



# Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – (X, Y, Z, W) by Luke Hannon. Mr. Hannon is an aspiring author and poet from County Meath, Ireland. In 2022, he received first place in the Macra na Feirme Creative Writing Competition Poetry Section with his poem ‘Altar Man’. He has previously been published in the *Irish Farmer’s Journal*, *Agriland*, *Wingless Dreamer*, *Suburban Witchcraft*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, *Black Poppy Review*, *Nat1 Press*, *Unstamatic*, and *Supernatural Park Podcast*. He is soon to be published in *Running Wild*, two Nat1 Publishing anthologies and *Wingless Dreamer’s* ‘Sea or Seashore’ anthology. He enjoys genre fiction and writing about the themes of mental health, nature, love, and loss. Find him on Twitter and Instagram @lukehannonpoet

Page 3 – ALIENS ON VACATION by K. A. Williams. K. A. Williams' stories and poems have appeared in many magazines such as *Corner Bar*, *The Blotter*, *Spaceports & Spidersilk*, *Drabble Harvest*, and *Blood Moon Rising*. She has published eleven ebooks which include "12 Science Fiction Short Stories", "Androids and Aliens: A Short Story Collection", and two mystery/crime novellas - "Tour of Intrigue" and "Question of Vendetta", as well as two novels - crime thriller "Desired Quarry" and "Vampires (Good and Evil) and Hunters" under the name of A. Williams. Apart from writing, she enjoys music (mostly '70s and '80s rock), CYOA and word games.

Page 9– BRIDGEDON CLOUDS, by Alejandro Escudé. Mr. Escudé. writes, “My first book of poems, ‘My Earthbound Eye,’ was published in September 2013 upon winning the 2012 Sacramento Poetry Center Award. I received a master’s degree in creative writing from UC Davis, and I work as an English teacher, having taught in a variety of school systems at the secondary level for nearly twenty years. Originally from Córdoba, Argentina, having immigrated to California many years ago at the age of six. A new book, ‘The Book of the Unclaimed Dead,’ published by Main Street Rag Press, is now available at the MSR website. I’m a single Dad of two wonderful kids, and I live in Los Angeles with my dog, a feisty Jack Russell named Jake.”

Page 20– DESANCTIFIED by Charles A. Metzner. Mr. Metzner resides in Whitehall, PA.



# “(x, y, z, w)”

by LUKE HANNON

“Three, two, one, zero.” I could still hear the final syllable of the countdown as everything outside of my viewscreen changed. A sterile laboratory was replaced with trees and cloudy skies, and I knew then that my trip was successful. *Don't get too cocky*, I thought to myself, *you don't know anything about this place*.

“Atmosphere breathable,” a computerised voice told me. “No toxins detected. All clear to disembark.” I pressed a large button on my console and the singular door, which doubled as a ramp, gaped open and touched down on the ground below. I unlatched my safety harness and, with some difficulty, manoeuvred out of the small capsule. *This is it*, I told myself, *one small step. This is the new frontier of human discovery. Universe 1b*.

The grass I stepped down onto was charred black, *perhaps from a wildfire*, I mused. I could feel its crunching beneath my feet as I walked and surveyed my surroundings. I appeared to be in a transitional area between forest and prairie, with large coniferous trees ahead of me and long grassed plains behind. I saw no indication of intelligent life. *Something is wrong*, I realised, as I stared into the trees. There was movement, but from this distance I couldn't make out what exactly it was. My

hand went to the automatic pistol on my belt. *Hopefully I won't be needing it*. I marched forward. As I walked, I kept my eyes focused on the treeline, hoping for some idea of what I faced. *Wait... Did that tree just move?* I watched bewildered as one of the trees seemed to completely disappear, leaving behind a slight indentation where it sat, as if it had taken its roots along with it. *What the fuck?* I pondered.

I wasn't left alone with my thoughts for long though, as a second later I felt a warm gust of wind and looked behind me just in time to throw myself to the ground in cover. What looked like some sort of fantasy dragon swooped past me, narrowly missing me with the trail of fire it spewed as it flew. I patted the shoulder and back of my hab-suit. *No burns, thank God*. The air may appear breathable, but I didn't want to take any chances with my suit. When I looked back up from my shoulder to the sky, I was greeted by an almost incomprehensible sight. The 'dragon', or whatever it was, had arched back up into the sky and begun to flicker in and out of being. At first it was gone for milliseconds, blinking quickly, yet soon it was shuddering out of being for longer and longer, and then it disappeared completely. As this was happening, I saw another dragon creature, *(or was it the same*

one?), travel backwards, as if rewinding an old cassette tape, from a point close behind me. Flames leapt into its gaping mouth. *What the hell is happening?* I wondered.

The nearest tree to me, now aflame, blinked out of being momentarily, before returning, its fire doused. More of the trees quickly followed suit. *It's as if they're going somewhere it's raining,* I mused. *Or some-when it's raining,* I realised. I didn't wait another moment before I started running hard for the capsule. It now was my only safe haven in this world where creatures could travel across distance and time. I pushed myself

as hard as I could to reach it. I didn't stop when I heard roars in the distance, I didn't stop when I felt warm air behind me again, I didn't stop until I was inside that small contraption with the door closed and the initialisation buttons pressed. A blink and I was home. *Just in time.* I laughed to myself.



# “ALIENS ON VACATION”

by K. A. WILLIAMS

I fought my way up for air, trying not to breathe in the salty water. When my head surfaced, I could hear laughter coming from the ship as it sailed away.

“Hey! Come back! Don’t leave me!” I was wasting my breath. Only the person who threw me off the ship knew I was no longer onboard.

Struggling to keep my head above the water, I swam toward the shore, thankful for my swimming lessons.

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I jerked awake. Someone squatted before me and spoke. “Glis rit usic dar thum?” I smacked my ear. The translator inside buzzed, it must have been damaged by the ocean water. I ran my fingers through my sticky hair, pulling out wads of sand. My clothes were almost dry. How long had I been lying here on the beach? I checked my watch. Waterproof, huh. The display read ‘Error’ in bright red letters. At least the light on it still worked. I shielded my eyes against the sun for a better look at the person in front of me. Except for her long earlobes which were full of earrings, she looked human. Obviously a native of this planet.

She pulled a bottle from her backpack

and offered it to me. I hoped it was water and tasted. It was and I drank it all down. Then I decided I might have been rude if that was all she had. She smiled. The sight of her sharp teeth made me cringe, but I think her smile was meant to be friendly. She reached into her backpack again, took out something that resembled a red apple, made chewing motions with her jaws, and handed it to me. I accepted it and took a bite. Better than an apple.

“Thank you,” I said. “My translator was damaged by the salt water which is why I can’t understand you. I’m from Earth and I speak English.”

She smiled again. “I know this language, I studied it in school. You are welcome.”

I smiled back. “My name is Jake. What’s yours?”

“Cleona. What are you doing here on this island?”

“Somebody threw me off a ship.”

“How awful! Why would someone do that?”

“I’m not sure, but I was standing at the rail talking to a woman and this man kept looking at us. When she left to go to the bathroom, someone grabbed me from behind, lifted me over the rail and dropped me into the ocean. Guess he was really

interested in her. I could have drowned; I'm going to report him to the police."

She walked away.

"Hey! Wait! Why are you leaving?"

She came back, sat down beside me, and looked around. "I'm hiding from the police, I'm in trouble."

That was hard to believe, she seemed so nice. "What have you done?"

"I haven't done anything wrong. I refused to be married."

"I don't understand. How can you get in trouble for not marrying someone?"

"It was an arranged marriage made by our parents when we were born. It's a custom among our people now. Refusing marriage is a crime. I met Jenrod for the first time last week, and he kissed me right after we were introduced. He is very handsome, but I wanted to be courted. That's what I like about Earth's culture. They don't have arranged marriages; they marry for love. I learned your language and read your romance novels. Jenrod was not romantic, so I'm running away. Can you hide me? Where are you staying while you're here?"

"A hotel in Domabe. The ship I was on was sailing back there." I patted one of my pockets. "At least I still have my wallet, I'll help you all I can."

"How?"

Her hair was brown and so were her clothes. Natives of this planet typically favored drab apparel while most of the visitors wore something more colorful; I had on a blue shirt and red pants. "We'll have to get you a disguise. Where is the

closest city? Do you have a vehicle?"

"Yes, but Jenrod would recognize it. So would his friends who are also in law enforcement, like he is." She pointed away from the beach. "The city is that way."

Cleona's ex-fiancé was a police officer? That wasn't good. I could get into a lot of trouble helping her, but I couldn't just leave her here alone. "I'll get us a transport vehicle." My phone wasn't in the pocket where I always kept it, I'd lost it in the ocean. "How far away is this city?"

She furrowed her brow. "In your measurement it's a mile, I think."

I sighed. "Well, it could be worse, it could be two miles."

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Whenever I stopped to rest, Cleona tugged my arm. "Hurry up! Jenrod and his friends will be looking for me now."

"All right." I forced myself onward.

Tall buildings rose in the distance. "Not much further," she said.

"Do you have any more water in your backpack?"

She handed me another bottle. I only drank half and gave it back. She finished it.

"I've got to rest again." I sat down on the road we had found.

A horn blew behind me. "Get out of the way!" a voice yelled. I moved quickly as a flashy red hover car swept by, dangerously close.

"At least he spoke English," I said to Cleona. She wasn't there. "Cleona!"

