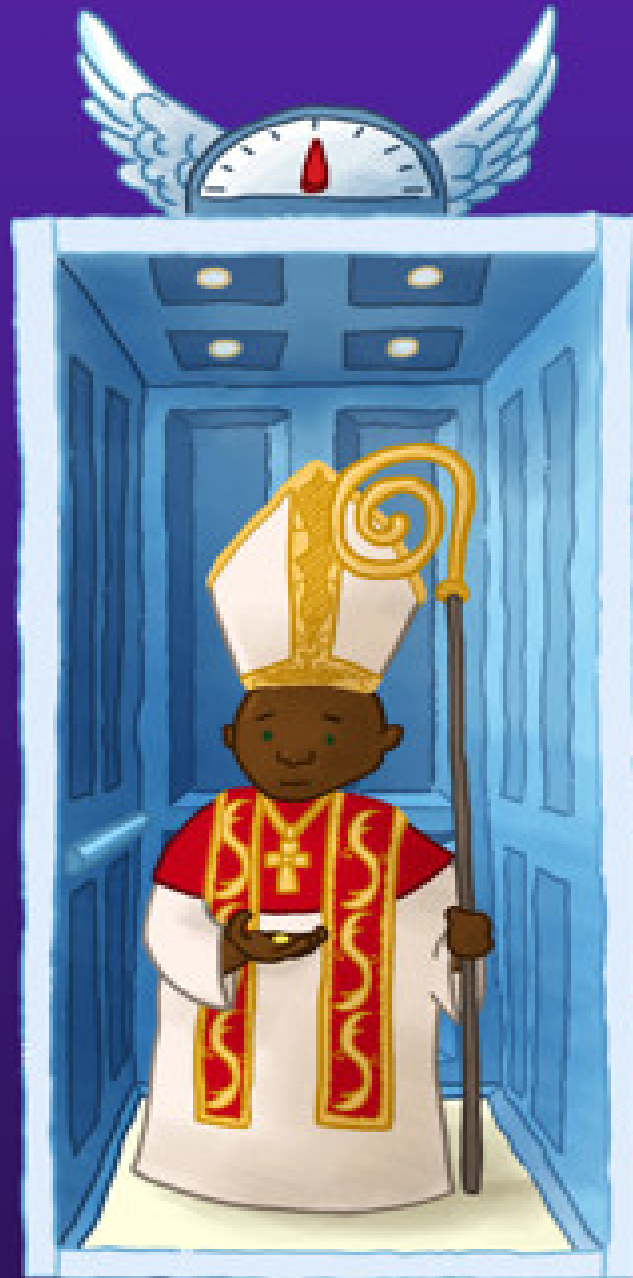


Innocent in the afterlife

Irene Soldatos



Innocent in the Afterlife

by
Irene Soldatos

Innocent in the Afterlife

Copyright 2013 Irene Soldatos

This Edition Copyright 2014 Irene Soldatos

All characters and events in this story are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead,
is purely unintentional.

The text of this book is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-
ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence

Cover Copyright 2014 Harry Saxon

The cover art is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives
4.0 International Licence

To get in touch or for further permissions for the text visit www.irenesoldatos.eu, or for the cover
www.about.me/harryasaphsaxon

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Harriet Goodchild for doing a wonderful job editing this story and for her unfailing encouragement and support. Harriet, you're indispensable and I've no idea what I would do without you. So, thank you for everything!

Innocent in the Afterlife

Pope Innocent XIV, né Polycarp Njue Wako, the first ever black Cardinal to be elected to the seat of St Peter, reigned for the grand total of three days – thus gaining for himself the dubious honour of henceforth heading the list of shortest-reigning Popes. The previous record holder, Pope Urban VII, trailed now at a distant second place, far behind him, with a reign of a full *thirteen* days.

Pope Innocent XIV dropped dead, quite suddenly, at the age of 73, while happily composing his Papal Inauguration homily. An asymptomatic and, as such, undiagnosed cerebral aneurysm chose that precise moment, to pop – with the holy father's new, 55,000 euro white-gold and diamond Mont Blanc fountain pen, a congratulatory gift from the African Cardinals on the occasion of his election to the Pontificate, suspended, for a moment, between the word *clergy* that he had just finished writing with a flourish, and the one that would follow it. Only that next word never came, for Polycarp Njue Wako, henceforth to be known as Innocent XIV, the 266th – according to modern reckoning – Bishop of Rome, rather abruptly vacated his hard-won Holy See and departed the world.

Rather bemused, Innocent XIV watched the commotion that ensued feeling more than a little cheated, and bitter, that he should have been plucked away from this vain world just when he had achieved his lifetime ambition, without first being given the opportunity to savor it, to enjoy its well-earned benefits, and of course to dedicate some years to the governing of the Church, to be allowed to put his own personal stamp on it. To *be* Infallible.

He had only been Infallible for three days – hardly much, by any reckoning – and, though he had known he was Infallible, he hadn't really had the opportunity to demonstrate his Infallibility to the world at large, by either word or deed. He hadn't even had the chance to finish writing his homily. And there were so many things he wished to say about condoms ... Not in the Inauguration homily, of course, that would have been inappropriate, the homily would have revolved around the selfless dedication of the Church and its priests to the service of humanity and God, an extolling of it as a force for good in the world; but later, at the first opportunity, condoms would certainly have been mentioned at length.

And it was only a few days before Christmas. He would have given his first *Urbi et Orbi* address, offered remission of all sins to millions of people gathered at St Peter's Square, or watching the ceremony on television, or listening on the radio, (for no reason other than that they were doing so), and now this was not to be.

Yes, Innocent XIV felt cheated.

Of course, he reprimanded himself for these perfectly natural feelings; this clearly was God's will and, Pope though he was, even he could not question this ultimate authority, or Its Divine Plan – whatever this was. Perhaps, now that he was dead, he would finally find out. He wondered, vaguely, whether the Divine Plan was revealed to all dead Popes, or whether sainthood was necessary first. Though he *was* beginning to experience a little niggle of worry, as he was still there, watching all the ancient, ritual preparations for his funeral, with all due honours; the Rite of Visitation at St Peter's Basilica; the endless flow of the crowds paying their respects – this seemed appropriate and most satisfying, of course – and he was not going anywhere. It was true that he had not received Last Rites, as his death had come so suddenly, but he had not been behind with his confessions, and he had died as Pope, after all.

All things considered, the worry was small, but nonetheless noticeable, as the days went by, his last will and testament was published, and finally the Mass of Requiem was sung, with an impressively good turnout despite his reign having been so short. Some fifty-five heads of state and nine or ten leaders of other religions – Innocent XIV didn't count them too carefully – attended the service, and there were a couple of million mourners gathered in Rome for the event. Despite his mounting concern, Innocent XIV felt as pleased as he could be, under the circumstances, with the turnout and the splendour and solemnity of the event.

Finally, eight days after his death, the body of Pope Innocent XIV was buried under St Peter's Basilica, in the Tomb of the Popes – while Innocent XIV himself watched in continued uneasy, and more than a trifle miffed, bemusement, wondering, ever more urgently, why on earth he was still there.

No sooner was the lid of the tomb lowered into place, than the crypt of St Peter's Basilica suddenly vanished, to be replaced by a dark, rocky landscape with no definable borders between dark grey ground and gloomy sky, if this were indeed a sky, and not impenetrable grey fog wrapped round the landscape

itself like a shroud. A great, dark river, its far bank almost invisible, flowed through the rock-strewn terrain, coming from a distant, indeterminate greyness that could not properly be termed a horizon to the left, and flowing towards much the same to the right.

Innocent XIV felt a little shriek of panic rising up inside him and demanding to be set free – despite the obvious absence of any pits of excrement or cauldrons of fire, which, in any case, as a twenty-first century, highly educated Catholic he didn't truly believe in, in a literal sense – when he noticed something else, which, by its mere presence, half-stifled the rising shriek. What came out instead was a timid little squeal.

“Eeek!” gasped Innocent XIV, staring at what was, admittedly, and without a doubt, the most handsome, white young man the ex-Pope had ever before seen or could, in fact, ever imagine might exist. He was breathtaking – though Innocent XIV wasn't himself that way inclined, this fact was as undeniable as the fact that the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel was a work of highest art. The young man had short, dark brown hair, just long enough to betray the curls that would develop should it be allowed to grow longer, eyes like liquid chocolate, fair skin and a body like any of the numerous ancient Greek statues of athletes kept at the Vatican museums, and with which Innocent XIV was well-acquainted. (Some of them had even escaped well-intentioned Christian vandalism and had not acquired new, marble fig leaves with which to preserve their modesty).

The young man was wearing khaki-coloured cargo shorts to below the knee, sturdy hiking boots, and a darker-green tank top. He had one knee bent, booted foot on one of the higher placed rocks, elbow resting on his knee, and appeared to be talking on a mobile phone. Until, that is, the Pope's squeal alerted him to his presence there, at which point the young man's eyes flashed round, glittering with something that worried Innocent XIV but which he hadn't the time to properly analyse, and a smile. It was a welcoming smile, Innocent XIV decided, electing to focus on that, rather than the unsettling twinkling in the liquid-chocolate eyes that somehow put him in mind of his schoolboy days.

“Ah,” said the young man, flipping the mobile phone shut and slipping it into one of his numerous pockets, “there you are. Sorry about that. Just arranging a little birthday party for tomorrow. It's a rather big do. We have it every year, and do you know it, every year it's the same nightmare to organize.

The birthday boy is demanding, the guests are demanding, some of them aren't even on speaking terms – perpetually, I must say – most of them don't have anything that could remotely be termed a sense of humour, they can't even take a little joke, half of them don't pick up their phones, or respond to messages, but what can you do? All part of the job ...” he smiled broadly, while Innocent XIV stared at him with wide, bewildered eyes.

“Birthday party?” he squeaked, at last, mostly to fill in the silence.

“Tomorrow,” nodded the young man, still smiling.

“That's ... Christmas ...” hazarded the Pope.

“Well ... currently ... yes. Upstairs.”

“Jesus our Lord Christ is having a birthday party?” squeaked Innocent XIV.

The young man burst out laughing.

“Oh, my dear fellow, no no. Jesus's birthday is nowhere near December 25th; I thought everyone knew that by now. Jesus was born in August. Not even anywhere near the supposed Roman census, which would have meant being born in late September or early October.”

“What? ... But, then ...”

