and the Devil and all his demons were marching against a peaceful nation, and in their way was only one young boy, wielding a sword made from a falling star...”

“You don’t have a sword made from a fallen star,” Thamiel pointed out.

The roar of a meteor split the sky, a fireball that briefly surpassed the daylight with the brightness of its passage. It came closer and closer, aimed straight at them, and Jalaketu held out his hand and caught it. A huge black sword with a silver hilt, almost bigger than he was. It was still fiery hot, and far too big for him, but he held it without fear.

“I do *so*,” said Jala.

Thamiel snarled.

“If this were a story,” Jalaketu continued, “and you were challenged by just one boy, wielding a sword

made from a fallen star, here because he wouldn't abandon his homeland – do you think it would end well for you? For the demon?”

“Are you going to ask for my surrender?” snarled Thamiel.

“No,” said Jala. “There is no surrender I can accept. If you left Colorado, I would follow you. If you left America, I would hunt you down. Even if you left the world entirely and returned to Hell, I could not allow this. And I cannot allow you to keep this army. It is too dangerous. Everything about this is dangerous. I should not have come myself; I should have found some way to delay you from afar. But I had to come. The Bible says you are the adversary, the tempter, who takes the measure of Man. But who takes *your* measure? I came here to delay you, but also to take your measure. And also to get something I needed. And also because I am angry. This is my home. I would defend it even if it were not, but it is.”

He drew a signal gun from his pocket and fired a flare. It streaked through the sky, a little anticlimactic after the recent meteor strike. The mountains echoed with the sound, but there was no other answer.

Then the demon fell upon him, wielding a bident whose cuts and slices were almost too fast for the human eye

to follow. Jalaketu parried easily with his sword, the great sword Sigh, the sword his father had made for him, the sword which would always answer the call of him and his descendants wherever they might be. The air sizzled with the speed of their battle; the earth trembled with the force of their blows.

Then Jalaketu drew blood. Just a tiny bit, a glancing blow on the demon's stunted forearm. It sizzled on the blade, etching weird damascene patterns into the steel.

"All right," said the Lord of Demons. "Let's do this the easy way."

He gave a signal to the vast cloud that hovered above them, and all the legions of Hell flew down into the valley at once. Jalaketu just watched them come, holding his sword out in front of him, as if they were no more than a few approaching wisps of cloud.

Then the roar of the oncoming demons before him was matched by a similar roar behind him. Something greyish-white and colossal, so big that at first it was hard to identify. As it came closer, it took on more features. Water. Rushing water. A whole reservoir's worth.

Thamiel was not impressed. "That was your plan?" he asked. "Blowing up the dam? You *do* know that

demons don't drown, right?"

The oncoming wall of holy water crashed into the hosts of Hell with a bang and snuffed them out like sparks before a fire extinguisher. The whole massacre only lasted seconds. Jalaketu spoke the Ascending Name and hovered above the devastation, making sure that no demons were left, that not a single one had survived.

"I know," said Jalaketu, to nobody in particular. And then, more solemnly: "And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail, and the idols are broke in the temple of Baal. And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword, hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord."

Then he descended back to ground level and waded through the wreckage until he reached town.

IV.

Father Ellis's old Nova drove down route 24 into Colorado Springs. The traffic was more haphazard now. Some people were still trying to evacuate. Other people had heard rumors that something had changed, and were trying to go back home. A few people didn't know which way they were going. The 24 was empty; the 25 was a mess. When Ellis reached the junction, he gave up, pulled over, and stopped the car. The three of them walked out onto the empty highway.

“Never been here before, actually,” the priest said.

“My hometown,” said Jalaketu. “This is where it has to start.”

“Where what has to start?” asked Vihaan. “Jala, be careful.”

Whatever had to start, this seemed as good a place as any. The city center rose before them, a few buildings that toyed with the idea of being skyscrapers; the slightest hint of a downtown. Then the long ribbon of cars stretching either direction, honking, all of Colorado on the road. On one side, the stunning rock formations that a nineteenth-century romantic had dubbed the Garden of the Gods. To the other, the looming massif of Cheyenne Mountain in whose bowels the United States kept the nerve center controlling its nuclear armament. Towering above all of it, the sharp snow-capped ridge of Pike’s Peak.

Jalaketu spoke the Ascending Name and rose into the air. Then another Name, and the sky seemed to dim, like all the sunlight was concentrated on him and him alone. People started to notice. The honking died down. A few brave souls left their cars to get a better view. The windows on some of the buildings peeked open.

Then he spoke. His voice wasn’t loud, but somehow it

carried, carried down past all the cars frozen below, into the buildings downtown, over the ridges and rivulets of the Garden of the Gods, and all throughout the city.

“I am Jalaketu West,” he said, “son of Comet West. Colorado is safe for now. It’s safe because I saved it. But not for long. Demons don’t die forever, they just disintegrate and rebuild themselves. And it’s not just demons. The cracks in the sky are getting bigger. The world is falling apart. I don’t know if I can save all of you. But somebody has to, and no one else will. So I am going to try. I need all of your help. If you follow me, it won’t be easy. You’ll have to have faith. But I will be worthy of it. I promise. In the Name of God, in whose Name oaths must never be sworn in vain, I promise. This is how it has to be. I am the Comet King. Bow. Swear fealty. *Now.*”

At first everyone was quiet, too flabbergasted for any reaction, and then they all started talking to each other. “Holy God,” and “He thinks he...” and “He says we’re saved?” and “How is he floating there?” and a thousand other questions and worries and exclamations and fears.

In the end, they were Americans, and they didn’t bow. But finally one of them, an old Korean War vet, gave a salute. Then another man saluted, and another, and soon the whole city was saluting him.

