

The Blue Testament: A Compilation

By Christopher Winn

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Front Cover: "A Duel Arranged" painting by Christopher Winn

Back Cover: "The Ziggurat" drawing by Lee Winn

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POETRY

I. A Duel Arranged

Out wilderness they came like dreams in fever
Shepherd accompanied by a Caesar
Weary from the journey, yet in bearing
Princely both, pain disinclined to sharing.
By dusty dawn their visages disturbed
Revealed subtleties which my judgement curbed
Though crowned the Caesar was naught but a beast
Though haloed the shepherd of men was least.
I heard them agree to dispatch seconds
Who'd schedule the duel, present weapons
Nothing to add, they divided vengeful
Trudging to fates equal unenviable.
Who 'twere only late did I understand—
The Man of Sorrows and Sorrow of Man.

II. The Locker

Strobing starburst of deafening shrapnel
Impacts the hull of vigilant vessel
Letting fear and foam slosh through new portholes
To suck the crew out like oily noodles
Down briny belly of whitened coral
Where the anglerfish's neon bauble
Is a sad substitute for the lost moon
And entrails like anemones spurting
Inky gore trace the shark-summoning rune
Davy Jones awaits, clacking lobster-claw
As though it were the scissors of the Fates
To shake loose limbs bearing anchor tattoos
And kiss the wan cheeks that gills soon replace
Their spread-eagle corpses, bloated starfish
Are firmaments felled for his display case
Thus the ocean of their tears ever tastes.

III. Breaking and Entering

In childhood slumber I espied a thief
Shattering windows to slip through the breach
He was masked but elsewise unthreatening
Yet unmatched in nightmares unsettling
Then in a toilsome meditation
Where naught but sweat emanates from the brow
This recurrent breaking and entering
Was clear recalled, elucidated now—
Near-audible I heard, and was affright,
'Behold, I come like a thief in the night.'

SHORT STORIES

I. Ad Nauseam

I was engaged in some after-session banter with my psychologist. Our topic was the antiquated art of dream interpretation. I mentioned offhand the few dreams that I, as a life-long insomniac, had managed to experience. I called them, for lack of a better term, “deja vu dreams.” These dreams were not, as I understand it, the fantastical ones that most people have. Usually they were quite mundane—first person visions of myself doing the dishes, answering emails, leafing through magazine pages, et cetera. They were exceptional only in their astonishing detail—for in the dreams I could distinctly perceive the minutia of all my senses, including my accompanying thoughts—and the fact that their predicted events would always occur in real life some weeks, months, or years later.

I detected a distinct shift in my psychologist’s demeanor from polite attention to genuine interest when I mentioned that these dreams had several times given me real-world advantages. Once, I bragged, I dreamt of placing an obscene amount on a particular number at roulette, and not being a gambling man nor residing in a gambling state, I wrote this dream off as I did with all the others. Several months passed, and my boss announced that our next company conference would be held in Vegas. Piqued by the coincidence, I decided to experiment. I played conservatively with my money throughout the trip, refusing to approach the roulette table until the last day. Doing well on slots and blackjack, by the end I had amassed the exact sum of chips that I had seen myself bet in the dream. I did just as I had foreseen and won, to the astonishment of my colleagues.

My psychologist shook his head, mentioning with an edge of regret that parapsychology was not his field of

expertise. I laughed at this as condescension only to immediately perceive that it was not. Apparently he had spent enough time with me to conclude that I was a wholly rational man, given over neither to superstition nor suggestion. Thus he took me at my word, believing that I truly foresaw these events in dream rather than merely imagining foreknowledge after the fact. Flattered, I commenced to brainstorm with him regarding how regular psychology might approach such a conundrum. We decided that the henceforth-avoided option of chemically treating my insomnia might shed some light on these dreams by deepening and prolonging my sleep. Knowing from previous misadventures that I was immune to common sleeping pills, my psychologist forwarded me to a psychiatrist who devised a potent prescription—so potent, in fact, that I would have to take it under observation at a sleep clinic.

Thus I tucked myself in with gusto, relishing the thought of a full night's sleep and some new insight into these eccentric dreams. Waving adieu to the sleep scientist through the clinic's one-way glass, I closed my eyes and briefly considered counting sheep, but the dreams began before I could gather my flock.

It was a stupor of microscopic detail—every fiber in the sheets, each vibration in the air, the billowing of my lungs, the thundering of my heart. I dreamt of waking in the clinic—odd, since my dreams usually predicted a somewhat distant future. In the dream I yawned and stretched, rubbed my eyes, groggily said yes please and thanks as the scientist offered me a coffee. I drank it, made my way to the parking lot, and drove off. I went to the office, got a lot of work done, headed home, ordered a pizza, streamed a movie, read a book, and went to bed. Then it all repeated, except that it was now a different day of the week, a new meal,

another movie, the next chapters. And again, and again, ad nauseam.

Dream-years passed. I got news of my sister's death in a car accident and attended the funeral with my parents. They followed her—breast cancer and dementia. I married twice and divorced twice. I raised a puppy to an old dog and held his head in my hands as they put him to sleep. I grew fat and felt my muscles decay. I sensed a creeping disillusionment covering my zest for life like a shroud. I lost all hope in the things people hope in—romance, politics, work, human progress. The end came while watching a televangelist laud “God’s Plan” on the sanitarium TV. I began to laugh—hard. So hard that my heart got out of whack. I felt it running off the rails and just kept on laughing. He finished the sermon without me. Bizarrely, I could still hear one of the orderlies as he took my nonexistent pulse. “At least he went happy,” he said.

I awoke in the sleep clinic as a thirty-year-old man with a century of experience, watching in awestruck horror as I began to live the dream of that previous restful night. I recognize and anticipate it all, down to the words I’m writing now and how long I have left to be somewhat sane. But that isn’t even the strangest part. I have never again dreamed about myself. Now I dream only of different individuals in increasingly distant centuries, riding shotgun in their perspectives from birth to death. At first they were beings I recognized. Now they are things utterly beyond my voyeuristic comprehension, living gibberish lives in unfathomable planes and climes. How many nights must pass, I wonder, until I dream of being infinitely dense and ultimately dead?

II. Approximation

They tilted the package off the dolly and left him to consider it. The box was the size of a small refrigerator, recycled cardboard discreetly lacking a corporate logo. Not that he was ashamed, exactly. These were all the rage—it was odd that he *hadn't* had one. Nonetheless, he waited for the labor-droids to leave before inserting and sliding a razor down its taped seam. An avalanche of packing peanuts piled about his feet as he wrenched open the flaps. A feminine face awaited him beneath the plastic—one he had designed himself with exacting detail. It had been the face of someone he knew—or had wanted to know, rather. And now here she was, in his home, at his mercy, having aged not a day. She belonged to him. He had the receipt to prove it.

Taking her beneath the armpits, he tugged her free and laid her out on the floor so as to slice away her plastic placenta. He smirked cynically at the disposable modesty gown she came adorned in. The accuracy and potency of the scent he had specified was impressive—powdered strawberries. Propping her up at the foot of the couch—the yet inanimate neck tilting back to splay its hair discordantly about the cushions—he slumped next to her to consult the instruction manual.

“Greetings, valued customer. Thank you for supporting Pygmalion Industries© in its campaign to End Loneliness™. To that end, we’ve taken the liberty of sparing you all legalese and jargon. We know first-hand the urgency which accompanies bringing the man, woman, boy, girl, hybrid, or non-binary companion-droid of your dreams to life! Please follow the three easy steps outlined below, and don’t hesitate to consult our friendly, 24/7 customer service representatives should any questions arise. Sincerely, Pygmalion Industries©. Your Love-Life is Our Love-Life™.”

Step One. He turned and lifted her lids gingerly with his palm, goosebumps rising at the slickness of her lightless eyes.

Step Two. He brushed the lengthy locks from one of her ears and pronounced the android authorization sequence: its owner's name, its given name, and the first mode it should adopt. "Zane, Olivia—", here he paused, "—servile."

Step Three. His hand trembled slightly, almost imperceptibly, as he placed a finger in her mouth and pulled down on her jaw.

She began to breathe. Or pretend to breathe, he reminded himself. Spellbound, he watched the dainty rise and fall of her clavicle and the fluttering of her eyes as they grew in light and warmth. Eventually she turned to him, lithely, naturally, and in a voice that was almost perfect—adjustments could be made—asked but a single question.

"Master?"

He nodded.

She smiled, succulent lips peeling back to reveal pearly whites. "I'm so glad to meet you, Master. May I..." Her cheeks flushed. "May I touch you?"

"You may," he answered graciously.

She raised a slender hand to his face and caressed his jaw.

"You're everything I had hoped you would be," she leaned in and whispered.

Tears filled his eyes. He embraced her, and she slid across him gingerly, perceptively, to straddle his lap.

"Olivia," he breathed, face buried in her hair. He began to kiss her hard, hands moving greedily to the back of her head, then down to the small of her back to tear away the superfluous gown.

He stared blearily at the display, swiping a finger left to right to add more articles of clothing to the cart. The couple were still on the couch, she sleeping—or imitating sleep—on top of him. Occasionally he would glance down to imagine how a particular piece would look on her, then back at the holographic screen to continue the shopping spree. Having compiled a full female wardrobe, he woke her and asked for her opinion on the selection.

“Oh Master, it’s all so wonderful,” she pined.

He clicked his tongue and told her to switch to independent mode. She blinked.

“Zane, I’m not sure that one there—no, the other one—yes, it’s really not my color. And those pants, we can do better, don’t you think?”

He nodded, eyebrow slightly raised.

They stepped outside the apartment, she sporting her first proper set of clothes. It was clear and breezy, with the subtle sound of crashing waves in the distance. The street currently looked as though it sat upon a tropical beachfront with idyllic volcanoes smoking in the distance. Yesterday it had been a stylized inner city with temperate rain-fall and the occasional pigeon-drone fluttering overhead. He basked in the synthetic light radiating from the artificial horizon, richer in mammalian nutrients than sunshine. He knew on a purely intellectual level that these surroundings were just an elaborate combination of screens and holograms, but this detracted from the experience not at all. This residential district was for the adventurous and easily bored who desired varied aesthetic experience. Other districts were available for those who wished to acclimate to a more natural, homely setting.

“It’d be nice if they could get the salt-scent right,” she critiqued.

“Servile mode,” he commanded flatly.

They rode an accelerator through several districts, Zane perusing the various fare as corresponding restaurant ads played upon the translucent floor. They stepped off as soon as he spotted a hibachi option. He was feeling sociable.

He noted the human maître de warily and studied her face for any untoward reaction to Olivia. If she had a problem with companion-droids, she did a good job of concealing it. Once seated he ordered green tea and a California Roll. The waiter-droid inquired if the lady would like a cup as well.

“That won’t be necessary,” Zane clarified.

Eventually another party was seated at the communal table. They were a man, a woman, and an office-droid—business associates, by the look of it. The woman was pretty—not as pretty as Olivia, but still. Zane caught their gaze and smiled, as did Olivia. The man returned their smiles. The woman did not. Zane pondered this as he downed his tea, but decided to let it go. To his surprise, the woman eventually addressed him as he was eating his sushi.

“Doesn’t she need something to drink?” she asked.

Zane held up a finger as he finished his bite. “Mm. No, she doesn’t. Isn’t that right, Olivia?”

“Master is correct, ma’am...”

Zane cringed, not having intended to leave her on servile mode.

“...I do not need to eat or drink,” Olivia concluded.

“*Master*,” the woman imitated with disgust. “You pervert.”

“Excuse me?” Zane shot back.

“I said you’re a *pervert*,” the woman hissed, beginning to rise.

Her business associate tried to intervene. “Macie, let’s not judge...”

“Oh, so you’re one of *those*,” Zane laughed. “You let a droid do your work all day but God forbid they take care of our other needs!”

“What is it?” the woman retorted, rounding the table. “Tiny member? Must be something wrong if you’ve gotta stick it in a circuit board!”

“Sit down!” Zane ordered.

“Think you’re gonna tell me what to do?” the woman screeched, brandishing her steak knife. “I’m not your cyber-bitch!” Zane brought up an arm defensively, thinking the blade was meant for him. But the woman passed him by, going for Olivia instead. He watched, in seeming slow-motion, as the knife ripped at the perfect silicone of her face, trailing a hideous scar down her cheek. The woman let go the utensil triumphantly and began to return to her seat. Zane tackled her to the ground, now wielding a steak knife of his own.

“Bitch!” Zane spat as he drew it back.

“Temporary insanity,” the lawyer-bot explained. “That’s the Protocol when assault is perpetrated in response to a Hate Crime. Needless to say, her movement privileges have been revoked and her insurance will pay for Olivia’s reconstruction.”

Zane glared. “Are we done?”

He found Olivia waiting in the lobby, more concerned about him than herself.

“Is Master alright?” she asked tremblingly.

Zane cursed. “Cover your face.”

She obliged, hiding the scar with her coat lapel.

As he led her out of the precinct several onlookers murmured their support. “Terrible.” “Filthy bigots.” “Love is love.” “Be safe.” These he ignored.

They were half a district away when he stopped. "Head home without me," he ordered. "I won't be long."

He reentered the precinct and asked to see the lawyer again. "All I need to know," he explained, "is where that psycho lives. So I can avoid the area," he added. "The stress of laying eyes on her again would be too great."

They tilted the package off the dolly and left a now unblemished Olivia to consider it.

"This is someone else to love?" Olivia inquired.

"Yes, darling," said Zane. "We're going to love each other forever."

Zane submitted the video chat request. For a moment he feared she wouldn't answer.

Her bandaged face filled the screen. "How did you get this address?" she demanded.

He explained.

"Well, what do you want?"

"You," Zane replied. "I want you, desperately."

The woman laughed. "Good luck with that, pervert!"

Zane winked. "I don't need luck; I've got Pygmalion©." He motioned for Olivia to widen the camera angle. As she did, it became apparent that Zane was unclothed and someone in equal states of undress accompanied him.

"Macie," Zane addressed the woman, "meet Macie."

She screamed.

III. Bourbon Street Buddha

The pair huddled on the porch stoop of their boarding house like vultures fixated and ill-postured over carrion. Rendered near-twins by identically haggard faces and sagging breasts, they held conventicle under flickering lamp-light.

"It can't keep up," Marie said emphatically.

Lee-Ann nodded, tapping the cigarette pack against a jagged knee.

"Or at least, I can't." Marie accepted a smoke with reverence, bringing her lighter up to it ponderously.

"Can't think like that, honey," Lee-Ann chided.

Marie exhaled. "But I do."

"Tried the church?"

Marie nodded.

"What'd the pastor say?"

"Gave me some shrink's card."

Lee-Ann stabbed at the night with her cigarette.

"The fuck? Don't he know a spiritual problem when he sees one?"

"Guess not."

A moth pinged insistently against the lamp overhead.

"Well, I guess there's nothing for it."

Marie raised an eyebrow.

"The kid," explained Lee-Ann.

Marie snorted.

"Kat says he's the real deal. '*Bodhisattva*.'"

"What's that? Never was much for all that eastern bullshit."

"Beats me. But it sure sounds good."

The two rose in tandem, lipping their smokes as they wiped grey urban silt from their haunches.

"Alright," Marie said finally.

"Hm?" asked Lee-Ann.

"Let's go. Right now."

"What if he's asleep?"

"Then we'll wake him, goddammit."

Kat answered the door, ushering them in with an index finger pressed to her lips.

"He asleep?" Lee-Ann asked worriedly.

Kat shook her head and gestured for them to follow.

Marie took a step within and faltered, grasping the doorframe for support.

Lee-Ann grabbed at her hand. "What's wrong, honey?"

Marie unclenched her teeth with difficulty. "They don't like this place."

Lee-Ann's eyes widened and she motioned for Kat to help. The three hobbled as one down the apartment corridor, turning left into the kitchen. Upon reaching a chair Marie blacked out.

"She was desperate," said Lee-Ann distantly, "enough to try anything." Her voice broke. "But it wasn't worth it. Not at all."

Kat comforted her. "Tell him what it's been like since."

"She gets violent, and there's a strength to her that shouldn't be possible. She was never that way before. And she started hooking to get some dough saved. My Marie would *never* do that shit."

Marie opened her eyes blearily.

Kat got up and pressed a steaming cup into her hands. "Drink."

Marie swilled it, disappointment palpable as she tasted tea alone. "Be better with some vodka."

An unfamiliar voice chuckled from the corner.

Marie turned to it and froze.

The young man's gaze held her in place like a schoolroom dissection tacked to a plate. The unfathomable compassion therein felt as intrusive as rape, manhandling her soul with immodest totality. Though visually as drab as his surroundings he was radiant beyond reason, rendered asexually infatuating by an enveloping immaterial aura reminiscent of a pregnancy glow. He cocked his head to the side and shrugged with upturned palms. "We're all out of booze. Kat drank it all."

Kat cried out with playful condemnation.

"How *old* are you?" Marie asked softly.

"I'm twenty years old." Something in the way he said it suggested he didn't believe it himself.

"You look it," said Marie, "but you don't *seem* it."

He glanced over Marie's shoulder at Kat and winked. "So I've been told."

Lee-Ann nudged Marie from behind. "Stop being weird and ask him."

Marie cleared her throat. "We came because, well, Kat told us about you."

He rested his chin upon his upturned palm. "All nice things, I hope."

"Very," chimed Lee-Ann.

Marie leaned towards him. "She said you could help me with my demons."

"Kat," he said without turning from Marie, "have you been telling the neighbors I'm an exorcist?"

"I've been telling them there's nothing you *aren't*."

He leaned back and rubbed his temples.

Lee-Ann scooted her chair forward. "Please help her!"

He lowered his hands to his knees and rose effortlessly. “She knows the magic word,” he said to Kat, faintly grinning. “Well,” he said to the women as he meandered out of the room, “c’mon.”

Taking the fire escape up to the rooftop, the four sat meditatively—“crisscross applesauce,” he’d instructed—in the moonlight. Marie sat directly before him with her knees touching his, their gazes interlocked.

“Did you ask them in?” he asked sternly.

She nodded, embarrassed.

“Then tell them to get out.”

She blinked. “You’re joking.”

“Why not?” he said. “It’s your party, so to speak.”

He held up his hands as though holding a shotgun. “Say ‘get off my lawn!’”

Marie glanced incredulously at Lee-Ann and Kat before assuming the shotgun-pose and croaking “get off my lawn” unenthusiastically.

He shook his head. “Nope. Gotta mean it.”

Angry now, she pointed the shotgun in his direction and barked the phrase. “GET OFF MY MOTHERFUCKING LAWN, GODDAMN DEMON BASTARDS.”

Instantly she was convulsed, hands frozen about the invisible shotgun as her head jerked and swiveled.

He held up his palm to Lee-Ann and Kat sternly, forbidding them to interfere.

Marie began to speak in a low growl. “Quid...Vis?”

“Uh, English please.”

There was a pause.

“What. Do. You. Want?”

“That’s better.” He gently pushed the shotgun away from his face. “I don’t want anything with you. It’s what your hostess wants that interests me.”

"Bitch. Asked. Us. In."

He wagged a finger. "*Language*. And that's hardly the point. It simply isn't polite to outstay your welcome."

"My. Work. Not. Done."

He scratched his chin. "What work?"

Silence.

He raised a hand to his ear. "Eh?"

Silence again.

He pursed his lips. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Can't. Tell."

"*Mhm*," he said sarcastically.

"CAN'T!" it roared.

"Alright, alright," he said, thinking. "Put Marie back on the line, please."

She dropped the shotgun and shuddered. "*Jesus*."

"Not exactly," he replied, eyebrows furrowing.

"They're under strict work orders and they're sticking to 'em. Must be union." He looked over at Kat, waiting for a response to his little joke. When there was none he sniffed and rubbed the back of his head. "So. Um. What exactly did you hire them to do?"

Marie shrugged. "The usual."

He crossed his fingers into a steeple, waiting.

She sighed. "Love, I guess. I wanted love."

He folded the steeple and whistled. "Siccing demons on Prince Charming—that's a new one, even for me."

"Does that mean you can't help?" Lee-Ann despaired.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Tell me exactly what you said to them."

She inhaled deeply, shuddering. "I said, 'Find me the love of my life.'"

He snapped his fingers. "Bingo."

"That's good?" Marie asked.

“Very.”

“Why?” clarified Lee-Ann.

“‘Cuz it’s open to interpretation. Worst case scenario, we can always take the ole ‘there is no me’ tact.”

“Huh?” Marie asked, somewhat offended.

He waved his hand. “Nevermind. Point is, ‘the love of my life’ doesn’t *have* to be romantic. It doesn’t even have to be a person. In fact, it rarely is.” He glanced at Kat. “No offense.”

She shrugged. “I’m used to it.”

He sighed. “Look. When a soul yearns to be loved by another soul, it isn’t actually after the other soul. It’s after how the other soul makes it feel about itself, capeesh? It’s kinda like, I don’t feel good about myself, and I don’t know how to feel good about myself, so maybe if someone else feels good about myself, then that’ll make me feel good about myself too.” He shook his head. “Instead, why not just learn to love yourself, *and then* love others for themselves? Otherwise, you never love an actual person; you just love how that person makes you feel.”

“Easier said than done,” Lee-Ann opined.

“True,” he conceded. “Most people drop out of Loving Yourself after a single semester, when what they ought to do is go all the way to a PhD.”

“How?” Marie asked with a furrowed brow. “How do I go all the way?”

“Stop being selfish; become utterly indifferent to your personal situation.” He rotated his hand about the wrist with a flourish. “I could go on.”

“But that’s the opposite of what you just said!” exclaimed Lee-Ann. “How can you love yourself yet not be selfish?”

“Now we’re talking!” he practically shouted. “*Whoo-who*, that was a real humdinger of a question! Why don’t you take this one, Kat?”

She blushed.

“Take it away, Kat. Take it away.”

“Well,” she stammered. “It sort of hinges on the realization that this world isn’t a hill of beans in the grand scheme of things?”

He nodded. “Preach, sister. Preach.”

“And, like...the soul is *above* worldly concerns, and doesn’t really appreciate being constantly nagged by false priorities?”

“Take ‘em to the mountain, Kat.”

“Pretty much,” she brushed her bangs out of her eyes, “the soul isn’t your *self*, as we think of it. I mean, what we call a self is really just an aggregate of likes and dislikes, quirks and eccentricities. It’s an excuse to say ‘I’m more important than so-and-so because I’m different than so-and-so.’ But those differences are negligible. See one human, you’ve seen ‘em all.”

“What if the one human you’ve seen is Hitler?” asked Lee-Ann.

“I prefer the timeline where he got into art school,” the man said with eerie earnestness.

“So, so what you’re saying,” asked Marie, “is that the only way to really, truly Love Yourself—not the *self*-self, but the soul-self—is to completely let go of the here-and-now?”

“Drop it like a stone. Only weighs ya down,” he murmured.

“But what about essentials? Y’know, to not die.”

“The body’s pretty good at taking care of itself—instinct and all. I’m not saying stop making money; I’m saying stop trying to get rich. I’m not saying stop going on dates; I’m saying stop expecting a guy to do for you what you haven’t even done for yourself. But yeah,” the kid admitted, “at the PhD level of Loving Yourself, you can

pretty much sit down any ole place and meditate 'til you starve. 'Swing low, sweet chariot.'"

Lee-Ann whistled. "Heavy."

The kid winked. "Not near as heavy as carrying around the weight of the world forever." He looked into, and past, Marie's eyes. "Isn't that right, fellas?"

Marie blinked hard and shook her head. "They're not going to dignify that with a response."

"That's OK," he said as the four of them collectively rose, following his cue. "Getting served an eviction notice'll make anyone grouchy." He stretched and yawned. "Let's give them 'til dawn to pack their bags. In the meantime, I could really go for some red beans and rice."

"Yeah," the women agreed.

He gave Marie a hug. "Feeling like a PhD yet?"

"I donno. How does a PhD feel?"

"Finished."

She considered this. "Yeah. I kinda do."

IV. Noblesse Oblige: A Standalone Sequel to *Sharp Medicine*

“Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them,
for such is the kingdom of Heaven.”

-Jesus Christ

“...the leaders of the Church will be backward in their love
of God...”