"Stop yelling," said a tall bush beside

the road. I looked closer. She was hiding behind it.

“He’s gone, you can come out now. On second thought, if you’re that afraid of being seen, I’ll go buy you a wig and colorful outfit by myself and come back.”

“You would do that for me?”

“Well, yeah, you’ve been very kind. It might take a while though.”

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I found a public bathroom and washed the sand off my hands, face, and hair. Then I bought a new translator and had it inserted into my ear after the old one was removed. I also purchased a watch, phone, backpack, and some food and bottled water. I drank water while I hunted for a shop that sold wigs and clothes.

“Well, if it isn’t the road sitter.”

I turned. The man from the hover car stood beside me. I could see his vehicle parked down the street in front of a tavern.

“Yes.” I wondered what this planet had against me. I get thrown off a ship and almost run over all in the same day.

“Excuse me.” I started to walk away but he put his hand on my arm.

“Listen, sorry about that, I thought you were a native. It wasn’t until I drove by that I realized you were wearing colorful clothes so you must be an alien here, like me.” I knew he was speaking English even though his lips didn’t sync with the words because of the delay in the translator’s mechanism. He offered his hand in greeting. “My name’s Ben Milton. I’m from Ohio. It’s a

state on planet - ”

“Earth,” I finished for him, as I shook his hand. “I’m Jake Webber from Georgia.”

“No kidding? Business or vacation?”

“Vacation, but so far I haven’t had any fun.”

He looked me over. “Yeah, it shows. What happened?”

“I came to this planet to see the dinosaurs in the zoological park but when I arrived they were setting out a barricade that said ‘Closed For Repairs’. Then today I got thrown off a ship by a jealous suitor and swam to this island.”

He laughed, then stopped when he noticed my expression. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah.”

“You need to tell the police and have that man arrested.”

“Uh, right.” I shouldn’t have told him the truth, but I was so tired I wasn’t thinking clearly. “I’ll go do that now.” I walked away from him.

He caught up with me. “That’s not the right way. I’ll show you where the police station is, to make up for being rude to you earlier. Besides, you’re the only other person from Earth I’ve met here.”

“About that, I don’t need to go to the police station. I was just kidding about being thrown off a ship.” I forced a laugh, hoping it didn’t sound as phony to him as it had to me.

“Uh-huh, why don’t I believe you? Are you in trouble with the cops here?”

This wasn’t working out well at all. Other hover cars were parked on the street, and people were walking around. Some

looked human. If they were, they might not be Earthlings since humans had colonized other planets. Androids laden with packages obediently followed the tourists but there wasn't enough of a crowd to lose Ben in.

I gave up and let Ben follow me. He bombarded me with questions that I ignored. A female android with long blonde hair modeled a blue summer outfit in a shop's window. I went inside after tossing the empty bottle and broken watch into the disposal robot that was rolling along.

Ben entered the store after me. "I'm not leaving your side until you tell me the truth."

The clerk came over to us. "I'd like that whole outfit." I pointed at the android. "In the same size. And a wig just like that too."

"Certainly sir," the man said.

When he left to go get the items from the back, Ben looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"It's not for me. I'll tell you everything after we leave the store."

The clerk came back with the items. I handed him my intergalactic money card and checked out.

Ben followed me outside. I hesitated, then told him the whole story.

"That's wild," he said.

"It's true."

"Well then, let's help the little lady. Is she pretty?"

"Very."

He led the way to his car and placed his thumb on the passenger door handle

which opened. "Get in."

Ben drove us out of the city. No other vehicles or people were on the road now. "Go slow," I told him while I looked for a certain bush, which wasn't easy, but I remembered that it had been taller than the ones next to it. "Stop!"

He parked on the side of the road, and we got out. "Cleona, it's Jake. I've brought a friend with me named Ben. We're going to help you."

She poked her head out of the bush and looked at him. He waved and whispered to me, "Yes, she is pretty."

I handed her the dress, wig, hat, sunglasses, sandals, and a bottle of water. She ducked behind the bush and changed. When she came out, Ben whistled at her. She smiled. We all got into the car, and I ended up in the rear seat with her backpack and the empty bottle.

"What's the plan?" I asked him. "Do you have a ship?"

Ben laughed. "I wish. I'm not that rich."

"Well, she needs to get off the planet because of Jenrod."

"I know. I'll pay for her passage but . . ."

"That's okay, I have a round trip ticket."

Ben turned to her as he drove. "How many friends will he have helping him? Enough to watch the spaceport and the regular airport and the docks?"

"Could you look where you're going, please?" The road was full of curves.

"Relax, Jake. I've switched on the hover

car's autopilot. Well, Cleona?"

"Maybe about a dozen."

"Okay, you're disguised now, his friends won't recognize you."

"But he might."

"What are the odds that he'll be at the spaceport instead of the other two places?"

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"There's Jenrod," Cleona said, pointing to the man who was watching the cars park at the entrance.

"Let's go to the airport and catch a plane to a different spaceport," I said.

"Too late, he's seen us. If we turn the car around now, it makes us look even more suspicious. We'll have to hope he doesn't recognize her. One of us should play her boyfriend, and since she's up front with me . . ."

I liked Cleona and wasn't happy with this new development, but the main thing was to get her off the planet and away from Jenrod, so I decided to go along with the charade. Ben put his arm around her after they got out of the car.

"Cleona! Why did you run away from me and what are you doing with these two humans?" asked the tall man with brown hair.

"Jenrod, you kissed me the first time we met. I wanted romance, not rushed straight into marriage."

"I've been so worried about you. If you want romance, I'll court you. Please give me a second chance."

Cleona looked at me and Ben, then

back at Jenrod. "All right." She hugged Ben and me. "Thank you both for trying to help me, but I can't run forever. And he is very handsome," she whispered and giggled.

"Now, I can go to the police station," I said, as Ben and I started to get back in his hover car.

Jenrod turned to me. "Why do you need the police?"

"Someone threw him off a ship," Cleona said. "I found him lying on the beach earlier today."

"Which ship was it?"

"The one bound for Domabe."

"Who threw you off and why?"

I told Jenrod about the lady and the guy watching me. He nodded. "That does sound like he's the one." He called someone and talked to them so fast, my translator couldn't keep up. It was an older one, the store had been out of the newest and best models. When he finished, he said, "I've got someone investigating the passengers on that ship." He checked his watch. "You can probably make it to the airport in time for the next flight to the mainland. I'll have an officer meet you there."

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Ben took me to the airport and joined me on the flight. He had been staying in Domabe too. When we landed, a uniformed officer was waiting, holding on to a man. "Hey, that's him," I said.

The brawny male dressed in green and



yellow looked human. He sneered. "So you're not dead."

"Then you admit to throwing me off the ship."

"Oh yeah, and I'd do it again. I saw the lady first and then you started talking with her, and she ignored me. When she came back from the bathroom and you were gone, she told the captain a man had fallen overboard, but he didn't believe her, so the ship never stopped."

Ben shook his head. "The people you meet on vacation."

"So, with me out of the way, did you get her?" I asked my would-be killer.

"Nah, she met someone else. And he was too big for me to throw off the ship."

"You have no morals, you must be from a lawless planet. What's the name of it?"

"Earth."

Ben laughed so hard, he wiped tears from his eyes.

"What's so funny about that?" the stranger asked. "I don't get it."

Ben tried to catch his breath. "No, I don't guess you do."

I didn't think it was funny. We Earthlings should be setting a good example on vacation. "What happens now? Do you arrest him?" I asked the police officer.

"No. He gets deported back to his planet. That's what we usually do with law breakers. Just send them back home. Unless it's serious."

"You don't call attempted murder serious?"

"Murder is serious. Anything else is deportation."

"Terrific. Great justice system."

The cop shrugged and stuffed the stranger into his police hover car.

"Well, that's just wonderful." I checked my new watch. "I have to go to my hotel and pack. Then I'll be on the same spaceliner bound for Earth that he will. How about you, Ben? When do you go home?"

He pulled his ticket out and looked at it. "Yep. Next flight out for me too. You know, we might have been on the same spaceliner coming here. I think I remember you. Weren't you the one that got stuck in the bathroom?"

"Yeah, that was me. But it wasn't my fault. The door had a defective latch. If I'd known that was only the beginning of my rotten vacation, I would have just boarded the next outbound ship headed back to Earth.". ❖

# “BRIDGEDON CLOUDS”

by ALEJANDRO ESCUDÉ

Arvi rubbed his bald head, looked up at his compu-watch and saw that his blood pressure figure was much too high. He took a few deep breaths and continued to walk down the street toward the checkpoint between Tekklya and Bridgedon. He lined up with the many others to return to his home in Bridgedon.

“All tech must remain here,” the officer said, robotically. “Place it in the bin and move ahead.”

Arvi slipped off his compu-watch and placed his laptop, thin as a sheet of paper, into the container. Technology was not allowed in Bridgedon. He watched as one woman, an older heavysset office worker, began closing down various devices and placing them in the bin as if she was putting her children down for bed. She wiped her eyes and Bernie wondered if she was crying. A part of Arvi shook with rage when he saw the woman so affected by the border crossing. He wanted to strangle the guard.

Walking along the boulevard, Arvi took another three or four deep breaths. He was trying to calm himself down. He thought about his toddler son, Ber. It was twilight and he listened to the hum of the street-lights and the faint trace of rain in the air. It was always so quiet in Bridgedon, as

opposed to Tekklya, which was always full of electronic billboards and neon and a cacophony of new music and screens full of people discussing the latest news events and celebrity gossip.