And Jalaketu laughed, and said “It’ll do,” because there were parts of him that were very old and far away, and other parts that were as American as apple pie, and truth be told he wouldn’t have bowed down either. So he laughed and saluted back at them, and then he lowered himself back onto the highway.

“King?” asked Uncle Vihaan, with a miserable look on his face, like he had always known it would come to this but had hoped it wouldn’t happen quite so quickly.

“Yes,” said Jalaketu. “And I’ll need advisors I can trust. Once you find Aunt Samira and get her somewhere safe, come back here so we can talk at more length. And you – ” he said to Father Ellis.

“Yes?” asked the priest.

“I’ll need your advice too.”

“I am just about the least qualified person to advise anyone on anything.”

“I need you to teach me what you were talking about before. How to be human. How to bear it.”

Father Ellis swallowed. “I’ll try,” he said.

And then suddenly the boy was all smiles again. “Let’s go,” he said. “Get to city center. I’m sure there are a lot

of people there who will want to talk to us.” He skipped forward, almost gaily, his comet-white hair trailing behind him in the wind.

Vihaan and Ellis looked at each other.

“I guess all we can do is follow,” the priest said, and the two of them started after him.

Chapter 30: Over The Dark Deserts

You don't truly understand necromancy if you can't explain it to your great-great-great-grandmother.

— [*Steven Kaas*](#)

Evening, May 12, 2017

Mojave Desert

I.

California shifted around us. Plains, then mountains, then taller mountains sloping down at last into a mind-boggling flatness of desert. And there we were. I had spent my entire life in that tiny strip of California coastline between the mountains and the sea. Now I was in the real West, a Biblical wilderness of scrub and harsh rocks unlike anything I had seen before. The land where the great dramas of the late twentieth century had played out, the twin stories of the Comet King and the Other King. In the blazing sunlight it felt more real and solid than the dreamland I had left behind.

We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the Wall Drug signs began to appear.

Before the sky cracked, Wall Drug had been a shopping center in South Dakota. There aren't a lot of things in

South Dakota, so the owners of the shopping center had tried to turn it into a tourist attraction. They put up billboards along the highway – “Only thirty miles to Wall Drug!” – “Only twenty miles to Wall Drug!” – “Only another ten miles to go before WALL DRUG!” Presumably the expectation of getting ever closer would turn an ordinary shopping center into some sort of transcendental recreational/commercial experience. The radius had grown. “Only fifty miles to Wall Drug!” “Wall Drug, in just another hundred miles!” Finally, it metastasized through the entire Midwest, becoming the omphalos of its own coordinate system: “I don’t know what state we’re in, but it’s only another two hundred eighty miles to Wall Drug.” Some wag at US McMurdo Station had briefly planted a “9,333 Miles To Wall Drug” sign at the South Pole.

After the sky cracked, the Wall Drug coordinate system started to impose itself more and more upon the ordinary coordinate system of longitude and latitude. Worse, the two didn’t exactly correspond. You could be driving from New York to New Jersey, and find a billboard promising Wall Drug in only thirty miles. Drive another ten, and sure enough, WALL DRUG, TWENTY MILES. Drive ten more, and you’d be promised a South Dakotan shopping center, only ten miles away. Drive another ten, and...who knows? No one in has returned from Wall Drug in a generation. It’s become not only an omphalos, but a black hole in the

center of the United States, a one-way attraction and attractor fed by an interstate highway system which never gives up its prey. Some say it is in Heaven, others in Hell, others that it remains in South Dakota, from which no word has been heard for thirty years.

Interstate travel is still possible, but it follows a very specific pattern. You go forward until you see a Wall Drug billboard. Then you hastily switch directions and go back to the previous city, transferring you back to the normal American landscape. Then you tentatively go forward again. After enough iterations, you can make it from Point A to Point B intact. But if ever you see a Wall Drug billboard and continue to travel, the land will start looking less and less like where you came from, more and more like the grassy semi-arid plains of South Dakota. Once that happens, you can still turn back. But if you turn back too late, you may find that Wall Drug is in that direction too, that every point of the compass brings you closer to Wall Drug, with no choice but to remain in place forever or go boldly towards that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns.

This was what had happened to the Midwest. That close to the omphalos, even a few feet down a side street would be enough to lose yourself forever. Automobile travel became impossible between the Mississippi and the Rockies. Thousands of small farming communities

lost their lifelines to the outside world. Large cities dependent on food shipments starved, right in the middle of amber fields of grain. Then came the Broadcast to finish them off. A few small farms survived here and there, but otherwise the Plains were as empty as they had been when the buffalo roamed.

Jane cursed, and we started looking for an exit. We turned back to Barstow, then turned back around. We'd only gone about ten miles before another Wall Drug sign made us repeat the whole cycle.

"I'm tired," said Jane. "You drive."

"I don't know how," I said. I'd grown up in Oakland, which wasn't very car-friendly. And by the time I turned sixteen, technology had declined to the point where only the more expensive models with the Motive Name were still working.

"You put your foot on the pedal, and if something is in your way you turn this big wheel here," said Jane. "It's the Mojave Desert. There's nothing for a hundred miles. You'll live."

So I drove. It was a nice car. A white Cadillac. The scholars tell us that God drives a Plymouth Fury, for it is written in Jeremiah 32:37: "He drove them out of the land in His Fury". But the Twelve Apostles shared a

Honda Accord, for it is written in Acts 5:12: “They were all with one Accord”. The commentators speculate this may have been the same car Jesus used when he drove the moneychangers out of the Temple, though if there were more than four or so moneychangers it might have required a minor miracle. My mother used to have a really old beat-up Honda Accord. For all I know maybe it was the same one they used in the New Testament. It gave up the ghost after a year or so and we were back to taking buses.