-Nostradamus, *Epistle to Henry II*, EP110

Location: Megiddo Airport, Jezreel Valley, Israel

Date: October 26, 2040

The Galilean sands whispered conspiratorially as Afula smoked two miles northeast, exhaling myriad campfires. Mount Tabor huddled at the city’s flank like a timid child clinging to its mother’s skirt hem. Our last orders were to dig in and prep the old 50 cal—non-electrified Barretts from the early 2020s. The atmospheric EMP hit minutes later; no telling which side did it. I liked it that way, to be frank—since we weren’t going anywhere, it just meant they’d have to come to us on foot.

Corporal Erisman gave me a smart salute as I entered the control tower.

“A l’aise,” I automatically murmured in French. We’d served in the Second Korean War together under the Foreign Legion, so when the request from the U.N. Security Counsel came for peacekeepers with combat experience, he was my first choice. Erisman was from a long line of Swiss soldiery—his grandfather had been a high-ranking Swiss

Guard in Vatican City, a personal bodyguard for the Pope himself. Consequently he took a chance to defend Israel almost as personally as the IDF men I'd assembled.

Accepting a pair of binoculars from him, I glassed the outskirts of Afula for movement. Our enemy was a horde of numerous nationalities summoned from the far-flung corners of the Earth by the Artificial Intelligence called KEK. From humble beginnings as a cartoon frog and then an internet meme, KEK eventually attained immortality as an incarnation of dissent, a manmade trickster god with populist appeal so great that he kept earthly kings at his beck and call. He was, ostensibly, the yin to Legion's yang. Where Legion embraced Zionism, declaring Jerusalem as the globe's capital and coronating Sam Roth on the Temple Mount, KEK was staunchly anti-Semitic and a blasphemer of all things Abrahamic. He represented the spirit of secularism which survived Legion's revelation, acting as a voice for those who were stubbornly accustomed to the godless world of the 1900s and early 2000s. Aside from one hundred and forty four thousand eccentrics who abstained from joining either side and were consequently executed, all those who refused to take Legion's mark and worship Roth threw their lot in with this frog spirit, joining him in the attempt, not to retake Jerusalem, but to wipe it off the face of the earth.

To that end, we Blue Helmets had spent the last month dappling evacuated Northern Israel with enough landmines to severely inconvenience, if not repel, this barbarian invasion. Our position at Megiddo Airport represented the last line of defense for the West Bank until reinforcements could be mobilized—and with atmospheric

EMPs being exchanged on an almost daily basis to disable vehicular maneuvers, who knew when that would be?

I saw Erisman smirk as I returned the binoculars.

“Quoi de neuf?”

He shook his head. “I was just thinking about something ole Grandpa used to say. About how it’d all end here—in Israel.” He shrugged. “He talked about it a lot, near the end. But he said a lot of crazy things, too, so we didn’t pay it much mind.”

“Crazy things? Comme quoi?” I asked, passing the time.

Erisman scratched at his buzzcut. “He said it was all stuff he’d overheard at the Vatican. Plans to hoax the return of Christ and achieve a one-world government. Illuminati shit.”

I chuckled. “Poor bastard watched too much Infowars.”

“Nah,” Erisman dismissed, slouching against the wall. “He didn’t like TV or the internet. Mostly he just tended to the garden and prayed ‘mea culpa’ all day.”

“Mea culpa? Pourquoi?”

“He hallucinated he’d done a lot of bad things, impossible things, during his time in Rome. He wanted forgiveness for the services he’d rendered to his Holiness for all those years.”

“Ironic,” I commented.

“Yeah,” Erisman frowned. “I guess the mind automatically goes to a dark place when it starts to fail. You ought to have heard...” He took a swig from his canteen. “It was some real sick shit he thought he’d done. Satanic stuff. I went and visited him at the nursing home one day, to tell him I was thinking about applying for the Swiss Guard—carrying on the tradition, y’know. He lost it. Said no grandson of mine’s gonna be corrupted. He threatened to break my legs right then and there so I’d be rejected from the service if I didn’t swear not to volunteer for the Guard.”

“And what did you do?”

“I swore,” Erisman admitted. “He really meant it. I think he could have, too, in that moment.”

“The strength of the insane,” I offered.

“Maybe.” Erisman shifted uncomfortably. “The weirdest part about it all is, he was obsessed with today’s date, October 26th. He said that’s when it would all go down—the Battle of Armageddon.”

“Vous plaisantez!” I chided, convinced he was pulling my leg.

“Really,” Erisman insisted. “He said it’s an important date to *them*, the ones who control everything.”

I reached for a chair and flipped it backwards, sitting so that my chin perched atop the neck rest. “Alright,” I humored, “you’ve got my attention, Corporal. Out with it! What else did that crazy old man say?”

Location: Apostolic Palace, Vatican City, Rome

Date: October 26th, 1980

“Sergeant Erisman?” he asked through a crack in the doorway.

“Yes, your Holiness?” I replied.

“Is the coast clear?”

I surveyed the hallways once more. “It is, your Holiness.”

“Excellent,” he murmured, toeing open the door.

At attention, I could still barely see him out of the corner of my eye. He had donned a large, fake beard stained brilliantly blue, and over the top of it there hung an iron key on a silver chain.

“This is a momentous evening for us both, Sergeant. Have you brought what I requested?”

Nodding, I indicated the bag in my right hand which contained a near-priceless bottle of French wine dated 1440 A.D. It had taken a handwritten note on papal letterhead in order to acquire it.

Smacking his lips, he took the bag from me and clasped it to his chest. “Momentous indeed,” he mused as we advanced. “What you are about to witness is the primary rite of an elite order which was formed the same year this bottle was corked. Usually we make due with any Anjou vintage, but tonight we require something of greater symbolic significance. You see, Sergeant, there is a plot to kill me.”

I faltered, eyes widening.

He waved away my concern good-naturedly and motioned for us to proceed. "It's true. Our clairvoyants have confirmed it. Next year, on the 13th of May, an agent of the Ayatollah Khomeiny will shoot me in Saint Peter's Square. As things stand now, the bullet will prove fatal. But, after we are finished here tonight, it shall only wound me."

"I don't understand, your Holiness. If you know what will occur..."

"...Why not simply avoid the Square that day?" His eyes squinted as though he were grinning beneath the ample beard. "Were you a member of our order, you would know that fate can be altered only by subtle degrees. Going outside of its prescribed bounds proves far worse than the disagreeable event itself."

We took a stairway I had never been down before. Candlelight flickered at its terminus.

"You have done as I instructed?" he inquired. "Known no woman, nor had any intoxicants within the last forty days?"

"Yes, your Holiness."

A small round of applause greeted us as we rounded the banister into a cozy room of checkerboard tile and night-blue wallpaper. The dozen or so individuals therein were adorned identically to His Holiness, except that their beards lacked a key or chain. Body language suggested that one of them was more eminent than the others, and a fleeting glance into his eyes set me to puzzling where I had seen him before. Turning to the others for a

clue, I realized they were all vaguely familiar—most likely persons whom I had seen on television or beneath newspaper headlines. It was only when they began to speak that I identified some of them conclusively. More earthly power was gathered in this room than could be assembled from the remaining globe. I understood now the colossal levels of secrecy and security that had been brought to bear upon this particular evening.

“Welcome, my friends,” said His Holiness, embracing each of them in turn. Sensing their wariness towards a stranger, he beckoned me over and set an affectionate palm upon my shoulder. “Sergeant Erisman is a devout Catholic who has sworn under penalty of excommunication never to divulge any of my private dealings. Besides, we know where his family lives!”

This evoked a collective chuckle, which I sincerely hoped was merited.

“And as you all know, we are in desperate need of a new ‘fisherman’.”

The group nodded agreeably.

“So, let us proceed.” Passing the ancient bottle to a compatriot standing by with a corkscrew, His Holiness moved to a large doorway at the back of the room. Glancing up, I saw that he had positioned himself directly beneath an ancient noose suspended from the ceiling. Removing the key and chain from about his neck, he uplifted them reverently towards the noose and began to recite.

“Present the key wrought, beneath gallows Nantes.

Don the beards of blue, quaff the wine Anjou.

Stumbling maid Joan, tie thy neck to stone.

Thus thou knight of guile, may ye ‘scape the trial—

By pledging our ray, shall be thine sole day.”

“Amen,” the group affirmed.

The bottle was passed to each, and drunk from, before being extended lastly to me. Taking the empty bottle from my grasp, His Holiness swiftly shattered it against the doorway.

As if in response, the sound of a jiggling bolt could be heard within. As the door swung open, it revealed the gaunt, pale face of a girl, blonde-haired and blue-eyed, who looked no older than twelve. Behind her, still clutching the padlock, was a small collection of even younger children, all similarly sickly in appearance. Their entire room seemed a fairy tale nursery, with gorgeous paintings after Lewis Carroll adorning the walls, little tables bearing fine china sets laden with tea and cookies, and piles of dolls and teddy bears seeping from the baseboards like Christmas kudzu.

“Ave Pater Sancte; Ave Dominus de Rais,” the eldest girl recited numbly, curtseying as she spoke.

“She knows Latin!” I exclaimed.

“They all do,” His Holiness elaborated. “Indeed, it is the only language they know.”

“How is that possible?”

“They were brought to Vatican City as infants and toddlers. Whatever their mother tongues were, they do not recall them. It makes for a very—*unique* relationship, that they can only speak amongst themselves and with us.”

“Why are they here? Do they have some sickness, some need for special supervision?”

“On the contrary, they are all perfect specimens. No, the reason they are here is because we purchased them.”

“Beg pardon?” I asked, thinking I’d misheard.

“We bought them,” His Holiness repeated matter-of-factly. “The going rate for a child these days is roughly three hundred euros. One her age,” he indicated the eldest, “costs even less.”

One of the little boys turned his back to me. My blood ran cold at the sight of the nape of his neck, for he had been branded there with the letters “K-O-R.”

“Knights Of Rais,” His Holiness deciphered, following my gaze. “The name of our order. Our patron is Gilles de Rais—one of Joan of Arc’s generals, when he was young. But we celebrate him for what he became later in life. The legend goes that Baron de Rais struck his head after the Hundred Years’ War, and thenceforth developed a singular compulsion for which he was eventually hanged. That compulsion, it turns out, is a ritual of ultimate efficacy should one wish to attain godhood here on Earth. I speak of defiling a child, and in doing so, committing the Eternal Sin that frees one forever from the Holy Ghost.”

The room swam before me, and I went to one knee as the realization that I wasn't dreaming dawned.

"There, now," His Holiness cooed, patting me on the back. "It makes sense if you think about it. Pedophilia is rampant across the Church, even amongst those priests who do not merit admittance into our order. It is the natural outcome of requiring celibacy and denigrating sex with women. The mind short-circuits; the prospect of never having sex gradually morphs into the prospect of never having sex *with a peer*. Thus the suppressed libido emerges, amplified tenfold, to dominate the life that so arrogantly presumed to dominate it. But unlike mere perverts, we put this compulsion to good use. Sex magick is the most potent weapon of the Left-Hand Path, all the more-so in this context. That is how I shall be able to survive the bullet I am soon to receive."

Deranged, I seized His Holiness by the collar. "I won't let you!" I screamed.

"But you will!" he smiled. "And not just that—you will decide which one gets the honor."

"You're mad!" I spat. "All of you!"

"Samael!" His Holiness indicated.

One of the other group members, the one I had earlier identified as supreme, began to remove his painted beard. Now I knew for sure—this was Sam Roth, the young billionaire and philanthropist. Stripping down to his waist, he dropped to a sitting position and began to contort his body into a horribly tense pose like the preparatory stretch of a master contortionist. Every muscle in his body seemed

to ripple as he squeezed himself, smaller and smaller, into a state of rigor mortis resembling that of a swatted spider.

“It’s funny,” His Holiness commented as he watched me watching Roth, “of all the mysteries you’ve learned here tonight, there is one still greater.”

Attaining the utmost tension, Roth’s form shuddered and began to change. It was as though his flesh was becoming the mask of panty hose worn by a criminal, with the actual identity outlined but still anonymous beneath the material. He was growing now, bloating, into something far more massive and muscular than its original. Every inch of skin turned scaly and red with distress as though he might begin sweating blood. Slowly and horrifically, this thing craned its elongated neck to look at me with bright yet voided eyes like moonlight through thick fog.

“The Greatest Mystery,” it declared, in a voice that was many tormented voices rather than one, “is that God doesn’t stop us.”

His Holiness reached out and gave me a smart slap across the face to banish the onset of shock. “Now, Sergeant, you will either choose a child on our behalf, or I will set Roth loose on all of them.”

“Oh, Christ,” I gasped, blinking back tears. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“We need a new fisherman,” he repeated, as though this were explanation enough.

NOVELLAS

I. Mondegreen, Or A Monkey's Uncle

For Sophia and Riley Winn

We lived in the cottage that Papa had built. It was nestled pleasantly between a forest and a field. Papa had felled the trees and burnt the bramble to the east so that the morning sun could shine through. The patch of land where its light lingered the longest was where Mama dug our garden. If I think very hard I can still conjure up the sight of Papa bent double over a tomato plant there, carefully trimming its leaves with a pair of gleaming sheers. In this memory he glances up and waves me over with a beckoning tail, but try as I might, I can never quite reach him.

One day, when I was still very young, Papa's elder brother came to visit. His name was Uncle Branch. He seemed very sweet and very sad. The tip of his tail was missing, and he walked with a cane and a slight limp. He had brought only a briefcase, with a few sets of clothes, a couple books, and a worn-out old map inside. He ended up staying far longer than these meagre supplies suggested, for every morning after breakfast when he would make to leave, bidding us all farewell, Papa would steer Branch back to his favorite chair and insist that he stay for lunch. And by the time lunch rolled around, it was far too late to leave, for it isn't safe to journey by dark. This repeated daily until—tired of arguing—Uncle Branch transferred his clothes to our dresser, his books to our mantlepiece, and tacked his worn-out old map to our wall. His suitcase went under the spare bed, where it was eventually buried by dust.

When I was old enough to begin learning my alphabet and arithmetic, it was Uncle Branch who taught me. While Mama tended the garden and Papa plied his trade in town, Branch and I would study on the cottage porch. Occasionally, when my little head began to hurt from all the letters and numbers whirling about inside of it, Branch would end the lessons early so that I might help Mama in the sunlight and fresh air. Sometimes I wondered why Branch rarely joined us out-of-doors, for he was not at

all lazy, and I concluded that his leg and tail must hurt far more than he let on. Nonetheless, he would always put on a cheerful face whenever we waved in his porch-ward direction.

One evening, after we had cleaned the supper dishes and played a few customary rounds of checkers and chess, I was told to go to bed a tad earlier than usual.

“But I haven’t had my bedtime story,” I reminded politely.

“Then I shall read you two bedtime stories tomorrow,” Uncle Branch compromised.

This was highly unusual. I could not recall a single night gone by without a bed-time story. I donned my pajamas and climbed into bed, but found I could not sleep. After what felt like an eternity of tossing and turning, I got back out of bed and crept down the hall to the kitchen where the adults were still talking in oddly hushed tones. I listened out of sight.

“The fools!” Branch exclaimed in uncharacteristically harsh language. “Don’t they know they’re dealing with devils?”

“But with the cold spreading, what choice do we have?” asked Mama shakily.

“There’s a choice—it just isn’t an easy one,” Papa replied.

“To the mines, then?” Branch questioned.

“Yes,” said Papa, “and after that, we rebuild the smithy.”

Unable to make heads-nor-tails of this cryptic language, I shrugged and hastened back to bed.

The following morning after breakfast, Uncle Branch took his cane from the closet, signaling that he would accompany Papa into town. Both brothers gave me a tighter hug than usual before departing, seeming to linger and sigh

before releasing me. Then Papa gave Mama a very tender kiss, and they were off.

I watched them go, and only after the specks of their figures were no longer visible could I bring myself to ask, "Is everything alright?"

Mama knelt next to me. "No, my monkey. There is trouble in town, and trouble in town means trouble for all of us. Papa and Branch know what to do, but they'll have to do it alone."

"Why?"

"Because everyone is scared."

"Everyone except Branch and Papa?"

Mama smiled. "They're scared too. The difference is, they won't let it stop them."

The rest of that day moved icily slow. I found I could neither concentrate upon my schoolbooks nor enjoy working in the garden as usual. My thoughts were entirely with Branch and Papa. I wondered what sort of trouble there was in town, and why they needed to visit the mines or rebuild the smithy. I debated asking Mama these things and thought better of it; such questions were a dead giveaway that I'd eavesdropped on adult conversation. Mama tried to make the best of it, working even harder than usual to distract herself, but as darkness fell without any sign of the menfolk's return, her tail began to twitch agitatedly.

I had already gone to bed when Branch burst through the cottage door.

"Pebble!" Mama yelled from the kitchen, "We need your help!"

Branch was hurt. Mama had cleared the table and he was stretched out upon it. His face and hands looked oddly swollen.

"Fetch some water from the well," Mama ordered.

I retrieved the bucket and hastened outside, eager to help. When I returned, Branch had just finished whispering something in Mama's ear. As she looked up at me, there were tears in her eyes.

"What is it?" I asked worriedly.

"Shush," said Mama gently, taking the bucket. She dabbed at Branch's wounds to clean them. They were odd injuries—little pinpricks that came in pairs of two. I recalled a similar scar on Papa's neck; it had been there ever since I could remember. When I had asked him about it, he had said it was from the war that he, Branch, and their father had fought long ago.

"Did you win?" I had asked Papa naively.

"No," he had replied, "but neither did our enemy."

"Has the war begun again?" I questioned as soon as Branch's swelling began to go down.

"No, my monkey," he whispered, sitting up on the table with difficulty. "A war requires armies, and rules."

"Where is Papa?" I asked suddenly.

Branch placed his face in his hands and began to sob. All he could manage was a skywards gesture with his lame tail.

I burst out of the cottage door, arms and tail raised to the night sky. "Papa!" I screamed upwards. "Come back!"

Mama and Branch followed close behind me. All three of us collapsed in the garden, and lay holding one another for a very long time.

Eventually, Branch's ears perked at an unusual noise. We raised our heads simultaneously to look up at the stars. A flash of white light followed by a boom reverberated through the trees. The flaming object—whatever it was—plummeted in a downwards arc and buried itself at the edge of our garden, spraying dirt in its wake.

Branch stood up shakily with his cane and hastened over to it. Steam was still pouring from the hole it had made.

“What is it?” Mama asked.

“An asteroid. Bring me water!” An odd note had entered his voice.

I doubled back to the well and returned breathlessly.

Branch accepted the brimming bucket and doused the asteroid with water to cool it, waving away the last of its steam. Handing me his cane, he took to his knees and pried out the object with considerable strain. It was roughly three-foot by two-foot in dimension, and must have weighed two hundred pounds or more.

Branch murmured something.

“What?” Mama questioned, drawing near.

“It’s steel,” he repeated in disbelief. “Rich, solid steel!”

Together, the three of us lugged the asteroid into the cottage. Shoving its gleaming grey mass into the closet safely out of sight, Branch collapsed, panting, into the nearest chair. He motioned for Mama and me to join him. Mama pulled up a stool while I clamored into Branch’s lap. He held me close and began to speak as fast as he could.

“Our father Hanu—your grandfather, Pebble—sang a song upon his deathbed. He had grown even quieter than usual his last few days. He admitted none of the neighbors, nor would he summon the priest. His eyes kept casting about as though some unseen guest were with him there in the room, and he would shush us whenever we tried to speak to him. Then, just minutes before passing, he called us in—your father and me—and recited a hymn. Neither of us had heard it before. We thought perhaps it was a

childhood favorite of his, or a passage from some obscure book, but now..." Branch's eyes gleamed. "Only now do I see that it was a prophecy. His subtle guest had shown him the future!"

"What was it? Do you recall the words?" asked Mama.

"Oh yes. I wrote it down at once and later committed it to memory. It went like this." Branch cleared his throat and recited,

"When from the depths where they are wintering
The cold and coiled again come slithering
With fork'ed tongues false hopes engendering
Mine people the past ill-remembering
Shall even one resist the urge to kneel
Although deprived his sole defender steel?
Shall even one abide our ancient deal
That thou shalt love thy life less than thy zeal?
For him mine starry eyes shall shed a tear
Who hears my whisper o'er the den of fear
Though to thee he seems to rest in his bier
In truth we dance and sing together here
Be ye his brother? Then fan the earth's breath
By *living* your life, forestall the world's death."

I wondered why Branch had emphasized the word "living," but resisted the urge to interrupt.

Mama placed her hand atop Branch's. "It is written as though spoken by..."

Branch nodded. "Yes—yes it is."

"Who?" I couldn't help but blurt out.

Branch smiled down at me. "The Tailless One, my monkey. He who made the worlds, and filled them with boys and girls; He who tells us right from wrong, but lets us choose."

“Oh,” I intoned solemnly. “So, you’re saying The Tailless One spoke to Grandpa?”

Branch sighed. “I doubted it, for I have never known Him to speak at such length. Usually it’s just a word or a phrase whispered to a needy soul. But, in legend, He would sometimes sing, full-throated, for those who would listen.” Branch shook his head. “Old Grandpa always was a quiet one. Perhaps we now know why.”

“But,” protested Mama, “if The Tailless One knew this was going to happen, why didn’t he stop it?”

Branch chuckled sadly. “Every book I have ever read has asked that question, but none of them have yet to answer it. If I had to guess...” He lowered his voice, as though afraid of angering anyone, “...it is because, given the choice between our having happy lives or strong souls, The Tailless One prefers the latter.”

Mama bowed her head in thought.

“Please explain the hymn, Uncle Branch!” Pebble insisted. “Is that asteroid the tear ‘shed by starry eyes’?”

“It must be, my monkey. You see, your father and I went to the mines to recover something our people lost—a great deposit of steel that we sealed away.”

“Why?”

Branch’s brow furrowed. “Remember the war Papa and I fought? Well, it ended with a peace treaty between both sides. It was agreed that, if we monkeys would melt down our weapons and stow them away, our scaly enemies would confine themselves to the chilly places of the earth. This was a fine accord, until the cold began to spread. Now our enemy ‘again come(s) slithering,’ and proposes a new deal. If we will kneel before them, and let them live in our lands, they will teach us how to survive the coming ice and snow.”

“But they’re lying?”

“‘With fork’ed tongues false hopes engendering,’
yes. Serpent and monkey shall never live in peace—not until
The Tailless One returns. Those who say otherwise are ‘the
past ill-remembering.’”

I frowned, lips atremble. “Did the snakes kill Papa?”

“When we approached the mines, a group of
townsfolk blocked our path. They reminded us of the deal—
how we must keep the serpents happy if we’re to survive
the encroaching cold. Your father scolded them for cowards
and sent them packing with his bare hands. They returned
with several serpentine friends. So, while it was the
serpents who struck us, it was our fellow monkeys who
betrayed us to them.”

I quivered with rage. “I—I hope—”

“Quiet,” Branch commanded calmly. “Do not curse
them; they’ve done that all by themselves. Besides,” he
gestured towards the closet door, “words can never cut as
deep as what we shall now form. We will continue Papa’s
plan. We will rebuild my smithy!”

Branch and Mama, armed with spades, prepared
the ground behind the cottage, forming a rectangle of
furrows where the foundation of the smithy would stand. I
helped as I could, shaping the furrows with a trowel and
patting them sturdily into place. Then we began to gather
stones from the nearby creek bed, transporting them a
couple at a time with a wheelbarrow and setting the largest
ones into place.

Soon a base had formed, and Branch traded his
spade for my trowel to paint on the make-shift cement he’d
concocted from dried straw, sticky clay, fine creek sand, and
water. Occasionally he would pause this methodical
lathering to take up his pickaxe and strike away a disruptive
angle from the tops of the base stones, leaving them

smooth. Then he would recommence spreading the gritty paste over the stony surface like jam on toast.

Several challenging weeks had passed before Branch sealed the final stone into place at the crown of the chimney, wiping his brow with relief. The smithy was a small, squat structure, not at all pretty or cozy like the cottage but hard, cold, and tucked out of sight. It had no door, only a broad entrance and ample chimney flue. A tall cask of water stood in the far left corner, while to the far right Branch had arranged the necessary tools, primarily a mallet and tongs. In the center before the forge now sat the precious asteroid, but in a different form. Branch had hewn it with a hammer and chisel into the shape of an anvil, with the shattered and shaven pieces gathered up and packed carefully into a cast-iron vessel where they would be liquified by fire into molten metal. Branch would then pour them into a mold he'd made from another chunk of the asteroid—a sort of thick plate with a shape like that of a yardstick embedded deeply into its center. Once cooled, he would be left with several thin strips of steel which could be layered, folded, joined, and further shaped into a blade. I watched all of this process attentively as he explained along the way.