The young man's mobile rang, and he motioned to the Pope with a finger to wait for a moment, while he answered it. “What?” he said into the device. “Why are you telling me? You were assigned those invitations.”

While the young man spoke into his mobile, Innocent stared at the device, and at him, for lack of anything better to stare at. After all, they were the only two things that stood out in this ghastly place. The phone looked a bit different to the one he had seen the young man use earlier, Innocent XIV decided, it was ... iridescent. Gold and iridescent. Though actually it was black. But somehow, through the black, an iridescent gold colour came through. Perhaps it was the same phone after all. “Look, I'm busy,” the young man was saying, “I've got Pope Innocent XIV waiting here, to be taken on the grand tour. The old boy, understandably, is a bit confused. This will take a while.” There was a pause. “Oh, I should think he'll escape with nothing more than a slap on the wrist. He didn't get the chance to do much harm in just three days of Infallibility.” The young man was chuckling and a faint, tinkling, female laugh sounded for a moment from the other end of the line. “Listen, make sure you let everyone know that our host will be performing his bull-killing routine again tomorrow, for our entertainment, and he won't be amused if battle-happy barbarians steal his thunder – so to speak – by temporarily killing each other in impressively

violent, and/or obscure ways, like the entertainment we had last year. Yes, I know the bull-killing routine is getting a bit old, but we're just the messengers, right?" There was another pause. "she's asking what?" he said. "Well ... I suppose a shape-changing performance might be acceptable ... I wasn't given any instructions against shape-changing, so long as it doesn't involve shape-changing in order to kill things – or people ... Yes, well I know that that's what she does! You'll just have to tell her it's not on. She can do the being three-in-one trick, and the shape-changing, and get everyone confused as to who the hell she is, or how *many* of her she is, but no killing. Birthday boy does all the killing tomorrow. He needs to demonstrate his manliness." The young man chuckled again, and the female voice laughed. "Look, tell her to call me on my network, and we might work out something fun together that does not involve killing. –Yes. –Yes, ok. –Got to go." He flipped the mobile shut, slipped it in a pocket, and turned back to Innocent XIV with a winsome smile.

"Once more, I apologize."

Innocent XIV swallowed.

"Slap on the wrist?" he breathed.

"Oh, nothing to worry about, I'm sure. As I said, not much harm done, in three days." He grinned broadly.

"Is that why I'm here?"

"What?"

"Here."

The young man blinked at him.

"You're here because you're dead."

"Yes ... is this ... purgatory ...?"

The young man threw his head back and laughed.

"No-no. No, dear fellow. Purgatory doesn't exist."

"It doesn't?" Innocent XIV wasn't sure how he felt about this news. And he was more than a bit concerned about certain things he had heard the young man say on the phone. Particularly the *being three-in-one trick* closely preceded by the feminine pronoun.

"No, of course not."

"Is this ... hell?" Innocent XIV breathed tremulously. The young man only laughed and shook his head again.

"No. Certainly not hell. – Not the one *you* mean, anyway ..."

“There’s an ... ?” Innocent XIV began, and then changed his mind. “Are you an angel?”

“Well ... let’s see ... ” The young man looked thoughtful. “Technically, yes. Yes I am.”

“Technically?”

“You do know what the word *angel* means, right?”

“Err ... ” The young man raised a disapproving eyebrow. “Well, messenger, it means messenger,” said Innocent XIV hurriedly.

“Well done! And there you go. Technically, I am, indeed, an angel.” The young man beamed beatifically at the ex-Pope, who was staring at him with more than a little scepticism. “In a way,” the young man added. “Only ... erm ... *more so.*” Innocent XIV continued staring, both sceptical and uncomprehending. The young man frowned slightly and, looking down at himself and seeing the tank top, the cargo shorts and the hiking boots, suddenly uttered a soft exclamation. “Ah!” he said. Then looked up with a sheepish smile, as though regretting having forgotten something important, and ... he was no longer wearing the tank top, cargo shorts and hiking boots, but a strangely cut, midnight-blue cape that reached no lower than the hip – pinned together with a fine fibula on one shoulder – and sandals. And nothing else.

Innocent XIV’s eyes grew as round and large as saucers, and his jaw dropped noticeably, but otherwise he didn’t react. He was, in fact, careful to avoid looking in the direction of the fig leaf that was *not* there to guarantee the modesty of something that most certainly wasn’t a marble statue. The young man stared at him expectantly, but Innocent XIV only continued staring back in shocked bemusement.

The young man sighed, slipped his right hand back, into the folds of his cape, as though reaching for something that might have been hanging at his belt, only he wasn’t wearing a belt and his hand came back out holding a wide-brimmed hat, which he plonked onto his head. Glossy black wings like a raven’s or a crow’s sprouted suddenly either side of the hat’s crown. A moment later, small, grey-white wings sprouted, one on the outside of each of the young man’s ankles.

Innocent XIV’s mouth dropped that little bit further and his eyes grew even wider, until they looked like they might pop out of his head.

“Still no?” asked the young man with kindly, but clearly fraying, patience. “Do I need to pull the stick out too?” he moaned, and he slipped his hand back into the folds of his cape. It came back out holding a slender staff with two serpents twined round it. Innocent XIV still gaped, eyes goggling and beginning to grow a bit glazed. “Would it help if I were black?” asked the young man, “It’s all the same to me,” and immediately he was the handsomest, black young man Innocent XIV had ever seen, or might have imagined could exist – wearing a midnight-blue cape, a wide-brimmed hat with raven’s wings, and sandals on winged ankles. And nothing else – except that he held a staff with two snakes wrapped round it. They hissed.

A black Hermes, or Mercury, or whatever that being was, was too much.

Innocent XIV fainted.

“Oh,” said Hermes, and returned to being white.

When Innocent XIV came to, it was to see that breathtakingly handsome, smiling face looking down at him with apologetic interest. “I’m so sorry. I thought being black might help – you know, make me seem less ... eh ... alien? Though, maybe it was the outfit. Was it the outfit? I could go back to cargo shorts and tank top if you like. Just say the word, and I’ll be black with cargo shorts and tank top – and hiking boots. I only started off with white because I thought I’d be more recognizable, it’s not that ... ” his voice trailed off, seeing that Innocent XIV was not reacting but was still only staring at him. “Listen, do you want me to be black, or white?” he said finally, having clearly lost all patience. “Whatever works for you. No skin off *my* nose.”

“White, please,” squeaked Innocent XIV. Getting his head around the fact that he was clearly having a conversation with Hermes, or Mercury, or something of that order, was quite enough, without needing also to adjust to the idea that Hermes, or Mercury, or whatever it was, might also be black. Though, of course, there was no reason why he shouldn’t be, seeing as Hermes wasn’t actually a human being. But this train of thought only led Innocent XIV to some place where he didn’t think he was quite ready to go yet. His mind gave a little twitch.

“Ah, well. Good. We’re getting somewhere.” Hermes beamed broadly at him and offered him a hand with which to rise. The caduceus had, in the meanwhile, disappeared once more. Somewhat robotically, Innocent XIV took

the offered hand and got back to his feet. "And the outfit?" Hermes was asking, "Keep it, lose it?"

"Keep it," said Innocent XIV hurriedly. It was the only thing he could think of that might help his mind adjust. Images are powerful things. He cleared his non-existent throat. "Erm ... may I ask a question?" he ventured timidly.

"Fire away."

"Earlier, when you were on the phone ... you mentioned someone who does a ... *being three-in-one trick* ... Erm ... you said *she* ... I ... don't suppose that might have been a slip of the tongue, and you actually meant ... *he* ... ?"

"No. Sorry. Definitely a *she*, old boy. Well, to the extent that any one of us is either." Innocent XIV had been racking his brain trying to remember who from the classical Pantheons ever had such a three-in-one nature, but was coming up with a blank, though he was, even if he said so himself, well-versed on the subject. He had gone to high-brow English boarding-schools, had had classics relentlessly hammered into his head from a young age, then he had gone to Oxford, more classics there, for years. Though he had left with the inimitable title of Doctor of Divinity, classics, it seemed, could not entirely be avoided.

There were, of course, at least two deities with triple attributes, Innocent XIV considered, Hecate and Diana Nemorensis, but *attributes* did not mean they were triple in *physical* form, as Hermes's earlier description seemed to indicate.

"Err ... may I ask who *she* is?" he hazarded.

"She is The Morrígan."

"The, *who* ... ?" Innocent XIV choked. He didn't know who The Morrígan was, but it certainly wasn't something classical.

"An old Celtic deity, dear boy."

"... *Celtic* ... ?" Innocent XIV sputtered.

"Well, you didn't actually think you people *invented* that idea, did you? The three-in-one thing? I mean, really ... There was a whole lot of history *before* the invention of your little fairy tale, you know. And yes, it was a great deal more than 4400 years. When will people get it into their heads? Dinosaurs! Fossils! We didn't put them there to confuse you. They are there because they *were* there. I mean, honestly ... " Hermes shook his head in evident despair. "When I hear people, in the twenty-first century – present company excepted, of course

– choosing to believe what was written by some Bronze Age desert nomads, over the results of radiocarbon dating, I despair, I truly do. I start thinking, what’s the point? I take it as a personal insult, you know, I do, not that anyone cares; though my stuffy eldest sister isn’t too happy about that kind of thing either, I must say; we occasionally get together and complain at length about this and other similar issues, have a glass of wine, you know, vent our frustrations, etc ... Sorry!” his mobile was ringing again, though he didn’t seem to have one on him, and seeing as he was practically naked, it was difficult to suppose where that ringing was coming from.

Hermes reached down to his thigh, where the pocket he slid the phone into had previously been, slipped his hand into thin air, and drew out a ringing, black mobile phone. He flipped it open and put it to his ear. Innocent XIV stared.

Was it the same mobile? It was black, certainly. Only now there was no golden iridescence coming out through the black. There was something silvery, instead. Like mercury.

“Ah, we were just talking about you!” Hermes was saying into the device. “With Pope Innocent XIV. Yes! No, he didn’t know who you are.” Hermes laughed, and a rough, female laugh, which sent shivers down Innocent XIV’s spine, sounded from the other end of the line. “Yes, yes, of course, they are all very impressed with your being three-in-one trick, darling! You know that. I never fail to mention it when I get high-ranking Christian clergy down here.

“Now, listen, about tomorrow. Iris told you, I know. Killing is not on, darling. Really ... Yes, if you just give me some time to think about it, I’m sure I’ll be able to come up with some little joke we can play on birthday boy together. Yes. Yes. I’ll get back to you.” Hermes flipped the phone shut.