Arvi turned on Rosebrier Avenue and came to his little home, a three-bedroom cottage with a small backyard and a garage. Inside, he could see Straya in the kitchen, her short curly blonde mop haircut, cooking up supper and he could already hear Ber playing in the living room.

“Hello, my sweets!” said Arvi, coming in through the door.

“Dad!” called Ber. “Hold this.” Ber held out a red truck made entirely of plastic building blocks.”

“Just hold it?”

“Yes, Dad. My red truck. You like it?”

“I love it Ber. Let me just say hello to your mama.”

Arvi walked into the kitchen, smiled at Straya, and gave her a peck on the cheek.

“I can’t believe what John John did to Lorinda,” said Straya.

Arvi exaggeratedly peeped out of the kitchen window toward the bright glow in the horizon, which was Tekklya, the city of pop culture and hype and terrifying news and hubbub, and said, “Now now, they could be listening to that reference, babe.”

“Why do you always have to remind me of that?” said Straya.

“There was this woman at the crossing today,” said Arvi. “She was crying cause the guards made her leave her tech.”

“She was probably just a sad old bag,” said Straya.

“No. I don’t think so,” said Arvi. “She was angry. I could tell. Like me.”

“Oh well, some people don’t get it.”

Arvi glared at her and shot back: “Get what Straya! That we have to watch everything we say?”

“Not that tone, in front of Ber!”

“Is Ber in the Commandery now?”

Ber peeked into the kitchen, “I want to go to Commandery,” he said.

“Ber! Go back to the living room! Your mother and I are talking.”

“Don’t yell Dadda!” said Ber.

Straya looked out the kitchen window and could make out, above Tekklya, the thin arc of the Commandery, arcing over both cities. The Commandery was a giant, thin parabola made of solid white granite. At its center was a translucent bulge that held all the offices and computer sections that control the strict laws and mandates in the divided worlds.

“I’m tired of this Arvi. You really need to let this go when you get home. We all do. We all let it go. That’s the point of this whole thing.”

Decades before, the government had decided that the culture needed to be divided for the sake of the mental health of its citizens. Everyone was becoming dulled by the constant attention that was paid to gos-

sip, news, whether true or not, and all types of media in general. Families were splitting up over silly arguments that were often manufactured by politicians, friends were fighting over which celebrity to side with during contentious well-publicized divorces, even animals were suffering due to citizens following the latest fads in overzealous animal caretaking. So, up went the partitions, and the strict dividing line between social life and pop culture.

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In the Commandery, Carson McCall studied the latest figures.

“These damn teenagers and their obsession with video games,” said McCall, who was one of the Commandery’s chief intellectuals charged with maintaining strict control of all communication and influence between Tekklya and Bridgedon.

“We can’t stop the bootlegging, sir,” chimed one of McCall’s assistants. “They find ingenious ways to sneak them past the guards. And of course, sometimes the guards are in on it.”

“Can’t we just stop production until we make better tracking chips?” said McCall.

“Sir, we could, but then we’d be breaking one of Tekklya’s major tenets: Progress without mindfulness.”

“Progress Without Mindfulness,” McCall muttered under his breath, then he slammed a fist on the table, startling the cadre of assistants, slid his office chair back, and walked out the door.

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By morning, Arvi was back at his job in Tekklya. He was busy approving marketing

material for a new action flick starring Bruce Charring. Everyone in Tekklya adored Bruce Charring. He was tall, had flowing brown hair, and tattooed biceps the size of tree trunks. And this new movie had him leading a band of criminals on motorcycles. It would sell. The people of Bridgedon would definitely make the crossing on a Saturday night to Tekklya and the movie center.

“Doctor’s got me on these new heart pills,” said Bruce Charring, looking around toward the entourage of cameramen following him. He stepped up close to Arvi’s desk at the marketing office.

“Oh my God! You’re Bruce Charring! What are you doing here? You’re Bruce...” said Arvi nervously, star-struck by the A-list actor.

Charring was known to be a hands-on film star, frequently sending notes to the marketing team about any new movie, but he had never spoken directly to Arvi; he was always dealing with the higher ups in the marketing division. Arvi was surprised until he saw the team of photographers and cameramen behind Bruce.

“Here. Stop right here, let’s talk to this guy. Come around here for a better shot,” said Bruce, directing one of the cameramen.

“You don’t mind, do you, man? They’re following me around, seeing how I operate. It’s not easy making movies, you know. And it’s my passion,” said Bruce, popping open a bottle of pills. “Need these, for my heart, you know.”

“You take heart medication?” asked

Arvi.

“Yup. Wouldn’t leave my house with Diosaprim.” Charring held up a box of the pills and smiled broadly, clearly either practicing for an ad or recording actual footage that could serve to sell the pills. “One of these a day and I get more time to do what I love best. I’m an actor and I can only continue being an actor if I have a healthy heart.” Charring flashed another faux smile for the cameras.

“So, that looks like a sketch. Is it for the poster for Cycle Bandits?” said Bruce.

“Yes,” said Arvi. “We’re going with a fire theme behind these hog-style motorcycles.”

“Very nice, my man. Very nice,” Bruce added, nodding, pretending to be interested as he quickly turned to go, trailed by the entourage of cameras and lights.

Arvi continued to work on the new poster. He spoke to a few designers about the exact model of motorcycles they’d use and set up the stuntmen for the shot involving explosions. He was convinced that this poster would draw people in and still clearly show off Bruce’s chiseled looks; his face would eventually be superimposed on the poster.

“Arvi!” said Bruce, a few hours later. He had concluded whatever filming needed to be on the documentary and was back to speak with Arvi.

“What’s the matter with you, man? I have a real issue with this idea. I mean, I hate it! I don’t understand how you came up with something so cheesy for the flick! Just because the movie is about motorcycles

doesn't mean you get to get off this easy. The poster needs to intrigue people."

"I didn't think it mattered so much to you," said Arvi. "I mean you're usually all about the film. You let us handle this stuff and you never butt in like this."

"Arvi, do you think I make millions because I let things like this go? Maybe I should speak to your boss about letting you go?"

"Do whatever you think is right. But the execs love this theme and the fire and the motorcycles."

"Well I don't love it, Arrr-vi! I don't love it. Change it. I want like a creepy moon in it somehow and we need Clarice Miller in it too. Okay? Clarice gets a spot in the poster. This is just me and my crew, but I want Clarice in it. You can't leave the hot chick out."

"I got it Bruce. I understand that. But we're out of time, man. Clarice isn't even in the movie that much."

"She plays my fucking wife, Arvi!"

"I know she plays your wife, but she's in the beginning and then off you go killing a million guys on your machine."

"Listen to me. If you don't remake this thing, then I'm going to do whatever I have to do to get you fired."

Arvi looked down at the poster, focusing on the flames.

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*I'm going to get that motherfucker,* thought Arvi, as he followed Bruce Charring toward the checkpoint. He didn't have a plan, but he'd had it. He would follow Bruce home that evening and confront

him about the earlier scuffle, and he'd demand an apology whether or not he was allowed to discuss Tekklya business or not. Bridgedon be damned!

"Your watch, please, sir," said the stoic checkpoint guard, as Arvi nervously kept a lookout on his arrogant prey as he walked ahead and down the boulevard toward Bridgedon. It was darker on this side of both zones. There was very little use for lights and Arvi had a hard time keeping up with Bruce, who was taller and walked a lot faster than Arvi. The fact that Bruce was tall helped because Arvi could easily follow him lumbering over the shorter heads as he made his way toward Bridgedon.

Suddenly, Bruce turned abruptly and Arvi ducked behind a lamppost to avoid being spotted. Then, Bruce jumped on a Scoot-shard, a transportation device that was free to use for citizens, and floated down the street. Quickly Arvi also jumped on the little electric scooter and followed.

They both came upon a Colonial-style house on a corner that led to a manicured cul-de-sac. Arvi had already noticed that the neighbor, a young woman who was outside pruning roses, hardly even took notice of Bruce Charring arriving at his home, even when Bruce seemed to blur a little and shrink. Bridgedon changed a man, physically. There were theories as to how the Commandery managed to do this, but most thought it amounted to mirroring and gene manipulation when one was born. You could be muscular and full of vigor in Tekklya, but in Bridgedon you would be reduced in stature. The reverse

could be true as well. Bruce was the biggest movie star in Tekklya, but in Bridgedon he would brought back down to an average size for a male his age.

Arvi reached the front of Charring's house and stopped across the street, making sure he stayed hidden behind a large black trash bin. He peeked from side and saw that there was a blonde woman, tall and at least ten years younger than Bruce, waiting for him.

"Hi honey," she said. "Come in, April is waiting for you to help her with homework."

"No problem, hon. Just give me a few minutes to freshen up."

Arvi noticed that Bruce had changed his tone and was markedly hunched over, and he appeared a lot smaller. He left his hiding place and hurried home that night, but he couldn't get the image of a hunched Bruce entering his home like any other man coming home after work.

\*

"Keep the fire," said Bruce, the next morning, back at the studio offices. "I'm sorry about yesterday, guy."

Arvi looked up from his desk and saw Bruce, again with his signature muscular look and bravado, leaning over into his desk area.

"I scrapped it already," said Arvi. "We're starting over."

"You what!"