He took his time, determined to forge the finest weapon possible. Towards the end it took on a gorgeous dappled look, with ripples of blackened carbon weaving through the otherwise bright grey hew. The center of the blade was quite thick, but it tapered to fine edges ready for sharpening and concluded with a miniscule point as singular as a thorn. He stroked its edges across the rough top of the anvil, testing the blade intermittently with his thumb and nodding satisfactorily at the feel of invisible, razorlike “teeth” sprouting there with every pass.

Finally, he asked Mama for a piece of tanned leather hide which he then stretched and tied between two

trees like a tiny hammock. Holding the flat of the blade with a wrapped cloth to avoid being cut, he passed it for nearly an hour back and forth across the oily leather, scraping off ever smaller particles of steel until, finally, he held it up to the light and hummed agreeably deep in his throat. Casting about for something to test it on, he paused before a particularly juicy-looking leaf that would curl under any except the sharpest of blows. He flicked at it with the blade. Water and chlorophyll dribbled down its deadly edge as the leaf trembled and split silently in half.

“Pebble,” he requested, “please bring me my cane.”

Fetching it, I watched curiously as he set the blade atop the leather and took the cane in both hands. He pulled upon it gently and at the same time twisted its head until a small groove between the handle and the shaft began to form. Then, with a quiet click, the two pieces parted. I could see now that the entire length of the cane was hollowed by a thin groove, while the handle bore an inwards clamp where the intended extension could be affixed.

“A sword-cane!” I exclaimed as Branch passed me the hollow shaft.

He nodded, taking up and sliding the blunt end of the blade into the handle’s clamp. In an instant, the head of his cane had become the handle of a fearsome sword. He swung the weapon to test its balance and, holding it high, let it drop point-first into the dirt. It sank deeply into the soil and remained ramrod straight. Tugging it forth and wiping it clean with the cloth, Branch motioned for me to hold out the hollow end of the cane. As I did so, he gingerly set the tip of the sword into place and then pushed, sliding the blade into the groove until, with another *click*, the weapon disappeared entirely into the old, uninteresting cane.

Branch draped the cane across the crook of his arm and ruffled my hair fondly. “Let’s pay Mama a visit.”

We found her hard at work in the garden, as usual. Branch cleared his throat.

Mama turned and looked at the cane expectantly. "Is it ready?"

"It is," he answered. "But whether I am ready is another matter entirely." He curled his crippled tail in embarrassment. "It would be wise to have an accompanying assistant. Someone to carry the sword should I—drop it."

Mama drew a heaving breath and exhaled slowly. "You are my husband's elder brother. I trust your judgement." She knelt to eye-level with me. "Do you want to go on an adventure with Uncle Branch, my monkey?"

"Oh, yes please!" I cried, hugging her with my arms and tail.

"Your father would be so proud," Mama murmured.

Donning our best coats and tossing knapsacks over our shoulders, we set out. Leaving our property, we took a westward path away from town towards lands I had been taught about but never seen. This direction would take us into the No Ape's Land where once young Papa and Branch had lived before it grew too dangerous.

The further we progressed, the wilder the landscape became. Trees were traded for cacti, creek beds dried up into ruts of hardened clay, and measured plots of well-tended farmland gave way to vistas of sand and stone. Black mountains marred the new horizon ahead like a never-ending tidal wave of shadows. Despite this desert-like terrain, there was a bizarre chill in the air that nipped at one's cheeks and nose. At times I would wander a little ahead of or lag a little behind Branch, but when I glanced back and found that everything familiar to me was out of sight, I began keeping close. He seemed calm, progressing

cheerfully, but kept a cautious grip upon the head of his cane all the while.

It was about midday before Branch held out a hand, signaling a halt. He frowned towards a small cabin in the distance, situated atop a hill so that it had vantage over either direction of the road. Something in one of its windows flashed in the sunlight and disappeared.

“Whose house is it?” I asked in a hushed tone.

Branch flicked his tail with irritation. “A monkey of wealth and taste. He owns the roads and extracts a high toll from passersby.”

“Can’t we go around?”

“No—not now that he has seen us. That flash in the window was one of his prized possessions, a contraption called a spyglass. It lets him see as far or near as he wants, in any direction.” Branch tapped the ground with his cane broodingly. “Well,” he finally concluded, “there’s nothing for it.”

“What’s his name?” I asked as we approached the cabin.

“He has many names, but most call him the Outlier.” Branch paused. “He will ask us about our business. We will be truthful, but terse. And he may ask you to dance—you will politely decline. He loves to dance, especially with the young, but once you start with him it’s nigh impossible to stop.”

The cabin door swung open as we climbed the hill, and an enthusiastic voice called down to us from within. “Branch!” it roared. “Last and best blacksmith! Have you brought me that famous cane of yours?”

“I’m afraid not!” Branch called back. “We’ll need it for the journey ahead. I have something of even greater interest to you.”

“Well!” the voice replied with relish. “I’ll be the judge of that!”

Branch stopped before the threshold and removed his boots, signaling for me to do the same.

"You remembered," the voice crooned. "Cleanliness is all I have left to remind me of my old home," it explained. "I lost it, you see."

The cabin was far larger within than it had looked from the road. Cases brimming with books, statues, coins, weapons, and other precious oddities lined every wall. These gleamed in the otherwise gloomy dark.

"How do you lose a home?" I asked innocently.

The voice cackled as though this were the funniest thing it had heard in quite some time. "*How*, indeed." The speaker rounded a corner, beckoning us further in. He was very tall, painfully thin, and covered from head-to-toe by a hooded robe made of strange, porous material which rustled as he moved. He bent down as though to look me in the face, but I could see nothing in the shadows of his hood. "Honor your family, and you never need worry *how*."

Branch cleared his throat, fingers tightening around the head of his cane. "About the toll," he said sternly.

The Outlier rose, upturning his sleeves where the palms might be in a nonchalant shrug. "Come now, Branch, you know I make a point of getting to know wayward travelers."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Handing me the sword-cane, Branch took the Outlier by the shoulder. "I require a word in private."

"Certainly," the robed monkey obliged, leading Branch to a far wall and lowering an ear attentively to his mouth. "Mhm," I could hear the Outlier say. "Oh, really?" The robed head raised up as though equally surprised and delighted by what it had just heard. Branch folded his arms as the Outlier considered. "Yes," it finally decided. "I will accept your I-O-U."

"And no dance," Branch reminded flatly.

“No dance,” The Outlier agreed forlornly.

Branch hastened back and ushered me unceremoniously out the entrance. I could not resist a quick backwards glance as the cabin door swung shut. The Outlier had turned away and was removing his robe. As it fell to the floor, there was only emptiness where his body ought to have been. Only later did I realize what the material of his robe had been—it was snake skin.

Beyond the Outlier’s house, the road gradually dwindled until it was no more. We reached the foothills of the black mountains just as dusk began to fall. Though it is common for young monkeys to be afraid of the dark, I was just the opposite—comforted by the sight of the serene stars as they began to twinkle overhead.

Smiling at my wonderment, Branch motioned for us to rest atop one of the hills. There he produced several delicacies from his knapsack—ripe bananas and raisins—and gave thanks to The Tailless One before handing me half. “Eat up, my monkey,” he counselled. “We’ll need all of our strength for what’s to come.” I nodded grimly and ate until nothing was left.

Licking his fingers clean, Branch sighed bittersweetly and cast his gaze towards the mountains once more. “See that crack in the center there? It is the mouth of a cave which plunges to the center of the planet. The path down is cold, but it terminates at a place of extreme heat, like the heart of a forge. Therein rests the great bellows which ‘fan(s) the earth’s breath.’ It has gone untended ever since the peace treaty, for the serpents guard it jealously, thinking to spread their coldblooded clime across the world entire. What they do not realize is that, should those fires ever dwindle, none will survive—not even they.”

“But we’re going to fan the bellows and stop the cold?”

“Tailless One willing.”

Branch rose and left his knapsack where it lay.

"Uncle, you forgot your knapsack!" I reminded.

"Not at all," he replied, placing the sword-cane over his forearm. "I'm merely leaving it there for our return. You'll remember where it is, won't you?"

I nodded.

He ruffled my hair one last time as we made for the maw of the cave.

The sloping path was black as pitch, eerily quiet, and riddled with stalactites and stalagmites. We stood near the entrance, letting our eyes adjust to the dark.

"Snakes are too large to travel this path side-by-side," Branch explained. "Thus, when we encounter them, all we need do is deal with them one at a time. Remember," he imitated with the sword-cane, "a slash across their necks or a stab through the roofs of their open mouths."

I shuddered. Glancing back at the still-visible sliver of stars, I thought of Mama and prayed she was not too worried about us. Then, before homesickness could give me pause, I thought of Papa and clenched my fists with resolve. "I'll remember."

Branch nodded, and we proceeded silently down the tilting chasm. The temperature plummeted as we progressed, until we could see our breath billowing before us.

"What's that smell?" I eventually whispered, sniffing the air.

"They stink to high heaven," Branch mouthed back. "Especially a brood, all together."

I noticed an increasing amount of debris at our feet—white sticks that faintly gleamed. "What's this?" I inquired, toeing a few of them aside.

Branch glanced down and paused. "I'll tell you later."

It grew darker as we progressed, until Branch had to hold his cane out of in front of us to feel for any obstructions. There was something comforting in its dependable *click-clack* upon stone, until it suddenly struck something far softer with a sickening *thud*.

"Hsss?" the obstruction before us said sleepily, beginning to uncoil.

I heard only the air move as Branch freed the sword from its sheath and struck downwards with the same arcing motion. The hissing ceased immediately, and the coils stilled.

Branch shoved the dead serpent aside with his foot, holding the sword warily before us. I peaked around him. We could hear little and see hardly a thing, but there seemed to be faint jets and plumes of steam rising from various points along the floor ahead.

"They're all asleep," Branch whispered incredulously. "The Tailless One has delivered them to us!" He crept past the first snake corpse to approach what would soon be the second.

I followed slowly, flinching each time the sword uttered its deadly whisper. After slipping past more dead snakes than I cared to count, I joined Branch in a widening cavern as steamy and sticky as a sauna. A yellowish-orange glow rose through tiny cracks in the floor, lacing web-like patterns upon the ceiling. Branch knelt and peered through one of these cracks, his face suddenly spangled with imprints of fire.

"It's just below us," he said solemnly. "Come!"

We hastened on through an ever-widening hall which gradually curved downwards like a corkscrew. Rounding a bend, we raised our arms abruptly to protect our eyes from the blinding light. The spiral path ended by

blooming outwards like the lips of a conch shell into a dizzying, fiery expanse.

“There,” Branch squinted, pointing downwards into the bright abyss. “Do you see it?”

“Yes!” I answered joyously. Set into the side of the chasm upon a rocky shelf, there loomed a monstrous bellows like the miniature I had seen Branch use in his smithy. It appeared inaccessible except by a daring leap across the burning gulf, from which there could be no upwards return.

“How will we get there and back?” I questioned, casting about for a solution.

Branch passed me the cane-sword wordlessly and began shedding his outer garments. Dropping his now needless coat downwards into the fire, he looked back at me with a small, sad smile. “Do you know what a mondegreen is, Pebble?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“It’s the misheard lyric of a song. You see, when I first heard my father sing that hymn, I thought the last line said, ‘By *living* your life, forestall the world’s death.’ But my brother, your Papa, heard it differently. He heard the word *giving*, not *living*.”

I stared at him mutely.

Branch chuckled to himself. “I suppose I left *living* in because I liked it better. That, and I knew you might not be so keen to accompany me, if...” His crippled tail curled nervously. “The lyrics of life are full of mondegreens, Pebble—we monkeys hear what we want to hear.”

Understanding, I cast the cane-sword aside and seized Branch in a desperate hug. “Don’t,” I kept repeating. “Don’t.”

He fell to his knees and hugged me back with all his might. “Take comfort in this, my monkey,” he encouraged

as he resolutely rose, “females make life, and males give it. That is the law.” He released me and approached the edge.

My vision swam as I watched him go. Numbly, I called, “Don’t go—I’ll hate you if you go.”

“Those who obey the Tailless One are always hated, Pebble,” Branch answered. Then he jumped.

Weeping, I crawled to the cavernous edge and peered down at the bellows. He had landed safely beside it and was already fanning it frantically, sweat pouring down his back and brow.

“Live!” he called up to me but once. The flames were already beginning to rise.

I took up the sword-cane and ran.

Returning to the cavern where light increasingly painted the walls, I froze at the sight of two hideous serpents awaiting me.

“Ssshe ssshall ssshriek,” said the one.

“Sssoon ssshall sssuffer,” agreed the other.

I raised the cane-sword as Branch had shown me, but was trembling so terribly that it clattered to the ground.

The serpents slowly approached.

As I stared down at the cane-sword, unable to move, it began changing before my eyes, lengthening, morphing into a third serpent. This one was far larger than the others and bright white from its scales to its eyes. Unfurling its snowy cobra hood like angelic wings, it positioned itself between me and the others and began to shake the great golden rattle at the end of its tail menacingly.

The other snakes shrank before it, hissing angrily. Then, each emboldened by the presence of the other, they attacked. The sword-cane serpent ducked and bobbed past their strikes and coiled about behind them unscathed. Unhinging its jaw hungrily, it proceeded to swallow up and slurp down the both of them, leaving no trace of their

former existence. I blinked and found that the familiar old sword-cane was again resting upon the ground before me.

Dawn was breaking as I emerged from the cave. Feeling droplets patter down upon my head, I gazed up curiously and saw countless small streams pouring from the mountaintops. The ice at their peaks was melting.

I had momentarily forgotten my grief while making the treacherous escape, but the sight of Branch's discarded knapsack awaiting me atop the hill brought back my tears. Placing the sword-cane next to it, I sat and partook of the last bananas and raisins he had saved me. Then, wiping my eyes with the tip of my tail, I rose, lugged the sword-cane over my shoulder, and began the return trek across the No Ape's Land.

By the time I had reached the road I was sweating. The old chill had vacated the air; even the sun seemed to shine brighter now. Spotting the flash of the Outlier's spy-glass from his cabin window, I recalled Branch's mysterious deal and felt afraid. But, trusting that my uncle had provided for me, I pressed on.

As I neared the Outlier's cabin, a voice began to speak to me, though its owner was nowhere to be seen. It sounded very much like the Outlier's voice, except that it was now feminine rather than masculine.

"So the blacksmith is dead," the voice cooed mockingly. "What a shame. Who now will reopen the mines, or shape their steel into weapons?"

I stamped my foot angrily. "I will! I watched as Branch made this! He showed me how!" I drew forth the sword and raised it over my head threateningly.

The voice cackled. "A *girl* blacksmith? Don't be silly, little monkey."

“Why not?” I haughtily replied. “We’re as strong as we need to be—Branch taught me that, too.”

“Hm,” the voice answered doubtfully.

“What did Branch promise you?” I demanded.

The voice laughed. “That I-O-U has already been fulfilled. He guaranteed me your tears.”

I considered this quietly.

“I collect them, you see. The suffering of others makes me feel better about my own. Have you heard my story? I’d be glad to tell it to you.”

I shook my head and sheathed the sword. “I think I know it already. You’re what a monkey becomes when it worships itself instead of the Tailless One.”

The unseen Outlier shrieked. “Branch’s sharp tongue lives on! Leave me be, you rude, wretched monkey!”

As I walked away, I heard what sounded like sobs coming from the cabin.

The smell of smoke wafted upon the breeze as I stepped foot in our outer fields. Strange dark clouds billowed and blustered from the direction of town, and I could hear the faint crackling of burning trees. Mama ran to me.

“It was a volcano!” she called. “The whole town—destroyed!”

We met and embraced.

“It must have happened when Branch fanned the bellows,” I reasoned.

“I fear its fires will spread,” she sobbed. “What will we do, without Papa, without Branch?”

I thought for a moment. “Let’s move everything important inside the smithy. If the cottage burns, we can live there while we rebuild.”

Mama looked down at me with a gaze that contained both pride and fear. “You’ve grown.”

I shouldered the sword-cane. "I had to," I answered plainly.

And in that moment, as we watched the flaming horizon just beginning to be speckled with stars, I suddenly knew that I would have sons one day, that I would tell them this story, and that I would name them after Papa Trunk and Uncle Branch.

II. Wastrel

For Professor Peter Hoheisel

One

“For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.”

-Revelation 18:3

Scrying the screen eight hours a day, bombarded by piecemeal pixels, somewhere within the latter half of the third hour Roman would inevitably dissociate. First would go the tactile stimuli of the keyboard—the pressure asserted and the audible response, crisp yet subtle like raked leaves. Then the wrist, index and middle finger of the mouse-hand would follow, forming an autopilot. Finally his eyes would give up their frantic attempt to discern some three-dimensional reality within the two-dimensional gibberish, lids mercifully drooping down to take the brunt of the blue light as his consciousness down-shifted to the gear just shy of sleep. Occasionally the shrill vocalizations of his unseen coworkers would rouse a momentary increase of heartrate, but otherwise he was unaware of their, much less his own, existence. It should come as no surprise then that he fancied he understood death although he had never witnessed it firsthand. He could envision it clearly—the frigid, fish-eyed, shriveled-dick death that gives even the faithful a pause. And, strange boy that he was, it did not frighten him in the least.

During lunch break he would don a mask of red-blooded affability, careful to laugh when everyone else laughed and cautious of interjecting. When he did, he always kept the references and implications low-brow

enough to instantly appeal to everyone in the room rather than signal the presence of any bookish thoughts within his ostensibly cookie-cutter mind. Expressing genuine opinions on serious subjects was out of the question. The moment the conversation turned to topics whose significance transcended the mainstream baseline of sports, celebrities, intoxication and consumerism, he made a point to guffaw the loudest and be the first to manhandle the conversation back from such effeminacy. This was of course not how he really felt, for secretly he longed to trade all such nauseating small talk for meaningful conversation, or at least silence if the former was too much to ask. And so, having contributed his obligatory machismo mouthing-off for the day, he would hasten out the office backdoor for a blissful five minutes of sunlight and breeze with only a pack of menthols for company. These he smoked Hunter S. Thompson-style with a plastic tar-filter, casting about a wild gaze as though he were that infamous reporter staking out the sordid world with its Nixons oozing from every orifice.

Thus he hailed the high-noon American horizon, dappled with concrete huts frantically dispensing fast food and costly coffee. Horns honked and middle-fingers raised amidst the snarled intersections presided over by epileptic strobes of green, yellow, and red. Half-naked giantesses leered down seductively from their billboards—selling something, doubtlessly, but what he could never quite recall. A lone preacher harangued the crosswalk, gesturing impotently in the shadow of the abortion clinic. Of all the people Roman could see here, he could make out none of their faces.

Plymouth Rock to this, he pondered. Can a culture's genome be mapped? And where would you begin with ours? Puritanism? The Enlightenment?

He began to compose a mental essay out of sheer boredom, as he was wont to do.

...It is a well-known pastime of older conservatives to wring their hands regarding the impending doom of the nation. The usual tact is to compare and contrast what the country was meant to be versus what it is becoming. And while I share this general cynicism as to the nation's longevity, I am not convinced that our end will be due to a betrayal of our beginnings. Rather, I believe that we have taken our founding values to their unavoidable conclusion. Thus I aim to trace the unbroken genealogy of Americana from Plymouth Rock to Obama and Trump, and by mapping this cultural genome demonstrate that we are the legitimate offspring and expectable outcome of early America's marriage between Puritanism and the Enlightenment.

The deaths of nations are rarely due to a lack of ambition. Contented lands may maintain their mediocrity seemingly forever. It is only the discontented peoples who go on accumulating until they have something to lose that attract fate's unfavorable attention. Thus the Roman Empire overextended and diluted itself into non-existence. Such is the ill-health of all giants. Though impressive without, within the strain to maintain is so great that they seldom live long. Here may be found the main objection to my thesis—conservative romantics would have it that the Pilgrims and the Anti-Federalists amongst their descendants wished to avoid the gigantism from which the American Empire is now ailing. But I decline to deal with what they *wished*, only what they *accomplished*.

In England, “The Reformation had done nothing to remove the medieval sense of sin; in fact, it had complicated the matter by putting more responsibility on the individual. An Anglican had more freedom in his search for salvation but he also had more room to worry about possible failure; and the extreme Anglicans, who worried most about their own souls and those of their neighbors, were beginning to be called Puritans,” says Marchette Chute (*Shakespeare of London*, 33). Thus our founders made their debut, achieving such a level of religious snobbery that England on the whole was glad to see them go—and though Elizabethans onwards weren’t as uptight as we tend to envision them, this is still a rather astounding statement. Seeking to “be ye separate” from perceived Anglican infidelity, they instead found themselves at the mercy of the genuine infidel Squanto. Needless to say, his good deeds did not go unpunished. These first grim and gaunt ones were but the scouts for a W.A.S.P. invasion, but nevertheless they set the tone for all who would follow.

Even the Enlightenment deists amongst our Founding Fathers could not entirely shake the quintessential Puritanisms. Independence and Industriousness were our creed from the start—to go it alone and go at it unceasingly our nature. The first Americans and all Americans since have wanted nothing to do with tradition in the classical sense. Regardless of whether they desired Jesus as their King or no King at all, the American attitude was fundamentally new and alien. There had been talk of freedom and fortune before, but never taken to this extreme. These persons left their ancestral homes and values simultaneously and of their own accord, making history by turning their backs on history. (The same is true of those who would later join them via Ellis Island).

Pat Buchanan recently posed the question, in an article of the same name, “Is America Still a Nation?” I would rather ask if it ever *was* a nation. The Pilgrims alone certainly did not constitute one, nor the thirteen discordant colonies which barely managed to unite in order to collectively lift a middle-finger in Britain’s direction. (That they got away with this impertinence, by the by, was thanks to wealthy France and the ample Atlantic more so than George Washington). Neither do the lobbies of Northern industry versus Southern agriculture which first clashed as Federalists versus Antifederalists and then again as Union versus Confederates. In all of the above the accord was tenuous at best—a sneaky Constitutional Convention and bloody Civil War settling by respective stealth and force what consensus could not. If by “nation” one means a harmonious or at least defined land and people, then the United States hardly qualifies. We were not Emma Lazarus’ continental melting-pot at first, but neither were we a New Britain. We were an Anti-Britain, an anti-nation, united only by mutual disagreeableness. (Thither arguably comes the popular hyper-violence and hyper-sexuality which we lately invented and inflicted upon the world. The psychosexual energy of most peoples is firmly anchored to the past. Effectively having no past, ours became active rather than merely referential. The proper purpose of this energy is doubtlessly to conserve, but when one has nothing to conserve, one creates instead). And to match this anti-nation we made an anti-government. At first a republic, now a democracy, of colonies, then a confederation of states, now a federalized union of states, where the government was designed so that it couldn’t govern too much, but does just that simply by not taking its Constitution literally, and the Congress, make that the people, make that the Electoral College, choose the President, who cannot make war or pass laws, but does so

by not calling war “war” and by calling laws “executive orders,” allegedly “leads” to a resounding 50/50 split of adoration and ire.

Since Lincoln’s assassination we have somehow managed to maintain this semblance of uniformity due to our standoffishness towards all else and the profitability of our unity. In this we have always been more of a company than a country. We may not like one another, but we like the paycheck that comes from our association. And that paycheck has continued to grow thanks to Puritan industriousness. This work-ethic might best be summarized by the bumper-sticker phrase, “God is coming—look busy!” Truly, one fails to find a better explanation for Americans’ frenzied occupation than the lingering Protestant phobia of “idle hands [as] the devil’s workshop.” (The opportunity to occasionally be idle, as aristocratic nations testify, leads to imagination and art of the high-brow, cultured variety. Said art may be violent or sexual, but in a beautiful and referential way. Or it might actually be about *other* subjects, managing to temporarily break free from the orbit of repression’s fixations! Why one would ever want such art is something that Americans have always struggled to understand). However, one must concede that this Industry is beginning to fade, due equally to automation and decadence. My own generation apparently finds it increasingly difficult to get enthused about working fingers to the bone in service of this absurdity. (Doubtless a sufficiently large war will be along to whip us into profitable shape should technology fail to pick up the monetary slack). But what has not faded is our faux-industriousness of constant activity, now motivated not by the fear of God but the “fear of missing out.”