“How ... ?” Innocent XIV was saying pointing vaguely at the mobile and Hermes’s general nakedness.

“Oh, come *on*! Dear chap!” Hermes finally erupted. “I *am* mobile phones! And television, and radio, and computers! I am the radio telescopes peering out into the aeons of space, and the electron microscopes delving into the invisible parts of what constitutes life. I am satellites, and palm pilots, GPS devices, and telephone bugs. Well,” he paused, “I should more properly say, they all are a small part of what I am. – Clear now?” he smiled winningly at Innocent XIV.

“Uh-hm,” nodded the ex-Pope meekly.

“Any more questions?”

“Eh ... the birthday party ... ?” Innocent XIV ventured, though he knew he wouldn’t actually want to hear what the response would be, because it would clearly be something intolerable, but somehow he was still hoping. “ ... Who is it for?”

“Well, this year it’s for Mithras. Generally we alternate, one year here, one year there, you know how it is when you have lots of people celebrating birthdays on the same day. Last year the Oak King threw the big party, the year before it was Sol – Invictus, he likes having the adjective always attached ... ” Innocent XIV’s mind did that twitching thing again. “Oh, balls!” said Hermes.

Innocent XIV had fainted again. Hermes placed a hand on a hip, sighed deeply, and waited.

When Innocent XIV came to, he was feeling, strangely, a great deal better. He somehow felt that all this was not truly real, like one feels in a dream just before one starts realizing that it *is* a dream, and since it didn’t feel real, it didn’t really affect him. He would either, eventually, wake up, or this dream would dissolve into some other dream, hopefully more pleasant than this one.

“How are you feeling?” asked Hermes, as Innocent XIV scrambled back up to his feet. Hermes was sitting on a rock, nibbling at pumpkin seeds, of which he held one large handful in his left hand. He was dropping the split open shells absently to his right, except that each shell started floating down, only to vanish into thin air half-way to the ground.

“Much better, thank you,” said Innocent XIV.

“Jolly good!” said Hermes. “Pumpkin seed?” He offered the heaped handful towards him.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Innocent XIV smiled for the first time, reaching out to pick some seeds out of Hermes’s hand, “Thank you.” And then he stopped. His eyes narrowed and slid to the left, as if in thought, then to the right, then acquired a distinctly crafty look, and Innocent XIV very slowly retracted his hand. “On second thoughts ... ” he said, “perhaps not.” He was still smiling, and his eyes still gleamed with that canny look.

“Oh, ah, ha-ha!” grinned Hermes. “You remembered how old uncle Pluto got cousin Persephone to stay. Very good! – Only, we’re not actually *in* Hades yet, where that kind of thing might work, so you’re actually safe to have some pumpkin seeds if you want.”

“All the same, I think I’ll pass. Thank you,” Innocent XIV insisted. He was still looking sly, like he had finally got the hang of all this and was fairly certain that, somewhere, there was a way out. “You are Hermes, right?” he asked. “Or Mercury? Do you prefer Mercury?”

“Either or, old boy. Choice is entirely up to you. Not much to choose between the two really, is there?”

“No, no, of course not. So, yes.” He beamed knowingly at Hermes. “Thank you for the very kind offer, but I shall pass on the pumpkin seeds.”

“You don’t trust me ... Can’t say it’s not wise, but when I’m doing the Psychopomp gig I seem to lose my sense of humour. No practical jokes or tricks on the dead. Seems cruel. Though some do thoroughly deserve it. Anyway, shall we get a move on?”

“Oh yes, let’s,” agreed Innocent XIV. “I expect this is the Styx,” he said, with a wave of the hand in the general direction of the great, dark river.

“Got it in one.”

“Where’s the ferry?”

Hermes raised a finger to request a moment of patience, then slid forefinger and thumb into his mouth and gave a very loud whistle. With an audible pop, a large, wooden ferry made a sudden appearance by the near bank of the river. A tiny, wizened old man, holding a giant pole, stood at its near end. He had one tooth.

“Afternoon, Guv,” he said, clipping the brim of his bucket hat with a forefinger. Its sideband was adorned with the brightly coloured feathers of an artificial fly. He looked like he was about to go fishing – or had just come back from fishing. In fact, there was a suspicious-looking bucket near his feet. “Oh!” he said suddenly, noticing Hermes’s traditional ensemble. “Err ... should I?” he waved a gaunt old hand vaguely over himself.

“If you don’t mind ... We’re having a little bit of trouble adjusting, here ... ”

“Sure thing, Guv,” said the little old man, and suddenly he was wrapped in a long, black cloak, and his face was mostly concealed by a black, wide-brimmed hat, not unlike the one Hermes was sporting – minus the raven’s wings. The bucket by his feet had vanished, to complete the decidedly more sinister effect.

“Err ... ” said Innocent XIV, remembering a little too late that there might be a problem here, as the Ferryman extended an open skeletal hand slowly in his direction. “I don’t seem to have ... ” he began.

“Yes, not to worry,” said Hermes, flipping a coin in the Ferryman’s direction, which, like the mobile, seem to have appeared out of nowhere, and which the Ferryman caught with alarming speed and dexterity. “It’s all part of our new social welfare program – well, I say new, it has been running now for fifteen hundred years, give or take. All in the interest of not allowing the world to get overrun by zombies and spirits, and all that.” Hermes leapt nimbly into the ferry. He was still holding the handful of pumpkin seeds. “Charon, allow me to introduce Polycarp Njue Wako, henceforth to be known to History as Pope Innocent XIV.” The Ferryman did nothing but look sinister, so Innocent XIV just stepped gingerly onto the ferry.

“Wouldn’t a bridge have been more ... ?” Innocent XIV began, as the Ferryman slid the pole slowly down into the water and gave a gentle push. There was a heart-stopping rush of speed, accompanied by a trailing shriek of raw terror that was coming out of Innocent XIV’s mouth – instead of the word *practical*, which is what he had drawn in breath to say – and suddenly the ferry stopped, as though it hadn’t ever actually been in motion, at the far bank of the river.

Hermes nibbled at a pumpkin seed and dropped the husk over the side of the ferry.

Innocent XIV made a strange sound, as though trying to exhale even the last dregs of air from his non-existent lungs – then sucked in a deep, ragged, tremulous breath, and let out a little whimper.

“THANK YOU FOR TRAVELLING WITH STYX FERRIES, WE HOPE YOU HAVE ... ” said a deep, throaty voice that was like the sound of two dry bits of parchment being rubbed together, and then stopped. The Ferryman had caught Hermes’s eye; he was shaking his head slowly.

“Sorry, Guv,” said the voice of the old man, meekly. “Say, didn’t we get another Pope just last month?”

“Yes, we did.”

“How long did this one reign for, then?”

“Three days.”

“Oh, well, that’s all right then. Lucky him!”

“That’s what *I* said,” agreed Hermes with a smile.

“No lasting damage done, eh?”

“Exactly.”

Innocent XIV had already, shakily, climbed off the ferry. Hermes leapt down by him, nibbling at pumpkin seeds all the way. "Ready to move on?"

Behind him the ferry, and the Ferryman, had vanished.

Innocent XIV nodded dazedly. He had only been on the water for about three seconds, but he was having trouble getting his land legs back.

"So, no ... Bridge is not very practical, as then anyone can just saunter across, you see. Whereas with the ferry, there's a much tighter border control, which is very important in these parts. Uncle Pluto is very particular about that. Can't have people either just sauntering in, or sauntering out, see? Stands to reason. Stands to *me!* – Ha-ha! I like that. That was funny. Stands to *me!* Ha-ha!"

Innocent XIV cast Hermes a sideways, rather irritable, and clearly uncomprehending, glance. "What on earth are you talking about?" he grumbled.

"Reason – Me. Don't you see?" Some memory stirred vaguely at the back of Innocent XIV's mind.

"Oh ... right ... Is this the *Logios* thing?"

"Yes! Well done, old chap! You didn't skip classics class did you?"

"Well ... No ... " admitted Innocent XIV. " ... So, aside from being mobile phones, you are also ... what? Pure intellect?"

"That's it!" Hermes slapped Innocent XIV companionably on the back. "so, I'm also language – in both my attributes, communication don't you see? – literature, in a large part; philosophy; oh and science, yes, mustn't forget science."

"Having a good couple of centuries, are you?" said Innocent XIV with a slightly sour sneer.

"The *best*, old boy! The best!" Hermes enounced with feeling. "Nineteen, Twenty and Twenty-One have been *great!* ... Having said that, that brainless half-brother of mine enjoyed Twenty more than he has enjoyed any other century in history. He's convinced it was the greatest haul yet. He keeps going on about it. Incessantly. He doesn't stop! He just goes on and on without an end. It's unbearable, I tell you. And he's practically gone into mourning now that it's over. Though, Twenty-One hasn't started off too badly either ... "

"Who?" asked Innocent XIV blankly.

"Ares, dear fellow. Mars."

"Oh."

“Remember? World War I, World War II, the Bolshevik revolution, Mao’s Cultural Revolution, Laos, Vietnam, Rwanda, Gulf war *numero uno* ... *The Bomb*?” Hermes paused, and grinned. “Lucky *you* weren’t Infallible at the time, eh?” he gave Innocent XIV a convivial little punch on the shoulder. “Eh?”

“I really don’t know what you mean,” said Innocent XIV haughtily.

“Yeah ... That’s what Urban VIII said too, when I mentioned the Galileo affair.”

“Well, the man simply could not have *known*!” Innocent XIV objected with feeling.

“Well ... without wishing to put too fine a point on it, in that case, how *exactly* would that make him Infallible?”

“Ahem,” Innocent XIV cleared his non-existent throat. “Well ...”

“Only, if someone with effective control over the consciences of literally millions of people claims to be Infallible, and acts as if he were, only he clearly is not, then would you not agree that he is either conceited and delusional, or conceited and hypocritical? – No offence!” Hermes smiled winningly at him. “Present company excepted, I’m sure ...”