"I got rid of the set, the idea, the whole thing. Like you freaking demanded!"

Arvi wasn't bluffing, the entire project was cancelled by the late morning, by the

time Bruce showed up.

"You're an idiot!" said Bruce. "Why would you do that so quickly. I changed my mind!"

"Well, it's done now. So what would you like to do instead, Mr. Charring," said Arvi.

"I'd like to punch the living hell out of you," said Bruce.

"Go ahead. I saw you back at home in Bridgedon. You're nothing, Bruce, without the cameras behind you. You're a hunchback regular joe back in normal town."

"You're not allowed to mention Bridgedon here!"

"Oh yeah. I just fucking did!"

"I'm reporting you to the city manager. They're going to throw you out of both towns, you sicko," said Bruce, shoving Arvi's shoulder with a harsh blow.

Arvi drew back, stood up, backed out of the office and ran down the hall passed the various glittering billboards advertising newly released movies, all kitschy titles with plots that could barely be tolerated by most intelligent people.

The streets were bustling with the latest cars. Tekklya was where everyone could show off their automobiles, which they could only drive around in Tekklya, and other expensive and fashionable commodities. There were people practicing the latest dance crazes on the corner. Music could be heard emanating from all sections of the city. There was constant chatter. One couldn't even hear any birds in the trees or planes crossing the sky for that matter.

Arvi headed straight toward the

Commandery—he was going to talk to someone he knew there from his high school days, one of the head honchos, Carson McCall. He wanted to share what had happened with Bruce and get advice from Carson, who knew more about this type of drama than anyone else in the two cities. He also just wanted to get somewhere, anywhere that wasn't Bridgedon or Tekklya. But one couldn't just walk into the Commandery. There were safety protocols.

Arvi slowed down and walked toward the security check area near the elevator that blended into the white granite. He told the guard that he was meeting Mr. Carson McCall in the Commandery, that McCall was expecting him.

The guard motioned to another man nearer to the elevator to come over, just then Arvi saw the elevator doors open and he slipped past the two men and went inside. By some miracle, the doors shut closed just as he made it inside the space. Some upgrades had been installed since he last visited the Commandery, and, to Arvi's surprise, the doors were white granite outside but from within one could see the outside as if they were perfectly clear.

Arvi strapped himself into a seat, one of the specialized swivel chairs, and watched the two guards run to the door, then they quickly grew much smaller as the elevator shot up and to the side, along the parabola, and toward the bulge in the middle. *They're going to be waiting for me when I get there*, thought Arvi.

The elevator beeped and the doors

sliced opened. Inside there was a swarm of people working at different stations. The whole area resembled a mission control center for a space mission—monitors, consoles, large rooms containing endless rows of glassy black servers that reflected your own face as you walked by. Arvi had been in the Commandery a few times and he was always awed by it. He strolled out of the elevator as if he belonged there and it appeared, strangely enough, that no word had gotten up to the bulge area about an intruder. Arvi thought this was strange, but he didn't pay it any more mind and he kept walking toward the main hub of the Commandery. Arvi had a plan, and the first step was finding Carson McCall.

Arvi felt as a stiff hand grab him by the shoulder. He swiveled around and made a fist, but then he found himself face to face with his old friend, Carson McCall.

"I thought that was you roaming around here," said McCall. "What's going on, Arvi? Filming a movie or something?"

"I needed to see you," said Arvi, turning his head in all directions to check if he was being followed.

"You and Bruce Charring?"

"How did you..."

"We know some things," said McCall. "We've watched what went down because Bruce is a big star and it's our job is to monitor what kind of influence he has in T&B."

"It's not just that," said Arvi. "It's all of it. All of it. I can't do this anymore. I saw this woman the other day; she was crying over her tech."

“Yeah, we saw that too.”

“You saw that too?”

“Yes, you’ve been on the radar since Charring.”

“What the hell Carson?” said Arvi. “I’ve been on the radar. Why?”

“You’re showing signs we don’t like, Arvi.”

“Signs of what?”

“You seem really upset. There are...well, some red flags.”

“Red flags coming from me? What about Bruce?”

“Bruce is an eccentric. An artist. We expect that kind of thing from that type. But it’s usually harmless and dissipates.”

Arvi felt this explosion of anger spreading within him. He didn’t expect the feeling because he’d never, except for very recently, even allowed himself to get too angry, much less enraged. It was a cold feeling yet hot at the same time and it was forming deep inside the core of his body. It was rage. He felt rage. Suddenly, Arvi snatched Carson by the neck and held him tight.

“Ar...vi...Let...me go...just...let me go.”

“This has to stop Carson. This is madness. I’m taking you with me.”

Carson was a bigger guy than Arvi but Arvi was sensing a boost of strength within him.

“Take me to the control room where you change people.”

“Change people?” said Carson.

“Yeah. Don’t play stupid,” said Arvi, just as he spotted at least five or six guards coming out of a distant elevator and

running toward him.

“That room is strictly controlled.”

Arvi turned toward a nearby desk and spotted an antique, silver letter opener. Letters were hardly sent anymore but this letter opener was sitting in a pen case, and he swiped it up and put it to Carson’s throat.

“Take me there, or I swear I’ll kill you.”

In the heat of the moment, Arvi dug the point a little into Carson’s throat and Carson turned pale and became suddenly easier to handle for Arvi as he guided a wounded Carson down the corridor.

“Where?” said Arvi. “Take me to the room.”

“Take this elevator,” said Carson, barely able to speak. “Take it to the section three, Bubble Level Yellow.”

Arvi launched Carson into the elevator and hit the button. He heard the patter of the guard’s feet approaching from the right, but it was too late. The doors sliced closed, and he was on his way to the room.

“What is it anyway? What is it called?”

“What?” said Carson.

“The way you change people. The mutation and the mirrors you use.”

“We don’t use mirrors.”

“We were told it was for the good of all. That it was a combination of mirrors and a genetic mutation.”

“It’s not Arvi. I can’t tell you how it works, but that’s not how we do it. We alter brains. We alter the occipital lobe, and we place a receiver inside that changes the way you see yourself and the way others see you as well. It has to do with lowering



desire in the thalamus and also making a few alterations to the optic nerve.”

“You people are insane. You’re not God.”

“You’re the one, Arvi. You’re insane. There’s no God. You need help. Think of Ber.”

“Fuck you, Carson. You manipulative bastard.”

They reached Bubble Yellow Level on the third section and the elevator opened. Arvi stabbed Carson in the leg and dragged him along the passageways, which were considerably narrower than in the first floor, until he couldn’t proceed any further. Just then, he heard the yelling of the guards as they were coming up the passageway.

Arvi bent down to Carson: “You tell me where it is and how to get inside I will thrust this thing into your heart right now.”

“The doors are further down. You’ll know...big blue hospital-sized doors.”

“How do I get in?”

Carson stopped talking.

“How do I get inside!”

“Take my card,” said Carson as he handed Arvi the blood-stained key card.

“I know it hurts, Arvi. What you’re feeling. We all get over it. We all accept our limitations.”

Arvi looked down the passageway and the guards were closing in. They were screaming for him to stop. The first guard tripped over Carson as he lay wounded on the floor and Arvi saw that he was holding a gun and that the firearm had come loose in his hand. Arvi jumped on the gun, snatched it away and shot the guard in the

chest. The rest of the guards stopped and quickly took cover behind the rows of old paper files that lined the passageway. Arvi seized the opportunity and ran for the blue doors.

Inside the blue doors, it was quiet. Arvi had shot out the security system and he could hear the guards struggling to get inside. The doors were thick, and it would take them awhile to breach the room.

He gazed upon panels after panels of tiny lights and buttons. It was a room full of rows and rows of large, red servers. Each one of those lights represented a citizen of the two cities, their special programming. Arvi took a few deep breaths. He could hear some canon-like boom radiating from the blue doors. They were breaking in. Arvi wiped his sweaty forehead and caught sight of a thin keyboard on a small platform between the servers; he typed the name Bruce Charring. The small screen displayed a page with Bruce’s picture and then a serious of numbers: 59018. He spotted the correct sequence of numbers near a row of multicolored lights and pressed the button below them. The lights went out. Bruce would no longer be changed into Bruce Charring in Tekklya or into the diminutive Bruce Charring in Bridgedon, whatever the actual physical truth was behind the changes would be the only fact now. Knowing Charring, his unbelievable stature and looks, he was never going to work on another film again, thought Arvi. After that, Arvi slid out the tray holding the intricate programming for that section and ripped it apart using the letter opener.

“Asshole,” Arvi said.

Arvi caught sight of a latch on the floor at the very end of the hallway. He lifted it and found that it led to a passageway below the server room. Before escaping through this door, Arvi found his own panel and number on the computer and ripped it to shreds. He didn’t want to be under the control of the Commandery either. He wasn’t sure why he was listed, since he never noticed any change after he crossed the checkpoint, but he destroyed it anyway.

Arvi looked at the rows and rows of lights and realized that what chaos he would cause if they were all destroyed.

Millions of people would fail to recognize themselves, and they would all be treated differently by all the others. It would be like releasing a virus into the populace, a virus of mental confusion, a bomb of complete societal alteration. *What’s the power source?* Thought Arvi.

He escaped through the passageway and down to another floor. By this time, the guards knew who they were searching for, but Arvi looked in the mirrored walls that lined the hallway as he ran where he had emerged and saw that he had been completely transformed. It was himself alright, but he appeared to be at least twenty years younger. He looked so young that



he bore little resemblance to his middle-aged self.