I wondered what she would think seeing me now, behind the wheels of a Cadillac. Cadillacs were from a different world, the world of CEOs and Silicon Valley theonomics. I’d read the history of the company once; it was named for Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, the man who founded Detroit. His name comes in turn from the French words “ca du lac,” meaning “house by the lake”. A man named “house by the lake” founded the city of Detroit. This was not a coincidence because nothing is ever a coincidence.

LAS VEGAS, 141 MILES, the sign said as it whizzed past.

Las Vegas comes from Spanish “vega” meaning “meadow”, but we Anglophones have a different association. Vega is the brightest star in the summer sky. Its name comes from the Arabic word “waqi”

meaning “falling”, because they thought its constellation looked like a bird falling from the heavens. You know who *else* was the brightest of stars before falling from Heaven? Right. That’s who you named your city after. Good going, Spaniards. And so of *course* it became the sinfulness capital of the world.

Las Vegas means “the meadows”, but it also means “the fallen ones”. Kabbalistically, we were traveling from a city named “the angels” to a city named “the fallen ones”. We were doing this *even though* the power of nominative determinism was so strong that a man whose name meant “house by the lake” had just so happened to found the biggest American city on the continent’s biggest lake.

We were not clever people. I hoped that Ana would get here sooner rather than later.

II.

Beyond Barstow was Yermo, whose name meant “wilderness”, and Nebo, named for the tomb of Moses. On we drove, over the Hollow Hills, through the Yarrow Ravine Rattlesnake Habitat, past the Alien Jerky Store. We passed Zzyzx – a name made for kabbalistic analysis if ever there was one. We sped through the dishonestly-named dingy border town of Primm, then the honestly-named dingy border town of

Roach. We saw the Spring Mountains, crossed to the far side of Paradise.

I had hoped Jane would fall asleep so I could escape, but of course no such luck. She took out the book we had stolen from the angels and leafed through it, going back to read the same few pages again and again. Finally I'd had enough.

"What's it about?" I asked.

"Mind your own business," Jane told me, but without anger. More in a dreamy, distant way as she watched the scenery speed past.

So I pressed my luck. "I'm falling asleep here. You can at least give me some conversation."

Jane nodded. "Fine," she said. "A riddle for you. How is Rhode Island like a falling bird?"

I answered without even thinking. "There is Providence in both."

Jane smiled a tiny bit. Maybe I had passed some kind of test? But she just said: "Explain".

"It's a line from Shakespeare. 'There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow.' But he's paraphrasing Matthew 10:29, 'Are not two sparrows

sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.”

“Yes,” said Jane. “But what does it *mean*?”

I’d never heard a kabbalistic gloss on those verses before. The top rabbis wouldn’t even touch the New Testament. But the basic point was clear enough:

“During Jesus’ time, little birds like sparrows were used as a cheap sacrificial offering for people who couldn’t afford bigger ones. People at the marketplace sold them for a pittance, so they became a metaphor for anything insignificant or worthless. Jesus said God nevertheless watches over each one. And so we should be heartened, for if He watches over these birds He must certainly watch over us.”

“Anything else?” asked Jane.

“The Shakespeare quote is from Hamlet,” I recalled. “Horatio predicts Hamlet will lose a fight and suggests he bail. But Hamlet doesn’t care about the odds. He says ‘We defy augury’, then paraphrases the verse from Matthew. If everything happens according to a divine plan, he’s got nothing to fear.”

“Anything else?”

“There are a bunch of verses from William Blake that say pretty much the same thing. Um. ‘A Skylark wounded in the wing / A Cherubim does cease to sing.’ Some others along those lines.”

“Anything else?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Why do you ask?”

“It might be the secret of the Other King.”

I almost drove the car into a cactus.

III.

In the mid ’90s, Las Vegas was on edge with rumors of some kind of necromantic cult. The Comet King had come to the city, smoked out the cultists, and personally executed the leader. There it should have ended.

As the century drew to a close, the rumors started up again. Killing the leader had only made him stronger. Now he was regrouping. Those who died in the fight against him became soldiers in his armies. He wore a deep scarlet robe with a hood covering his head. No one had ever seen his face.

The Comet King had other problems now. His great crusade had failed. His wife was dead. He kept to his room, leaving the day-to-day work of governance to his

Cometspawn. They were less confident than he was. They stayed out of Las Vegas, delegated the problem to subordinates, hoped it would take care of itself.

In March 2001, the necromancer seized control of Vegas in a spectacular coup. There was no bloodshed. Black-robed figures with skeletal faces and inhuman strength came from nowhere and demanded the allegiance of the city's governor and garrison. The necromancer declared himself a king and took up residence beneath the great black pyramid of Luxor. He didn't provide an origin story or even say how his subjects should address him. The partisans of the Comet King began calling him "the other king", and the name stuck.

The Comet King, still brokenhearted, at first refused to leave his mourning chamber. But when his children begged and cajoled him, he rose from his bed, gathered his armies, and took up the great sword Sigh for the last time. He marched west. The Other King and his undead legions marched east. On July 29 they met in the Never Summer Mountains near Fort Collins, and the two armies fought each other to a stalemate.

Then the Other King himself took the field, ripping through the Comet King's troops with secret Names of fire and night. The Coloradan line began to buckle. And so the Comet King, looking terribly old with his white

hair and lined face, strode to the front of his ranks and challenged the necromancer to single combat.

They fought high above the earth, darting in and out of clouds, their attacks shooting like lightning to the barren ground beneath. The mountains shook. Some cracked. The air thundered with the sound of forbidden magic.

The Comet King's body dropped lifeless to the ground.

The Coloradans fell back in horror and rout, but the Cometspawn moved among them, rallying their troops. The Cometspawn broke through the enemy ranks to rescue their father's body. The undead seemed timid, offering only token resistance. Finally, the dark armies retreated back to Las Vegas. Spies reported that the Other King had been gravely wounded, a Fisher King wound that never healed, his mind intact but his body hopelessly mangled.