Innocent XIV scowled at him. “Listen,” he began, but was interrupted by an excited little bark. His head snapped round, wide-eyed, in time to see a black, shaggy mutt of decidedly unimpressive size launching itself at Hermes in slobbering, mad-eyed, canine happiness. The far end of the dainty-looking, long chain fastened to its equally dainty-looking collar appeared to be attached to the grey rock at the mouth of an exceedingly dark cave – leaving the mutt entirely too much slack in Innocent’s personal opinion, but since the mutt was not gracing him with its attention, he decided to forgo any comment. Instead, he watched with a slightly revolted curl of the lips as the mutt engaged determinedly in its doggy ritual of greeting, which mainly involved diligently covering Hermes’s entire face in drool – while Hermes, laughing, attempted to wrestle the shaggy creature back down to the ground.

“Down boy! Down! Down! I said down! Cerbie ... ! Down! Good boy! Well done! There you go ...” With one last, pointed, and extremely wet lick from chin to forehead, the mutt finally settled down to just panting happily, skipping around excitedly, and staring at Hermes with its mad, doggy eyes.

“*Cerbie* ... ?” said Innocent XIV with a sneer, his voice dripping acid. “*This* is the legendary Cerberus?”

“Oh yes!” agreed Hermes.

“Hardly impressive, you must admit ...”

“Well, it’s all a matter of one’s point of view, isn’t it?”

“If you say so. Now, before we go in, I wonder if you would be so kind as to answer a couple of questions that I have ...”

“Fire away, dear chap, fire away! All part of the service!” Hermes grinned.

“So kind,” Innocent XIV smiled sourly back. “My first question is: Do all the various traditional and ethnic deities exist?”

“Absolutely, old boy.”

“Including the God of Abraham?”

“Naturally.”

“And Jesus?”

“Dear chap ... I don’t know how to break this to you ... Jesus did exist, but he was never a deity ... He was human.”

“Fine,” Innocent XIV said hurriedly. “The Adoptionists were right. No problem. Moving on. Coming to my second question: Will I be meeting the Lord?”

“Which one?”

“The *Lord*! Almighty God the Father!”

“You mean The Name?”

“Who?”

“יהוה”

“What?”

“YHWH.”

“Did you just say Yahweh?”

“Yes. Kind of.”

“Yes. Yahweh! The *Lord*!”

“I doubt it.”

“WHY, in the name of all that is holy, *not*?” Hermes shrugged apologetically. “Am I condemned to Hell, forever to be deprived of the dear Lord’s presence?”

“No! You’re not condemned to anything. There hasn’t even been any judgement.”

“Then *why* not? Who better to judge me than the Lord Almighty!”

“Not my rules, old boy! Sorry. I can call him, if you like, but frankly the chances are ...”

“Call Him?” Innocent XIV repeated in excited awe. “YES! By all means, call Him! Let Him know how I pray and beg for his Grace and infinite Mercy! How I humbly beseech to be allowed into His presence!”

“Dear chap, I can try, but really, you mustn’t get your hopes up, the chances as I said ... ”

“Call Him!!” Innocent XIV screeched in desperate, uncontained hope, and excitement that the nightmare might soon be over.

“And about that *infinite Mercy*...”

“Call Him!!”

“Fine, fine!” Hermes sighed, shrugged, and pulled the black mobile phone out of thin air again. “I’ll put it on speaker, shall I?” he said in the tone of voice one reserves for children, when one is about to demonstrate that the grown-up always knows better.

Hermes punched a single key, and waited, while the phone rang. “I have him on speed-dial ... ” he mouthed to Innocent XIV, but Innocent XIV barely glanced at him. He was staring eagerly at the mobile phone instead, though it kept on ringing, and no one seemed inclined to pick up. Finally, after what seemed like an interminable age, the ringing stopped.

“I’m busy!” barked a rough male voice from the other side.

“And good day to you too, Name,” responded Hermes, unabashed and still smiling. Innocent XIV’s eager grin had wavered in alarmed doubt and was even now disappearing. Was that machine-gun fire he could hear in the background?

“Get lost, pip-squeak!” another male voice, a rather pleasant, manly baritone, joined in.

“Oh, what joy, dear brother, you are there too!” Hermes enounced, feigning profound feeling. “You and Name on speaking terms again?”

“Piss off!”

“And I had so missed your witty repartee ... ”

“What the hell do you want?” the first voice cut in. There was an explosion. It was definitely and unmistakably an explosion. And machine-gun fire, Innocent XIV decided, and took one horrified step back, away from the mobile phone.

“Now-now, Name, be nice. I have a lovely chap here who would very much like a couple of words with you ... I’m sure you could spare the time ... ”

“He’s not Jewish. Tell him to bugger off. We’re watching some live Smiting here in the Gaza Strip.” There was another explosion. “By the way, congrats on your High Definition televisions, nebbish. They are pleasing, very pleasing ...”

“Thank you. Kind of you to say so, Name. You know, there is also a facility, whereby you can *pause* live television. I’m sure the set and box I gave you have that function ... Not to mention that you are not really bound by the arbitrary human convention defining the direction of time ...” The pleasant male voice hooted in excitement in the background, accompanying, it seemed, a series of explosions, gunfire and screaming sounds emanating from a slightly more removed distance.

“Did you see *that?*” it cried.

“No chance, nebbish!” barked the first voice. “I did not, because nebbish is distracting me ...” it added, in a completely different tone.

“Pip-squeak, don’t make me come beat you up! Buzz off and leave us in peace. Name is not interested.”

Hermes smirked and his liquid-chocolate eyes glittered in a way that Innocent XIV would have found very alarming, had he been looking in Hermes’s direction at the time; only he was not, for he was still staring at the mobile phone in confusion at the incomprehensible sounds that were emanating from it.

“I’m sorry! I’m going to have to put you on hold for a moment, Name. I’ve got another call coming through,” said Hermes, and punched a couple of buttons, snickering silently. This time Innocent XIV noticed. He turned bewildered, horrified eyes to him.

“What ... ?” he squeaked.

“Shh!” said Hermes, putting the phone to his ear. “Ah, Hephaestus! Hi. It’s Hermes. Yes. Are you home? ... Lovely. And sis too? ... Excellent, excellent. I’m calling to deliver an official invitation for Mithras’s big do tomorrow ... Yes ... Yes, usual time. Will you pass on the invitation to Ditie? I’m sure she’ll need from now until tomorrow at least, to get herself all ready and decked out ... You won’t forget? ... Thanks, Hephaestus old boy! See you tomorrow!”

Grinning broadly, Hermes punched another couple of buttons on the mobile and returned to holding it between himself and Innocent XIV.

“Very sorry about that, Name,” he said. “It was, actually, a call for my brother that I received ... Do you mind if I deliver the message to him now?”

“Go ahead, and make it quick!” the rough voice responded.

“Dear brother, I have a message from Ditie ...”

“Oh?” the pleasant baritone changed perceptibly, to something smooth, very slightly unctuous, and nonchalant.

“I shall paraphrase slightly, since you are with company, but she says that that creep of a husband of hers Hephaestus is out, and she would very much like you to go to her, to put your sturdy arms around her, to kiss her, like only you do, everywhere, to lie with her so she can feel your firm body pressed up against hers and ...”

“Err ... Yes, yes. Thanks for the message, pip-squeak ...” the baritone, turned now a bit husky, interrupted hurriedly, “Err, look here, Name ... I, umm, need to run off ...”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk ... You and that floozy ... When will you learn?”

“Now, steady on! Ditie’s not a floozy. We’ll ... we’ll do this again soon. I’ll bring the booze, next time ...”

“You’d better!”

“No question! Won’t forget! Err ... have fun!”

A sound unmistakably like a sigh emanated from the other end of the line. “Nebbish, you buggered my evening. I have half a mind to Smite you.”

“Come now, Name. If you don’t want to show up, since we’re all here anyway, why don’t you just clear up a few things for Pope Innocent XIV, eh?”

“What does the goy want?”

“Well, aside from going to heaven ...”

“There is no fucking heaven!!”

“*What?*” squealed Innocent XIV.

“Well ...” Hermes began, “I’m sure he would take your word over mine, Name ... So maybe you could explain ...?”

Over the sound of continuing machine-gun fire, explosions and screaming, the rough, male voice snapped, “Fine, if it will get you off my back, nebbish. But this is going to be quick. Goy, listen ...”

“Yes, Lord ...?” Innocent XIV breathed humbly. He felt overawed. The Lord God Almighty was addressing him in person. He felt vindicated. He had held on to his faith, in the face of incomprehensible adversity, and was about to reap the rewards.

“Grab a Bible.”

“What?” A Bible dropped out of thin air into Innocent XIV’s hands. He stared at it. It looked exactly like *his* personal Bible. The one he had had while he had still been alive. “Thank you, Lord,” he breathed again in stunned awe.

“Goy, stop chattering. Am I the God of Abraham?”

“Yes, Lord.”

“Am I the God you worship?”

“Yes, Lord!”

“Good. Go to Job 10:20-22 and read it out loud.”

Innocent XIV flicked through the Bible’s pages and quickly found the verses. He read out loud:

“Are not my days few?

Then cease, and leave me alone, that I may find a little deer,

before I go – and I shall not return –

to the land of darkness and great shadow,

the land of gloom and thick darkness,

like thick shadow without any order,

where light is as thick as darkness.”

... Err ... ” said Innocent XIV.

“Shut up! Psalm 88:3-6.”

Once more Innocent XIV flicked through the Bible and began reading:

“For my soul is full of troubles

and my life draws near to the Sheol.

I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;

I am a man who has no strength,

like one set loose among the dead,

like the slain that lie in the grave,

like those whom you remember no more,

for they are cut off from your hand,

You have put me in the depths of the Pit,

in the regions dark and deep.”

“Psalm 115:17, goy.”

“Ahem!” Innocent XIV cleared his throat and read:

“The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence.”

“Ezekiel 31:14”

“Erm ... *All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the Pit.*”

“Notice any pattern here, goy?”

“But ...”

“There is no *but*. And, by the way, since we’re talking, I don’t remember ever authorizing the abolition of the Law (not that it was my invention to begin with, but anyway, I didn’t authorize its abolition). Nor, to my recollection, did that Jesus person, you all think so highly of, advocate it either. That obnoxious little impotent rat, Saul, came up with that idea – oh yes, you might know him as Paul – because he knew there was no other way to convince the goyim to convert. Those Greek and Roman heathens thought too highly of their uncircumcised shlongs to let anyone with a knife near them, no matter what else was promised. Sissies!” Innocent XIV was certain he heard the Lord snort. “Not to mention that it would have been impossible to convince them to forgo pork. The dirty buggers loved it. Their favourite food. Now, beat it, goy. I see there’s some Smiting going on in Afghanistan too, and I want to watch that.”