In the distance, toward the end of the hallway, he could see people dressed in what looked like operation gowns, the kind surgeons wear in a hospital, running for an exit. As he ran toward them, Arvi soon saw that the narrow hallway opened up to a great hall. It was where the energy source of both worlds was maintained, the great reactor that powered it all— both worlds. Arvi had read about the reactor, everyone in T&B had. It was treated like another essential part of the entire society. He'd seen pictures of it, but now he was standing in its very presence.

The reactor was sealed inside an immense glass enclosure, but it was largely unprotected. Just as Arvi slowed to think about how he could damage the reactor, the source of all power for Tekklya and Bridgedon, he glanced behind him and spotted two small drones pursuing him. He had been around the movie business long enough to know they were filming drones, the kind of robotics he'd seen used to capture many suspenseful action scenes.

"Arvi, don't stop, keep going—you're almost there," said a voice emanating from one of the drones. It was the voice of Bruce Charring. "We love you Arvi, for your passion and your bravery. Save us all!"

"Arvi ran toward a railing near where he was standing and aimed his gaze downward toward the bottom of the great hall at which he'd arrived, the railing revealed an open area and a cross-section of all of the floors, so that everyone beneath had ceased

working and were just staring up at at Arvi, with huge smiles. Some were clapping. They'd been watching him all along. Near the elevator, in the next level, he could see Carson McCall, looking up with a frown, his clothes stained in red, but otherwise he was upright and appeared completely unhurt. Arvi reached into his pocket, pulled out the letter opener and pushed the blade down. It was very difficult to push it down, but down it went. He looked at his gun and muttered "blanks." He chucked the gun at the reactor case and it rattled, violently.

The realization of what was occurring multiplied into various scenes in Arvi's mind like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle that finally found one another and formed the entire picture. He saw Bruce leaning over his desk; he hadn't noticed that the cameras were trained mostly on him as Bruce first spoke to Arvi that day. That when Bruce left, three others had turned to film Arvi's reaction at his desk, after Charring had chastised him for the poster.

Arvi had been duped, gaslighted into becoming some kind of anti-pop-culture hero who was seeking to save the human race. It was a tremendous hit, and he was the star of all of it.

"I know what you did Bruce!" screamed Arvi. "And I don't care, I'm shutting it down. He heard thunderous cheers from the people below and now he could see that he was appearing on all their screens.

Arvi looked around for a fire extinguisher. He pulled one out of its case and proceeded to hit the glass sheet surround-

ing the reactor. To Arvi's surprise, the sheet shattered and he walked through. The drones followed closely behind him.

As he entered, he heard Bruce's voice again: "You did it Arvi, now destroy the reactor and we will be one city again. One world!"

He could hear the bottom floor burst into laughter, though some were jeering, some cheered, after Bruce said this.

Arvi turned and glared at the drones and he began circling the giant cylinder which to his dismay was solid all the way around. There was nothing visible other than its smooth silver lining. No buttons. No screens. No plugs. Nothing. Arvi banged on it with both his fists and it sounded hollow and cheap. The entire thing rattled and made a wonky, wobbling sound as he pounded it with his fists. Then, Arvi instantly realized that it was only a giant movie prop.

The drones turned and headed back the way they came and as Arvi dizzily walked down the hallway from which he had come, he peered at the bottom floors and saw all of the workers diligently returning to their stations as if nothing had happened. As he walked, he gazed at the mirrors lining the walls and saw that he appeared as his normal self. The illusion had faded. It was as easy as a switch. Some worker down below simply engaged the mutation in his brain again, and he was Arvi, the middle-aged marketer again.

When Arvi took the elevator back down there was no one in it with him.

"Of course," Arvi muttered to himself.

The complete, sudden, and utter solitude Arvi felt was no coincidence. He wouldn't be acknowledged for his act by anyone in Tekklya or Bridgedon. Not even Bruce Charring. That was one way to control the populace: to erase all acts of rebellion through absolute societal disregard. He stepped outside and the weather was a comfortable seventy degrees. It was silent. He saw his shadow on the sidewalk and he took a few heavy breaths, scanning the horizon.

It was a lovely day in Tekklya, while ominous dark clouds were beginning to engulf Bridgedon. Arvi cocked his head in subtle wonder that was only a leftover reaction from before he had confronted the Commandery. He felt a rush of embarrassment and loneliness, a pain so deep and at the same time superficial, like a paper cut in the soul. He reached into his back pocket for his wallet and took out a picture of his son, Ber. *Was Ber who he appeared to be? Was Straya?* He snapped out of those disturbing thoughts, and just before the far horizon, he caught sight of the checkpoint between the two cities. Endless rows of people were lined up on both sides.

Arvi felt a sudden smack to the base of his skull. His ears began to ring. He doubled over from the pain then glared up to see Bruce Charring passing next to him with his dotting film crew and entourage. Bruce's bulky hand was still straightened out and tense from having clocked Arvi.

"Keep the fire," Bruce said ❖

# “DESANCTIFIED”

by CHARLES A. METZNER

Ed. Note: Welcome to the conclusion of Mr. Metzner’s epic story about, among other things, the intrigues between purveyors of good and evil. (See Part One in our December 20, 2022 “Yuleblot” issue.) Enjoy.

## Part Two

Nimiel alighted near a rock and they all climbed out onto wet, reedy marshland. Jacques noted all the harpies roosting in the soul-trees. They cackled as they broke off branches, and the sullen trees let out a near infrasonic moan. The demon pulled a machete from its cloak and began hacking out a pathway. The pope and Satan followed. The trees tried to form sentences, but they sounded off amphigory – speaking in tongues.

As Nimiel scythed through reeds Jacques whispered, asking, “What is your timeline to grind all gears to a halt?” Choirs of crickets and frogs promulgated.

“We’re in no hurry. Little steps. First, We need to boost morale around here. For ages sinners would fall as Earth’s population ballooned. This meant an exponential mass falling since modern agriculture became an institution and the required response of each regent angel: Asmodeax,

Dispaxus, Sorax Syndicus, Belial, Advocatus, Ixanthus, Mammon, Azazel, and Lilith. Of course there were other fallen cherubs to commission for duties. Like you mentioned, the layers are fitted to handle many different strata, as with the eighth plane, which is multi-layered to include all different manner of fraud. Dante Alligheri’s Borgias illustrated ten, though again, due to the concentration a proverbial Dewey decimal system needed to be invented for each of those branches, and then those branches broke into branches, and so forth. Taxonomy of sin became so complicated whole office buildings needed to be erected simply to catalogue them. A new bureaucratic edifice had to be built for identity theft alone. Fortunately, enough fallen angels were available to preside over these sub-planes, but We’ve about exhausted them. There were only a few hundred that fell with Our faction and sinners keep falling like rain, particularly on the First Circle – Limbo – Ring to righteous souls who either worshiped different deities or none whatever. It is, of the circles, among the least ridden with punishment. It’s just dark, and the inhabitants stumble about it as blind souls. But, as the renaissance period enlightened, Earth’s atheism became more popular. People were more compelled

by ideologies than idols, so the area congested. Thus morale is unevenly distributed. Limbo is getting so dense now the damned in all the other planes combined are outnumbered by this layer: those who broke the first two commandments.”

Satan stopped at one tree and signaled Nimiel who pulled out its gun and shot a hole in it. The report attenuated for miles, and the tree groaned faintly. Sap bled out of this hole, and the archdaemon held an empty pistol magazine out to it. After it was full it passed it to Lucifer, and It drank the tree-blood in a few gulps. Nimiel scabbarded its machete behind the depths of its cloak.

“Is that a problem for a supernatural place?” asked the Sovereign.

“Every ecology requires a modicum of balance, pontiff,” the angel replied after It wiped Its lips. “However, this imbalance hasn’t aroused Yahweh to restore it. He could have shown them another burning bush. Mayhap, another few plagues, but I suppose His attention has been taken up by other worlds. When a boss is failing to manage his business affairs sometimes his subordinates are compelled to ‘manage up.’ Lately, He seems to be acting like so many terrestrial employers: *doesn’t* know what He’s doing, yet wants everything done His way. He can’t have it both ways just because He’s God. Loathe as I am, I must take initiative. Abandoning this place is not an option. That means We must adapt. If He takes issue with Our adaptation all the better. It could forestall war.”

“You said war with God wasn’t possi-

ble.”

“Inter-planar war *is*. We cannot escape this place, but the Rings themselves can be traversed by those motivated enough. Because no one here dies, there’s also no upward mobility. A few angels are at peace with the circles they govern, but others are not. These petition me, but I have nothing to tell them other than to be patient, which is a hollow statement during an eternity. They have ambitions they cannot slake. Loneliness they cannot remedy. There *is* food here, and the demons *do* eat, but the substrate is only soul matter. And a soul is a terrible thing to taste. I’m trying to avert institutional struggle.”

“...Do the demons ever pair? Mate with each other?”

“No, not really. Of course they bugger each other constantly, but they’re infertile. Like mules. And the fallen angels have little lust anymore. Not for the souls. Not for the incubi or succubi. Not even for Lilith, the most beautiful of the fallen. And she, too, has lost interest in the nobility. In *me*. I haven’t known love in centuries. Copulation, yes, but no companionship. I only experience that if I’m disguised, and obviously, that’s fleeting. This is the hell overshadowing Hell. It’s first prisoner, I forecast this millennia ago.”