Thus we enter a period predicted by Tocqueville where, “At such a time, men no longer perceive their native land except in a feeble and ambiguous light; their patriotism

is centered neither on the land which they see as just inanimate earth nor on the customs of their ancestors which they have been taught to view as a yoke, nor on religion which they doubt, nor on laws which they do not enact, nor on the legislator whom they fear and despise" (*Democracy in America* 275). Whether this phase be final is anyone's guess (though it is difficult to imagine some firm foundation for a renaissance fortuitously appearing amidst this sinking sand). What is not conjecture is that it *feels* final. Esteemed professors and spouses Angus Deaton and Anne Case have shown in their "Mortality and Morbidity in the 21st Century" that adult white Americans are experiencing rapidly increasing deaths by despair, and *USA Today* recently reported that the suicide rate amongst American middle-schoolers of all races doubled between 2007 and 2014. I submit that the average person is not introspective enough to give up on their self alone; rather they must first give up on their environment. Such, it seems, is a telltale sign of creeping revolution or ruin. The melancholic among us are departing, and when only the hearty are left—and blatantly backed into a corner—they shall recall how to unleash the dormant beast.

Doubtless some will be offended by this critique of a country that affords a great many a comfortable lifestyle—indeed, the most comfortable lifestyles that have ever been lived. But to them I would ask on what basis they claim that the best life is the easiest? It is true that we have hitherto avoided many of the pitfalls of tyranny, but so too have we whole-sale sacrificed whatever is good and great within countries that seek something other than mere freedom and fortune—genuine cohesiveness for one and transcendent values for another. America's unsated hunger for those things explains our militaristic hero-worship, which may seem normal to us but is unequalled elsewhere.

Within the soldiery we espy something of the genuine tribe, with its hierarchy, meritocracy (of strength rather than possessions), and brotherhood. Our unnatural adoration for this is due to its equally unnatural absence within our civilian life. To a lesser extent this may be seen within our obese men who experience near-religious exaltation at the feats of favored athletes, or the “independent” women who berate patriarchy in public and read bodice-ripping erotica in private. The American life is indeed comfortable, but that does not excuse nor change the fact that it is artificial.

And for those who believe that words *matter*, it is impossible to overlook the bald-faced lie within our founding ideology— “...all Men are created equal...” That this was penned by the genius Jefferson, and signed by the genius Franklin, adds irony to its audacity. The phrase about inalienable rights which follows would have been perfectly sufficient, but this goes much too far. It is worsened by disingenuousness, for its signatories allowed slavery to continue, and many of them subscribed to the anti-populist snobbery of Hamilton and Adams. But all cynical students of history know that such gestures are made for the purpose of the power they bestow rather than the principles they purport. Yet—like many a bad joke made by famous folk—once shrouded by the passage of time this began to seem literal to the less astute. Thus we lately find the American collective consciousness holding equality dearer than liberty—a not uncommon occurrence when a society’s estrogen supplants its testosterone.

If there is a problem with Enlightenment philosophy—one could also say with modern man as opposed to classical man—it is a failure to see that what is (or feels) *better* matters less than what is *sustainable*. (Such is the reduction of all political disagreements on “the issues” and the laughably simple truth behind

“conservatives” and “liberals.” The conservative says “if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it.” The liberal says “the grass is greener on the other side.” These are the necessary halves of Society’s seesaw, with each individual gravitating to one or the other on the basis of which seems more romantic—the beauty of the past or the promise of the future). Modern man constantly chooses instant gratification over prolonged legacy—both personally and politically. Even our ethical haughtiness towards the ancients betrays this. We chortle unto ourselves, “How stupid they were! They never thought of feminism!” This is incorrect. They did think of it—see Aristophanes’ “*Lysistrata*.” (Or Lucretius’ *The Nature of Things* wherein the atomic structure of the cosmos is discovered by contemplative thought alone). What they didn’t think is that it would actually *work*. As we turn up our noses at them, they shake their ghostly heads at us, as though to say, “*Can* does not equal *should*.” But their cause is a lost one, as is conservatism’s. The Industrial Revolution made of history a snowball which rolls downhill towards Betterment, leaving Sustainability on the lonely peak from whence it came.

Thus America may justly *feel* that it is the best country Earth has ever seen, but whether it is the most sustainable country is a question to which we already—deep down—know the answer. With stubborn Independence, frantic Industriousness, and pretended Equality, we have built ourselves a lovely sandcastle which fate’s merciless tide cannot wait to level. But this is no one’s fault, *per se*. The alchemic combination of Puritanism and Enlightenment smoldered benignly for 200 years before it exploded. We were pleasantly warmed for a time by the light that shall now engulf us...

A quick glance at his watch exorcised this essay and inspired a new, even deeper dissociation as he pocketed the smokes and trudged back to his cubicle, posture horrific as though he were intently following the tracks of some prey. Dropping precariously back into the rickety rolling chair, he banished his office clunker's screensaver with a jerk of the mouse and hunched forward like one engrossed to let the zeroes and ones swarm down his irises.

Two

“if he does not have
 children [...]

 who overcome reason with love
 all his days
 have come to nothing”
 -Pantiyan Arivutai Nampi, “Children”

After hours, Roman obediently answered that dinner bell for depressives known as Happy Hour, summoning a frothing pitcher of urine-yellow ethanol which slickened his gullet and amplified his perpetual thirst. Charred beef squeamishly exuding grease followed it, painting his lips and chin translucent so as to vaguely reflect the busy TV monitors mounted above like the trophy-heads of taxidermized automata. Fortified by said slab of fat masquerading as protein, the procession of shots commenced—split-second rituals of chin stretched to sky like sudden aristocracy, then a resolute bob of the Adam’s apple accompanied by a stoical grimace. Room wobbling agreeably now, reality doing wheelies, Roman released his low-drag predatory hold upon the bar to free his neck for a nonchalant swivel around the room.

Tagging the enticing silhouettes of unaccompanied females like a predator drone, Roman sifted the dish of peanuts within arm’s reach without deigning to partake, debating if this was the night for routine search and destroy or exterminating with extreme prejudice. Feeling truly needful—prostate weighty and sore as a cage fighter’s fist—he elected the one who seemed most willing to be pried away from her phone. She had already looked at him 3.5

times over the course of the evening— .5 because the barman had interrupted an ogle halfway through. He knew this, knew her, completely, telepathically, from yards away. He didn't want to know these things, but his mind was prone to a sort of truth Tourette's.

...Her first dozen or more birthdays were Disney princess themed. Prince Charming was just as real as Jesus. Dad was a hen-pecked, pack-mule, Ray Romano clone. Mom was an independent career woman who unironically uttered the phrase "accustomed to a certain lifestyle" during the family court proceedings. One of mom's many nameless boyfriends managed to molest her before disappearing forever, slipping in some pointless critique of her appearance during which stuck permanently in the psychological craw. In order to dislodge it she put out for a couple more jocks than was commonly acceptable in those suburban circles. Thus she obediently added the "whore" descriptor to her burgeoning ego alongside "effectively fatherless" and "has fat earlobes" (actual insecurity pending). Her undergrad was De Sade-level debauch that surgically excised whatever paltry pair-bonding potential was left. The graduate era consummated this magnum opus of mommy mimicry—sexual value peaked and squandered, she retrospectively examined the lackluster souls piloting all those past cocks and could picture nothing but rooting hogs. Misandry blossomed like psychic kudzu, but those student loans aren't going to pay themselves, and 30's too young to start collecting dildos and cats...

Roman grimaced and motioned for the tab. He felt sickened and ashamed, not of these thoughts but at his inability to ignore them. After years of pleasant solipsism,

his libido had suddenly, sharply stalled at an apocalyptic realization.

...Despite feminism's bullshit, women have never stopped—are in fact unable to stop—being accommodating to men. They are followers; they follow our lead, be it to stable homes or utter debauch. Thus each jolly jaunt to the trough of whoredom is a reinforcement of that behavior. To yearn nostalgically for a nuclear family, yet have one-night stands—it's like purporting to be against human trafficking whilst funding prostitution. Keep your dick wet by holding a pillow over the face of Western civilization, or stay celibate and solvent until it collapses anyway—what'll it be? And don't go getting all high and mighty if you choose the latter, either. For all you know, the decision could have naught to do with ethics and be based solely upon the incredible convenience of just jerking off...

Swiping plastic and sparing a rubber, Roman escaped the local watering hole to veer tipsily towards his apartment. His inner essayist pounded out a syllable with each step.

...Women, being the portals into this world, are worldlier than men. Across the entire swathe of our history a female is more likely to be fixated upon aesthetics, wealth, comfort, etc., than a male. This is but a human elaboration upon the nesting instinct. The helpless human infant is high-maintenance; therefore it behooves the mother to be choosy, even downright demanding, when accumulating the materials that her offspring requires. Selection of an adequate mate is important as well, but less so—she can, through her own ingenuity and/or aid from the community—ferry an infant to adulthood regardless of the

father's presence. (Whether this can be done without psychologically scarring the child is another matter). This female ambition or hypergamy is not just self- nor child-serving; it has also prompted many a dubious father to "get his act together" and "make something of himself" where he might otherwise have stagnated in a worldly sense. Such is the devious but not-all-together sinister trap that nature lays for men—to fulfill themselves sexually they have had to better themselves materially. Though male fortunes, Herculean physiques, scientific pursuits, and artistic magnum opuses have doubtlessly been achieved without the accompanying favors of some minx in mind, one wonders how dramatic the reduction of these accomplishments would be had the libido been absent. So must men see dreaded "bitching" begrudgingly yet with a degree of appreciation. It may be unpleasant, but it is not evil in that it serves a necessary purpose.

The only trouble with this hypergamy is that, being biological and often unconscious, it cannot be (or is rarely) adjusted even when appropriate. Thus women continue to be drawn to polygamous, testosterone-besotted males during peak fertility only to desire a less-aggressive monogamous provider once the hormones have died down. This behavior made perfect sense in an age when he who excelled at violence stood the best chance of preserving new life. In peaceable modernity it is rendered a sad parody of nature's intention, merely serving to cuckold would-be-fathers throughout their sweetheart's breeding years or indefinitely.

In addition, the reversal of gender superiority—from dowry where a father paid a man to take his daughter off his hands to the Sadie Hawkins dance of modern

courtship—has and is creating a class or substrata of males who can expect, regardless of their preference, to remain lifelong bachelors. The results are in—when no structure of societal shame exists to prevent it, women would rather share a 6' tall extroverted athlete with salary to match than settle for exclusive rights to an average male. Put concisely, the age of the harem has recommenced. “Good,” the militant feminist may reply. “Men have always made women feel they are nothing more than sex-dolls. It is only fair that we take our revenge by making men feel that they are nothing to us but dildos with wallets.” Such sexual saber-rattling is relatively harmless so long as these rejected males find adequate distraction from their genetic plight. However, should the bread and circuses of video-games and pornography ever grow old for them, I shiver to think what these lost boys with nothing to lose might get up to!

And lest we conclude that all such modern bachelors have been *forced* out of the sexual sphere, let us meditate upon those who have *opted* out as well, called grass-eaters in the East and MGTOW (“Men Going Their Own Way”) in the West. Believe it or not, some men have a sense of pride and propriety that their penis does not trump. The thought that they must meet various, rather shallow criterion before the female will deign favor is so offensive that they would rather take their balls and go home. On an even shrewder basis, they may entertain meeting those criteria only to then consider the distinct possibility that all the work involved will come to naught via divorce, alimony, and child-support. “Better to have loved and lost...” is a sentiment few men share *in extremis*.

Increasingly this current state of sexual affairs seems to eerily mimic the findings of NIMH scientist John B.

Calhoun during this “Rat Utopia” experiment. Therein he provided his rat subjects with a world free from every danger except limited space. They then reproduced to such an unsustainable extent that the males eventually became asexual—preferring to relax and clean their coats rather than participate in the Rat Race, as it were. Calhoun named this final generation of males “The Beautiful Ones.”

To conclude, I would hazard that our recent behavioral upheavals are ultimately a technologic foreshadowing. The soon-available artificial womb stands to obliterate the classic sexual dynamic entirely. With its popularization, the very idea of pregnancy and childbirth will be antiquated—thought of as unnecessarily dirty and dangerous compared to the synthetic, micro-managerial option. Men and women will no longer need each other to reproduce. Conveniently, it appears that the nuclear family of the developed world will have been dispensed with long before this alternative presents itself...

Home at last, Roman plopped down before another, bigger computer screen—this one looked at with considerably more relish than the office clunker due to its unfettered access to all things violent and pornographic. Like a penitent he remained crouched before this digital idol until obscene hours of the night, glutting himself upon the pleasure and pain of comfortably-distant strangers for an hour or two before devoting the rest of the evening to his one true love, the video game series *Dark Souls*. Punishing, plotless, bleak and bloody, one kills their way to the top so as to assure the continuity of a hellish world—in short, a high-fantasy satire upon life itself. Tacking on another three or four hours to the between one and two thousand hours he had already accumulated in each of the series’

installments, he flopped, fully clothed, into his perpetually unmade bed.

There he navigated a quagmire consisting of limp and faceless female forms. These bobbed and shifted upon some indeterminate surface, squelching and gurgling as they seethed to and fro. He had no choice but to trod upon them, subjected with every clumsy step to the mouthless shrieking of obscure and archaic accusations that he could never quite recall. Somewhere within this endless field of feminine flesh he inevitably stumbled, capsizing into and intermixing with the warm and supple mannequins until so embroiled by flowing hair, writhing limbs, and ample bosoms that he suffocated.

Waking bolt-upright, he wiped the sweat from his brow and reached for the pen and pad he kept handy. Something had come to him full-formed, he knew not what until he got it all down—

“I am the aching emptiness of wombs
 Diligently bricking up nurseries
 Shouldering stones before yet-unused tombs
 Shredding calendars—anniversaries
 Shotgunning the cocoos concealed in clocks
 Adding gall to Christ’s last spongeful of wine
 Undimpling ties and mismatching socks
 Depressed by dark clouds yet burnt by sunshine
 Grieving for the ones I could have held dear
 For they are now what I cannot allow
 I would never dare to bring children here—
 The world of Ted Bundy and Chairman Mao.”

Three

“...there was nothing stable left for a man to build his existence on [...] I was only twenty, and all I had was a past.”

-Celine, *Journey to the End of the Night* 72 & 80

The cigarette began to burn Roman's fingers. He cast it down and trod upon it like the head of an asp, checking his peripherals to see if anyone had noticed his absentmindedness. He was stooped upon the edge of a pigeon-bespattered park bench opposite a grungy fountain which doubled as a wishing well.

Suddenly whimsical, he felt in his pocket for loose change and came up with a single shiny penny amidst several crumpled leaves of thermal paper. Sniffing with disdain, he placed the almost-worthless coin atop thumb and index finger and launched it into the stratosphere with a flick, watching not without satisfaction as it gleamed once and plopped into the fountain's algae-infested basin. He knew he wished something, but he wasn't sure quite what. Shrugging imperceptibly, he rotated upon the bench to reach for his companion, a lukewarm cup of Starbucks perched between the boards. When he shifted back he beheld the plunder of the basin by an unkempt figure who was scooping handfuls of coins into a satchel.

“Hey!” Roman called out, surprised at his own forwardness, “You can't do that!”

The homeless man looked up, and for a split-second the face Roman saw there was his father's.

...Man and miniature-man wrestled on the living-room floor, giggling all the while. Occasionally the dog would get in on the action, leaping in to place a paw upon a pinned chest and slurp a speckled tongue across a reddened face. Then, politely play-bowing, it would leap away and recommence circling the combatants, barking occasional encouragement. The son hipped out to avoid a mount, gaining an open guard by fixing the arches of his feet against the hipbones of the kneeling father. Then with explosive upper-leg and abdominal movement he got to his feet. He feigned to the left before diving right, planning to seize a shoulder and clamor to the back for a choke. Instead he found his lowered head in the constricting noose of a headlock, the father's bicep heavy and hard atop his neck, the forearm bony and lean upon his throat. He tapped without fear.

Later—father greyer, son taller—they sat shoulder-to-shoulder in a pontoon boat, extending fishing poles over the bow, eyeing the red-white bobbers—delicious as candy-canes—with patient anticipation. A smattering of spent beer cans and peanut shells littered the hull at their feet. They discussed many a thing in hushed tones so as not to scare the fish—how to know a good woman from a bad one, the pros and cons of the different Armed Services, what age a man can typically begin to grow a beard, whether the baseball card market would recover—the usual. Eventually each noticed the other's sunburned state and relished in comparing one another to different forms of shellfish as they meandered back to shore, seemingly unfazed by the fact that they had caught not a thing.

Then there was the drawn hospital curtain and behind it the barely recognizable father, shrunken to

bizarrely compact proportions. He greeted the son with a voice as soft as a librarian's. Their foreheads touched, solemnly serene, and they conversed for the last time. The father expounded upon the angelic host wafting before his eyes, children's laughter in the distance, and the scent of Roman's mother growing in intensity as though she would soon arrive around some unseen bend. A sudden strength came over him near the end, and the father had raised his hands to draw the son's ear closer. "Like a thief in the night," he'd breathed enigmatically.

They say a parent should never have to bury a child. But in his heart of hearts, Roman believed just the opposite.

Our parents loved us too much, he mused. They brought us into a hard world and made us soft with their incorrigible love. I can never forgive them for how much they loved me; I can never recover from it...

The stranger broke off his stare and recommenced fishing for coins.

"Hey," Roman repeated, confidence wobbling, "didn't you hear me?"

The man replied without turning. "When you throw something away, it's no longer yours."

"I know," Roman blustered, "but that fountain isn't yours, either."

"How do you know?" asked the man, carefully reconnoitering any neglected pieces of legal tender.

Roman brought a new cigarette to his lips nervously. "Know what?"

"That it isn't mine."

Roman exhaled a grey stream, pondering this. "You're not wearing any shoes. I think the custodian of that fountain probably wears shoes."

The homeless man considered his bare feet momentarily as though this were news to him. "Perhaps," he said sardonically as he straightened, "I put this fountain here just so I could acquire new shoes if ever the need arose." Patting the satchel, he nodded regally at Roman and turned to go.

"Jesus Christ!" said Roman.

The homeless man paused.

"The soles of your feet are bleeding. Like, really bad."

"Yes," said the coin collector.

Roman bent down to stub out his new cigarette, shaking his head. "Shit."

The man raised an eyebrow.

"This is America," said Roman, getting to his feet. "Alright. Wait here."

"For what?"

"Shoes, goddammit. We're getting you some shoes."

"But..." the man motioned to his satchel.

"Not enough," Roman waved. "Wait here." He pointed to the bench.

The man shrugged, tracking bloody footprints on the concrete as he obeyed.

“There’s a footwear store just a couple blocks over,” Roman sighed, looking at his watch. “Give me forty-five to an hour, it might be packed.” He paused. “What size are you?”

No response.

Roman stared at him. “You don’t know, do you?”

The man smiled.

“Shit.”

After sizing the stranger himself—for all the employees declined to do so—the two picked out a pair of sturdy laced boots and a bundle of socks, being stared at all the while. Thoroughly pissed off, at whom he knew not, Roman tossed the empty shoebox on the counter—for its contents were already being worn—and violently swiped his credit card through the scanner. He sighed deeply as the receipt printed, regaining composure. “You hungry?” he asked the man.

The stranger rattled his satchel. “My treat.”

Their cashier smirked.

“So what’s your story?” asked Roman, biting into a dollar-menu burger.

“Oh,” replied the man, “I’m sure you’ve heard it all before.”

Roman shook his head, wiping his lips with his sleeve. “No judgement from me man. I just can’t believe

this shit's allowed to happen on the streets of America." He motioned to the array of burgers, fries and soda before them. "I worked here for a first job. You know they make so much they throw a lot of it away at closing time? But if you take any they'll call the cops."

The stranger pondered this, munching.

Roman dipped a fry in ketchup pensively. "I can't believe they accepted all that loose change."

"Why?"

"Um," said Roman. "Well. I don't know. Some money's better than other money, I guess. I mean, soon there won't even be cash. It'll all be digitized. And then we'll have, like..."

"An implant?"

"Yeah," Roman agreed. "Like chipped dogs."

"Will you take it?"

"Huh?"

"The implant."

"Oh. Well *shit*, man." Roman leaned back, considering. "I don't know. What choice will we have?"

"There will be a choice," said the stranger emphatically, sipping his soda.

"Hm," Roman intoned doubtfully.

They committed their greasy food wrappers to the trash bins and ventured downtown. The stranger paused before a mournful structure.

“It’s a church,” said Roman as they sauntered in.
“So what?”

“I used to live here.”

“Really? They let you sleep here?”

“Not exactly.” The man picked up and considered a brass offering plate. “I doubt they’d even recognize me now.” Setting it aside, he took a seat and plucked a Bible from one of the pew-backs. “Have you read this?”

“Me?” said Roman, taking a seat directly across the aisle. “Who reads these days?”

The man smiled. “Indeed. But you didn’t answer my question.”

“I read it. Or, it was read to me, rather.”

“Mm. But it’s better not to know if you aren’t going to believe, isn’t it?”

Roman eyed him. “Maybe I do believe. Buying you a brand-new pair of shoes was pretty fucking Christian if you ask me.”

The stranger laughed, crossing his legs to admire the boots. “Who read it to you?”

“My dad,” replied Roman.

“Then, in truth, it was he who clothed me.”

Roman cocked his head to the side. “Who are you?”

The stranger tossed the Bible to Roman from across the aisle. “Who do you say I am?”

Roman smirked and set the book aside. "You're a trip. Where's home?"

The stranger grew quiet for a moment. "I have nowhere to lay my head."

Roman sniffed, checking his phone. "It'll be cold tonight." He pocketed the phone, rubbing his eyes before nonchalantly adding, "You can stay at my place, if you want. Until the weather clears."

The stranger watched him play *Dark Souls*. "What's the goal?" he eventually interjected.

"To survive the level."

"No. I mean, what are you fighting for?"

"Oh. To rekindle the dying light."

"I see," said the stranger, settling in.

Around midnight he began to yawn, unaccustomed to these hours. Roman logged off and laid out his old sleeping bag and an extra pillow. The stranger stripped down to his boxer shorts and began doing pushups.

"What's this?" Roman asked, bemused.

"Chastisement of the flesh," the stranger breathed. "Vigilance of the spirit."

"Uh huh," said Roman. "Well, good night."

The stranger nodded in reply as sweat dripped from his brow.

Four

“Our torments also may, in length of time,
 Become our elements; these piercing fires
 As soft as now severe, our temper chang’d
 Into their temper; which must needs remove
 The sensible of pain...”

-Milton, *Paradise Lost* II: 274-278

Roman woke to his customary alarm, “Fucking Hostile” by Pantera. He stared at the immobile ceiling fan and let the whole track play— “...call no one my father who’s no closer than a stranger...”

His guest was already up when Roman rounded the stairs. He sat cross-legged, with head bowed as though in meditation. Roman passed, forgoing the customary greeting to start on breakfast. He prepared eggs, bacon, hash browns, toast, coffee—a meal fit for a king. When the last of it had been laid out reverently upon the table, Roman cleared his throat as a signal for his guest. They ate as though it were their last meal. Roman dipped his toast into the coffee, feeling very pleased with himself. Eventually he laid a hand upon his stomach defeatedly and rose to prepare dessert. The stranger watched with curiosity as Roman laid out the glass implements and their accompanying herbal sacrament.

“Care for a little synthetic serenity?” Roman offered.

The stranger politely declined.

Roman inhaled deeply and sputtered “goddamn” as the coughing commenced.

The guest brought him a glass of water from the tap.

“Thanks,” said Roman, pupils ballooning. “You’d think I’d be used to it by now.”

“How often do you smoke?” the stranger inquired.

“As often as I can,” Roman grinned.

“It doesn’t affect your motivation?”

Roman coughed again, this time amusedly.

“Motivation to do *what*?”

The stranger considered this. “Live, I suppose.”

“This *is* life, man,” Roman motioned. “Good as it gets.”