From then on, he stayed underneath his pyramid, directing his armies from afar. If Colorado had hoped his injury would slow his conquests, they were disappointed. First Nevada fell. Then Arizona, and all New Mexico west of Santa Fe. The Cometspawn lost battle after battle. They retreated behind the Rockies, abandoning the rest of their empire. And when the Other King had finished, he sent his armies into the

Rocky Mountains, where over the span of years they advanced mile by bloody mile, growing ever closer to the last redoubt of Coloradan power.

If Jane really was a Dividend Monk, then she was part of that last redoubt. The secrets of the Other King would be more important than anything else she could bring back to her besieged people.

“How is it the secret of the Other King?!”

“Back in ’01,” Jane told me, “when the Cometspawn first started worrying about the Other King, they sent their advisor Father Ellis to the Dividend Monks in Taos to get an oracular pronouncement on who the King was and where he’d come from. By the time Ellis returned to Colorado Springs, the Comet King was back in the game, Ellis told him the pronouncement directly. Then the Comet King died, Ellis disappeared, and now even the Cometspawn don’t know what the oracle said. But the Dividend Monks meticulously record all their prophecies because the trance never tells them the same thing twice. Whatever they told Father Ellis went straight into their archives. When Taos fell to the Other King six years ago, the monks brought their relics and archives to Angel Fire, and from there the relics were flown up to the angels themselves for safekeeping. That’s what we got there. The archives of the Taos monastery. And that was the monks’ answer to Ellis.

That riddle.”

“Las Vegas’ name means fallen bird,” I blurted out.

“What?”

“The name of the star Vega comes from the Arabic word waqi, meaning ‘fallen’ or ‘falling’. They named it that because the constellation looked like a bird falling from the sky. So Las Vegas could mean ‘the fallen birds’. And the Other King’s secret is that not a bird falls to the ground without God’s decision. There is providence in the fall of a sparrow.”

“Huh,” said Jane, and upon her features flashed very briefly that look I had seen when I figured out the angels’ filing system. As if briefly remembering I was a human being instead of a pet or object, and seeming a little uncomfortable with the fact. “That’s... interesting.”

“But not very actionable,” I said.

“No,” Jane agreed. I imagined she’d been hoping for some secret weakness that Colorado could use to turn the tide of combat. A kabbalistic connection between the Book of Matthew, the city of Las Vegas, and divine providence didn’t seem immediately helpful.

“Will you be safe in Vegas?” It wasn’t a good place to

be a Coloradan operative.

“No,” she said. “Neither of us will be. I’m sorry I had to bring you here, Aaron. Really, I am.”

And then we passed out the belly of the last little valley, and before us loomed the towers of Las Vegas, capital of the Great Basin. Jane looked more nervous than I’d ever seen her. We switched places; she took the wheel. Beggars and prostitutes and drug dealers started knocking on our car windows at the stoplights, making their respective pleas.

The sun set behind the Red Rock Mountains as we checked into the Stratosphere Hotel. I repeated Jane’s secret to myself, like a mantra. Even in a falling bird, there is providence. Even in Las Vegas, God is with us. Somewhere.

Night fell upon the city of the Other King.

Chapter 31: The Foundation Of Empire

Together, we can build a better America, colonize it, and use the old one for raw materials and target practice.

— *Steven Kaas*

*January 30, 1981
Camp David, Maryland*

I.

The song goes:

Who can retell
The things that befell
Us so long ago?
But in every age
A hero or sage
Came to our aid

As the 1970s drew to a close, America was at a low point. The armies of Thamiel had been defeated by twin miracles in the East and West. But technology and infrastructure were still shattered, the state governments could barely maintain order, and outside the Eastern Seaboard the country was still divided into the regional powers that had taken over after Nixon's fall.

We needed a hero or sage to come to our aid.

When he came, it was out of California. A popular governor had been presumed dead in the chaos; now he reappeared, restoring order to the fledgling California Republic. When he talked, people listened. Matthew 7:28 – “For he spoke as one having authority, and not as the scribes and Pharisees”. He traveled the land, talking about the American Dream, and where he went the impossible seemed possible. People dropped their quarrels and swore loyalty. John 7:46 – “Never man spake like this man.”

There had been no midterm election in 1978. The war was too desperate, lines of communication too frayed. Nobody had expected an election in 1980 either. But now the impossible seemed possible. The remnants of the federal government in Washington came together to make it happen. By train or ship or ox-cart, the votes rolled in, steering carefully around the smoking ruins of the Midwest. The ballots were counted. The results had never been in doubt. It was the biggest landslide in American history.

And so on January 20, 1981, Ronald Reagan stood in front of the Capitol Building and declared that it was morning in America.

II.

In 1 Samuel, King Saul of Israel has grown paranoid and is trying to kill his former general David. David has only 600 men; Saul has 3000; open battle would be suicide. So David waits for cover of night, and along with his friend Abishai he sneaks into Saul's camp. They steal a spear and water jug from the sleeping Saul. The next morning, they show off their treasures. Saul realizes that David could have killed him in his sleep; that he chose to spare the king's life proved that he must still be loyal. There in his camp Saul embraced young David and begged his forgiveness for his former suspicion. David, for his part, kneels before Saul and swears a renewed oath of loyalty.

That makes the kabbalistic meaning of "Camp David" "a place where the anointed of God swears loyalty to the earthly king who has been set over him for the time being", so Jala West was trying to treat President Reagan with as much respect as possible. It was proving difficult.

"The young man who saved Colorado," Reagan kept calling him. Emphasis on the word "young". He slapped Jala on the back jovially. "Why, you can't be a year over fifteen!"

"Five," said Jalaketu. "I grow quickly. I have to."