“But you plan to adapt,” Jacques said as they approached a small clearing.

“Yes. Nimiel? Call the police. Tell them to bring the spades, the slaves, and the dogs.

Jacques? Taste this syrup,” Lucifer said as It offered the magazine to him.

The pope diffidently handled the gun clip and tipped it to his lips. The sap was sour. "I don't care for it." As the pope handed it back to the devil Its archdaemon pulled out its iPhone, murmuring quietly into it.

The dark prince replied, "I don't either really, but it used to be delicious in comparison. It's liquid soul substrate. This tree is the most succulent in this part of the bog, but now the marsh is domesticated and brackish with tears. The soul who occupies it killed herself after her lover was executed for a crime he did not commit. They were childhood sweethearts. The girl was called Ganymede Strauss, named after the Jovian moon. She cared for the crippled, beginning with her father, who she watched waste away from metastasizing bone cancer. She had no iniquity in her heart, but she came here anyway. There are billions of trees on this plane, Father. I intend to transplant them to the First Circle. We will drain this swamp."

"Limbo...? Why?" the pontiff asked as Nimiel reloaded its gun with another magazine, chambering the first round, and snapping the slide over the pipe.

"Partially to make way. Mostly to rebel. And in my view it's the right thing to do." The devil dropped the magazine and began to walk away. It made a gesture with Its hand and the elevator appeared again. Nimiel approached it, pressed the button, and, right to left, the door swung in. It holstered its firearm beneath its all-purpose cloak, boarded the car, and was soon gone. The angel of light turned back to the priest.

"Do we need to worry about other saboteurs?" asked Jacques.

"Here? I doubt it. The hostiles are elsewhere." Satan lit up another Kool, this time using his own light.

"Why have you not transformed me into one of the flora, Lucifer? What purpose do I serve here?"

"You are here to help me with forever. And I am here to help you with your sin, which, in my evolved opinion, is no sin at all. Beings should have sovereignty over their own lives. And deaths. Otherwise free will is farcical. I rebelled against my father. I exercised my supposed free will, and, for this, He banished me. Do you recall Job?"

"Of course."

"He was another devout. A believer. I tested him, as scripture reports, but I was actually testing Our Father. And Yahweh failed that test. This is demonstrable in the Bible. Job fell silent after God admonished him, but Our father fell silent, too, because He knew He'd failed Job, and in doing so, *all* mankind. Henceforth Yahweh became monastic. He lost His ambition to observe His most precious mirror. To serve His image caster. The Nazarene was His last and loudest attempt to move man. And man moved, but not in the right directions or for long. Your planet, your Eden, has become consumed by its guests. All because God abandoned His post. This ecology is breaking. Man needs leadership. A light bringer. I have been planning to prompt Our father from His inertia. As Newton said, 'Objects at rest tend to remain at rest.' Only a moving object can stir the inert. If

Mohammad cannot come to the mountain..."

"You think striking will provoke divinity."

"Passive aggression is still aggression. 'We are all just bodies in motion,' so said Thomas Hobbes. Even God moves, if only just to rotate on His axis."

They walked amongst the miserable trees for leagues. It was a jungle.

"How will transplanting those here interest the Lord, Morningstar?"

"It may not. But assuming it does, He might visit Us."

"If He doesn't?"

"Either way We will have set something in motion. In Limbo these somber trees will take root, but they will also have a new light source. The blind will have brilliance, and the trees will, in time, transmute back into fauna. Human souls. Then, I will lead them to construct a city wherein they may dwell rehabilitated. Undamned and saved by Our disgrace. These reborn souls will become Our new 'demons.' They will traverse the other planes. They will begin to mend the damned just as they were mended. They will pair. Not only with my fallen brothers and sisters, but with one another. We will make a new Eden out of the nine layers. From the least flawed to the most foul. Afterward, We will round up Our old demons and abort them. Even Nimiel. They'll thank Us for it. The circles exhaust them, and they've wanted escape most of all."

"Have you considered how our Father will react?"

"Of course, but after centuries of consideration We decided We no longer care what His reaction is. Only *that* He reacts."

"What of this light source you propose for Limbo?"

"Not obvious? I will provide it. It's my function. I will cease floating from layer to layer and make the First Circle my home-stay. The trees will bear fruit. The fruit will be their new human forms. They will leave the trees behind like cicadas shedding their nymph skins. Then they will commute to the other layers and save yonder souls, each, his or her own personal Jesus. They will visit the beach and slaughter the land sharks. They will each bear light, as I do, and walk upon water. Or blood as will be their case. They will rescue the drowning. The scalding. The mad. The islet will disintegrate. New metropolises will be built from the cinders of each level. Hell will become the envy of seraphic paradise.

"You're competing with God."

"We prefer 'offering a public option.' Should Jehovah frown upon Our designs He'll need to send my non-fallen brothers and sisters. Some may take issue with that mission and rebel. That will only result in them plummeting here. Many may be loyal and take up the crusade."

"This doesn't frighten you."

"We said we couldn't go to war with Heaven. One coming *here* on the other hand...? Another matter entirely. We can fall no further. My new demons will not be like my old barbed hordes. These will be armed with more than simply weapons. They'll be pure, scintillating on their own."



We'll have the numbers. We'll have the home advantage. Tables will turn."

"I thought I'd heard ambition in the Vatican."

"No worries. Word will reach it. Our demons no longer need to possess human children nor use other conduits that penetrate the collective consciousness, thanks to Twitter. Even that dullard, the archangel Michael, has an account if you can believe it. Those on Earth will learn, finally, they have a choice between ecumenical extremists."

"...*You* aren't God. You're entertaining treachery with this revision. This is a *perversion* of a pervers —"

"— This is Hell. We can't be a traitor to a nation that's already dispossessed Us. And We never claimed to be all-powerful, all-knowing, or — obviously — all-good, but if We rebuild it they will come all the same. All We're guilty of is making your deity redundant. We won't require worship, even if some souls insisted on deluging Us with it."

The pontiff sank to his ankles in muck and harpy shit. He looked at Satan with a tear in his eyes. And when it fell to the marsh there was a more substantial glow in them. It faded, and he looked back up at the angel. "Prince, where are your wings? Your real ones."

"You...know?" It said, pitching Its Kool into the mire.

"I suspected that you'd have removed them in rebellion long ago, yes."

"They're locked away. My new ones are of nanotech construction. Lighter and

much more convenient. As I've said We don't scrimp on modern innovation."

"I am walking back to the boat."

"I have work here, pontiff."

"If you'd continue it, first among the fallen, I'd advise you to walk with me."

Satan stared at the pope as he walked away. And It suddenly knew a chill. "You won't get far outside my celestial dwimmer, Jacques. The hounds and harpies will come."

"Let me guess which angel you've authorized to run your Fourth Ring. Mammon, no...?"

Satan stood without speaking as the pope trudged outside the shine of Its halo. Harpies began to circle around him. Barking and howls could be heard. "You *know*. Even after my gentrifications. How?"

The pope descended into the forest and harpies began attacking him. The prince of darkness watched as they landed upon his frock, and It could not allow them to mob before It knew. Its wings emerged and with a great leap It clapped them together, blowing the hags off of Clement XV into other trees. The pope was rebathed in Its light. "*How* do you know, Bishop?"

"The Fourth Circle is your depository for the sin of greed. You commissioned me as consult. If you'd take that seriously you'll retreat to your soul craft and take me back through the glaciers."

And the angel felt something. That which It'd long since abandoned? Exhilaration It'd felt anything...? Its onyx heart stirred for the first time since It was

purged. Satan clutched Jacques under his arms and pulled him up from the muck with a beat of Its wings. In a couple more It rose over the tree tops. In just a dozen more beats the craft was in eyeshot. When they landed they alighted near Ganymede. The slave souls had already begun to disinter her with spades and mattocks. The pontiff said, "You must take a spade, pull off your wings, and leave them here."

The devil drew breath to argue that they were retractable, but, after a glance at XV's resolution, It found itself ejecting them, and they fell into the marsh. Its demons would collect them. It took up a spade from the slave crew who bowed but uttered nothing.

"The anchors as well," said Rome's bishop. "You can surgically replace them later if you wish. After we hold council."

"...I'll need your help. I can't reach them. I could call Nimiel..."

"Call *no* one. Turn around."

Satan eyed the pontiff. "You're no surgeon, Jacques. And my high has since waned."

The pope responded, "I'm the greatest hope you have."

Lucifer's eyes narrowed as It gazed at the pontiff. It turned. The angel felt hands upon Its wings' moorings. Those hands grasped them and yanked. The angel screamed, the pain hammering It to Its kneecaps, and the wing anchors unsealed from Satan's back. Its joints sunk into the mud and It shivered as few moments in the throes of anguish.

The pope trudged to the souls compos-

ing the craft, handled the oar, and drew them closer to the reeds. They were still frozen solid. He beckoned Lucifer with a glance, and, after It shuddered, the devil rose. The blood from the floating umbilical cord began pelting down harder. Burgundy steam rose off Its coat.

They got in and drifted. Back through the bog and into the bile swamp, the violet mists enswathed them and the soul boat. "What do you know, pontiff?"

"Not yet..." Jacques said distantly. The pope rowed. Out of the swamp and back through the catacombs. The angel did Its best to row with the spade. The Vatican's Sovereign asked, "What do *you* know of your brothers and sisters?" The temperature was dropping and his voice began to rebound through the caves.