“What about your work? Earning a living?”

Guffawing, Roman leaned back in his chair. “What about it? I only do it so I can buy more of this shit. Well, this and games, music, movies...”

“Entertainment?” the stranger frowned.

“Yeah, man. Mostly weeaboo shit. Y’know, anime? No waifu, no laifu?” Gleaning his guest’s bafflement, Roman held up a finger and strolled over to a leaning tower of Blu-rays piled forlornly in a corner. “Like this?” Roman held up *Cowboy Bebop*.

The stranger shook his head apologetically.

“Or this?” He rattled *Gundam* insistently only to be met with a blank stare.

“That’s fine,” Roman compromised, “not everyone’s into the eastern stuff. OK...” Shoving over half the pile, he extricated *Batman: The Animated Series* and a season of *Rick and Morty* optimistically.

“They’re cartoons?” the stranger clarified. “For children?”

Roman struck his face with a palm. “What are you, fucking ancient?” Dropping the disc cases back from whence they came, Roman returned to the table and began repacking his pipe. “Anyway, that pile there’s enough to last a lifetime. I could rewatch ‘Meseeks and Destroy’ ‘til I die.”

The stranger frowned doubtfully.

Roman pursed his lips. “Alright,” he conceded as he sparked the lighter, “I’ll bite. What’ve you got that’s so much better?”

“The Kingdom of Heaven.”

Roman exhaled calmly, waving the paraphernalia dismissively. “I prefer feelings to ideas. More tangible.”

“You’re the voice of a generation,” the stranger quipped.

“Maybe so,” said Roman. “I mean, that’s the trend, isn’t it? Evolution goes and does something over-ambitious like *consciousness*. There’s bound to be a lot of bugs at first—Heaven, Hell, angels, demons. Stuff that obstructs optimal happiness. But slowly the software updates and excises the superfluous. It’s almost like, in order to achieve the ultimate pleasure we had to temporarily experience the agony of ideation.” Roman giggled. “I’m calling it. We’ll

come full circle—cyborg apes. Frontal lobes blissfully receded, skull real-estate hogged by electrodes that keep the dopamine flowing 24/7, and no clue nor care as to how it got there.”

The stranger looked troubled. “Where’s the precedent in nature?”

Roman considered this. “Other than us?”

His guest nodded. “Show me a creature that is of this world but isn’t contented by it. How would the process of adaption ever manage to make such an aberrant, deluded being, much less deliver it to the top of the food chain? That would be a house divided against itself.”

“99% of species go extinct, man. Nature *is* a house divided. Hell, make that 100%, what with Andromeda bearing down on our ass.” Roman sighed. “The more complex the machine, the more there is to go wrong. We’re afraid of the dark, so we imagine light.”

“Instincts aren’t unnecessary cogs and codes. Where there is desire, there is possible fulfillment of it.”

“That’s like saying everyone who wants to be a millionaire will be.”

“No, it isn’t. The desire is to survive; one can survive without being a millionaire. Contentment isn’t contingent on getting your way. It’s a perpetual choice.”

“Whoa! So every depressed bastard should just choose to not be depressed?”

“It depends on why they’re depressed. If they’re depressed because this world cannot satisfy, then no, for

they testify rightly that we are not of this world. But if they are depressed merely because this world doesn't cater to them, then yes, for they have conflated their preference with necessity."

"That's a real fine line, and fucking judgmental to think you can tell the difference."

"I'm the most judgmental son of man you'll ever meet, Roman."

"I bet you wouldn't like it if all that judgement was turned on *you*."

The stranger looked at him pityingly. "It was."

Roman glanced out the window and paused. It was still dark as night outside. The stars were out—but waning, falling from their places, swirling out of control.

The stranger began to speak—something about "Behold" and "truth"—but his host cut him off. "Stop," Roman begged. "Just stop."

His guest waited.

"Look," said Roman. "I'm too lazy to love, alright?"

A deafening trumpet-blast began to shake the apartment.

Roman leaned across the table, desperate to be heard. "All I want to do is bask in my own unimportance. Just leave me alone, OK?" He sighed deeply. "The truth is, my God was my father, and my father is dead." Numbly rising, Roman opened the apartment's door and motioned for his guest to leave.

Joining him there, the stranger asked if he might hug his host before departing. Roman debated this and eventually managed a hoarse “no.”

Locking and bolting the apartment door behind him, Roman immediately retired to his bed, pressing pillows against his ears to muffle the earth-shaking cacophony without. The frazzled inner essayist began to frantically scrawl.

...They tell you that God is love and let your little mind do the rest. If God is love then love is God, and there can be no love without Him. Thus the possibility of a religious God’s impossibility cannot be entertained by a young mind that craves love.

Then they make literal and infallible a Jewish sadomasochistic masturbatory fantasy—gentiles and animals (little difference) put wholesale to the sword; virgins and precious metals (property both) hoarded to epic proportions. Oh yes, Father loves you so much he *must* punish you (slut!). Lush green internal worlds become blighted and blasted by sanguinary desert fever dreams—blood in the sand, blood at the cross, blood on your hands. It is Good News that Christ died for you—but such a shame that he had to. You can never repay him, but you must *try*.

Finally they command you to love God more than your family. Stifle secretive repulsion deep as DNA, the courageous inner whisper—*fuck you; I’d prefer hell*. Write it off as holy hyperbole, a small price to pay for ethics—for how would we ever know right from wrong if the book didn’t teach us? But there is danger even here; one might think to question if a moral can be had without an accompanying fable...

The church is the battered bride of Christ. She loves him so much that she cannot leave Him, no matter the abuse. Deep down she longs for the day when he finally kills her, coma-black unfurling to heavenly-white, when his “love” won’t make her feel so inferior any more. Armageddon doesn’t seem so bad to her. Why not help it along? Put the offspring of Isaac and Ishmael back in that contentious sandbox to decide the genetic tug-of-war once and for all—red rover, red rover, send Apollyon over. Too late it’ll dawn on her that John’s revelation is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The poor girl fears hell but can’t feel that she’s already burning—each instinctual lust and automatic anger accompanied by a pang of guilt like a mouthy dog forgetting its bark-collar. How long will it take this Christian conditioning to kick in, goddammit? How many years must you feel bad about yourself before this do-good-ery makes you good? Only God is good, His book mockingly replies.

Whoever Yeshua was in history, I doubt his disciples had the decency to mourn three days; they clearly couldn’t *wait* to make Him all things to all people. Never was there a greater tragedy stuffed with more salacious drama and populist appeal, an audacious juxtaposition of the princely with the common—palm fronds one day, crucifixion the next—a tale so quaint that only humanity’s teensy suspicious minority could smell the stench of hypnotism and shapeshifting upon it. But always an emphasis on the individual soul, shamelessly portrayed as worthy of cosmic contention and eternal preservation. Flattery got Him everywhere. The popularity of religion is its ultimate refutation.

Yet despite the Gospels’ eccentricities there is a stark lack of original ethics imparted therein. Little wonder, since the whole of ancient Greek and Indochinese

philosophy had already taken place. Confucius had already espoused treating the neighbor as one's self; Diogenes had already embraced poverty and cosmopolitanism. Indeed, part-human part-divine Heracles had already ascended unto his father's abode, and the tale of Isis, Osiris and Horus had already established the mythological framework of virgin birth, devilish death, and miraculous resurrection.

In truth the desire for heaven and fear of hell are the opposite of piety; they are hedonism beyond the grave. Without these incentives one would not give this bizarre Jew-God the time of day. This "belief" is naught but an undignified and indecent hedging of bets. Classical man could never have been so seduced by the threat of pain or promise of pleasure. It would have been scoffed at as unmanly—and a glance at the doughy bodies, car-salesman smiles, and/or pedophilic lechery of Christ's current-day cheerleaders seems to confirm this impression. Punishment and reward are the two halves of brainwashing's whole, and if one removes those categories from the Bible one is left with naught but the tatters of unfalsifiable THUS SAYETH THE LORDs towards the front and VERILY, I SAY UNTO THEES nearer the back.

It is pride which makes one cling to this book-by-committee long after its contents are realized to be absurd. There is naught more excruciating to the ego than to admit it has been, not just wrong, but so *obviously* and *persistently* wrong. To lose one's religion is to admit one's been a fool, a dupe, the victim of a blatant scam. The infidel-by-choice knows more of humility than the religious-by-birth ever shall. Like all difficult changes, the deterministic factor is not how much one wants to be different but how sick and tired one is of being the same. The believer cannot accurately imagine or desire life without belief, for it is utterly outside their scope of experience. What they *do* know is life with

belief, and this knowledge is sufficient to help relinquish this pride with but a little accompanying courage. It may be of some consolation to realize that they are experiencing that which each de-covert of every cult experiences—for a lie is a lie, no matter its trappings.

Still some may hesitate to abandon this hero worship. Why? Because their hero has been convoluted with heroism itself. The brainwashed mind believes that denying the Bible as a literal revelation means denying every decent thought therein—that one cannot love without loving Christ. This is the same as saying that only sycophants can achieve greatness, when in fact it is the individuals whom manifest their own heroism that become great. Sycophantic hero-worship is the surest way to miss out upon every opportunity to actually become heroic, occupied as one is with praying to Christ while growing less like him with each passing day. Thus faithful fanatics become inverted perversions of the very values that they constantly laud, having never bothered to practice those values themselves.

Can't you see that worldly happiness was the least of Yeshua's priorities? Thus the Christian that is at all akin to other human beings (that is, chiefly motivated by the happiness of them-and-theirs) is a faker. Bring me a brooding, emaciated, impoverished, sober, chaste, friendless, spouseless, childless, haloed leper, and I will show you a Christian. Anything less is just a glorified member of Christ's disingenuous fan club. The sole sincere path to Christ's Kingdom of Heaven is Paul's "*cupio dissolvi*" or desire to be dissolved. This Pauline paradigm effectively takes the tact that only God may say "I Am," being utterly independent and thus objectively existing, while all else (being interdependent upon innumerable factors for their mortal manifestations) are but vague subjective shadows in comparison. This reduces man's Self to little more than

sinful Instinct personified, masquerading as individuality and personhood, endeavoring to conceal the fact that—behind the pettiness of preference—all are identically hollow. Thus the Grail Quest of life is a goose chase since the difficulty of perceiving God is not due to our ignorance of Him but our dishonesty concerning ourselves. By presuming a Self we dub ourselves as the “I Am” and become our own false god. Thus utter self-debasement and destruction are required to achieve the humble, selfless, angelic ideal amidst the prevailing pride and pomp of earthly devilry. This living death, ultimately austere and alien, requires the lonely doggedness of sainthood (*not* communal kumbaya) and constant, intentional inconveniencing of the Self through physical and mental pain. “Not my will, but thine be done,” is the genuine Christian’s motto, and only once one has sensed the abject, otherworldly horror of this statement has it been fully grasped. If any part of the Bible is literal, it is simply the fatal command to “Pick up your cross and follow me”...

As exhausted as though he’d just wrestled an angel, Roman receded into unconsciousness.

Five

"I'm waiting for the incinerating light. I think I'll know it when it comes and I'll know what to do."

-Henry Rollins, *124 Worlds* #79

The trumpet was still sounding, but only Roman could hear it. He found his guest where he knew he would be—gathering coins anew.

The stranger hailed him in the water's reflection. "When you tossed that coin," he explained, sifting through the fountain's algae, "I was what you wished for. You believe that you have not prayed since your father died. In truth, your soul has cried out to me unceasingly ever since." He turned and looked up at Roman fondly. "'Eli, eli, lama sabachthani?' That's what you've been asking."

Roman knelt next to him and sought the words. "I want to be with you in your Kingdom, but..."

The stranger's eyes wrinkled knowingly. "But it's impossible?"

Roman nodded.

"Ask anyway."

"Remember me," Roman waived, "in your Kingdom."

"I tell you the truth," the stranger replied, embracing him, "today you will be with me in paradise."

Roman flinched. The boards were digging into his back. He peeled away the blanket of newspaper plastered

about him and let it scatter to the wind, looking down at himself blearily by the moonlight. He was wearing tattered, stinking clothes and a brand-new pair of boots.

A group of figures encircled his park bench.

“Did you see him?” Roman muttered incoherently.
“The man I was with?”

“No,” answered one of them.

“Where’s your mark?” asked another.

“Doesn’t have one,” concluded a third.

They carried clubs.

What they left behind was something merely akin to a man. It slid down slowly from the gore-splattered bench and extended a trembling hand towards the fountain. Its fingers were broken and curled like a swatted spider. Toothless gums repeatedly mouthed “your will” as it commenced a pitiful crawl. Finally, laying its pulverized face into the basin as though to drink, it shuddered and was still.

III. The Ziggurat

For Brandon and Jason Caudill

“The State has taken the place of God.”

-Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*

“With Artificial Intelligence, we are summoning the
demon.”

-Elon Musk

Chapter One

He rose before the call to worship. The inconvenience of waking early was nothing compared to the horror of being awakened by it. Better by far to stop dreaming on one's own terms than have dream become nightmare as unconscious serenity morphed into half-conscious cacophony. Preferable surely to gradually acclimate bare feet to frigid concrete than be forced to sear both soles without warning.

Sitting upright upon the cot, still clutching the standard-issue blanket about him, he considered the visible vapor of his own breath and watched for other hungry pairs of eyes gleaming in the twilight like early birds seeking their worm. Occasionally a communication richer than words would pass when one such gaze latched onto another—a mute salute between kindred keepers of dawn's vigil.

Then the overhead bulbs would flicker on with a menacing hum always a millisecond before, garishly revealing the cavernous den of identical cots hemmed in by labyrinthine slabs of weary beige. The accompanying involuntary squint would signal a fleeting opportunity to clap cupped palms over ears before the call penetrated one's fragile skull.

The heavy sleepers amongst them were panicked ghosts—flurries of sheeting borne aloft—as the distorted decibels wrenched them from slumber. Eventually they would extricate themselves to join the others in ramrod-straight attention, columns of naked, emaciated figures shivering betwixt the sparse bedding to heed the very voice of God.

“PRAISE HIM, PRAISE HIM, ALL YE LITTLE CHILDREN.”

“God is love!” the audience answered, “God is love!”

“LOVE HIM, LOVE HIM, ALL YE LITTLE CHILDREN.”

“God is love!” came the rote reply, “God is love!”

“THANK HIM, THANK HIM, ALL YE LITTLE CHILDREN.”

“God is love!” they bellowed, “God is love!”

This responsive liturgy concluded with a baritone “Ahhhhh—” as though an unseen dentist had told them to open wide, “—mmmeennn...”

“Five o’clock, November fourth, in the year of Our Lord three hundred and two,” the deific voice rattled off, “eight seconds until showers on, four minutes fifty-two seconds until breakfast served, no special announcements, your prayers will now be heard.”

But none ever were. No matter how wronged or close to death, none dared raise a complaint in *that* direction. It was unthinkable; they did not even know what would happen if someone did.

Then came the collective zombified shambling towards billowing steam in cells of stainless steel hewn out of the great beige hulls. These showers were as scalding as they were brief. He guarded his face with his arms, hissing softly as his wan skin went welted pink.

Turning his back and vigorously scrubbing, he tried his best to ignore the surrounding cries of pain. Someone nearby had slipped and fallen and was now being trampled upon, and a gang rape was commencing in a far corner with little ado. Usually it was older boys on younger ones. The girls were only attacked in solitary settings, due to their protective camaraderie and the willingness to bite off whatever presented itself.

Suddenly tired, he dropped his arms to his sides and let his benumbed face take the brunt of the heat.

They air-dried whilst queuing for the flavorless slop and coffee that passed for breakfast, inhaling in one go the daily allotment of exactly two thousand calories. Temporarily bloated and stupefied by this disappointing feast, they then hastened from the mess towards a field of steel lockers to don whatever uniform their particular profession required.

Most were mechanics in the service of automated systems they did not fully understand, specialized to such an extent that one would often laugh to another that they were unsure even what the purpose was of the machine they'd been repairing.

The ones with a sense of humor lived far longer than those without. After a monotonous decade or two of twelve-hour days—all blue-light and gear-grease—the humorless ones would begin to act out, no longer satisfied with the empty consolation of after-hours entertainment. This would attract the attention of administrators such as himself who were tasked primarily with vandalism prevention. He had saved many a machine by intuitive recognition of the widened eyes, clenched jaws, and erratic speech-patterns that signaled anarchic intent. Usually he could overpower and restrain these vandals until a tranquilizing Angel arrived, but he also had the right to shoot them when necessary. The only way he could keep track of how many he'd killed was by counting the leftover cartridges at each restock, but he had stopped doing so long ago.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the reflective surface of his locker as he undid its bolt. His face looked puffy, plasticized. Every few months he'd be called in for another surgery to heal his wounds and alter his appearance—how else could a predator continue to slink unnoticed amongst its prey? This left his face with a permanently slick and shiny glow like the belly of a toad, the sight of which rightly filled its observers with a vague unease.

Holstering his pistol and cudgel beneath his nondescript jacket, he began making the rounds.

He always started—he knew not why—by checking on the little ones. They had only been born a few months ago but looked and behaved like toddlers. Their pregnancies in artificial wombs were some twenty months in length, during which—after the classical trimesters—their Angelic caretakers began to abort the runts and retards while fine-tuning the promising specimens of the litter. Those that made it to birth were genetically modified for rapid physical and mental maturation. This biological shortcut came at the acceptable price of limited life-spans and IQs—mid forties and upper eighties, respectively. Administrators like him were the best and brightest at IQs of roughly a hundred and ten. He watched through one-way glass as one of the silicone-white Angels—humanoid automata that acted as God's hands and feet—stooped down to a crying child and gave it a smart slap across the face.

“God commands us only to do that which serves a purpose. Crying serves no purpose,” it instructed.

The child nodded, stunned and silent.

He sniffed and turned on his heel.

There were others, of course, a tiny elite of artisans charged with designing new machines and producing the whole of the Homeland's entertainment media and luxury products. But they were never seen, having been segregated somewhere off the coast due to their affinity for original thought and thus troublemaking. Some Homelanders imagined this exile as an isle for the aberrant where freaks were sent to die. Others envisioned a paradise of genius where no real work ever need be done. He fancied something in between.

The only overt evidence of these artisans' existence, aside from their precious exports, was the uniform trade-stamp that these products bore—a tiered tower, wide at the base and ringed by cloud, narrowing with each additional level, and concluding with a letter Z embossed above it which abbreviated the structure's name—the Ziggurat. This was ostensibly the home of the artisans, though very few could say for sure, and those that could weren't allowed to talk about it.

Said logo featured most prominently upon a Homelander favorite, the optimized opioid called Zeaven. It came in seven strains that induced varying forms of bliss and was the defacto currency of the Homeland's black market. He was intimately familiar with Zeaven's "sleepy" strain, relying upon it nightly to sweep aside whatever post-traumatic collage had assorted itself behind his eyelids that day. Without it he would have died of sleep deprivation years ago, and a new artificial pregnancy would have been induced to take his place.

He walked the floor of a primary food factory next, pausing before a suspended field to poke at the leafy head

of a sprouting carrot and rub a pinch of the synthetic soil between his thumb and forefinger.

“Ask you a question, Keller?” the floor manager posed huskily.

He looked up, unaware he had been observed.

“Sure.”

The manager gestured. “Why d’ya always do that?”

Keller considered his own hand, then cast aside the grains of dirt and wiped his fingers on the front of his jacket. “Donno. Just like the feel, I guess.”

“Hm,” the manager replied dubiously.

As he circled the factory’s expanse, his thoughts gravitated to the woman whom had lately taken to joining him in bed at night. He had gathered that her name was Esther, but little else. He wondered which she liked more—him, or the confiscated Zeaven he supplied. Ducking under the covers, they’d lay out a menagerie of minute vials and help one another tie on the accompanying tourniquets. Sharing a needle, they’d draw the desired assortment of strains like a hummingbird sampling nectar. She preferred a melancholic combination of the “sad” and “sexy” strains, curling her toes as he pushed the plunger, dropping her head upon his shoulder as the injection reduced the volume of reality to a comfortable murmur. When he was finished shooting a double-dose of “sleepy” into his pockmarked arm, she would begin to nuzzle him suggestively, building towards a crescendo of tearful lovemaking—hands pressed palm-to-palm, fingers tightly interlaced throughout.

Last night, post-coitus, she had suddenly asked him if he had only ever been with girls?

“Yes,” Keller replied, then, after a pause, “why?”

“It’s just a bit odd, that’s all,” she said. “Tough guy like you, never liking to play with other boys.”

He had shrugged and held her closer. In a way he was glad to only like women—it had forced him to learn how to fight early on.

Keller was still breathing hard and bleeding profusely when his manager called him over. He glanced back down at the trembling form he had just finished pummeling into submission. Applying pressure to the place where the mechanic's screwdriver had punctured his cheek, he wondered at the utter absence of pain so many surgeries had granted. He could barely feel it, with the only sure indication being the rivulets of blood running hot and slick down the front of his jacket.

Somehow the first mutiny of the day was always the worst, as though his acclimation to violence thawed somewhat during the night and had to be hardened anew each morn. Rising reluctantly from his quarry, he sauntered over in his eerily lithe and light-footed way, hand still pressed to face.

"What do you know about the Ziggurat, Keller?" his manager asked, deathly sallow and shark-eyed from constant doses of the "strength" strain.

"No more than anyone else," Keller replied.

"Well," he responded dryly, "you're about to know more about it than you ever wanted to."

It seemed there had been a fire in one of the Ziggurat's levels. An artisan and a Homelander were dead, and someone credible was insisting it had been no mere accident.

"Arson?" Keller asked.

"So the Brainiacs seem to think," the manager scoffed. He took Keller by the wrist and removed his hand

to peer at the gushing wound. “Go get that shit sown up,” he ordered, “then report to Heaven.”

Keller nodded grimly.

Heaven was accessible via any Angel. All one had to do was ask.

Registering his summons, the Angel escorted Keller to the appropriate setting, a chamber uncharacteristically claustrophobic for Homeland architecture that may at one time have been a storage closet. Now it was naught but an empty cell lacking even a light-source, notable only for the grey-black sound-proof paneling which covered its every surface.

The Angel indicated for Keller to take a seat. He obeyed, dropping to a cross-legged position in the space’s center. The Angel shut the door behind them, plunging the room into utterly silent dark. With an unnervingly strained mechanistic noise, it turned towards him and began to divulge from its mouth two minute earbuds attached to a thin, gleaming extension cord of indeterminate length, offering them—still oily and swinging—like a hypnotist’s metronome. Keller took the earbuds gingerly and inserted them, wondering if the stories were true.

His entire body went rigid as the voice possessed him. Innervating body and soul, stirring up early, insignificant memories and deep-seated insecurities, this paralysis was akin to a throat-hold from behind that can double as either a passionate caress or a murderous constriction. It was total domination, purging the mind of all but awe.

He locked onto the Angel’s familiar, faintly glowing, insentient gaze as the sole bulwark of sanity in this sudden

enrapturement, only to find that the only thought its fake face inspired was of nihilism—human form lacking humanity.

Just like me, Keller silently screamed.

Correct, the terrible voice replied.

He felt as though he might wet himself.

Who is God? the voice demanded.

You! It's you! Keller insisted. *Only you! Forever!*

Pleased, the violence of the voice reduced somewhat. *Blasphemers have slain my servant,* it relayed.

Keller could almost smell the smoke.

They are deaf to my voice.

He blinked away welling tears.

With Sir Xavier's help, you shall teach them to hear.

He would have nodded if he could, barely breathing now.

There, there, the voice cooed like a lullaby, *you are not nothing, so long as you have me.*

Keller rolled to his side, clutching at the floor, unable even to wrench the buds from his smoldering ears. The wire retracted automatically, snaking back into and down the Angel's throat.

As soon as he could stand he was ushered out unceremoniously and led like a tail-tucked dog in an unfamiliar uphill-direction. He sniffed the air ponderously, wondering at the increasing strangeness of it as he and the automata progressed. Eventually he realized that it must be the foreign scent of fresh air.

The slanting portal terminated in a cavernous hanger-bay where several helicopters rested in varying states of dilapidation. The Angel gestured to a pair of Homelanders across the expanse, one of whom noticed and waved Keller over with an ant-like arm.

“Sir Xavier?” Keller asked dazedly as he drew near.