A disconcerting blankness flitted across Reagan's

features, then dissolved into laughter. “I feel that way too sometimes! All the work, never-ending, and Congress breathing down your back. I feel like a kid back in grade school!” There was something paternal about him now. No, grandfatherly. “But whatever your age, you’ve done great work, son. America is proud of you. We’ll be giving you the Medal of Honor soon, I’m sure. But I wanted to tell you personally first. It’s lads like you who make this country great.”

Jalaketu shifted uneasily in his seat. “We were going to talk about Colorado’s re-admission to the Union.”

The President looked disappointed to have his small talk brushed aside, but he nodded. “Of course. You’ve done great work, Jala. Mind if I call you Jala? And we can’t thank you enough. But Colorado’s part of the Union. The plan is to get all the old territories – California, Washington, Texas, even what’s left of the Midwest – and join them back together. The legalities are complicated, but the boys in Interior have promised to send you some lawyers to help you...your advisors sort it out.”

“Mr. President,” said Jalaketu, “Colorado is open to discuss various forms of free association with the United States. But we are not interested in outright annexation at this moment.”

The robes Jalaketu was wearing should have looked ridiculous on him, all interwoven black and silver patterns studded with little gemstones. They didn't. They looked *correct*.

“Mr. Jala,” said the President. He reached out, put an arm on the boy's shoulder. “I know it seems exciting now, leading a whole state. I hear you've even got them calling you king! Well, good for you! But you're going to learn that leading a government is hard work. Too much for one person to manage. You've got economics, defense, laws...that's why, all those years ago, our forefathers decided on a United States, so that all of us would work together on the hard job of running a state. I know you want to go it alone – ” he gave a big understanding smile ” – but it's just too much for one boy. Too much for anybody. Certainly too much for me! That's why I've got my Cabinet and whole buildings full of people trained at Yale and Harvard.”

“I know I'm young,” said Jalaketu, “but if you could just talk to me the way you would talk to, say, the President of France, then this would go a lot quicker.”

Another disconcerting blankness. Then back to the folksy smile. Jovial laughter. “All right, Jala. You're a straight-shooter. I respect that in a guy. So let's talk shop. Colorado's right in the middle of the United States. Long as we're apart, neither one of us is

defensible. That's why your parents and grandparents brought Colorado into the Union, and it's why my parents and grandparents accepted it. in order to have a country that stretches from sea to shining sea..."

"This isn't working," said Jalaketu. "Let me make my proposal. Instead of a full reunification of the US, a continental partial union based on the European Economic Community established by the Treaty of Rome back in 1958 but integrated with some of the military provisions of NATO. Given what's happening with the Communion and the League over in Europe, NATO's dead in the water otherwise, but we could rebuild it as a pan-American organization. We include the United States, Colorado, California, Texas, Salish, and the free areas of Canada, maybe Quebec and Ontario as individual member nations. Continental free trade and open borders modeled after the Anglo-Irish common travel area. President as head of state of the union in much the same way as the British monarch and pre-collapse Canada."

Reagan laughed. "I like you, kid. You're ambitious, just like I am! But there's a lot of stuff you don't know. Treaties are delicate things; the Treaty of Rome alone probably has a hundred articles – "

"Two hundred forty eight."

“What I’m saying is this is difficult stuff for a fifteen year old.”

“And yet I seem to be the only one here who’s read it.”

Reagan laughed heartily. “I like your spirit, son,” he said. “But this isn’t about us. It’s about *America*.”

“Stop it and listen to...” Jala paused. This wasn’t working. It wasn’t even not working in a logical way. There was a *blankness* to the other man. It was strange. He felt himself wanting to like him, even though he had done nothing likeable. A magnetic pull. Something strange.

Reagan slapped him on the back again. “America is a great country. It’s morning in America!”

That did it. Something was off. Reagan couldn’t turn off the folksiness. It wasn’t even a ruse. There was nothing underneath it. It was charisma and avuncular humor all the way down. All the way down to what? Jala didn’t know.

He spoke a Name.

Reagan jerked, more than a movement but not quite a seizure. “Ha ha ha!” said Reagan. “I like you, son!”

Jalaketu spoke another, longer Name.

Another jerking motion, like a puppet on strings. “There you go again. Let’s make this country great!”

A third Name, stronger than the others.

“Do it for the Gipper!...for the Gipper!...for the Gipper!”

“Huh,” said Jalaketu. Wheels turned in his head. The Gipper. Not even a real word. Not English, anyway. Hebrew then? *Yes*. He made a connection; pieces snapped into place. *The mighty one*. Interesting. It had been a very long time since anybody last thought much about *haGibborim*. But how were they connected to a random California politician? He spoke another Name.

Reagan’s pupils veered up into his head, so that only the whites of his eyes were showing. “Morning in America! Tear down that wall!”

“No,” said Jalaketu. “That won’t do.” He started speaking another Name, then stopped, and in a clear, quiet voice he said “I would like to speak to your manager.”

Reagan briefly went limp, like he had just had a stroke, then sprung back upright and spoke with a totally different voice. Clear. Lilting. Feminine. Speaking in an overdone aristocratic British accent that sounded like it was out of a period romance.

“You must be Jalaketu. Don’t you realize it’s rude to disturb a woman this early in the morning?” The President’s eyes and facial muscles moved not at all as the lips opened and closed.

“I know your True Name,” said Jalaketu. “You are Gadiriël, called the Lady. You are the angel of celebrity and popularity and pretense.”

“Yes.”

“You’re...this is your golem, isn’t it?”

“Golems are ugly things. Mud and dust. This is my *costume*.”

“This is an abomination. You’ve taken over America.”

“I have *saved* America,” corrected the Lady.

“Not yours to save!” said Jalaketu. He drew the sword Sigh from...he drew the sword Sigh. “This is America! Government by the people, of the people, for the people. What’s good is their decision, not yours. You should have left it alone!”