The line went dead.

Innocent XIV stared at the phone for a few moments longer, then slowly raised desperate-looking eyes to Hermes.

“There-there,” said Hermes, patting him kindly on the shoulder. “It’s not so bad, really, you’ll see ...” He lowered his voice and continued, almost conspiratorially. “It’s a little known fact, but Name is, actually, a war deity. Always was. At one time, he went around repeating his name to everyone, left right and centre, to make sure he wasn’t confused with any of the other Jewish deities. Advertisement, you see. He was on a drive to get promoted to sky god. But then, when he got really popular and nabbed promotion to creator god too, everyone was repeating his name as well, far too often for his liking, and he decided it would be better for his image to be a bit more mysterious, so people got it into their heads that they shouldn’t speak the holy name out loud. This had the unfortunate side-effect of people forgetting what his name actually was, since the vowels were not indicated in writing, so he became YHWH – which, of course, is unpronounceable. *Then*, he heard that Prince had changed his

name to an unpronounceable symbol which forced people to start calling him Symbol, and he thought that was a brilliant idea, and promptly decided he wanted to be called Name, from now on.”

Innocent XIV blinked.

“What?”

“What, what?”

“*Prince?*” said Innocent XIV. “... The pop singer?”

“Yes.”

“But ... But that was ... just a few decades ago ... The Lord has been referred to as *Name*, on and off, since time immemorial ...”

“Ah, but yes ... you see ... erm ... , well, to paraphrase the Tenth Doctor, people assume that the arrow of time only goes in one direction, from cause to effect, whereas actually time is more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey ... stuff.”

Innocent XIV blinked again.

“Stuff?” he said.

“Stuff.”

“... Right.”

“Shall we be moving on?”

“Err ... ” said Innocent XIV, still a bit dazed, as Hermes took him by the elbow and propelled him gently towards the cave’s entrance.

“Not that I wish to rush you, or anything, but, you know ... Well ... ”

The black, shaggy mutt sat primly to one side, panting happily and staring up at them with slightly crazed, canine eyes and undisguised interest, as they walked past, into the cave. It grew darker and, on motor, mindless instinct alone, Innocent XIV turned his head and looked back out, the way they had come. He jumped, yelped, and leapt forward, away from the suddenly very unattractive exit to the cave. With a triple bark like a roar, coming from three great heads with giant slavering jaws, the enormous creature at the entrance, still black and wearing a dainty collar and chain, but with a snake’s tail, and a mane of live serpents now on each of its three heads, had told him what it thought of him looking that way.

Innocent XIV turned away feeling distinctly crestfallen. His cunning plan to escape from this dreadful place had come to naught. Not only naught. Less than naught. Apparently, Jesus was *that Jesus person you all think so highly of*, St Paul

was an impotent rat, the Lord was a war god who enjoyed watching *smiting* with his mate Ares on High Definition television, and who had called him goy and told him to beat it. Ordinarily, when feeling so disconsolate, he would have attempted to think of someone worse off than himself, in order to lift his spirits. In this case, the only people he could think of that had clearly got it more wrong than he had, in fact, than all Christians in the world past and present had, well, maybe with the exception of the Adoptionists – they had got it, perhaps, slightly less wrong than the rest of them – were the atheists. They, without any shadow of a doubt, had got it completely wrong, on every conceivable level. Upon having this thought, Innocent XIV felt immediately better.

“Ha!” he muttered, involuntarily. He had been at least right about *something*. There were gods, there was life after death, there was cosmic justice, and divine rules.

“Hmm?” said Hermes.

“Nothing. Nothing. I was just thinking ... The atheists must get a bit of shock when they come down here, what?”

“The atheists? Actually, they adapt pretty easily. They haven’t got their hearts set on anything in particular when they get here, so they just find the whole thing pretty damned well fascinating.” Innocent XIV’s face fell. “Not to mention that they ask the most interesting questions. They always strike me a bit like eager tourists, you know. I handed one a camera once. He started taking pictures. And then he began asking me how the whole taking pictures works, on a meta-philosophical level, seeing as he was dead, so the camera probably didn’t really exist, except as a thought-form, which probably meant that the pictures he was taking with the camera, only appeared to him to be stored in the camera, but were, actually, stored in his own consciousness. He wasn’t *very* far off from the right idea. Only if I tried to explain to him the entirety of string theory, plus the mathematics that mathematics itself cannot prove, D-branes and S-branes, the wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey stuff we were talking about ... and some other things ... we would have still been here, so I kept it simple. Anyway, those who are generally rather disappointed when they get here are the suicide bombers. Very disappointed. And a little bit shocked, yes. That too. Hecate has taken charge of all incoming suicide bombers. She enjoys seeing

their faces, apparently, when they see her, and then realize that she's not one of the promised virgins."

Innocent XIV didn't know how his after death experience could get any worse. He was, apparently, a little bit less wrong than suicide bombers. That was all he had to console himself with: suicide bombers had got it more wrong than he had. The retrospective gloating at atheists had somewhat lost its allure, since the only image that came now to mind was of jolly atheists in Hawaiian shirts and Bermuda shorts eagerly taking snapshots of Hades, while Hermes the tourist guide, holding aloft a yellow umbrella with a red ribbon tied to its tip and leading the way, treated them to interesting titbits of information on the sights.

He would have spent more time sulking about this, but was distracted by the fact that the cave suddenly ended, and they came out into the open again. Which made it, technically, not a cave, but a tunnel, a detail Innocent XIV would have ordinarily dwelt on for longer, only once again there was something to distract him from this too. A dreary, grey, office block, clearly designed in the Fifties with a great economy of imagination and, in fact, talent of any kind, sat rather suitably, it must be said, in the midst of an equally grey, dreary and utterly uninteresting landscape, no different to the landscape at the other end of the tunnel. Except that this landscape had two rivers. One flowing to the left and one to the right of the office block.

"What's this?" asked Innocent XIV, as they approached.

"Administration."

"Fancy that!" said Innocent XIV. "Though perhaps the word 'ADMINISTRATION' written very clearly over the main entrance, should have tipped me off."

"Ooh, sarky!" remarked Hermes good-humouredly.

"What I *meant* was what goes on here?"

"Well, all sorts of... administrative things." Innocent XIV sighed deeply and rolled his eyes, as they climbed the steps to the entrance. "Really, most of them are not very interesting at all," said Hermes, and pulled the metal-framed, glass door open, holding it with a gallant smile for Innocent XIV to walk through.

The foyer, strangely, wasn't unpleasant. There were potted plants. And two fountains. Innocent XIV stared at them. They were the first pleasant thing he had seen since he had got here. Lift music was playing in the background.

“Do we have to wait?” asked Innocent XIV.

“Oh no, no. We go straight through.”

“What’s the lift music for then?”

“Uncle Pluto likes it.” Innocent XIV stopped and stared at him. “He says it helps eliminate any trace of personality in humans.”

“How nice of him.” Innocent XIV sighed. “Well, I suppose even a deity is what it is. I expect it’s not his fault he’s Death. And frankly, if one is condemned to live *here*–”

“Uncle Pluto’s not Death!” said Hermes, aghast.

“No? What is he then?”

“He’s Entropy.” Hermes leaned conspiratorially towards Innocent XIV. “It’s safe to say this here, since Dad won’t be listening, but Uncle Pluto is by far the most powerful deity in the universe,” he whispered. “Well ... he and all the others that are what he is ... like Kali ...”

“So, death and destruction then ...” said Innocent XIV.

“No no, dear fellow! No. Entropy is the tendency of everything in the universe towards equilibrium, which is a maximum state of disorganization – although it is now *en vogue* to explain entropy without using the words order and disorder and synonyms, as they are not used in their ordinary sense and that just confuses people – so, let us better say: a maximum dispersal of energy. Which, in fact, means a greater number of possibilities of arrangement of that energy, at any given moment, in a system. Well, a greater number of microstates for the Final state, than for the Initial state, and hence a greater number of possible arrangements for its total energy. But, anyway, in short, more entropy equals more possibilities.”

Innocent XIV just continued staring at him. “Do you really think I have any idea what you just said?” he said in the end.

Hermes stared back.

“Never mind. Moving on.”

“Where to?”

“Just down here ...” he was leading Innocent XIV down a very bland corridor lined with doors on either side. All of them were shut; most of them had no signs on them. Except the one at the end.

A small, flimsy metal plaque on it said: JUDGEMENT.

The lift music continued sounding overhead, unobtrusively doing its work and eating away at the emotions, imagination, creativity, and individuality of any human being that heard it. Wearing away its resistance, its ability to rebel, even the need for such a thing; lulling it, unnoticed, into a mindless stupor – not unlike that of most sheep. For some reason, Innocent XIV started thinking about going shopping.

Shopping was a good idea. He hadn't done that in a while. He couldn't think of anything he particularly needed, but he was certain suitable items would present themselves once he was out looking for them. He was, in fact, so caught up in this idea that he failed to notice the plaque on the door, until Hermes raised his hand in order to knock.

"Wait!" Innocent XIV squealed in sudden panic.

"What?"

"Judgement?"

"Yes."

"Erm ..."

"Well you were expecting one, weren't you? It can't be that much of a surprise."

"No, no. No surprise. It's just ... Well, who's going to be doing the Judging? And what happens after the Judgement?"

"Well ... the after bit is kind of complicated. But really nothing you should be worrying about ..."

"Not worrying about?" screeched Innocent XIV.

"Look, we're talking about the survival of consciousness after death, right? Or not ..."

"What do you mean, or not?"

"Or the *not* survival of consciousness after death."

"But, clearly ... " Innocent XIV began pointing out.

"Temporary, dear chap. It's all temporary. Like all things."

"*You mean the atheists are right?*" shrieked Innocent XIV. That was the final blow. Being slightly less wrong than suicide bombers he could deal with, more or less, but the atheists being right on anything, and at any level, was simply intolerable.

"Now, I didn't say that ... exactly ... As I said, it's complicated. If you take the end result as your criterion then, yes, you probably have to say that the atheists

are right ... in most cases. If, however, you take the process that leads to the end result as your criterion, then, no. The atheists are wrong. Isn't that a nice thought?" Hermes smiled at him encouragingly. "Eh?"

"And what of the soul?"

"Ah."

"Well?"

"That's complicated too."

"Explain it to me."