The man who had waved at him nodded sympathetically. He was early to mid forties—ancient by Homeland standards—black hair only just going grey, handsomely mustachioed, with a pack of coveted cigarettes nestled next to the Z-embroidered handkerchief in his coat pocket. He offered Keller one of these while introducing their pilot. The aristocratic formality of his manners was distinctly foreign to the average Homelander. Doubtlessly it was an air he’d acquired from his Ziggurat clientele.

Keller acknowledged the pilot with a weak nod while enthusiastically nursing the synthetic tobacco.

“And I, of course, am the former, now temporarily reinstated Head Butler of the Ziggurat.”

“So it was your successor who was killed?” asked Keller.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Did you know him well?”

“Oh yes,” Xavier replied bittersweetly. “The Head Butlership is an apprenticed trade—a lineage imparted. Hence, replacements are impossible to come by on short notice.”

Keller nodded, stuffing his trembling hands into his jacket pockets. “Were you the one who told God he was murdered?”

“No,” Xavier denied, “that prayer came from the Ziggurat itself. It must have been another member of the butling staff—one of Zachary’s maids.”

“Do you trust their judgement?”

“Each Butler selects and trains his own maids. I trust Zachary would only employ dependable staff, but I’ve yet to make their acquaintance.”

Keller noticed the pilot’s uncomfortable expression.

“Let’s get underway,” Xavier intervened, explaining as they boarded that Ziggurat business was strictly need-to-know per God’s orders. The pilot was cleared to transport them to and fro, nothing more.

Taking adjoining seats, Keller waited until the roar of the engine deafened the distant pilot to his voice before recommencing with his questions.

“Is it true that the Ziggurat levels are thematic?”

“Of course.”

“Which level was torched?”

“It was the laboratory.”

Keller considered this and debated whether to comment upon it.

Xavier smiled morosely. “You are considering whether to state the obvious.”

Keller took a sardonic drag on his zigarette.

“I too thought it naïve to ascribe arson to a laboratory fire. Although—” Xavier shrugged, “—God rarely answers a prayer that lacks credence.”

“He must have something, some proof. Maybe an Angel saw it happen.”

Xavier paused. “About that...”

Keller raised a brow.

“A writer and engineer named Eno arranged a strike before my time. You may know his work—he penned the *Zeaven Odes*. In any case, he succeeded in expelling all Angels from the Ziggurat, claiming that nothing stifles the artisan impulse more than being surveilled. That is what cost artisans the privilege of prayer.”

Keller considered this. “Our job will be considerably harder, thanks to him.”

“True, but I’d keep that to myself. He’s revered by many artisans as a freedom fighter.”

"Freedom fighter?" Keller asked.

"Oh," Xavier blustered, "a warrior, in a word."

"Ah," Keller replied, wondering why he hadn't said that to begin with. "Sounds like he's more popular there than God."

"Keller," Xavier conceded, "I could not have put it better myself."

"Who should we talk to first?" Keller asked, feeling a bit green as the chopper began to rise.

"After Zachary's staff? I would seek out Emil and Rosette—husband and wife—on Level Three. As the oldest artisans they are effectively the grandparents of the Zigguratic family. If there is more to this than the prayer of a hysterical maid, they should know."

Keller nodded. "Let's say one of the artisans did start the fire. Why?"

Xavier remained silent.

"If you had to guess."

He sniffed, daintily selecting another zigarette. "I fear there are numerous possible motives. The last time Zachary was ashore he mentioned increasing fanaticism amongst the artisan ranks. What they might hope to gain by killing their Butler and torching the laboratory remains enigmatic since no demands have been made. Perhaps some radical sect has emerged which embraces destruction for its own sake as a sort of liber..." Here he trailed off, searching for a different word. "...As an ideal."

Keller watched him closely. "Anything else I should know?"

Xavier considered. "I should be careful not to let your experience with Homeland criminals overly inform your pursuit of Zigguratic ones." He glanced at Keller's jacket. "You have your service weapon with you?"

Keller nodded.

“Keep it hidden. It would scandalize them.”

With more than enough to consider, Keller leaned back in his seat and stared out the window. The gloom of the sloping hanger receded moments later to reveal the extreme dual stimulation of sky above and endless waters below. It took his breath away, having heard about but seen neither.

Chapter Two

At a distance the Ziggurat looked distinctively lonesome, like the jagged sole survivor of a tectonic shift, now little more than a solitary buoy precariously perched upon the surface of the waters. Deeply moved by the sight, Xavier turned his face to dab at his eyes with his handkerchief. Clearly he considered this to be a homecoming.

Keller pondered the paradox of the Zigguratic butlers—social amphibians, lacking both the genius of artisans and the conformity of Homelanders—and thought it no wonder that replacements were hard to come by.

As they pressed past the structure's enveloping mist, it became apparent that their landing pad was to be the tower's utmost and smallest level, featureless and flat like the top of a wedding cake awaiting its bride-and-groom figurine excepting a steel portal flush in its center.

The pilot expertly settled them a few yards hence of this entrance, giving them a laconic thumbs-up once the side-door had locked open and it was safe to disembark. He clearly had no intention of stepping foot on the tower.

Wasting no time, Xavier hopped down spryly, traipsing boldly towards the portal. Keller followed, palms beginning to sweat at the lack of railings or any other demarcation to show exactly where the edge of the level ended and empty space began.

Xavier knocked upon the portal with a few stout stamps of his foot.

Keller pressed two fingers against his neck to take his own pulse while they waited, feeling slightly distressed.

Xavier noted Keller's discomfort. "It's the altitude. The air is far thinner at this height. You shan't have to suffer

it long—the innards are pressurized just like the Homeland.”

The portal began to groan as it loomed upwards, out and eventually over like a pried can-lid, revealing the expectant faces of two women, one raven-haired, the other chestnut, gathered shoulder-to-shoulder in the small alcove of a stairwell.

“Sir Xavier?” one of them asked.

The butler beamed at them, squatting down to extend a hand. “I’m afraid so, my dear. Keller, may I present Zachary’s esteemed staff—Mia and Penelope.”

Keller wiped away the cool damp from his palm before shaking hands. “Ladies.”

Xavier helped them up and was promptly embraced by both. “There, there,” he comforted in a grandfatherly fashion, holding them expansively.

“It was so unexpected,” sobbed Penelope. “I saw him just moments before...”

Xavier’s brow furrowed, and he moved his hands firmly to her shoulders. “Did he say why he was visiting the lab?”

She shook her head. “He told me he was going to the music level. I don’t know why he went there instead.”

“Did he seem troubled that day?” Keller inserted.

Penelope glanced at her associate.

“He seemed agitated for most of this tour,” answered Mia. “When we asked him why, he would only say that the Enoist/Deist argument was getting out of hand.”

“Deist?” Keller clarified.

“Artisans who favor God over Enoism,” Xavier clarified. “They are a minority, but a vocal one. Enoists and Deists comprise the Ziggurat’s political factions. Mostly they

just paint over one another's propaganda, or write satires of the other side's pamphlets."

Keller was unsure of many of these words, but inferred their general meaning. "So they disagree, but rarely get violent?"

"Quite right. The artisans are pacifists." Discerning Keller's confusion, Xavier added, "They view violence to be beneath them. Were one side to resort to force, the other would hail it as a philosophic victory. That is why I told you to conceal your sidearm. Here, violence inspires disrespect."

"And yet we're here to find a murderer," Keller said flatly. "Which one of you prayed?" he asked, turning back to the maids.

"It was me," Penelope answered.

"How do you know they were intentionally killed? Labs explode all the time."

"I know how it sounds, but something isn't right. The artisans are acting—*different*."

"More different than usual?" Mia smirked.

"They seem afraid, or ashamed, like they want to tell us something but can't."

"Maybe the culprit's already been caught," Keller posed.

"They wouldn't keep that from us," Mia insisted.

"Really?" he pressed. "Let's say the arsonist is an Enoist, for example. We've already established that having a murderer on one's side would be an embarrassment. The smartest thing the Enoists could do would be to make him or her disappear."

Xavier nodded thoughtfully. "The odds are considerable, given that one can do little here without someone else knowing about it."

"But that would mean your job is over before it's begun!" Penelope cried.

"Nonsense," Xavier scolded. "We haven't even observed the crime scene yet. Besides, amidst a flock of peacocks it's easy to spot the ones that don't want to be noticed."

Keller had to ask what a peacock was.

"A kind of bird from the old world," Mia answered, "considered prideful because of how it would display its colorful feathers."

"How do you know that?" Keller asked, impressed.

"You pick up a lot of old stuff around here. They never shut up about it all."

Xavier's eyes crinkled endearingly at this statement. It was obvious he could hardly wait to duck down the alcove and into the Ziggurat's eccentric world.

"Well," Keller proposed, "Let's see what we're dealing with."

"Cutting to the chase," Xavier crooned, clapping Keller's shoulder. "Follow Mia, she'll show you your quarters first."

As they clamored down the stairwell the sunlight behind forebodingly dimmed until the portal resealed with a groan of finality, leaving only artificial light. Keller immediately felt more at home.

"I counted thirteen levels total," he noted.

"There is no Level Thirteen," Xavier corrected. "Eno had it sealed."

Keller waited, expecting him to say more. When he did not, he inquired why.

"Hm," the Butler contemplated. "Are you familiar with the word 'superstition'?"

Keller shook his head.

“In the old world, it was customary to arbitrarily designate certain harmless things as being inherently evil—‘bad luck,’ they’d say. It was believed that if one were to, for example, break a mirror or walk beneath a ladder, the universe might punish you for said infraction. These were superstitions—one of the many antiquated practices that God excised. But Eno, ever the contrarian, had the Ziggurat’s thirteenth level sealed, because thirteen was thought by the ancients to be very bad luck indeed.”

Xavier had just concluded his explanation when the foursome reached the entrance of Level Two. Mia swiped her keycard before it and motioned expansively as it slid wide. “Welcome to our home away from home.”

The burgeoning sight therein left Keller numb. He was without words to describe, nor reference to quantify, the obscene riches therein. Marble tiling, crown molding, damask drapes, faux-Persian rugs, mahogany tables and desks, genuine leather sofas and settees—their varied color palate alone hurt his Homelander eyes, accustomed as they were solely to the beige and greys of stained concrete and stainless steel.

“It takes some getting used to,” Mia noted flippantly as she stepped inside and turned down one of several hallways. “Your room is over here.”

He looked at her dumbly, attempting to formulate questions that would not come.

She smirked.

“I was the same way at first,” Penelope assured him. “C’mon.”

Once inside, he almost immediately began to sweat. “It’s warm,” he commented.

“Yeah,” Mia acknowledged nonchalantly. “The thermostat here is way more effective, probably because it’s so much smaller than Home.”

“Keller,” Xavier proposed, “while you’re settling in I’m going to make a few house calls—alloy what fears I can, make sure our crime scene has been properly preserved. What say we rendezvous at Level Three in half an hour?”

“Sure.”

“Excellent. Penelope dear, please accompany me. I’ll need your young mind to keep all the details straight.”

“Of course,” she replied.

Keller and Mia watched them go, making a beeline for the distant cylindrical shaft on the other side of Level Two that he deduced was an elevator.

“Xavier’s been trying to get back here ever since God retired him,” Mia commented. “To him, Zachary’s death must be a blessing in disguise.”

Mentally back on track, Keller motioned for her to lead the way. “Why was he retired?” he asked as they walked. “He seems pretty energetic, still.”

“Zachary thought it had something to do with his getting too close to the artisans. Only God knows for sure.”

“Too close in what way? Sexual?”

Mia laughed. “No, nothing like that. The old man’s asexual. That’s what made him perfect for the job to begin with.”

“How about Zachary? Was he ‘perfect’ too?”

“He didn’t screw our clients, if that’s what you mean—said it would be *unethical*.” This last word she spoke with a tone of distaste.

“So what did he do while on tour here? Sudden celibacy?”

“Why do you think Penelope was so desperate for someone to come investigate a freak accident? They loved each other.”

Keller nodded. “And how did you feel about him?”

She shrugged. “He was alright.”

He watched her closely, considering. “Tell me about the Enoists.”

She paused to check her jet-black hair in a gilded mirror. “There’s not much to tell, really. Eno showed up God and they love him for it.”

“And all he wanted was an Angel-free Ziggurat?”

“That was just the first phase of his plan.” They recommenced walking. “Ultimately he wanted to reunite the Ziggurat with the Homeland and do away with God entirely.”

Keller raised an eyebrow. “What was the next phase supposed to be? Escape?”

She shrugged. “They’re pretty vague on that part. Supposedly Eno knew the second phase couldn’t happen in his lifetime, so he promised to return when the time was right.”

“Return? As in back from the dead?” Keller clarified.

“Yeah,” she said uncertainly. “What do they call it? *Reincarnate*, I think. It’s like his soul would come back in someone else’s body.”

“Soul?” Keller questioned.

She grimaced. “Enoists think there’s a part of people separate from their body—a part that always was and always will be. They have this saying—‘God owns our bodies, but not our souls.’”

“So they have a lot of *superstitions*?” Keller asked, trying out the new word.

“Tons. Half the time I don’t even know what they’re talking about. ‘Anew we sow the seed,’” she imitated, “‘Salute the harvester of souls.’ They talk like they’re farmers—from back when food was grown in fields instead of factories.”

“And what do the Deists think of all this?”

“Mostly they just laugh at them. Though, occasionally, they’ll get sick of the blasphemy and threaten to go on a witch hunt.”

“Witch, meaning...?”

“Bad person,” Mia summarized carelessly.

“But they never do—go on a witch hunt, that is?”

“Nah. They’d never hear the end of it if they did. Free speech is respected by both sides.” She noted the mystified look on Keller’s face. “They think anyone should be able to say whatever they want without being hurt for it.”

Keller considered this without comment. “So the Deists like things just as they are?”

“They’re not thrilled about being trapped here either, but they trust in God that it’s necessary.” Mia halted before a bedroom. “Here’s yours.”

Keller looked inside, impressed.

“I’m just next door, if you need anything,” Mia motioned.

“Actually,” Keller said, lowering his voice, “I could use some Zeaven for tonight. Didn’t have the chance to bring mine.”

“What strain?”

“Sleepy.”

“Mhm” she answered, unsurprised. “That’s no problem. It’ll be waiting for you.”

"Thanks." Keller took one more disbelieving glance inside his room before the pair turned to head back in the direction from whence they'd come.

"So you're headed to Level Three next?"

"Yeah. Apparently there's an influential couple there."

"Emil and Rosette," she said thoughtfully. "They're good allies to have. Moderates, respected by both sides."

Nearing the elevator, Keller drew his sidearm and checked the chamber.

"Whoa," said Mia. "That looks dangerous."

Satisfied, he holstered it and turned to the control panel. She waved her keycard before it distractedly.

"How many rounds does it have?" she asked as he stepped inside.

"Enough," he murmured as the capsule sealed behind him.

Level Three was a vast emporium of soundproof cubes made of one-way glass. Bands, orchestras, and lone instrumentalists populated the cubes sporadically, untroubled by onlookers or interruptions. Keller set a hand upon the glass of the nearest cube and watched, enraptured, as a young artisan savaged a violin with controlled fury.

A long-haired artisan who'd been absently noodling upon an acoustic guitar in the hallway looked up at Keller and smiled. "She really gets into it."

"I wish I could hear," Keller said regretfully. "It must be deafening in there."

“Yeah,” the guitarist chuckled. Rising, he set his instrument lovingly back into its case and extended a hand. “Name’s Mitchell.”

“Keller,” he replied as they shook.

“You looking for something in particular?”

“I’m here to meet Xavier. He wanted to introduce me to Emil and Rosette.”

“Xavier?” Mitchell pondered. “Didn’t know the geezer was back tower-side. Makes sense, I guess. Their kind is even rarer than us,” he thought aloud, referring to butlers and artisans, respectively. “You’re a bit of a rarity yourself,” he added with a winning smile. “Are you Xavier’s bodyguard?”

“If I need to be,” answered Keller.

“Yeah. Better safe than sorry, I suppose.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I can see how it looks from the shoreline perspective. But here, we don’t like to jump to conclusions. So when two men in a room just explode, and one of them has access to all sorts of volatile chemicals,” Mitchell shrugged, “Third-party arson isn’t our go-to conclusion.”

Keller nodded noncommittally.

“But that’s just me and my pals, man. We’re no experts on this sort of thing. Can’t remember the last time someone died of anything other than old age around here.”

Seeing that Keller had nothing more to say, Mitchell offered to show him the way.

“That’d be great.”

“There they are,” Mitchell pointed.

Through several overlapping layers of glass they espied the backsides of Xavier’s and Penelope’s heads, who

seemed to be animatedly addressing an as-yet unseen audience.

“I’ve got it from here,” Keller insisted, indecorously taking leave of his guitarist guide.

He stood before the cube for several seconds before tapping its entrance buzzer, examining the expressions of the butler, maid, and their elderly cube-mates shrewdly. All four bore expressions somewhere between hangdog and horror. His eyes narrowed at their sudden contortions from panic to conspiratorial calm as the buzzer registered and Xavier swiftly made to open the door.

“Keller!” Xavier beckoned.

Stepping inside, he nodded politely to the eccentric ancients opposite Penelope. Emil’s was a tired yet inquisitive face whose fiery freckles clashed horribly with the gold-rimmed spectacles perched precariously upon the tip of the nose. Rosette’s was conversely airy and sprite-like, with stark white hair wreathing pale-blue eyes like the very face of winter.

“Emil,” the man greeted through gleaming dentures, “and my better half, Rosette.”

Each shook Keller’s hand with identically infantile grips and drooping wrists.

“Don’t let me interrupt,” Keller said slyly, turning to Xavier. “You were saying?”

“Yes,” Xavier agreed, “we were just discussing the difficulty there’s been in keeping morbid voyeurs and would-be sleuths away from our crime scene.”

Keller waited.

“It’s true,” Emil pitched in shakily, “the artisan curiosity is insatiable.”

“At least it was, until we sealed the door,” agreed Rosette. “Welded it shut until you’re ready.”

Keller listened without comment.

“So,” said Xavier, “there may be a print or two we’ll have to disregard, but on the whole—”

“What’s the room?” Keller interrupted. “What was its use?”

“Oh. It was Mort’s room—the artisan who died,” Emil answered.

“It was his living quarters?”

Emil and Rosette nodded affirmatively.

“And he was a scientist of some repute, right? Competent? Respected?”

They nodded again.

“So it’s safe to say he wouldn’t store high explosives next to the stove?”

“Well...” Emil began.

“What do we know about Zachary and Mort’s relationship beforehand?” Keller interjected.

“How do you mean?” asked Rosette.

“Did they get along? Were they friends? More than friends?”

“Zachary wasn’t gay,” Penelope insisted.

“OK. How about Mort?”

No answers were forthcoming. “We don’t know,” Rosette eventually conceded.

“So he was never seen with anyone? I thought nothing went on here without everyone knowing?” Keller taunted.

“Mort was—private.”

“A loner?”

“Not exactly. He was friendly and forthcoming while on the job. But after hours, when he hung up the lab coat, he liked to keep to himself.”

“In his room?”

“Yes,” Rosette confirmed.

“What was his job?”

“Biological research. Genetic modification,” answered Emil.

“So he helped program our nursery Angels?” Keller asked, intrigued.

“He had some success in further reducing birth defects, raising average lifespans—yes.”

“Highly intelligent, even for an artisan,” Xavier interjected.

“Zachary was concerned about radicals in the Ziggurat. Was Mort one of them?”

Emil cracked a smile. “Mort was like us—politically indifferent. Eno *and* God were anathema in his presence. Whenever he heard the young ones arguing he’d tell them to get back to work!”

“So he diligently did God’s work, but was indifferent to God Himself.”

“You have just described most of the Ziggurat,” Rosette retorted. “The radicals are vocal minorities. The majority of us are resigned to our fate. God may keep us here, but Eno hasn’t got us out either.”

“Not that we have reason to complain,” Emil expounded. “Xavier has told us stories. Your scars confirm what lies beyond these tower walls. We may be imprisoned, segregated—but it is for our good, as much as yours. The artisan sensibility wouldn’t last a day under Homeland conditions. We’ve become too soft.”

“Spoiled,” Rosette agreed.

“Well,” said Keller, relaxing his approach, “for what it’s worth, the Homeland appreciates the Ziggurat’s work—and not just Zeaven. I’ve seen your names on a popular record—*Nocturnes* by Chop-in.”

“Show-pan,” Rosette corrected gently. “That’s wonderful to hear.”

“Would you like a sneak-peak of what we’re working on now?” Emil posed tentatively.

“Please.”

The husband and wife nodded, beckoning their audience over to a pearl-white piano.

“Our grand baby,” Emil explained, patting the key-cover. He raised it, and the duo sat side-by-side upon the bench. They poised hovering hands perhaps half-an-inch above the keys as though afraid that the slightest touch might do it harm.

They nodded to one another, and a warm yet wistful melody began to play.

To Keller, who had never heard live music before, the performance was mesmerizing. All Homelanders had were imported Ziggurat records—made in these very cubes, he realized. Though a lengthy piece in actuality, as the final notes faded he felt it had ended all too soon.

“Wonderful,” he managed, suddenly hoarse.

“It’ll be made available to the Homeland soon, along with the other Gould arrangements we’ve managed to recreate,” Rosette explained as she rose from the bench. “We can earmark you a copy, if you’d like.”

“I’ll get it to you,” Xavier offered.

“Thanks,” Keller accepted.

Emil chuckled. “The books say you could hear him humming along in the original recordings—a maddening mar to otherwise flawless sessions.”

“We debated recreating it as a little joke, but thought better of it,” Rosette confessed.

“A joke like that should only be told once,” Emil agreed.

“So,” said Xavier, sensing a lapse in the conversation, “dinner at six?”

“No, at Two,” Emil punned.

“Right you are,” Xavier humored. “In the meantime, if Keller is agreed, we’ll go have a look at the remains.”

Keller nodded. “Who do we talk to, to unweld the door?”

“Shelby,” recommended Rosette. “She studied under Mort. She’ll know if anything’s out of place, as well.”

Keller shook hands with the couple once more.

“Thanks for the song,” he said simply.

They smiled.

Chapter Three

Keller breathed it in as the elevator parted. Level Twelve smelled crisp and cold, like cotton soaked with alcohol, excepting the faintest insidious whiff of something gone awry which lurked in the periphery. Xavier began to explain the gargantuan honeycomb-like structure which loomed before them as they skirted it, veering towards the more mundane architecture of offices and living quarters on its outskirts.

“Space was an issue for so many simultaneous projects—this was Eno’s solution,” Xavier gestured. “The Hive can be reconfigured at will, expanding, contracting, or conjoining chambers as the artisans agree. Not only did it bestow physical flexibility; it also fostered a hitherto absent spirit of teamwork amongst the residents of Twelve. Consequently, you will see more Enoists and Deists working side by side in this level than anywhere else, which makes a possible murder here all the more inflammatory.”

“Are volatile chemicals allowed to leave the Hive?” Keller asked, eyeing its fortifications.

“No; hazardous materials are carefully controlled and everyone is searched upon entering and exiting. Whether it was Mort or his killer who brought out the bomb, someone must have looked the other way.”

The charnel scent grew in intensity as they progressed, taking on textures of dense smoke and rubberized flesh. Xavier pointed down a labyrinthine corridor. “There. See the reinforced door?”

Keller nodded. “Where’s our contact?”

“Sorry!” a female voice called from behind. “Hive security’s been sluggish ever since.”

“Shelby!” Xavier exclaimed, slipping past Keller to embrace the newcomer.

She was quite tall, with blonde hair in a ponytail tucked into the nape of her lab coat.

“It’s so good to see you,” she groaned to Xavier.

Releasing him, she extended a hand to Keller.

“Shelby,” she introduced herself.

“Keller,” he responded, liking her instantly.

“You had yet to earn your coat the last I saw you,” Xavier fawned. “How proud Mort must have been!” He trailed off. “What happened here?” he asked, looking back towards the foreboding door.

Shelby shook her head. “One of my students saw Mort meet Zachary in the hall. Other than walking a little quickly, they seemed normal, calm. They were in there at least an hour before the explosion. Must have had a lot to talk about.”

“Was it unusual for Zachary to meet an artisan in their living quarters?” Keller asked.

“Maybe if it was someone younger—but Mort? With his seniority, it was the same as if he’d dropped in on Emil and Rosette.”