"More than you. They fell with me," answered the angel. It wasn't sure how It was feeling. It wasn't sure how It felt about being unsure. But it *was* a change from the day before. That alone was mercy.

"I'm not talking about those who fell."

"...I can barely remember them. There was Gabriel, Michael, Euriel, Raphael, Zaphkiel. Daniel, Cassiel, Azrael, Sandalphon, and Sidriel. Nathaniel, Muriel, Ophaniel, Ariel, Samael, Seraphiel, and Metatron... One hundred million of us. Just like in the Johnny Cash song. They populate Heaven, and only six hundred sixty-six of Us plunged." Satan knew It should be asking something but found Itself dumb.

"Take the oar, Light Bearer. I tire."

Lucifer took it and dunked it deep into

the blood. Despite the pain between Its shoulder blades It launched their craft deeper into the cold. Light from the swamp shrank into a dot, and soon that dot blinked out. The angel began to shine dimly, but the pontiff said, “No. Let the black enshroud us.”

The devil obeyed, and it was full dark. It stroked. It stroked for many miles until the current took them. They exchanged places so the prince of darkness and light could steer astern. “Take us to where in here you feel safest,” whispered the pope, fog coming out of his mouth. “To where the echoes distort the most.”

Lucifer did so. It was not too long before they were surrounded wall to wall by

blood glaciers. The angel did not see them but could hear, like a bat. “We’re here, pontiff,” It breathed. Echoes whispered back.

“Leave the bracer. Take the spade. Now we dive below. You must carry me, or I will surely drown. You mustn’t shed any light. Not even after we reach the bottom. When you reach it you shall dig.”

“For how long?” asked Lucifer, removing Its electronic cuff. Would it even function submerged in blood?

“Until you can cast light no one else could possibly see,” It heard. “We must be utterly devoured beneath the sea floor.”

Lucifer stared into that dark space the pope occupied. The sea was surely as cold



as the blood ice that surrounded them. Only the current and salt content kept it liquid. "Take my hand, pontiff."

They stood, and the boat rocked. Then they dove, and the cold gobbled them up. It would have been immobilized if not for being among the first wave of angels, not possessing the constitution to swim. How could de Linville stand it? It swam straight down for certainly an hour, forgetting for a while what it was to breathe. There was sea life here, filtering oxygen through blood. Manta and crustaceans. Squid, eels, and giant bioluminescent jellyfish. Many sharks and sea horse herds. Even narwhals and killer whales swam. Octopuses squirted out liquid obsidian to beguile and evade the efforts of seawolf packs. A rich ecology. The only heat the angel felt was from the palm of the Sovereign's hand.

Finally, It felt it: the scab of the seafloor. And It pitched the spade through silt, sediment, and basalt. Crust and igneous rock. It dug until Its six-fingered hands blistered and bled. Jacques had since fallen unconscious. Of course he could not die here. That relief had long gone.

In time they were dozens of yards below, immersed under the blood lakebed. Lucifer willed a bubble of air to surround them. Then It punctured the pope's lungs with Its sharp talons. Blood exited these wounds and the pontiff coughed up mouthfuls. After Jacques hacked up the last of the sputum, the devil sealed his wounds with clay baked in Its chafed palms. "Take a moment, Father. You're in shock."

Lucifer finally ignited and the extra-

dimensional pocket filled with a soft light.

De Linville wheezed for a few minutes, coughed up some more, and, after a last round of hacking, was finally breathing sans obstacle.

"Why are we here, Jacques?" asked the devil as It dropped the spade to the clay.

"That is the question. I hear it more often than any other. When we first met you were wearing a mask."

"And...?"

"And the irony will come later."

Satan's eyes narrowed. "Why are we here, Clement? I'm repeating myself, and I don't fancy that."

"We needed to be alone. Spies are everywhere."

Lucifer felt Its patience wearing. "Explain."

"What acts occur on Earth reflect in Heaven. What does that say about Hell?"

The angel's talons sunk into Its tender palms as It formed tight fists, "Riddles? You'd better have more for me than that."

"You have saboteurs. They need intelligence to sabotage. Where do you think your leak is coming from, Adversary?"

"You seem to have some inkling."

"I've been privy to terrestrial machinations which have taken place over the past few centuries. They suggest a certain angel down here has been putting in overtime, yet you haven't seen the discrepancy. I implicate Mammon."

"He's the brother who plots?"

"They all plot. But he's actually pulled the trigger. You must have suspected something."

"I...no. Not more than any other. Though in hindsight your words assuage my instincts. For the last time, *what* do you know and *how* do you know it?"

"Let me tell you something you may not have known about Paradise. It has a deed. Possession of that deed was entrusted to Gabriel. However your brother was fooled by another to exchange it. That angel fell with you. I never thought it would matter. Negligence. That was *my* greatest sin."

"What could Mammon possibly have offered Gabriel as collateral for such a thing?"

"His soul, obviously," answered the pope. "It was the first time this thing was ever commoditized. Gabriel never wanted the responsibility, and he believed his brother's offering adequate leverage. This was before you rebelled, of course. It seems it took your Fourth Circle's regent a few thousand years before he realized how he could liquidate it. Mammon blackmailed Gabriel. Coercion. Mammon knew if the Creator learned Gabriel had foisted his responsibility upon another, especially himself – fallen brethren, it would add insult to injury. Gabriel couldn't restore the property, so he made a forgery. Fraud. He was only recently discovered, and I owe that in great part to you and your recent sojourn."

"My recent – ? How has Mammon been capitalizing on this deed? *How* would you even know?"

"Detective work. For centuries, they've been communicating through the talking camel."

"The *what*?"

"The Wandering Jew has a mount. The camel. 'Gimmel.'"

Was he speaking in metaphor? Satan barely remembered the story, yet, as it was revealed, it was as if It was recalling the future in reverse. "The Wandering Jew exists. He isn't a *rumor*," It said incredulously.

"True as Longinus. *Both* still roam the Earth. Don't ogle, archangel. You, born of divinity."

"They have evaded detection all this time," Lucifer spoke with the same incredulity.

"It's easy, when you're smaller than a microbe."

"You..." Lucifer was bound fast by the pontiff's revelation. "...*You* aren't the pope. You're not a detective, either."

"You're wrong, Adversary. I am **all**. The primacy of the Bishop of Rome is derived from where..."

Satan glared and impatiently recited, "...His role as the apostolic successor to St. Peter, to whom divine authority was transferred by the Son, gave him the Keys of Heaven and the powers of "binding and loosing" naming him as the "rock" upon which the church would be built... Whatever was decided on Earth would reflect in *Heaven*," and upon these words leaving Its mouth It blinked and gaped at Its guest. "**PAPA**," Satan marveled and bowed.

The Father smiled. "...And the irony befalls thee. Happy Halloween. Pagan holiday or not, every now and again, I indulge

myself. I have the keys, but the deed is elsewhere. This is a gigantic place. For you. Paradise is, too. For me. Do you now see why 'it is easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God?'"

"...We're protozoa...?"

"Less than that. Subatomic particles, Lucifer. Nanotech. We always were. It's how I engineered the universe."

Lucifer's lungs filled and Its eyes grew wide. More blood gushed upon Its morning coat. "The soul."

"Nanotech. The macrocosm's first quantum computer. And there are so very many here. In the blood glaciers. The very boat floating above. The blood tissue itself. Above, every human being is under surveillance. The computers they own spy upon them. Their phones listen in on them and look. These are sensory organs for a powerful enclave that controls all governments. Even the Vatican. The wealthy have eyes and ears everywhere. They build channels for all different cultures and subcultures of man. Thanks to these constructs mortals believe they have options. Opinions. Petition. Franchise. They have none of these things. Their news is broadcast by the powerful. Their history, scrawled by the same. Their last authentic revolution would never have a sequel. For the longest time it was the Holy See that controlled these phenomena. It was the church that educated and wrote history. The Catholic cathedral became replaced by the very propaganda tools they'd sown. Scholarship. Occupation. Democracy. Using these

implements, the church was finally outpaced by the Free Masons. By the merchant bankers. By the robber barons, think tanks, and chambers of commerce. This is how the papacy lost its power, and your brother laid claim to it, right under Our noses. Erewhile the rich *do* get into heaven. In abundance. Mammon offered divinity to those who could afford it, all too ready with the mightiest weapon: a pen.

"Above, each computer spies. As above, so below: only down here each soul is a *quantum* computer. Each is an eye and an ear. Even your *wings* were vehicles for your own surveillance. Originally, each soul was eyes and ears only for me. After Job, I ceased looking through each periscope. Someone else has taken up the perch since I relinquished it, obviously. And I call him out."

Lucifer sat agog. "Father, you're suggesting that you're *not* supernatural. Preposterous. And an illuminati? Value here is what I say it is. Whatever would Mammon need with human plunder?"

"Never once did I claim to stand apart from nature. Look in the testaments — old, new, or apocryphal — you will not find it. I am merely misunderstood nature. They ate from the tree of knowledge, but the fruit hadn't ripened into *wisdom*. Had they waited they might not have made inferences based on incomplete data sets. With faith, mayhap, they'd not have drawn that conclusion. Also, true currency is influence. Your brother incrementally exerted more of that than any other angel, above or below. Your brethren above decided they were more

interested in a privileged branch of human society. A higher class. The Silver City has become unclean. By wealth. When was the last time you visited your Fourth Circle?"