"My dear fellow, without wishing to sound patronizing in any way, I just tried to explain entropy and we found ourselves in deep, bottomless waters ... The soul ... Let's just stick with consciousness, eh?" and Hermes knocked.

The door was opened immediately by a young girl, no more than twelve or thirteen years old. She was holding a paper bag full of sweets, of which she picked one and popped it in her mouth.

"Hallo," she said, smiling, looking up at Innocent XIV. He stared at her. "Von't you cam in?" She stepped to one side, and since Innocent didn't seem inclined to move, Hermes gave him a little shove. Stumbling rather gracelessly in through the door, Innocent XIV stopped again, and looked around. It was a conference room, of sorts. Large table, many chairs, little place-name cards on the table in front of each chair, and a sideboard, with two full water jugs and a single, empty glass on it. Innocent XIV's gaze darted back to the sideboard. That made no sense, he decided.

"Hello, you!" Hermes was saying to the little girl. "How's tricks?"

"Tricks are goot," she grinned at him. "I'm very match enjoying zat book you brought for me, Mr. Hermes. Sank you very match!"

"Don't mention it. My pleasure. Here's another one." He pulled a book out of thin air and handed it to her. It was a giant, hardback affair, of the type one sees university students lugging about campuses. On its otherwise mostly bare, yellow cover, the title stood out prominently in a no-nonsense, large blue font: *Introduction to Superstrings and M-Theory*. The author's name appeared in a black, also no-nonsense font, within a blue rectangle, above: Michio Kaku.

The little girl skipped excitedly up and down.

"Oooh, sank you, sank you!" But then she seemed to remember herself, and cleared her throat primly, and straightened her *very* old-fashioned cardigan. "Sweet?" she offered.

“Thank you.” Hermes picked a lemon drop out of the paper bag. The little girl turned back to Innocent XIV who had been watching this performance in wide-eyed bemusement.

“Mr. Vako?” she said.

“Err ... yes ... ?”

She extended her hand very properly. “I am Hannah Goldberg.”

“Err ... Nice to meet you, young lady,” said Innocent XIV, taking the offered hand.

It was a bit sticky.

“I vill just call ze ozers and ve can shtart.” She walked primly and rapidly down the length of the conference room, book and sweets clutched to her chest, opened a door at the far end, and disappeared through it. Innocent XIV turned to Hermes.

“I’m sorry ... Why does she have an accent?”

“What do you mean? It’s her accent. Can’t be helped.”

“*You* don’t have an accent.”

Hermes burst out laughing.

“Dear chap, in every way that counts, I *am* language. Of course I don’t have an accent.”

“Right ... And she’s ... what?”

“She’s Hannah Goldberg. She just introduced herself.”

“You mean she’s a real person?”

“Yes.”

“A human being?”

“Yes. Well ... *was* a human being ... Before she ... you know ... ” Hermes discreetly ran a thumb across his throat.

“ ... Was killed ... ” Innocent offered.

“Yes. Along with lots and lots and lots and lots – I could just go on – of other people ... ” said Hermes meaningfully.

“You mean ... ?”

Hermes nodded.

“Oh.” The penny dropped. “Well, all right ... And what’s she doing here?”

“She’s one of the judges.”

“*WHAT?*” Innocent XIV shrieked, unaware that the door at the far end of the room had opened, and a gaggle of people, talking easily among themselves,

were coming through it. They stopped, deciding, apparently, to listen in detached interest to the unfolding conversation. "You mean I am going to be judged by *people*?" Innocent XIV was yelling. "*Human beings*? ... That is preposterous! What of universal morality? Ethical absolutism? ... Divine law and justice?"

"No such thing."

"How can you say there's no such thing?" Innocent XIV continued shrieking. "You're a god yourself!"

"Well, 'e's mobile phons," someone said from the back, a deep, rumbling voice, and everyone sniggered, including Hermes. Innocent XIV spun round. "And 'e's de patron of tieves an' meerchants ..." A not very tall African man was grinning broadly at Innocent, and everyone sniggered again. He was wearing a very traditional outfit. Which meant wearing not very much at all.

"Now, who's that?" Innocent XIV spun back to Hermes, albeit pointing emphatically at the man who had spoken.

"He's Kwame."

"He is practically naked!" yelled Innocent XIV. "Why is everyone naked? And in front of the little girl! It's outrageous!"

"Why?"

"It iz only bodies," said Hannah, chewing daintily on a stick of licorice.

"It is shameful!" yelled Innocent XIV. "And also, I thought the judges of the dead were the Kings Minos, Rhadamanthys, and Aeacus!"

"Oh, yes, sorry, sorry!" some new voices were heard from the depths of the small gaggle.

"Sorry!"

"Move aside, man!"

"Well, all raiiight. No need to sheuve, euh?"

"Sheuve?"

"Yes! Sheuve! No need to sheuve! ... Mon dieu!"

Innocent XIV turned round again, in time to see a young-looking Franciscan monk (he could tell this from the very coarse, brown habit he was wearing), rolling his eyes impatiently at a middle-aged man with extremely long, grey hair, wearing an extraordinarily elaborate crown involving giant peacock feathers, and what amounted to a short, wraparound, pleated loincloth. And nothing else. He looked like an older version of a fresco

Innocent XIV had seen somewhere, only he wasn't standing at a peculiar sideways position with one arm wrapped across his chest and the other spread out behind him.

"Sheuve?" the middle-aged man was saying again. "Sheuve? Oh, you mean *shove!*"

"Yes! Sheuve! That's what I've been sayiiiiing, mon vieux!" the young monk rolled his eyes again. "Maybee it is time to retire, dear fellooww, non?"

"Don't be absurd, young man!" the man with the crown retorted, moving forward regally. He was followed by another two men, one of them maybe a decade younger, the other perhaps a decade older than him, all in very similar attire. The eldest of the three was wearing the least elaborate headdress, and a slightly longer loincloth. "Well, here we are."

Innocent XIV stared.

"You are King Minos?" he said in the end.

"No."

"I'm King Minos," said the younger man.

"I'm Rhadamanthys."

"That's Aeacus," King Minos offered, with a very faint, regal gesture towards his older companion.

Innocent continued staring. The peacock feathers seemed to have some sort of supernatural command over his attention. In the end, he said, carefully, "You don't have an accent ..."

"Oh, we've been doing this job now for so long, we lost it."

"We can hardly remember what it sounded like any more."

"You mean you are people, too?"

The three men looked at each other. "Of course we're people," King Aeacus, the eldest, responded at last.

Innocent XIV turned back to Hermes. "They are *people?*" he yelled again.

"Well, what did you think they were?"

"I thought they were ... you know ... *mythological* ... Something. Imaginary Beings ..."

"People. Sorry."

"Then who are all these others? What are they here for?" he seemed unable to lower the tone of his voice to anything below a scream.

“Well, we’ve recruited some more people, over time. And you remember we said time ... wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey ... What’s the problem?”

“The *problem*,” shrieked Innocent XIV, “is that they are *human beings*!”

“And ... you would rather be judged by ... ?”

“GOD!! OBVIOUSLY, GOD!”

“But, you spoke to Name earlier and ... ”

“Yes, he doesn’t care. Someone else then!”

Hermes sighed deeply. “Uncle Pluto, for example?”

“For example ... ” Innocent conceded.

“Right. So, you think Entropy cares whether you’ve killed anyone, fibbed, or used some dirty words?”

“Well ... All right ... Maybe not. Your ... father then ... ” Innocent couldn’t bring himself to say it. The word seemed to stick in his throat. “ ... Zeus ... He’s not Entropy.”

“No. He’s a celestial deity. A sky god.”

“Wonderful.”

“So, you think a supernova is greatly concerned about when, with whom – or with what – and in which position, you get your jollies?” There was some snickering at the back of the room. Innocent XIV’s face looked like thunder.

“This is why,” Innocent XIV almost growled, “a creator God is necessary!”

“Well, necessary ... Depends really on one’s point of view. But, anyway, the kind of creator god you’re thinking of is one that resides outside the space-time continuum and who, from there, has created the entire multiverse, and everything in it. Correct?” Innocent XIV nodded. “Assuming such a thing existed, you really think it would be concerning itself with whether some of the inhabitants of an entirely insignificant planet, of an insignificant solar system, of an insignificant galaxy, of an insignificant universe, among literally zillions (and this is a technical term, mind you), *zillions* of others like them, put rubber sheaths on their genitals when copulating?”

Innocent XIV was almost apoplectic. “*Condoms*,” he cried, a mad gleam in his eye, “are an abomination! And, God Almighty, who surely exists, outside the space-time continuum, from whence He has created the entire multiverse and everything in it, *surely* disapproves! For it stands to reason that He should! The transmission of life must *not* be prevented!”

“Umm, Mr. Wako?” said a new voice. Innocent spun round. “I am Omar.” A dark-skinned old man with a white beard, in a kaftan and a turban, holding a glass of wine in one hand and a decanter of the same in the other, moved forward, ambling unhurriedly towards the conference table, where he took a seat. “Why do you not come and sit down, and tell us all about condoms? Hmm?” He smiled at Innocent XIV, and then took a sip of his wine, his dark eyes glittering.

Innocent XIV’s gaze narrowed. “Are you supposed to be drinking that?” he said, rather critically.

“No.” The old man shook his head, still smiling. “De Qur’an expressly forbids it. But I still do.”

Innocent XIV looked scandalized.

“Why?” he breathed.

“Because I want to. I wrote a poem or two about drinking wine once. Didn’t go down very well ...” he sniggered. “But, anyway, I tink we all want to hiar your toughts about condoms.”

“Yes, please,” said Hannah, and leapt onto a seat by Omar still chewing daintily on the stick of licorice.

“I am veery inte’rested to ‘earr aboot condoms, too,” said Kwame, sitting himself down.

“Oh yes, me too,” said King Rhadamanthys with a discreet roll of the eyes. “No doubt dear brother you as well?”

“You know me so well. Surely Aeacus will be interested also.”

“Without a doubt.” Three mesmerizing headdresses placed themselves strategically round the table so that giant peacock feathers kept ensnaring Innocent XIV’s attention no matter which direction he looked at.

“Mais oui, mee too. I ouish to ‘ear about condoms alsoo!” The young Franciscan monk, smiling, scuttled round the table towards an empty seat, and then stopped. “Ah. Bat ouee ‘ave not all introduuced ourselvs. I am Robeeert ...”

“We call ‘im Bob,” said Kwame.