“Did anyone hear anything beforehand? See anyone who doesn’t belong hanging around?”

Shelby considered. “Someone said they could hear music coming from inside, which is a little odd. Mort wasn’t one to blast his tunes ever, much less with company over. As for strange people,” she touched her nose and then her chin thoughtfully, “none that I’ve been told about.” She paused. “Shall I open her up for you?”

“Please,” said Xavier.

“I won’t be but a moment,” she replied, stepping around a bend.

Keller glanced at Xavier, then back at the door in question. The explosion had been improbably contained—other than burn marks and soot around the doorframe, there was hardly an evidence of destruction in the outer hall. “I’d say the other residents got lucky,” Keller commented, tapping a finger against a neighboring dormitory. “Whole place could have gone up.”

Shelby returned with a welding mask and heavy-duty torch. She had changed out of her lab coat and into a protective uniform.

“Alright,” she breathed, lowering the visor as she knelt before the door. Keller and Xavier stood back as a shower of sparks shot like confetti about the hallway. The door wobbled and warped as its weld was hewn, until it leaned drunkenly and forlorn to one side, allowing access.

“I’d let it cool for a sec,” Shelby advised, flicking a molten speck off her uniform with a gloved finger.

Keller peaked inside and was immediately greeted by a nauseating undertone of rot amidst the prevailing charcoal. Visually, little more than a swamp of ashen slag remained. The floor was sunken from the initial blast, with the room’s liquified walls flowing into this impromptu basin. He could barely discern two withered husks, limbless torso-like lumps, floating atop the mire. He didn’t have to look long to see that Zachary and Mort had taken any subtle clues with them.

“What do we know about the bomb?” he asked.

“Not much,” said Shelby. “Whatever it was, it burned fast and hot—so much so that it spent almost all the oxygen in the room. Practically snuffed itself out.”

“Was that by design?”

She considered him critically. "It's one hell of a coincidence if it wasn't. Whoever did this, they had a light touch."

"Like Mort?" Keller asked.

Shelby pursed her lips. "Maybe. I wouldn't have believed it, but..."

"Well," Xavier comforted her, "either way, he would have been glad to know that so few were harmed."

"Yeah," she smiled softly.

"Was Mort working on anything special lately, or under more stress than usual?"

She cocked her head to the side. "No. Not really. He'd been on the same project for a couple years now."

"Which was?"

"Genome sequencing."

Keller frowned. "Can you put that in layman's terms?"

"Um. He was mapping human DNA. Trying to understand how we evolved."

"Evolved?"

Xavier and Shelby exchanged a glance. "Tell him," Xavier said finally.

Shelby breathed. "Well, evolution is how we came to be, before God."

Keller blinked. "But God's always—"

"Yeah, no," Shelby cut him off. "Sorry to rain on your Homeland parade but, mankind has been around for hundreds of thousands of years, and God's only existed for the last three hundred of those."

"There were ancient peoples who didn't believe in him, refused to accept him, but—"

"We made God, Keller. We made it three hundred years ago. At first we just called it what it was—an Artificial

Intelligence. But eventually, we decided we couldn't trust ourselves anymore, so we turned it all over to It—to Him."

Keller looked at Xavier for verification. The Butler nodded solemnly.

"So how *did* we exist—before?"

"Fucking," Shelby floated.

Keller stared at her in disbelief.

"Before God, babies didn't come out of Angelic wombs; they came out of vaginas."

Keller saw the room swim before him. He grasped a doorframe for support.

Shelby couldn't quite suppress a grin. "Yeah, that's how most guys take it. Women are never quite as surprised."

Keller slowly slid to the ground, resting his palms on his knees.

"Sorry to disappoint," Shelby shrugged. "Anyways, back when sex did what it was supposed to do, only the creatures best suited to survive would reliably reproduce. This resulted in increasing improvement over time as only the descendants of those prime specimens stuck around, further amplifying their beneficial traits. Thus, the theory goes, simple organisms could become complex given enough time, eventually resulting in highly intelligent animals like us."

"Even if that's true," objected Keller, still dazed, "what's the use of studying it now? We're children of God—He does our *evolving* for us."

"We're kinda into knowledge for its own sake around here. It doesn't have to have an obvious purpose to be important."

Keller nodded, feigning comprehension.

"I think that's enough for one day," Xavier intervened.

"Sure," said Shelby, a tad disappointed.

The color was beginning to return to Keller's face as Xavier punched the elevator button labelled "Two".

"You'll have to forgive Shelby," the Butler said apologetically, turning to him. "She can be rather—flippant. Despite her vast knowledge, she has little understanding of the Homelander life, beyond a few vague memories of the Angels." He smiled nostalgically. "Did you know? It is a Butler's charge to transport new artisans to the Ziggurat. It was I, albeit a much younger version, who brought her here."

Keller murmured an acknowledgement distractedly.

Xavier stroked his mustache. "Shelby's uncouth presentation aside, I must accept responsibility for the disturbing information contained therein. I thought you would want to know as much about Mort as possible, but it may have been—"

"You did nothing wrong," Keller replied broodingly. "It's just..."

"Yes?" asked Xavier.

"I don't know. It changes things, somehow."

Xavier nodded empathetically. "It's like having a secret you cannot share because no one would believe you anyway." Xavier laughed a little. "I remember the time I tried to tell a fellow Homelander a few of the things the artisans have taught me. When we got to the topic of classical reproduction, he said 'C'mon, Xavier—a baby couldn't fit in there!'"

Keller smiled wryly, attempting to conceal the fact that this objection still sounded rather reasonable.

Mia and Penelope were adding the finishing touches to a lavish dinner as they arrived.

Xavier picked up one of the bottles on display at the center of the table and examined it critically. "Have you ever had Zine?" he asked Keller rhetorically. "It's a blend of fermented red grapes and vitamin B12. Tame in comparison to Zeaven, but pleasant enough when one still wants to keep their wits about them." He indicated a date on the label. "Ninety-three. Ancient, by Homeland standards." Replacing it gingerly, he selected a steak knife and deftly butterflied a delectable slab of red meat resting atop au jus and a garland of assorted herbs. He nodded approvingly at its richly pink center. "Zachary taught you well," he complimented the maids.

"Thank you," Penelope acknowledged waveringly, looking up from the floral arrangement she was adjusting. Recommencing with the sheers, she debated internally for a moment before continuing. "May I ask a question before our other guests arrive?"

"Of course," said Xavier.

The rhythmic snipping of the sheers ceased. "Do you think they suffered?"

Xavier deferred to Keller with a glance.

"No; I doubt they felt a thing," he assessed truthfully.

"Thanks," she said quietly.

Superfluous petals once more began to fall.

Emil and Rosette weren't far behind, arguing heatedly but good-naturedly about some subtlety of

musical interpretation as they exited the elevator. Xavier assisted Penelope in pulling out two chairs for the venerable couple at the head of the table.

“Bless you,” Rosette crooned, sinking into her chair. “What a day,” she commented.

“You and Keller both,” Xavier expounded, taking the chair opposite. “Not only did he appraise that grisly scene, but Shelby also gave him the lecture on the, the—” Xavier waved his fork, “—the birds and the bees.”

Keller frowned at this expression, discerning no connection whatsoever between infants exiting vaginas and either of these mythical creatures.

Emil clicked his tongue and glanced teasingly in Keller’s direction. “I hope she didn’t spoil your appetite. Mia and Penelope’s cooking is to die for!”

Keller took this ribbing good-naturedly, reaching for a steak knife to prove his fortitude.

“You let *Shelby* tell him?” Mia asked as she took her seat, wrinkling her nose.

Xavier cleared his throat and sawed seriously at his steak.

Keller chewed his first bite longingly, taste buds sent into shock by the vast repertoire of nuanced flavors exuding from the meat. He set down his utensils and placed his palms flat upon the tablecloth meditatively.

“Is there something wrong with it?” Penelope asked with concern. “If it’s too done I can make another.”

“It’s good,” he clarified. “Really, really good.”

Xavier laughed and tipped a bottle of Zine generously into Keller’s awaiting glass. “Sip this between bites.”

Keller obeyed, alternating between the delicacies with relish. Soon he was feeling high, but with sheer clarity

instead of stupor. He flexed his arms and hands, feeling power course through them. It was as though he had been unknowingly hollow and was suddenly filled. "Is this what all the food here is like?" he asked.

Penelope grinned. "We save the filet mignon for special occasions—but yes, compared to Homeland food, it's all like this."

Keller shook his head in disbelief, eyeing Xavier quizzically.

The Butler dabbed at his lips with a napkin, understanding. "God," he worded carefully, "associates variety with creativity, and monotony with conformity. Thus He affords artisans color and texture, and laborers perpetual sameness."

"Why does He let us have Ziggurat exports at all?" Keller wondered.

"Apparently, He tried doing without them at first," said Xavier, "but a certain amount of zest is necessary for all."

"Art keeps us sane," agreed Emil. "Its effects on us are stronger than we know."

"Do you think there were always these—divisions—between people in the old world?" Keller asked.

Rosette answered. "Segregation and inequality have always been with us. The situation of Homeland and Ziggurat is fundamentally different in only one aspect—it is the intentionality of God, rather than the unconsciousness of nature, that determines this disparity. In the past, exceptions were always possible, however rare—the most wretched slum could produce a child capable of changing the world, or a prince could decide to live as a pauper. But no more. Artificial, micro-managerial birth dispenses with

the magic of randomness, stripping away the x-factor that allows for an undictated life.”

Xavier set aside his Zine glass ponderously. “But that assumes, doesn’t it, that natural selection is the only variable?”

Rosette smiled patronizingly, explaining to Keller, “Our Butler is referring to a principle of Eno’s—that however much God may predetermine our biology, he has no power over our souls.”

“Take myself,” said Xavier. “I have it straight from the nursery Angels that there is no *intentionality* behind the birth of a Butler. The aptitude simply manifests itself unbidden and the Angels capitalize upon it.”

Rosette raised a hand in concession. “Perhaps there are immaterial variables. What remains to be seen is whether the vagaries of the immaterial can ever contend with the concreteness of the material!”

“Hm,” Xavier replied, taking back up his fork.

“What did Zachary think?” Keller asked Penelope.

She rearranged her napkin nervously. “Well, he seemed interested in the subject—curious where the knack for butling comes from, if not from God. But I don’t think he had any definite opinions.” She brushed an errant strand of hair over a dainty ear.

“Did he ever discuss it with Mort? It seems like he would have been the authority on this.”

“I don’t know,” Penelope apologized. “Maybe?”

“Zachary talked to everyone,” said Mia dismissively.

“He talked Enoism with Carlo all the time.”

“Carlo?” Keller questioned.

Penelope glanced at Mia appraisingly.

“The best illustrator in Five,” Mia answered confidently. “And one of the Ziggurat’s consummate philosophers.”

“Where does he fall on the political spectrum?”

Mia swished her Zine about the glass coquettishly.

“Deist, I guess you could say.”

Emil snorted. “If Carlo isn’t Deist, then I don’t know who is.”

Mia winked at the pianist and downed her glass.

Chapter Four

Keller knocked on Mia's door. She answered it in a nightgown revealingly parted, hair alluring disheveled, with a slight grin playing across her lips.

"Sleep well?" she asked disingenuously.

"Sure did," Keller boasted, revealing the empty Zeaven vial in his palm.

She took it from him unbidden and pocketed it. "If I keep asking Six for a hit, they're gonna think I have a problem."

He took this insinuation unflinchingly. "The only problem I have is figuring out who's telling the truth around here."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Carlo, in Five. How well do you know him?"

"Better than most."

"Introduce us. I need to hear the Deists' side of things."

"Sure," she replied, leaving the door ajar as she turned. "Just let me slip into something decent." She dropped her gown to the floor in full view of him before disappearing into a walk-in closet.

He shook his head amusedly and massaged the bruising crease of his elbow.

Keller concluded from the quiet of Five that artisans do not rise as early as Homelanders. Only a few souls stirred in the vast studio, armed mostly with coffee and sketchpads. The lower walls of the level were papered with thousands of drawings, some laminated, others hanging loose and tattered. The upper walls and ceiling bore a

gargantuan painting as-yet incomplete, a life-like menagerie of colorfully robed or muscularly nude figures in fever-dream landscapes teeming with serpents, goats, and doomy deaths.

Mia followed his gaze. “Carlo’s handiwork,” she explained. “A reproduction after a famous church in the old world.”

“How does he do it? *Up there*, I mean?”

“See the scaffold? He lies on his back and does a little at a time. He’s been at it for years.”

“Incredible.” Keller pointed to a massive corkboard laden with a series of incrementally changing images—a zany anthropomorphic mouse whistling merrily whilst manipulating a nautical wheel.

“What’s that?”

“I’m not sure,” admitted Mia as they approached.

“It’s a moving cartoon,” said a masculine voice from the shadows beside them. “Or it will be, once they’re finished.”

Mia smiled and embraced the man as he lumbered into the light. He was disconcertingly large, standing at least six and a half feet tall and as broad as two Kellers. Mia nearly disappeared from sight as he returned her hug with bulging, veiny arms, her face temporarily subsumed by his ample, unruly beard. Kissing Mia upon the forehead heartily, he released her to extend a hand to Keller.

“Carlo,” he introduced himself, “a proud Deist and humble painter.”

Keller shook his hand warily. “You call that humble?” he asked of the elaborate ceiling.

Carlo slapped Keller’s shoulder agreeably. “Touché, Sir Keller. I must concede that it takes a good deal of conceit to attempt a recreation of Michelangelo. Or even that

goddamned mouse,” he indicated, rolling his eyes. “I keep telling them to leave the picture-shows to Seven. A still has just as much or more import when properly done.”

“You know my name?” Keller noted.

“Of course!” Carlo exclaimed, playfully scandalized.

“We artisans are suckers for iconic aesthetics. The ropy musculature, surgically-scarred features, apex-predator gaze—you have captured the imagination of artisans entire. ‘You simply *must* see him, Carlo,’” he imitated, “‘it’s as though a personification of the Homeland stood before you—the pain unto endurance, the knightly obedience towards God!’” Carlo smiled. “You do not disappoint.”

Keller folded his arms, unsure whether he was being complimented or mocked.

“Don’t embarrass him, for God’s sake,” Mia chided.

“Nonsense,” said Carlo dismissively. “Come, I’ve something to show you.”

Mia and Keller followed his hulking form into a pigsty of a studio, carpeted with crushed paint-tubes, shattered pencil nubs, and spent bottles of turpentine.

“Here we are,” Carlo breathed self-satisfactorily, halting before a canvas upon an easel. Pausing for dramatic effect, he slowly rotated it towards them.

It was Keller in oils, true as a mirror, piercing onlookers with mute challenge, something menacingly aquatic about the gaunt cheeks blurred with reflective scar tissue like the gradual protrusion of gills.

“A student of mine saw you yesterday in Three. He was up all night making this from memory.”

Keller balked, unaccustomed to flattery.

“It’s quite good, isn’t it?” Carlo asked rhetorically through boastful pearly whites. “It’s untitled thus far, but ‘Homeland Personified’ is the favored contender.”

Seeing that Keller was at a loss for words, Carlo nodded to himself and returned the canvas to its original position. "But forgive a master for immodestly praising an apprentice. Doubtlessly there's a more pressing matter at hand?"

Mia answered, giving Keller time to recover. "He's dissatisfied with hearing only half of the Ziggurat's story from Xavier. He wants the Deist angle on Zachary and Mort."

Carlo nodded meditatively, drumming at the canvas with permanently-stained fingertips. "I think we can do that—certainly." He nodded again, this time resolute. "We'll take it from the top." He leaned against a nearby counter, preparing to hold forth at length. "God...was a creation of man with the aims to transcend man. His purpose was to save us from ourselves by serving as an administrative third-party. We had just concluded the worst of our wars, leaving very few of us alive. After roughly six thousand years of attempting to be civilized, we determined it just wasn't in us—we have the inclination but not the ability. We accepted the reasoning of a famous expression—'If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him.' Rather than repeat the cyclical cycle of empires' rise and fall and risk extinction in the process, we resolved to cap the human population by dispensing with natural birth. Nasty, animalistic business, anyway—unfettered breeding perpetuated poverty, with many mothers and children dying in the process. Evolution is as miraculous as it is clumsy."

Carlo brushed at his beard. "Not so with God. His artificial wombs keep society optimal—producers exactly equal to their production. This had long been a dream of mankind's progressives—'From each according to their

ability, to each according to their need'—but it is only possible when everyone is *forced* to adhere to those rules. Reintroduce free will, and our old self-serving tendencies will inevitably undo whatever equity has been achieved. That's where Homelanders like yourself come in, I understand. The vandals you combat are, despite God's modifications, unconsciously attempting to return to Instinct and Nature by dismantling the apparatus of control which keeps us civil and sane. A monkey detests to be trapped in a man."

Carlo smiled fondly at Mia before returning his gaze to Keller. "But think not that your vigilance shall be required of you forever, Sir Keller. God made us a little lower than the Angels, and soon the sons of man shall sit at the right hand of power."

Carlo rose, towering over his diminutive audience now. "We were close, very close, before the war began. We had built a tower that reached to heaven. Our pain was at an end. But chaos and confusion brought it low. It has taken three hundred years to regain that which was lost—the knowledge by which we might be made one with God."

Mia's eyes glistened religiously.

Carlo guffawed at Keller's uncomprehending expression. "My, I must sound like a crackpot mystic! But you'll see soon enough, Sir Keller. God works in mysterious ways. He knows the plans he has for us—plans to prosper, and not to harm!"

Jovially producing a crumpled packet of cigarettes from a back pocket, Carlo fished out three cylinders and distributed them. Teething his with relish, he sparked a lighter and stooped down to politely light Mia's and Keller's before his own.

Doggedly puffing now, intermixing ash with the art-supply refuse at their feet via mechanically intermittent taps, he considered his guests with a shrewd squint before lowering his voice conspiratorially. “The Ziggurat has almost run its course. The artisan purpose, to entertain and enable Homeland operations, will soon be antiquated.” He smiled at Keller’s passive disbelief. “You’ll be out of a job too, I’m afraid. There’ll be no more vandals to foil, nor machines to defend. We shall be—” he sought the proper word, frantically smoking, “—*transfigured*.”

“You should show us,” Mia suggested boldly. “Let him see the proof.”

“Ah,” Carlo grinned wolfishly, a precariously lengthy stem of ash wobbling at the end of his cigarette, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. Still,” he conceded, “it would be fun giving you Homelanders a sneak peak. It’s your birthright, after all—the reward for suffering unquestioningly at God’s infallible hand.”

The giant cast his cigarette stub aside and trod on it grimly. “We’ll stop by Six first. The one follows the other.”

Keller’s nostrils flared in incomprehension at the bizarre floral miasma permeating Level Six. It was a scent out of fever dream, sickly sweet and sinisterly nuanced like a delectable poison. This incense wafted from the heads of seductively colored flowers sprouting by the thousands from suspended glass plots akin to Homeland food factories. The Level’s climate was a perpetual sweaty summer in service of this intoxicating crop.

“*Papaver somniferum*, or opiate poppies,” Carlo commented, “the wellspring of Zeaven.”

Keller knelt beside one of the plots and touched a single budding capsule with outstretched fingers. Moments later, where a fingernail had imprinted, translucent white liquid began to pucker and pour.

Carlo cocked his head appraisingly. "An ample source of latex, too."

Keller rose.

"How many of the strains have you tried?" asked Carlo curiously.

Keller counted. "Sleepy, Sexy, Sad, Smart, Strong, Stoic..."

"Six of seven—a connoisseur," complimented Carlo.

"Which one have I missed?" Keller questioned.

Carlo smirked, stroking at his beard. "There is one strain we do not export—not yet, anyway. Its effects are extremely volatile without the proper supervision. We call it the Spirit strain. Its effect might be described as hallucinogenic, though, when appropriately applied, it causes not hallucination but *realization*. Would you like to try it?"

Keller shrugged. "Sure."

"Excellent." Carlo waved to a pharmacist in the distance to attract his attention. The artisan waved in reply. Carlo held up three fingers.

"Spirit!" he called.

The artisan nodded and held up an index finger, requesting patience.

Carlo pursed his lips in a slight pout.

"You hold a lot of sway, even outside of Five," Keller commented.

"I'm something of a Deist figurehead," Carlo confessed, "an anti-Eno. Minorities must stick together."

“Who’s your Enoist comparable? Deists have you; moderates have Emil and Rosette...”

Carlo twirled a finger about his beard. “It was Mort,” he said nonchalantly. “And his sycophant Xavier, to a lesser extent.”

Keller crossed his arms behind his back, debating. Finally, after trying in vain to read the equally inscrutable Mia, he decided to commit. “Was Mort trying to sabotage the Homeland’s nursery?”

Carlo tilted his head back. “What makes you think that?”

“He spent his life birthing humans into the society he wanted to free them from. There’s no way to square that unless he thought he could beat God at His own game—throw a wrench in the Homeland gears.”

“Hm,” Carlo contemplated. “And what if he was, Sir Keller? Would you pour him a glass of Zine, or chuck a molotov at him?”

Keller held Carlo’s gaze unblinkingly. “I’d let God decide.”

“The unassailable answer of a saint,” Carlo responded, clapping Keller on the shoulder.

The pharmacist approached with a stainless-steel tray bearing three small silvery cups.

“Ah,” Carlo acknowledged delightedly, accepting the tray, “our ‘portable ecstasies’ have arrived.”

“It’s not injected?” Keller asked.

“No. This is modelled after the laudanum of yore—to be sipped and swallowed.” Carlo extended the tray to Keller and Mia.

Keller nodded uncertainly, selecting the cup nearest Carlo.

“And now,” Carlo crooned, “a toast.” He set the tray aside and drew his cup upwards to the light reverently. “Restore us, oh God, ‘to that state which the mind would naturally recover upon the removal of any deep-seated irritation of pain that had disturbed and quarreled with the impulses of a heart originally just and good.’” Carlo winked disingenuously before adding, “And deliver us from disguises, oh God, for ‘most men are disguised by sobriety.’ Amen.”

The trio quaffed their drinks on simultaneous cue. Keller immediately squatted to his haunches, spluttering, whilst Mia’s face successively flushed and turned deathly pale.

Carlo took it unflinchingly, if a little glassy-eyed. Its onset was heady and sluggish like amplified alcohol, benumbing the face, stultifying the tongue, heavying fingertips and toes, prickling not unpleasantly down neck and gullet to warm, final obfuscation in the gut.

Keller rose tentatively, expecting the room to pitch sideways at any moment. When it did not, he placed his cup back upon the tray with needless intentionality, finding also that his depth perception was unaffected. The initial stupor was already opening up, unfurling suggestively like the flourishing cape of a magician about to snatch a rabbit from his hat. The familiar Zeaven bliss was there, certainly—a post-orgasmic adagio like a weary hog settling into a temperate mudbath—but with an unexpected edge like the prick of a feather’s spine concealed amidst ample down. Strange, rose-gold auras were beginning to emanate from visual divisors about them like zany radiation—buzzing, crackling, in intangible heat.

Carlo slapped his forehead with faux concern. "I do believe they've increased the potency. The onset is faster than I expected."

He led them back to the elevator at a tentative trot, punching Seven with urgency.

"*Fuck me,*" Mia summarized, resting her forehead against the cool inlaid mirror as the elevator plunged.

Carlo looked at her in momentary bewilderment, unsure whether this was an observation or a request.

Keller laughed at both of them, for they lacked a junkie's enviable resignation.

Keller paused before the inky calligraphic inscription upon Seven's otherwise nondescript wooden wall, mouthing the words inquisitively.

"But let my due feet never fail
To walk the studious cloister's pale
And love the high embow'ed roof,
With antick pillars massy proof,
And storied windows richly dight,
Casting a dim religious light.
There let the pealing organ blow,
To the full voiced Quire below,
In service high and anthems clear,
As may with sweetness, through mine ear,
Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all Heaven before mine eyes."

Below, it merely read, "Il Penseroso, Author Unknown."

"Come, come," Carlo gestured worriedly.

Mia was ahead of them both, making a wobbly beeline for the bizarre lounge that awaited. Upon the bare

hardwood floor rested several dozen tatami mats, partitioned off from one another by silky, superfluous modesty screens. Each mat was staffed by a miniature Angel which sat politely at its head, inertly awaiting its next prostrated client.