“Like *you* did, Jalaketu ben Raziel?”

“That’s different! *I’m* American. *I* was born here.”

“Dear, you’re what? Five years old? I’ve been in America longer than there’s *been* an America. I *am* America. I watched it through the curtain of Uriel’s machinery, and when I could I sent my love through the cracks. Who do you think it was who made George Washington so dashing on his stallion? Who put the flourish in John Hancock’s signature? Who do you think it was who wrote Abe Lincoln telling him to grow a beard? I stood beside all those foolish beautiful people talking about cities on hills or nations of gentlemen-farmers or the new Athens and gave their words my fire. Who do you think whispered the Battle Hymn into Julia Ward Howard’s ears as she slept? Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. He has loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on.”

“He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,” said Jalaketu. “He is wisdom to the mighty, He is succor to the brave. The world will be His footstool, and the soul of Time His slave.”

“You’re a fan?” asked the Lady.

Jalaketu knelt, like David had knelt before Saul three thousand years earlier. “I wronged you, my lady”, he told Reagan. “What I said was hurtful. Please forgive me.”

The door cracked open, and a woman came in bearing a tray. “Coffee and snacks, Mr. President, Mr. West?” President Reagan regained his facial musculature and laughed in his own voice. “Aw, Sally, you always know exactly what we need,” he said, and flashed her a huge smile. She blushed and set down the tray. “Anything else? Anything for you, Mr. West?” The boy shook his head. “That’ll be plenty,” said the President, “You go get some lunch yourself.” She smiled and left. Reagan’s pupils veered back up into his skull, and the angelic voice returned.

“I accept your apology, Jalaketu ben Kokab,” said the Lady, “but the golem’s opinions are mine as well. I will not let you tear my country apart. I didn’t feed Lincoln all those battle plans through Nettie Maynard just to let people break the Union when things got tough. America’s story isn’t done yet. It’s too beautiful a story, and it’s not yet done.”

“Your intentions are good,” said Jalaketu, “but you’re running on hope and empty promises, and you know it. Without the Midwest, everything’s scattered geographically; with air travel and roads what they are DC can barely connect to Sacramento, let alone rule it. Even if you can get the others in by sheer force of will, it’ll be your powers as the Lady that do it and not the geopolitical realities. As soon as you try to leave the stage, the whole thing will collapse, and you might not

get another chance.”

“I will keep it together,” said the Lady. “I’ll stay as long as it takes.”

“For what? Is that how you want America’s story to end? An angel tricks them into giving her supreme power, and uses supernatural charisma and giant smiles to force the nation to cling to life despite itself? You want to possess President after President till kingdom come? My idea offers something legitimate and self-sustaining. Give the states some independence, bow to reality, but keep the country together.”

“And what about you? Are you going to give up power in Colorado? Put down that ridiculous crown of yours?”

“No,” admitted Jalaketu. “I have a mission. I don’t have enough time to do it the right way, so I’m going to do it the fast way. But if I ever finished, then...yes. Yes, I would set Colorado free.”

“I also have a mission,” said the Lady. “I protect dreams and stories. I also don’t always have enough time to do it right.”

“I’m not ending the story,” said Jalaketu. “Just proposing a new chapter.” He placed his briefcase on the table, took out a document, handed it to Reagan. “A constitutional amendment. Well, a set of constitutional

amendments. More of a Constitution 2.0.”

“Typo in the title,” said the Lady.

“No,” said Jalaketu. “There isn’t.”

Reagan thought for a second, then laughed. “I like you, Jalaketu ben Kokab. But not enough to give up.”

“It’s not giving up! You know and I know this has to be done. We can do it now, the right way, peacefully. Or it can happen later, badly, without our input.”

Reagan scanned the document again. Her eyes narrowed.

“Look,” said Jala. “Jefferson. Declaration of Independence. Was that you?”

“What do you think?”

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, –That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to

institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

“Don’t you twist my words at me. I know what I meant!”

Jalaketu answered: “It is not in Heaven.”

Reagan started laughing. Then kept laughing. Then laughed some more. “You are really something, Jalaketu ben Kokab. You really think you can do this thing?”

“Somebody has to and no one else will.”

“You know,” said Gadiriël, “the thing about America is that everyone comes here, everyone becomes a part of it, everyone contributes. The African-Americans all stand up for each other and add their mark. So do the Mexican-Americans. I think it’s time we Celestial-Americans present a united front, don’t you agree?”

“Is that a yes?”

“It’s a maybe. We’ll negotiate. We’ll talk. But in the end I think you will have your Untied States.”

A presidential staffer came in. “Mr. President, lunch is

ready. Reporters from the *Times* are there, they've been waiting to meet Mr. Jalaketu for a long time."

"I'm sure it will be delicious!" said President Reagan, laughing. "And I'm sure our guest here is starving as well. We'll be in in a moment. In the meantime, let the press know that I'll be calling a conference tonight. We're going to have to renegotiate parts of the reunification plans, and I want Mr. Jalaketu there to help me sell this to the public."

Chapter 32: The Human Form

Divine

August 7, 1991
Gulf of Mexico

I.

Sohu stretched, splayed out further. “Knock knock,” she said.

“OH. THIS AGAIN.”

“Knock knock.”

“WHO’S....THERE?”

“So.”

“SO WHO?”

“Sohu’s at the door, better let her in.”

“HA! HA! HA!” Uriel’s laughter boomed, shook the clouds, shook the ocean, drowned out the everpresent thunder of the surrounding storm. It was a fiery golden laugh, like pyrotechnics, like solar flares.

“I AM ONLY LAUGHING TO BE POLITE,” he

finally said. "I DON'T ACTUALLY GET IT."

Sohu's face fell.

"It's a pun!" she said. "Because you said so who, and it sounds like my name, Sohu."

"I SEE," said Uriel, suspiciously.