“Oui. Zey do. It is veryyy annoyiiing.” Just then Innocent XIV realized that there were two more people coming out of the room beyond that he had not noticed before, which was not surprising, since they had been hidden by all the others standing in front of them. A dark-haired, middle-aged woman in a sari, with a small red smudge on the forehead, and a wizened old man, of manifestly

Asian origin, with an extremely wispy, long, white moustache and goatee-beard, who looked like he had just walked off the set of an 80s Kung Fu movie. He was grinning at nothing in particular and nodding with happy vigour.

“Namaste,” smiled the woman with a typical little wag of the head.

“Zis is Madhuvantiiii,” said Robert, while the little old Asian man scuttled forward, grinning all the time. “An’ zis is ...”

“I am Yongzheng,” grinned the old man, nodding vigorously, “bu’ yu can cawr me Bwluce. Eh? I rwiike Bwluce. Easiar, eh?” He slid into a seat, beaming broadly at Innocent XIV.

“Euh, oui. Voilà. Madhunantiiii en’ Bruuuuce.”

“We have a codeshare agreement with the Far Eastern Bloc,” said King Aeacus, “and Madhunanti and Bruce are the current Exchange Judges.”

“Of course, we have our own Exchange Judges sitting over with the Far Eastern Bloc,” pointed out King Minos, quite seriously. “Little White Feather, and Marcus Tullius. Spiffing judges, the both of them! Spiffing!”

“It offers a broader variety of destinations at practically zero cost,” King Rhadamanthys explained. “Now, won’t you take a seat?”

“We verry much want to hearr yourr views on condoms,” Madhunanti smiled, wagging her head encouragingly.

A bit dazedly, Innocent XIV reached for the chair at the head of the table and sat down. Those peacock feathers were hypnotizing. But everyone *was* looking at him with polite, expectant interest, which is more than he’d had in a while, since it is really very difficult to impress fellow cardinals with one’s eloquence and moral superiority – and, as a cardinal, he didn’t all that often preach to a flock, which in general is much more likely than one’s colleagues to hang on one’s lips and take one’s words as manifestation of divine truth. Particularly when it comprises people who have not yet been apprised of the news that the earth is round, and who, frankly, wouldn’t care either way, because they’re too busy trying to find something to eat. He cleared his throat.

“Condoms,” he declared haughtily once more, “are an abomination. They prevent the transmission of life. Besides which, they spread AIDS.”

“Condoms do zat?” said Robert.

“Yes, they do. Not everywhere. Only in Africa. Because some European manufacturers deliberately infect them with the virus, in order to wipe out the

African people and colonize the continent – as Archbishop Francisco Chimoio very rightly first pointed out.”

“Ah bon?” said Robert.

“Bot not all manufacturrers,” asked Kwame.

“No. Only two or three of them.”

“So, den peepel should use condoms frrom de adder manufacturrers.”

“Certainly not! Condoms should never be used! Ever! For any reason!”

“Bat, zere iz a big AIDS epidemic in Africa,” said Hannah, ‘should not people protect zemselves?”

“Absolutely not!” Innocent XIV seemed incensed. “For one thing, as Cardinal Trujillo scientifically proved, condoms do not stop the HIV virus, since it is 450 times smaller than the sperm, and hence can pass through the pores of the condom. There is about a twenty percent chance of that happening. While, at the same time, people who think they are safe, because they are being misinformed by all the aid and health organizations, succumb to temptation, fornicate more often, and hence are infected more often! *Condoms*,” he concluded with triumphal vehemence, “increase promiscuity, and thus the transmission of the disease!”

“Fascinating,” said Omar, and took a sip of his wine. “Do go on.”

“You don’t truly believe that, do you?” asked King Aeacus, before he could stop himself. “Oww!” he flinched, and turned to glare at Bruce. “You kicked me!”

“Sowry.” Bruce tried to look abashed but failed miserably, as he seemed unable to stop himself grinning. “Weflex rweaction.”

“An’ whot of married coupels?” asked Kwame. “Eef one ‘as HIV and de adder not ... Should dey not use condoms? Dey arre allowed ta fornicate den, arre dey not?”

“Well,” Innocent XIV conceded. “This is a difficult question indeed. For a married couple may legitimately copulate, of course. *However*, only if every intimate encounter allows for the possibility of conception, for, if not, then copulation, becomes *fornication*!” he cried, forefinger pointing towards the ceiling and shaken pointedly for emphasis. “A condom, clearly, will prevent conception, which is unacceptable, and reduce the holy act of procreation to a sordid act of debauchery! So, to answer your question, no. A married couple

may not use condoms either. In any case, most of them have holes in them, so it's pointless to ... "

"Ai 'm sorry," Kwame interrupted, "bot what should da married coupel do instead?"

Innocent XIV looked at him, startled, as though he had just been asked a question, the answer to which was so self-evident, he wasn't certain he was required to respond.

"Abstain, of course!" he said in the end.

"Never have sexual intercourse again?" said King Minos.

"Of course."

"Ever?"

"Of course."

Omar cleared his throat. "Are you aware dat human beings, dolphins, and some higher primates, are inclined by nature to have sex for fan?"

"Fan?" said Innocent XIV.

"He means fun," King Rhadamanthys offered.

"Oh. *Fun*?" he cried. "*Fun*? Well," he snorted. "I think moral rectitude and principles are slightly more important than *fun*!"

"Beut it iz a naturelle urge ... " said Robert. "ow can it be resisteed? Particularly ouen dere iz loove ... ?"

"Carnal desire is not love. Anyway, you cannot encourage weak people to remain weak! You have to challenge them to overcome their weakness!"

"Zo, vat you are saying is zat you are demanding zat human beings shtop being human beings. Stimmt?" Hannah popped a lemon drop into her mouth.

"Err ... " said Innocent XIV. "No, not exactly ... Only that they overcome their weaknesses."

"On pain of eternal torrmment in hell if dey do not?" said Madhuvanti.

"Well ... yes. Unless of course they repent before they die."

"How has that been going for you?" asked King Minos. "In the last, say ... fifteen hundred years?"

"What?" asked Innocent XIV.

"The forbidding of fornication and the encouraging of abstinence. Has it been having good results, would you say? ... People been fornicating less than previously in your opinion?"

"Erm, of course!"

“And the celibacy of the clergy, would you say that has had the desired results? No dire side-effects there or anything?”

“Now look here! What you are referring to are isolated incidents, do you hear me? It is not representative of the practices of the clergy as a whole!”

“Many incidents dough, uh?” Omar took another sip of wine.

“Certainly not! It’s only the press that has been making such a big deal of it all! If you think of the number of priests in the world, and the number of boys they come into contact with every day, then, well ... the incidents you are referring to are a hardly noticeable fraction of an otherwise chaste and righteous total.

“An' it has been vewry goot fowr evelylene’s psychologicawr and mentawr heawrth, eh?” said Bruce.

Innocent XIV looked at him blankly. “Psychological and mental health?” he repeated, as though the words were entirely incomprehensible to him.

“Guiwlt,” said Bruce. “Good fowr peopwre, eh?”

“Of course! Without guilt, there is no remorse and no repentance!”

“For being human,” said King Rhadamanthys.

“No! For *sinning*!” cried Innocent XIV.

“By succumbing to de natural demands of de body and de mind,” said Omar.

“Yes! For being weak!”

“Ah bon,” said Robert. “En' for zat peopolle deserve deass end eternelle tormeent in 'ell.”

“Well, if they were not weak, they would neither die, nor go to hell. Mind you, hell would only be for fornicators, whereas married people would only die. – There have been in fact some suggestions that those who contract AIDS in this manner within the bonds of marriage, *by refusing to succumb to the temptation of the condom*, should be declared martyrs. I think there is much to say about that idea. I was, in fact, seriously considering endorsing it. No doubt my successor will do so.”

“How nice forr dem,” said Madhuvanti, smiling. “It would cerrytainly be verry comforrting to dem to know dat, once dey are dead, dey will be considerrd martyrrs, by dose still living. And forr deirr families too. How many soon-to-be-declarred martyrrs do you tink you have perrsonally crreated, Mr. Wako?”

“Personally? How do you mean, personally?”

“Trough your prreaching and serrmons.”

"I'm sure I have no idea."

Omar punched the tabletop with a forefinger, as though hitting a button, and a state of the art computer screen flipped slowly open, rising up from the table in front of him. He peered at it.

"Tree tousand, four handred and fifty two," he said. "And dat is widout even being Infallible," he smiled at Innocent XIV. "Seeing as you were only Infallible for tree days." The computer plinged. Omar peered at it again. "Oh. And fifty tree."

"Just cwreated anothewr one!" Bruce nodded, still grinning.

Innocent XIV looked confused. "I don't understand," he said.

King Aeacus rolled his eyes. "Omar, why don't you just do the input, eh?" he suggested.

"Oui," agreed Robert. "I 'ave 'eard enough. Non?"

There was a lot of general nodding round the table, which caused three sets of giant peacock feathers to quiver and sway back and forth in an inexorably mesmerizing manner, so that Innocent XIV couldn't help but stare at them, while Omar did some key-punching on a computer keyboard that had risen up out of the table to accompany the screen. Hannah, sitting next to him, was leaning over and watching what was coming up on the display with interest.

"So, self-righteous bigotry," Omar listed as he typed, "idiocy, criminal negligence, conceit. Accessory to crimes against humanity, hypocrisy, more bigotry ... Anyone want to add anyting?"

"Smawl dick," said Bruce, grinning and nodding. Omar sniggered.

"Dat is no crime, doough, Bruce."

"No no. No cwime. Extenuatin' cilmstances."

"What?" asked Innocent XIV, as a gale of laughter rose up round the table. He had been so transfixed by the peacock feathers, he had missed the entire exchange.

"Notting, notting," said Kwame, wiping a tear from his eye. Omar, doing the same, hit the return key with a flourish.

"We agree on *Lethe*?" he said. With some still-fading snickering erupting every now and then, everyone nodded. "Den I see here dere are also dese potential positions available: one, Corporate: Founder/owner. *BigJohns*; two, Scientific: Head Research Scientist: *BigJohns*; and tree, Volunteer: Healt Worker: *Society for Family Healt*."

Another gale of laughter erupted round the table. "I put ten buck on twro," said Bruce.

"I vill bet twenty on sree," said Hannah. "And sree lemon drops."

"Put twenty for me on one," said King Minos.

"I bet ten on none of dem," said Madhuvanti.