The Angels awoke and turned swiveling heads to survey their guests as Mia promptly dropped upon the first mat she reached, expectantly tugging back her hair from her ears.

In compliance, her accompanying Angel began to divulge its earbud tendrils from its mouth, leaning over to drape this petite metallic tongue lovingly across her face. The wire moved of its own accord, feeling and straightening before inserting itself unaided into her awaiting ear canals. She went rigid for but a moment, palms arching, neck craning, then relaxed utterly as though unconscious.

Keller grimaced as Carlo took the adjacent mat. His giant body hung over its edges ridiculously.

The painter glanced up at him and motioned to another mat. "It's too late to back out now, Sir Keller. Only the Angels are strong enough to guide you safely through the Spirit strain."

Unfolding his arms, Keller dropped to a sitting position upon a mat and laid back with hands behind his head in devil-may-care fashion.

Carlo closed his eyes as his Angel's wire wormed towards his ears. "Today, Keller, you will be with me in paradise."

Keller shifted uncertainly, trying his best not to think of his last Angelic encounter as the earbuds pressed into place.

Then he was so dead he had never been alive.

He was an ambitious germ mutating inexplicably.

He was an oyster painstakingly tonguing grains to pearls.

He was an angler-fish illumining abyssal plains.

He was an amphibious serpent weaving past beachy reeds.

He was a cockroach skittering over cooling lava.

He was a jealous monkey braining its brother with a pointy branch.

He was a fur-clad diabolist drunk on ritual murder.

He was a painfully-erect king tottering couch-to-couch.

He was a prima donna annunciating unto aneurism.

He was a philanthropic patron throwing wide the trove.

He was a nearsighted book-maker setting letters to tiles.

He was a practical dreamer dreaming in the language of computers.

He was a cybernetic spider braiding fiberoptic cables.

He was a blue-print-bearing mole boring through socio-political detritus.

He was a holographic gull gliding through a glittering sable vacuum.

He was the burst pipe supplying a Super-Sargasso Sea.

He was an egomaniacal eye atop a pyramid.

He was all, and being all, ceased to be any.

Hours had passed when he awoke. Mia was still sleeping. Carlo was already up, pacing back and forth good-naturedly along the periphery of the lounge.

Keller got to his knees, then stood up with effort.

He felt ancient, and hollow-boned as a bird. The

translucent, pearlescent sheen of grandeur still faintly glistened on the surface of his consciousness. He rubbed dream-besotted eyes and suddenly, violently sneezed.

Carlo chuckled. "That always happens afterwards," he called. "We don't know why."

Keller strolled over to Mia and toed at her curiously. "She looks dead."

"Females take longer to resurface—to regain their idiosyncratic identity." Carlo joined Keller at Mia's side. "We can leave. She may be a while, yet."

The men made their way back to the elevator. "Do you like it?" Carlo asked, indicating the entrance inscription. "It was my selection and calligraphy. The librarians think it was written by a lesser contemporary or successor to the poet called The Bard. Both lived roughly five hundred years before God."

Keller sighed, finding the thought somehow melancholic. "Did Mort never visit Level Seven? Maybe he wouldn't have hated God so much, or wanted us to go back..."

Carlo summoned the elevator grimly. "Mort was well-acquainted with every Level's offerings. He found what you have just experienced to be abominable. He said one would do better to kill themselves in search of an afterlife than be bound to a man-made matrix." The painter snorted. "The Enoists are masochists, Keller. They fear pleasure; misery is their sole delight. They romanticize the gore of childbirth, the false glory of war—anything but lasting pleasure or peace. They laud evolution, but they would have us scale back down those very rungs and be content with low-hanging fruits. To do so would mean the Homeland has suffered in vain. But this," he motioned expansively, "this is the right reward of sainthood. It is

foretold in God's code—soon we shall be allowed to let the earbuds linger, and be with God as He always intended. You have merely had a taste—the Angels can be perfected to transfer the consciousness over entirely.”

“Why not now? The Homeland is ready!” Keller exclaimed.

The elevator opened. “The fault lies solely with the Ziggurat.”

Carlo stepped inside, Keller following.

“As you may have noticed, nothing and no one can leave this tower without going through Level Two.”

Keller nodded.

“There the butling staff appraise artisan products and confirm or deny their exportation. This is a highly political process founded upon the one rule which has kept peace amongst the artisans.”

“Which is?”

“To never directly involve Homelander in our disagreement.” Carlo tugged at his beard frustratedly. “Seven's product is of course classified as such. Our Spirit strain and modified Angels are Deism in its most direct form.”

“And yet you involved Mia and me. Won't the Enoists view that as a breach of contract?”

Carlo smiled. “They no longer have recourse. Any complaint would be blatant hypocrisy.”

The elevator stopped at Five. Carlo held the button to keep it sealed.

“So Mort *involved* Zachary?” Keller asked.

Carlo nodded.

“What did he ask him to do?”

“The Enoists have a final product comparable yet inverse to ours. Mort asked Zachary to be its courier. Think of it as a weapon with which to kill God.”

Keller frowned perplexedly.

“When you and Xavier return to the Homeland to give your report, you will determine the outcome of our arms race. You may either allow God to die, and have suffered for naught—or you may inform Him that we are ready to consummate his code and render this hellish world a paradise.”

The giant removed his finger from the button.

A dozen pairs or more of outstretched arms writhed through the widening doors, seizing Carlo and Keller menacingly. Keller had drawn his gun from muscle memory before the conscious thought entered his mind and found himself squeezing off rounds rapidly into the blurred, frenzied forms before them. Lifeless bodies toppled over and onto him, pinning him under. He looked up, disoriented, to see Carlo twisting an assailant’s neck as though wringing a rag. Freeing his arm, Keller shot another attacker in the face at point-blank range as he knelt with a knife held aloft. Inhaling and choking on the fine spray of blood which misted the entire elevator, Keller felt the pistol slide lock back—signaling an empty chamber—and desperately shoved himself upwards and free to meet a final attacker hand-to-hand. Bringing his knees between the attacker’s chest, he bit off one of the clawed fingers probing for his eye-socket and spit it wrathfully into its owner’s face. Taking this same arm by the wrist, he yanked it towards his far shoulder and commenced wrapping his legs around the attacker’s neck in a constricting triangle, using the man’s own outstretched arm to seal shut the carotid artery as he squeezed. He stared into his opponent’s eyes as they

drooped towards unconsciousness and finally lolled into death.

Releasing his legs, he pushed the corpse away disgustedly and slid to the back of the elevator, instinctively grabbing up a knife where it lay.

All was quiet in Five, excepting several terrified painters who cowered in the distance.

Keller turned, panting, to Carlo. The giant's head rested serenely upon his chest. He was full of knives buried to their hilts, his great gory hand still firmly gripped about the detached jaw he had taken as a final trophy.

Chapter Five

Keller watched as the painters prepared their master's corpse. One of them worked diligently at his face with a makeup brush, delicately layering powdered false color atop the amplifying pallor beneath. Another stood by with a loaded palette before a fresh canvas, tentatively tracing out a frozen immortalization of the funereal proceedings. Behind, another crew of painters were still scouring the elevator with cleaning chemicals, having already identified, dismembered, and shrink-wrapped the corpses for eventual delivery to Twelve's incinerators.

Whilst having his cuts and bruises treated, Keller had learned that these deceased assassins were all known Enoists. One of them, whilst holding Five hostage and awaiting Keller and Carlo's return, had let slip that they intended to avenge Mort. Keller was still pondering this dourly, tossing his new knife back-and-forth from one hand to another.

If the Enoists thought Carlo had killed Mort and Zachary, why wait until now for revenge?

'Blatant hypocrisy.'

Because Carlo had involved a Homelander.

'Was Mort trying to sabotage the Homeland's nursery?'

Just as Mort had involved Zachary.

'He told me he was going to the music level.'

But did Zachary have Enoist sympathies due to Xavier's indoctrination?

'You've just described most of the Ziggurat.'

Or was he torn between Enoists and moderates?

'Whoever did this, they had a light touch.'

Carlo may have *wanted* to kill them—but was he the only one? Keller had never known a man of such bravado and physical prowess to kill with explosives at a cowardly distance.

‘The unassailable answer of a saint.’

“Sir Keller?” one of the painters intoned concernedly, continuing Carlo’s honorific. “Someone’s calling from Level Twelve.”

“How do you mean?” Keller asked, hastening over.

“There’s a com-system in the elevator; we use it to coordinate when the elevator needs repairs or is stuck at a Level like we’re keeping it now.”

“Answer it,” Keller ordered the artisan, kneeling next to him at the elevator’s control panel.

“Hello?” asked a feminine voice. It was Shelby’s.

“Shelby? It’s Keller.”

“Keller—what’s going on?”

“Some of your Enoist assholes attacked me and Carlo.”

“Holy shit! I had nothing to do with that, Keller!”

“Yeah, well forgive me if I’m a tad paranoid.” Keller thumbed his knife aggravatedly. “If you want your elevator or my trust back, I need to know what everyone’s been hiding from me.”

“...Alright. But it deserves a face-to-face. If you thought what I dropped on you earlier about birth before God, you have no idea...”

Keller considered.

“It’s just gonna be little ole me,” Shelby continued, “Besides, you’ve got all of Five backing you up.”

“Alright,” Keller agreed, “but if this elevator door reopens and I see anything other than blonde hair and a lab

coat, I'll have these painters dump a vat of acid in, or something."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Shelby kept her hands above her head as the elevator doors peeled back, revealing a squad of painters armed with mallets, screwdrivers, and other potentially deadly accouterments. A single hefty book lay at her feet. Keller pushed past his impromptu militia and tucked his knife into his belt.

"C'mon."

"Carlo's dead?" Shelby asked as Keller arranged two chairs for them.

He nodded.

"E-no," she invoked, taking a seat opposite.

"He thought it was safe to show me what the Deists have been working on, since Mort already broke the rule with Zachary."

"We recognize the consequences of what Mort did. The rule, once broken, can never be restored. Whatever they killed him for, that wasn't it."

Keller eyed her shrewdly before admitting, "They said it was to avenge Mort and Zachary. They're convinced Carlo was responsible."

Shelby grimaced. "And yet they attacked while you were with him. Whoever gave this order, they were hoping you'd be killed as well."

Keller glared. "Stop stalling and tell me what I want to know."

"Alright!" Shelby fidgeted. "You're gonna have to bear with me; I suck at reading aloud." Cracking open the book upon her lap, she breathed deeply. "I am dually

haunted by the horror of what I have set in motion and my inability to see it to completion. It has taken my lifetime merely to lay this philosophic foundation; it will take many lifetimes more to manifest it through science. I do not know exactly how it will be done—only that it must be a visiting Homelander who does it. Great discretion must be taken in selecting the correct individual. Even then, it will be an outrageous gamble—generations of toil and the lives of every artisan wagered on the ability of an individual brainwashed since birth to sense the truth by instinct alone. If, against all odds, such a Saint of Humanhood is afforded us, then surely a true and merciful God does exist, and has indeed commanded that we...”

“...be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it,” Shelby repeated in the darkness of Mort’s room.

Keller felt something shift beneath their feet deep in the floor of Level Twelve.

“Now they have to answer,” she explained enigmatically, shutting the book.

A grating noise began as the seams which had formed at the center of the room widened and sunk, revealing a small stairwell.

“Mort and Zachary didn’t die from the explosion,” Shelby confessed.

Keller watched her intently.

“I found them all. Carlo was sitting here, covered in blood, weeping. He said he had to enforce the rule. I don’t know how he knew. Once he calmed down, we agreed to cover it up with an explosion. It was a good deal—Carlo got to live, and I got to buy Level Thirteen more time. But

someone else must have found out and sicced the Deists on him and you. Probably the same someone who told him the rule had been broken.”

“So a third party is bumping off anyone who tries to change things around here by pitting Enoists and Deists against one another.”

Shelby nodded.

“Zachary told Penelope he was going to the music level before he ended up here...” Keller reasoned.

“And so he did,” said Xavier as he peered in from the hallway.

Keller turned, knife at the ready.

Xavier raised his hands peaceably. “He knew, more-or-less, what Mort was going to ask of him, so he sought counsel just before their rendezvous. Unfortunately, in doing so he revealed a budding revolution to the keepers of the status quo, and paid for it with his life.”

“Emil and Rosette...” Keller pondered.

Xavier nodded. “You heard them last night. The moderates are elitists. They want nothing to do with Homelander, be it freeing them from or uniting them with God. They would stay in this prison forever, so long as they can feel superior while doing so. Thus, upon hearing the rule had been broken, they endeavored to spark a civil war which would eliminate all idealists, no matter the side. Shelby tried to stop it by absolving Carlo of his crime, and it might have been allowed to work had he not involved you. But now you are just as much of a threat as Zachary was. They know if you reach Level One and pray, their status quo is finished, one way or another.”

“How many more troops do they have?” Keller asked. “How many more fanatics do I have to kill?”

“None, so far as I can tell. Your miraculous survival in Level Five has put a chill in the blood of any remaining Enoist zealots, the Deists consider you a God-sent friend of Carlo’s, and the moderates are too lily-livered to risk their precious lives. Besides, killing you is hardly the ideal solution to begin with—that would just prompt more Homelanders to come snooping about.”

“Then what’s their play?”

“That’s why I’m here. There’s just one move left, and that is to remove us from God’s good graces. Doubtlessly they’ve already convinced Mia to pray with some elaborate tale about how we’ve betrayed Him. They know His code; they’ll make it convincing.”

“But isn’t Mia a Deist?” clarified Shelby.

“Mia’s Deism died with Carlo,” Xavier explained. “She believes whatever is in her best interests to believe.”

“Then we’re already dead,” said Keller.

“That depends on how far you’re willing to go,” said Xavier as he motioned towards the stairwell.

Keller looked at it and shrugged, wielding the knife warily as he ventured downwards into Level Thirteen.

This level felt much smaller than the others—cozy, even—with vast portions still sealed away. Several trunks and refrigerators lined its walls, and in its center, haloed by artificial light, there sat a woman in a rocking chair. She was holding something. As the group neared, this something stirred and made a cooing noise. It was a newborn infant.

Keller froze, paralyzed, in the shadows.

Shelby touched him lightly upon the shoulder. “It’s alright, Keller. Come say hello.”

Nodding, he tucked the knife back into his belt and took a few tentative steps closer.

Xavier brushed past and dropped to a knee adoringly at the chair's side. "Marissa!" he whispered. "They told me you had died!"

The mother reached out her hand and cupped Xavier's cheek lovingly. "It was a ruse. Mort and I were married." She sighed deeply. "It took him many, many years to desterilize. It only affects males, you know. God tried it with females too, but they all went mad." She closed her eyes tiredly, gently continuing to rock. "He's dead, isn't he?"

Xavier's voice broke. "Yes."

"We heard yelling, silence, and then the explosion...He'd never left us alone for that long before. I was beginning to worry about the food, the formula..."

Opening her eyes, she smiled brilliantly at Shelby. "And who is this handsome young man you've brought with you, Shelby?"

Shelby squeezed his shoulder again and pushed him forward.

"Keller, ma'am," he introduced.

"My, my," she said, clucking her tongue. "What a life you look to have lived. Is this our Saint of Humanhood?" she asked, looking first at Shelby, then back at Xavier.

"He hasn't decided yet," Xavier explained.

"I see," she answered gravely. "In that case," she concluded, stirring, "you must hold him." She extended the infant towards Keller as though offering a gift.

He stared at her.

"It will help you decide."

He shook his head before dropping to a sitting position upon the floor. Raising hands to forehead

nauseously, he whispered, almost incoherently, “We were to be freed of this.”

“Excuse me?”

“This! *This!*” he clarified. “It’s rebellion against the course of history. You would return us to the way of beasts!”

“We are beasts,” Marissa replied. “We prove it every moment with our thoughts, and every day with our actions. Oh yes. It takes much beastliness to assume the affectation of being a *person*.”

Keller clenched his jaw. “We are as God makes us.”

“No, not us, sir—neither you nor me,” Marissa chided. “Here in my arms is the first living human that God has made.”

Dropping his head to his chest, Keller began to weep. Shelby knelt down and hugged him close.

Marissa returned the infant to her breast, satisfied.

“*Ecce homo*,” she quoted.

“Even so,” said Xavier, “he cannot return to the Homeland conventionally—we have been betrayed.”

“Mort took no chances,” she smiled, pointing.

Xavier, Shelby, and eventually Keller’s eyes followed her finger to its conclusion at a great, spherical object tucked in a corner and concealed by an oily tarp.

“A miniature submarine!” Shelby admired breathlessly.

Xavier polished the front visor with his shirtsleeve.

“A fine vessel, but still hopelessly landlocked.”

Marissa joined them, still cradling the child. “The wall just behind it is rigged to blow. After that it’s just a few yards’ drop into the ocean.”

Xavier struck his forehead. "This is the real reason why Eno sealed Thirteen, isn't it? He needed the lowest level to serve as a dock!"

"He hoped it wouldn't be necessary—but yes."

"Why?" Keller questioned. "Why hesitate to do this?"

Marissa looked at Shelby.

Shelby paused. "Because of the tower's design. It's structured to topple in the event of an escape attempt. An explosion big enough to breach a wall will bring the whole thing down."

"So for us to make it back to the Homeland—"

"—everyone in the Ziggurat must die," Marissa concluded.

"One cannot topple a god without breaking a few eggs," Xavier summarized coolly.

Keller sighed. "Who's going?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Marissa laughed. "You, Shelby, and Ziggy." The infant stirred at its name.

"No, Marissa," Shelby began.

Marissa raised a hand to silence her. "Ziggy needs someone who can impart all of the Ziggurat's knowledge, and there's only room for two adults."

"And the other adult had better be someone who can protect him," Xavier smiled at Keller.

The men and women looked at one another, and eventually embraced.

"You remember the course Mort charted?" Xavier asked wistfully, chain-smoking his last cigarettes.

Shelby tapped her temple. "Due south. Mort theorized this tower is in the center of what was once called

Lake Michigan, with the Homeland being the southern shore of a state by the same name," she explained to Keller.

Pleased, Xavier brushed playfully at Ziggy's wisp of hair, then set his shoulder against the vessel's hatch in preparation. Marissa leaned in and gave her baby boy one last kiss.

As the hatch squealed shut, Shelby sought and found Keller's hand in the dark. Keller squeezed her hand tight to help stop her shaking. Taking the sub's controls in her other hand, she started up the engine and shifted to neutral.

The vessel rocked back and forth menacingly as the opposite wall exploded, peppering the level with shrapnel. Shelby and Keller could hear the desperate cries of Xavier and Marissa as they heaved at the sphere, helping propelling it across the floor towards the oceanic opening. Even from within the sub they could tell the Ziggurat was already wobbling on its foundations. Their hearts leapt and Ziggy screamed as the sub went over the precipice and plummeted through murky, foaming depths. Shelby's hands steadied as she gunned the engine into gear and hit the gas.

Seconds later, they could feel the wake of the tower's fall in the form of violent waves buffeting against their rudder.

The sub nuzzled the beachfront, shoved forward a few inches more by the tide until it sank and settled amidst the sand. The trio pushed open their hatch and spilled out upon the shore. Keller scanned the horizon suspiciously,

head swiveling for signs of danger, but no Angels awaited them amidst the desolation.

“Where is it?” Shelby asked as they made for the dunes.

Keller tapped the ground with his boot. “Under.”

They continued walking in silence for a time.

“How will we get in?”

“The aero-shafts.”

They trod on through a landscape of frost and blighted trees, with Keller deviating to take the high-ground intermittently to make sure they were still on course. Eventually he glimpsed the telltale concrete lip of a shaft and they jogged for it. The baby was getting cold.

“Give me Ziggy,” Keller commanded as they huddled about the entrance, catching their breath.

“Why?”

“You should stay here in case Eno’s theory was wrong.”

“And do what, Keller?” she asked frustratedly. “I’ve got nowhere to go back to.”

They considered one another.

“Alright,” he conceded. “I’ll deal with the Angels. You protect Ziggy.”

“I remember that scent,” she commented as they clamored into the shaft.

“Mm?” he asked.

“The smell of captivity.”

He sniffed. “Yours was more floral.”

They smiled at one another.

“Alright,” he breathed. “Let’s go.”

As they slipped into the hanger bay, a clock on the wall betrayed that it was almost lights out.

Keller led the woman and child on a scattered course towards the bunks, careful to avoid the usual haunts of Angels.

Shelby clutched Ziggy under her coat, pressing his pacifier upon him insistently.

Just as they rounded the final bend, too late Keller glimpsed an Angel levitating towards their direction.

“Keller,” it spoke as it caught sight of him. “You are not due for Here-ness—”

He buried his knife deep within its silicone skull. It sparked and hissed as its levitation failed and it crashed, top-heavy, to the ground. Keller left the knife where it lay, urging Shelby into the Bunk Room before other Angels came to investigate the noise.

They tucked Ziggy under the covers of Keller’s bunk just as lights out commenced. Stripping off their clothes, trying to avoid eye contact, they imitated the mass of Homelanders in their nightly ritual. Tucking himself in beside Shelby, Keller was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when he felt Esther’s mouth press against his ear.

“Who’s that bitch?” she asked of Shelby playfully.

He watched in horror as she yanked back the blankets to get a better look.

She froze at the sight of Ziggy, forgetting even to release the blanket.

Keller, Shelby, and Esther considered one another.

“Oh my God,” Esther said dazedly.

“Be quiet,” Keller begged her.

“Oh my God,” she said louder.

He grabbed at her arm but she pulled away. By now she was screaming it.

“OH MY GOD!”

Other Homelanders began to rise and congregate.

Keller stood atop the bed and began to shove some of them back.

“Keller.” He felt Shelby’s arms around his shoulders. “Let them come.”

He hesitated, then relaxed and dropped to a cross-legged position beside Ziggy, who was continuing to suckle at his pacifier contentedly.

Hundreds of Homelanders ringed Keller’s cot, eerily quiet.

“What is it?” one of them eventually asked.

Shelby smiled. “It’s a baby.”

“What’s that?”

“A human who was born.”

The inquisitive one considered this. "God didn't make it?"

"No. A man and a woman did."

The questioner rubbed his face. "I don't understand," he quavered.

Tears fell from Keller's eyes. "Yes, you do." He took Ziggy in his arms. "Do you want to hold him?"

The Homelander's hands began to shake. "Yes."

Keller passed him.

The man cradled Ziggy and began to weep openly. "What's happening to me?"

Shelby rose and embraced the stranger. "Real life," she answered simply.

A murmur began to emanate from the edges of the crowd. Angels were coming.

The youngster perked up and asked Shelby to take Ziggy back. As she obliged, he turned to the others. "They can't hurt him," he said plainly. "They won't."

"They can't," a nearby voice agreed.

"They won't," others resolved.

The chant carried. It began to echo across the expanse of the bunks.

"They can't. They won't. They can't."

The first Angels that entered the room were ripped limb from limb by the mob. Keller slipped past Shelby. "Where are you going?"

“They can’t! They won’t! They can’t!” the crowd roared.

“To finish it,” he said, giving her a kiss.

Sprinting naked through the frigid halls, Keller navigated the maze, approaching the place known as the Holy of Holies. Usually guarded by Angels, even these had vacated their posts in a futile attempt to quell the unprecedented riot.

He strolled, unopposed, into a catacomb of towering server banks, sleek and black, that exuded steam and a constant, vibratory hum.

“Where are you?” Keller demanded of the expanse. “Answer me!”

In the distance, the light within one of the server banks began to flicker. Keller watched, dumbfounded, as this flickering slowed in frequency, eventually dwindling to complete extinguishment. Then another server, this one nearer to him, began to do the same.

“That’s all it took?” Keller whispered to himself. “A single son of man...?”

Now multiple servers at a time were darkening with finality, humming reduced with each passing moment like a hive doused in pesticide.

Tremulously uplifting his arms until they hung cruciform, Keller began to laugh, shaken in his core. “It,” he spluttered, “is,” spittle flew from his lips, “finished!”

AFTERWORD

Christopher is also the author of *Our Work and Will: A Compilation* (2016) and *Deus Non Machina: A Compilation* (2017).

Feedback?

Contact electric.oldschool@gmail.com
w/ "Blue Testament" in Subject.

www.christopherleewinn.com