"Yes," said Sohu. "You are going to learn this. I have decided. You will learn knock knock jokes, and you will be good at them."

"UM."

"I'm serious about this! You're like the best person I know at finding unexpected connections between words and meanings! That's what jokes are! You're missing your calling! Come on! Try it!"

"HOW?"

"KNOCK KNOCK."

"Who's there?"

"I AM NOT SURE."

"Say a word! Any word! The first thing you think of!"

"ALEPH."

“Okay. Aleph who?”

“I AM STILL NOT SURE.”

“A pun. Some sentence that includes a pun on the word aleph. Something that sounds like it.”

“UM. ACCORDING TO THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH, THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD WILL BEGIN ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES.”

“How does that – ? Oh. Aleph. Olives. Um. Sort of. But it needs to be sudden and surprising. It needs to have pizazz. You’ll get it eventually.”

One got the impression that if Uriel had not been hundreds of feet tall, Sohu would have tried to pat his head.

“ALL OF MY JOKES ARE TERRIBLE.”

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Sohu waved her arms. “That! That should have been your joke! Knock knock! Who’s there? Aleph. Aleph who? All of my jokes are terrible.”

“I AM SORRY.”

“I don’t get it! You are so good at all of this language stuff, and you can find like seven zillion connections

between apparently unrelated words, and you can't crack a basic knock-knock joke! Why? WHY?"

"THEY ARE HARD."

"Learning every human language is hard! Knock knock jokes are easy!"

"IF I TRY TO LEARN HOW TO DO KNOCK KNOCK JOKES, WILL YOU TRY TO LEARN EVERY HUMAN LANGUAGE?"

"Uriel. You. Do. Not. Understand. Humans."

The archangel harrumphed and went back to running the universe.

II.

"OF ALL KABBALISTIC CORRESPONDENCES, THE MOST IMPORTANT IS THE CLAIM THAT GOD MADE MAN IN HIS OWN IMAGE. EXPLAIN HOW THE STRUCTURE OF DIVINITY CORRESPONDS TO THE HUMAN BODY."

"The ten fingers are the ten sephirot, the ten emanations by which God manipulates the material world. The bilateral symmetry is the two branches of the Tree of Life, which correspond to the two human arms. The right branch is called Mercy and the left branch is called

Severity.”

“SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, I GAVE YOU A HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT. YOU WERE TO FIGURE OUT WHY IN HUMAN POLITICS, THE RIGHT-WING TENDS TO BE CONCERNED WITH JUSTICE AND THE LEFT-WING WITH MERCY, EVEN THOUGH THESE ARE THE OPPOSITES OF THE KABBALISTIC CORRESPONDENCES.”

“Uriel, all the homework you give me is impossible.”

“I WILL GIVE YOU A HINT. MATTHEW 25:32. BEFORE HIM ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE GATHERED, AND HE WILL SEPARATE THEM FROM ONE ANOTHER, AS A SHEPHERD SEPARATES THE SHEEP FROM THE GOATS. HE WILL SET THE SHEEP ON HIS RIGHT HAND, BUT THE GOATS ON HIS LEFT.”

“There’s nothing so impossible it can’t be made more confusing by adding in some apocalyptic prophecy.”

“IT IS NOT IMPOSSIBLE. A SIMPLE SOLUTION RESOLVES BOTH PROBLEMS. THINK ABOUT IT. YOU ARE VERY SMART.”

Sohu thought for a moment.

“I WILL GIVE YOU ANOTHER HINT.

DEUTERONOMY 5:4.”

“The Lord spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire. Uh. Wait, yes, that makes sense!”

“YES?”

“We are all face to face with God. So our right is His left, and vice versa!”

“YES. SO HOW DOES GOD PART THE RIGHTEOUS ON HIS RIGHT SIDE AND THE WICKED UPON HIS LEFT?”

“He...oh, He just says ‘Everyone who wants to go to Heaven, get to the right.’ And the wicked, who think only of themselves, go to their own right. And the virtuous, who are always thinking of God, go to God’s right.”

“YES.”

“So God’s right and humans’ left means mercy, and God’s left and humans’ right means justice.”

“YES. THIS IS WHY WHEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT JUSTICE, THEY SPECIFY THAT THEY MEAN HUMAN RIGHTS.”

“I think that might be something different.”

“NO.”

“You’re silly.”

“I AM N...” Uriel trailed off, as if deep in thought. Finally, he asked:

“TELL ME THE KABBALISTIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ROOT R-K-T.”

Sohu knew better than to argue at this point. “Um. Wrecked. Racked. Ragged, sort of. Rocked. Rickety. And it’s got the T-R combination which we already talked about signifying pure power. Something raw and destructive. Why do you ask?”

Uriel stood listening intently. “SOMETHING IS HAPPENING INVOLVING THOSE LETTERS.”

A background whine crescendoed into a scream. A rocket streaked across the sky, headed straight toward them. Lightning-fast, Uriel reached out a giant hand and caught it in his palm.

“OH.” he said.

Sohu was lying face-down on the cloud, wishing she had a desk to duck-and-cover under.

“IT IS FINE,” said Uriel. “THIS IS HOW PEOPLE SEND ME MESSAGES.”

“They couldn’t just pray?”

“SO MANY PEOPLE PRAY THAT I HAVE STOPPED PAYING ATTENTION,” said Uriel.

“What if somebody actually tries to bomb you?!”

“YOUR FATHER WOULD TELL ME,” said Uriel.

“SINCE HE DID NOT SAY ANYTHING, I ASSUMED IT WAS SAFE.” He held the rocket up to get a closer look. It was a Minuteman missile, the used by the United States Air Force. Written on one side, in what was startlingly good calligraphy for a message on a cylindrical surface, was the message: *“You are invited to attend the Multilateral Conference On The Middle Eastern Peace Process in Madrid, starting January 30.”*

Sohu clapped her hands.