"Ah ... cruel woman," said King Rhadamanthys. "I wager fifty on three."

"Oooh," said Robert. "Fiftee euh? I ouill not wageer. I alwayyys lose."

"Fifty on one," Kwame joined in. He grinned knowingly at Rhadamanthys.

"Twenty on three," Aeacus made his bet.

"Den I will wager fifty on two," Omar declared, reached into a non-existent pocket and drew out some silver coins. He tossed them onto the table. "Let me see your money." A selection of coins, notes and lemon drops were tossed onto the table, to the utter bemusement of Innocent XIV. There was also an "IOU". Then this was followed by some clearing of throats, collecting of composures, and shifting of seats.

"Mr. Vako," said Hannah. "Vould you like a trink?"

"Eh?" said Innocent XIV.

"Some votter?"

"Water?"

"Oh. Err ... " The truth was that Innocent XIV was suddenly feeling quite thirsty. Hannah got up from her seat, walked to the sideboard and picked up the jug on the left-hand side. She poured water into the single glass and brought it to the table, setting it down with a smile in front of him. "Err, thank you," said Innocent XIV.

"You are velcome," said Hannah, reclaiming her seat.

"So, what now?"

"Oh, now nothing," said King Radamanthys. "You drink your water, Mr. Wako, and you go."

"Go? Where to?" That water was truly very tempting. And he was *very* thirsty. Innocent XIV's eyes kept drifting towards it. He picked up the glass.

"Where to?" said King Rhadamanthys as Innocent XIV took a couple of long, satisfying swigs. "I have no idea."

Innocent XIV spurted water out all over the table.

"You don't *know*?" he sputtered. "How can you not *know*? Aren't you people the ones that are supposed to decide?"

“We decide on whether you have committed any crimes worth discussing, and what these are. We decide on Forgetfulness or Remembrance. And then we check to see if there are any available destinations that we like, and we put in a request for them. Whether you will end up at any one of those, we cannot say. The system does all that automatically. You might not be going anywhere at all. The variables are simply too numerous for us to be able to take into consideration, what with the non-linearity of time, the arbitrariness of its direction, the multiplicity of universes, and all that ...”

“... You mean ... it's *random*?” Innocent XIV breathed, aghast.

“Well ... let us say we ... *load the dice*,” King Rhadamanthys cast a glittering glance to the others. “So,” he pushed himself up from his seat in that universal manner, which emphatically declares that *this meeting is over*. Innocent XIV's eyes helplessly followed the upward, swaying and rather graceful progress of the peacock feathers sweeping up and backward out of the middle of King Rhadamanthys's crown – which meant that he didn't see Hermes, behind him, push himself up from the door against which he had been leaning, while at the same time hurriedly tossing a newspaper over his shoulder – from whence it disappeared. Hermes tried to look nonchalant but only succeeded in looking sheepish. There had been a very grainy, black and white photograph, blown up to the size of half the newspaper's front page, where a cow seemed to be floating in mid-air in the midst of endless fields and an endless sky, only in that sky there was also an indistinct, oval-shaped blob to one side. The side, in fact, to which the cow appeared to be floating. Underneath, in a typeface that was surely measured in feet, rather than points, the headline marvelled sensationally at the phenomenon captured on this amateur photograph. The words *cow*, *abduction*, and *alien* may have all featured in the headline. Below this and to one side was another blurry, and extremely grainy photograph of a man with grey hair, large sunglasses, and a very distinct, swept-back hairdo involving very long sideburns, carrying his shopping, it seemed, to his car. An inch-high headline above it declared him: “Alive!”, while diagonally below this, in the same proud typeface, was the startling news: “Woman Weds Ape!”

Hermes cleared his throat and pretended the newspaper incident hadn't happened.

Meanwhile, since everyone round the table was rising meaningfully from their seats, Innocent XIV did the same. People started coming round and

offering him polite handshakes.

"Nice ta meet you."

"Yes, verry pleased to meet you," Madhuvanti wagged her head gently.

"Have a good twip," Bruce grinned, nodding.

"I'm sorry," said Innocent XIV at last. "I'm ... I'm still a bit confused ... When you say available *destinations* ... what do you mean exactly?"

King Aeacus was shaking him heartily by the hand.

"Incarnations, Mr. Wako. It was a pleasure. May I wish you a good forward journey ..."

"... *Incarnations!*" choked Innocent XIV. "You mean, possible *re-incarnations* ..."

"Exactly."

"But ... But that's ... " He was trying to remember what exactly this was, but was having trouble for some reason.

"Why be so surprised, Mr. Wako? Even some early Church Fathers advocated the doctrine of reincarnation. Perhaps you've forgotten Origen?"

In actual fact, Innocent XIV *had* forgotten Origen. Until Aeacus mentioned him. Then he remembered. And then promptly forgot again. Along with why they were discussing him in the first place.

"*Auf wiedersehen*, Mr. Vako," said Hannah, shaking him very properly by the hand. "Oh. Would you care for a lemon drop?" as an afterthought, she offered the paper bag towards him very sweetly. "One for ze road?"

"Err ... thank you," said Innocent XIV, and picked one out, forgetting entirely his earlier resolve not to eat anything while in this infernal place. He popped it in his mouth as Robert ushered him towards Hermes.

"Eh, voilà," he was saying. "Bon voyage, en' all dat. It ouas a pleasuure."

Hermes pulled the door open and held it, smiling and polite, for Innocent XIV to walk through. "Au revoir!" called Robert, and waved briefly at Innocent XIV's back, then turned and scuttled back to the table. Everyone else was doing exactly the same, crowding round, pushing and elbowing each other, and in general attempting in any possible way to get a clear view of the computer screen, which Omar seemed to be hogging.

"I am only zmall, I should be near ze front!" Hannah was primly declaring.

"Euh, you know zoes peacock feazeeers are verryyy annoyying, mon vieux. You do know zat, non? You should stand in ze back wit zoes, euh! Ozerouaize

no one can see any tiiing, euh!”

“Don’t be absurd, young man. I have seniority here!”

“Buwrlshi’. And I can kick yowrl ass, ‘cause you sissy! ... Seniolity, my foot.”

“Besides, we’re guests!” Madhuvanti claimed very regally, without a hint of a head-waggle. “We should get de best seats.”

“Ai say! Are you pushing mee aside becoz Ai’m black? Is dis rashial discriminaashion?”

“No. I push you aside ‘cause you young. I’m ow wrd. I get best seat. Othewlwise it is agism. Eh? And then I kick yowrl ass too.”

Happily for Innocent XIV, he heard none of this – continuing – exchange, since, as soon as they walked out into the corridor, the lift music was playing again. Hmm, he thought, as he sucked on the lemon drop. Pretty. And soothing. And hardly noticeable, really. Maybe I need another pair of shoes. Or a nice Mont Blanc pen. He was following Hermes very docilely down the hallway, until he remembered a word that had been spoken a good few minutes earlier. He stopped.

“*Lethe*?” he said. Hermes turned back. “Did that Arab man say *Lethe*?”

“Actually, Persian ... But yes. *Lethe*. He said that.”

“*Lethe*, as in the river? The River of Forgetfulness?”

“Yes.”

“You mean ... ” Innocent XIV stared at the two fountains visible now from the corridor, up front in the foyer. “Those two fountains, come from those two rivers outside, and one of them is *Lethe* and the other *Mnemosyne*?”

“Yes.”

“And those two water jugs ... ?”

“Yup.”

“You mean I’ve just drunk from the river *Lethe*.”

“Yes.”

“Err ... that is ... ” Innocent XIV thought he should be feeling incensed, but for some reason couldn’t remember why that was. He sucked on the lemon drop and decided to let it go. “All right.” He started walking again. “Where to now?”

“Just here.” Hermes was stopping in front of a lift. He pushed the call button and it lit up, as Innocent XIV ambled up and stopped by him, staring at the lift door vaguely, as people do, whenever they happen to stand in front of one.

Maybe he needed to buy some lemon drops too. And some licorice. He hadn't actually had any licorice since ... Well, he couldn't remember since when, but it didn't matter. Without realizing, he had started humming the lift music. Also without realizing, he had forgotten most of what had happened in the last hour or so, as well as the reason why he had ever considered this place unpleasant. And the chap standing next to him wasn't all that bad, either, really – Innocent XIV couldn't remember the chap's name, it was at the tip of his tongue, but not coming to him. Something with an H. He decided to let that go too, as the lift plinged, and the door opened.

"Well, here we are, old boy," Hermes said, with a broad smile. "This is your stop." He shook Innocent XIV's hand warmly, and gestured towards the lift with his left arm. "All yours, dear chap."

"Oh," said Innocent XIV. "You're not coming?"

"Fraid not. But anyway, trust me, the trip will be over before you know it," Hermes smiled encouragingly at him. "Besides, I've got this bloody birthday party to organize, and it's all a bit of mess to be honest ..."

"Birthday party?" said Innocent XIV. "Who for?"

"Oh, for old Mithras, this year."

"Oh. Right." Innocent XIV nodded vaguely, as Hermes leaned into the lift and hit the single button to be found on its walls. It lit up.

"Well ... " said Hermes, with another encouraging sweep of the arm in the direction of the lift.

"Oh. Right," said Innocent XIV again and stepped into it. The lift music, predictably perhaps, was playing here as well. Innocent XIV smiled, vaguely. Good idea this, with the music, he decided.

"Cheery-oh!" Hermes waved to him, as the door plinged again, and closed.

The lift moved, though strangely it was impossible to tell in which direction. For all Innocent XIV knew, it could have been going sideways. Not that he cared particularly. He hummed the lift music happily, and sucked at the last tiny shards of lemon drop. He had forgotten his own name about five minutes ago, but hadn't yet realized, and he was now in the process of forgetting that he had ever known it. Damned nice lemon drop, that, Innocent XIV thought. Must definitely buy some at the first opportunity. Along with some socks. And at that point, just as the lift stopped moving and the door plinged once again, Innocent XIV, né Polycarp Njue Wako, made a grave, though inevitable, error, for which, admittedly, he was not to blame.

He forgot to continue thinking; therefore, the lift doors opened and discreet lift music gently spilled out of the empty car.

<https://irenesoldatos.eu/>

<https://bit.ly/3dbcWwY>



This free edition was downloaded from
www.obooko.com

No charge has been made to access or download this book.
You may freely use this digital copy in accordance with the terms and
conditions of the license attributed to this work.