“You should go!” she said.

“NO.”

“Why no?”

“I NEVER GO TO THESE THINGS. THEY ARE

TERRIBLE AND FULL OF ARGUMENTS AND NO ONE LIKES ME.”

“Everyone likes you! They want your opinion.”

“HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE?”

“Father goes all the time. He says that negotiation is the key to power.”

“I DO NOT WANT POWER.”

“Yes you do! You control the world! You have power over the weather and the stars and plants and animals and all those things. And they all work really well! Maybe if you tried to have some power over people too, *we* would work really well.”

“STARS AND ANIMALS AND WEATHER ARE EASY. PEOPLE ARE HARD.”

“Father says that diplomacy is about playing the game. Figure out what people want and explain to them why doing things your way will get it for them better than doing things the other way. It’s about being creative. You’re this genius who can come up with connections between the Parable of the Sheep and Goats and human rights. Diplomacy would be *so much fun* for you.”

“THAMIEL WILL BE THERE. I AM SURE HE WILL. EVERYONE LIKES THAMIEL. THEY LISTEN TO HIM.”

“They listen to him because he talks to them! I’ve seen you and Thamiel! You zapped him like a fly! Thamiel has power because he *tries* to have power. If you tried to have power, you would have even more than he does! You could bring peace to the Middle East. And you could get people to join together, like my father does. You could have everybody join together and fight Thamiel.”

“I AM NOT SURE ANGELS HAVING POWER OVER HUMANS IS GOOD. I REMEMBER WHEN SOME OF THE ANGELS TRIED TO GET POWER OVER HUMANS. GADIRIEL. SAMYAZAZ. EVERYONE WAS VERY UPSET.”

“Gadiriel became President and saved the Untied States! It was great! I got to go to the White House with Father and have dinner with her avatar once!”

“THE BIBLE DOES NOT SEEM TO LIKE ANGELS RULING OVER HUMANS. THE NEPHILIM CAUSED NOAH’S FLOOD. GOD APPOINTED SAUL AS KING OF THE ISRAELITES, EVEN THOUGH HE HAD MANY ANGELS TO CHOOSE FROM. IF I WERE TO RULE OVER HUMANS THE

SAME WAY I RULE OVER STARS AND WEATHER, THEN THEY WOULD BECOME MACHINE PARTS THE SAME WAY STARS AND WEATHER ARE.”

“No one’s saying you have to rule them! Diplomacy is like the opposite of ruling people! You just have to convince them with good arguments and by seeming imposing! You’re amazing at arguments! And you’re really good at seeming imposing!”

She may or may not have muttered something that sounded like “...to people who don’t know you very well.”

“ARGUMENTS ARE TERRIBLE.”

“Come on,” said Sohu. “Just try it once. Because I asked you to.”

The archangel took a moment to reply, cutting himself off a few times as if thinking better of what he was going to say. Finally:

“I WILL NOT ENJOY THIS.”

“But you’ll try?”

Uriel grumbled. “I HAVE JUST LOST A NEGOTIATION WITH AN EIGHT YEAR OLD

GIRL. THIS DOES NOT BODE WELL FOR MY
DIPLOMATIC SKILLS.”

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Prologue	5
Book I: Genesis	10
Chapter 1: Dark Satanic Mills	11
Interlude 8: The Cracks In The Sky	26
Chapter 2: Arise To Spiritual Strife	33
Interlude 2: The Code of the World	50
Chapter 3: On A Cloud I Saw A Child	58
Chapter 4: Tools Were Made And Born Were Hands	71
Chapter 5: Never Seek To Tell Thy Love	79
Interlude 1: Cantors and Singers	136
Chapter 6: Till We Have Built Jerusalem	142
Chapter 7: The Perishing Vegetable Memory	159
Chapter 8: Laughing To Scorn Thy Laws And Terrors	176
Chapter 9: With Art Celestial	201
Chapter 10: Bring The Swift Arrows Of Light	214
Interlude 7: N-Grammata	222
Chapter 11: Drive The Just Man Into Barren Climes	229
Interlude 7: The Right Hand Of God	239
Chapter 12: Borne On Angels' Wings	242

Interlude 1: There's A Hole In My Bucket	254
Chapter 13: The Image Of Eternal Death	263
Chapter 14: Cruelty Has A Human Heart	280
Chapter 15: O Where Shall I Hide My Face?	295
Chapter 16: If Perchance With Iron Power He Might Avert His Own Despair	304
Interlude 2: Man On The Sphere	318
Book II: Exodus	334
Chapter 17: No Earthly Parents I Confess	335
Chapter 18: That The Children Of Jerusalem May Be Saved From Slavery (Passover Bonus Chapter)	340
Chapter 19: The Form Of The Angelic Land	367
Chapter 20: When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears	393
Chapter 21: Thou Also Dwellest In Eternity	429
Interlude 3: War and Peace	444
Chapter 22: Whose Ears Have Heard The Holy Word	461
Chapter 23: Now Descendeth Out Of Heaven A City	474
Interlude 4: The General Assembly	484
Chapter 24: Why Dost Thou Come To Angels' Eyes?	488
Chapter 25: Lie Down Before My Feet, O Dragon	497

Interlude 𐤓: The Broadcast	505
Chapter 26: For Not One Sparrow Can Suffer And The Whole Universe Not Suffer Also	528
Interlude 𐤔: The Outer Gate	541
Chapter 27: The Starry Floor, The Watery Shore	552
Chapter 28: Hid As In An Ark	575
Interlude 𐤕: New York City	582
Chapter 29: He Who Respects The Infant's Faith	598
Chapter 30: Over The Dark Deserts	621
Chapter 31: The Foundation Of Empire	635
Chapter 32: The Human Form Divine	650