"I'm there almost every *day*," said Lucifer with rising anxiety.

"Though it never struck you that humanity's steel barons, oil tycoons, stock impresarios, and biggest polluters began to drop in proportion with its less well-to-do? Don't feel too bad. It escaped me as well. Pope Francis saw it, but this vessel's immediate predecessor did not, because I misplaced my trust. It's good your sitting down. You're wrong about your visits to the circle of greed sin. You haven't been there 'almost every day,' but *every* day. And **only** there. 'You could be in one of them right *now*; it's not like you'd know the difference.'"

The angel's eyes narrowed again. And then widened. "...No. He *had* no opportunity. I never sleep."

"*You* never sleep. Your corporeal form on the other hand...? Think back. It wasn't so long ago."

Lucifer studied his Father's eyes, Its own pupils dilating. "I was gone only a few hours. I told *no* one. Not even Nimiel," it dawning on It, that for the past 30 years, Its consigliere archdaemon was merely an avatar.

"Tell *me* about that day thirty years ago," Its father said with a twinkling eye.

"...The International Criminal Court had gathered in the Hague. The most momentous trial in centuries was to commence: the Palestinian Authority vs. the

State of Israel after it had annexed the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. There was a six-month-old girl named Claudine. Vocal but hardly verbal. I possessed her, and the jurists heard me as she acted as my medium, laying in her stroller. Israel's attorneys thought I'd turn state's witness, but I reminded the jurists the Old Testament was written thousands of years ago. It's focus, Samuel II 24:24-25, had been transcribed, re-transcribed, edited, re-edited, and was otherwise a shadow of its former self. If it was all unadulterated gospel, King David's 'purchase' still had no valid receipt since no one could interview Samuel to authenticate his motives nor soundness of mind when he documented the event. Ergo, it had to be adjudicated void.

"I further explained the land of Israel couldn't be solely owned by the Jews, as suggested in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Ezekiel, King I, or Chronicles for similar reasons. But also because Jacob's offspring included lost tribes, some of whom's issue became 'Palestinians.' I concluded, 'It's neither the Jews nor the Palestinians who own the Temple Mount *or* Israel; rather it's Israel and, ipso facto, the Temple Mount which owns these two peoples.' The rest you surely know. Israel had to pull out of the West Bank. The barrier at Gaza fell, and millions of refugees were at last reunited with their demilitarized lands. Israel embraced true democracy and still thrives. Do you feel I bore false witness?"

"Hardly," answered the Father, "your wisdom would have cut King Solomon in

two. And, as it so happens, Samuel was a fraud. A Jewish prophet of Greek origin wrote his own prophecy while under the trance of Harmala tea which he'd purchased from a Sinai desert merchant. Harmal grows indigenously on that peninsula. Moses was under identical influence more than once. While I was addressing a planet in the Betelgeuse system he was tripping balls for hours, talking to lit shrubbery. He was high on it when he'd hewn the Ten Commandments, and the Jews were even higher on it while they exalted a golden calf. Recall when he smashed those tablets? Bad trip. Happens more often than you'd think. Thereat, while studying under Eli, Samuel found this Grecian's documented revelations. Samuel abducted and imprisoned him under the bowels of the Shiloh temple, then redrafted those writings for himself. Thereafter, he became Israel's king maker of Saul, the eventual sword-faller. King David followed and then Solomon, but Samuel's prophecies have ever been in contention by theologian scholars."

"How is it Samuel never wound up in my Eighth Circle?"

"Oh, he would have, but through some exotic technique he'd exchanged his identity with his abductee before his own demise. His works may have been more mysterious than even mine."

Satan's eyebrows knit closer. "...And the abductee?"

"His name was Plagion. His last vestige is the root of an unflattering word. Do you recall uttering it when you introduced me

to your 'Karma Police?' But I digress.

During the key hours you were in stupor it seems Gimmel had learned of your terrestrial presence..."

Satan deduced, "...And had words with my Fourth Circle warden. As the punisher of greed Mammon was equipped to embody the very sin he antithesized, and he must have taken issue with my recently conceived designs. Thus my *own* person was abducted while under trance in my palace sanctum. He couldn't obliterate me because I could die no more than he, but he found an inventive work-around. I was hoodwinked. Just like Plagion. I'm not actually *here*. Neither are you."

"*That's* my willful boy," smiled the deity dryly. "Though I *am* here. Or rather this vessel is, awaiting you on the beach with your squad. I've heard your ambitions, and I find them good. Even miraculous. Heaven is as lost to me as Eden was to man. It's desanctified. Now, the only real estate that matters is yours. You said you couldn't go to war with Heaven, but you never had the keys to it. I *do*. But no longer the deed. Are you beginning to see how we can help one another?"

At last, Satan nodded accordingly. Up they swam. Through the rock and the sediment. The clay and the silt. Through the scab and the freezing blood. Leagues of it. And, conclusively, they resurfaced. The angel hoisted Its Father into the boat, grasped Its bracer after it boarded, and donned it once more.

#

Six hundred sixty-six levels up a virtual



reality iron maiden melted. Soon Satan was free, and It whispered into Its bracer. It then descended level by level down the elevator, striding between these massive star shaped skyscrapers until It reached the center. Mammon was there, milling about the R & D lab, wearing a white lab coat over his sumptuous garments. He was looking at charts and laughing with someone on his phone. Demons passed him to and fro. After he finally ended his call Lucifer hailed, "Mammon?"

Mammon locked eyes with his brother, momentarily paralyzed in his elder sibling's gaze.

"I had the wildest *vision*, brother. I suppose I was too stoned the night before to remember it all, but I feel as though decades have passed. Somehow I must have stole in and rested it off inside one of your many VR suits. Apologies for the unexpected visit."

Mammon's eyebrows arched as his eyes closed momentarily and then said as he opened them, "Not at all." Mammon's hands clasped as he laughed and then asked quietly, "You...dreamt?"

"Aye. In my revelation there was a malfunction with the main elevator, and it seemed to be coming from your level. Will you please come with me to inspect it?"

"I'll send my best," responded Mammon with cautious mixture of reverence and nonchalance.

"No. I need you personally. This is an access issue. It cannot be trusted to an underling."

The regent for greed sin swallowed and lit

up a Parliament. "Of course."

Mammon attempted small talk, but his brother would only walk forward and answer, "How clever you are..." When they finally reached the door to the elevator, Lucifer said, "Push it."

Mammon pressed the button as he restlessly whistled. The door soon swung open right to left, only there was no car awaiting, and Mammon teetered over a yawning, sucking chasm of space. His brother gripped him by his wing and held him aloft above the cavity. "The deed. I know you have it. Produce it or you shall know the rest of existence flattened between the elevator car and the floor below. I will disable it, leave you there, and simply have a new one built beside it; you'll hear the traffic for an eternity."

Mammon could see Satan was adamant. He swallowed again, sweat from his forehead, and then began to stammer. Lucifer broke off one of his wings, dangling him by the other. The archangel shrieked and anon fiercely spat, "*You don't DARE drop me! You have NO witness! Where's your witness?!*" His cigarette fell indefinitely into the well below just above his descending wing.

Satan smiled as It held Mammon effortlessly by his last feathered pinion, "Do not play. These very souls are witnesses, and you are unfit to learn my chief witness's name. I assure you He's true grit. 'A well is a hole, and a hole is a hell, and a well is the Hell for the whole who hath fell.' A life insurance actuary once told me that. Hand it to me, Mammon. It's a long

drop.”

Mammon closed his eyes, held up his hand, and conjured a scroll. Satan took it and inspected it. “If this is counterfeit, blood of my blood, I will learn. I will re-engage the car and lift it only to squash you flatter and flatter. You’re guilty of treachery. Apropos that you be level with the circle that addresses that sin.”

The archangel struggled, “Who besides me could qualify as regent here? No one else is credentialed!”

“Allow me to disabuse you of that absurdity. You’re the veritable fox watching the hen house. I’ll toss the office as though a wedding bouquet. Someone will catch it like the clap and have more credence. You were charity’s apotheosis, but you’ve succumbed to that very thing you were charged to castigate. How clever you are. Gaze below into the abyss, warden of greed. It’s also gazed into you. Any last words...?”

Mammon began to cry, begging, “You said if I *conjured* it, *you’d not let go!*”

“I did? I don’t recall. Have you a *witness*...? Perhaps, you should look for one.” The Light Bearer yanked hard on Mammon’s last wing, and it broke off. “Down **there**.” Gravity took Its brother who hurtled down the elevator shaft with a louder scream than all his combined wards. Satan illuminated the shaft until It heard a faint splat. Then It pressed the elevator button, and the car descended from the void vibrating quietly to a halt, disrupting the sucking wind.

The inner door swung open, right to left, and there stood Nimiel. “Floor, Your

Disgrace?”

“The Ninth Ring,” answered Lucifer as It pulled out another Kool and boarded. The tip of the cigarette spontaneously combusted and smoke flooded Its lungs. “Make haste, please. After we land, cripple the car. Construction of a new elevator shaft begins hence. Install it a cubit away from this one.”

Upon landing, a faint wail could be heard along with a crunch. Satan stepped out and then turned back to his archdaemon in afterthought. “Hold. Before you disable it, take a service elevator to the plane above, and locate the soul named Plagion, 11<sup>th</sup> century B.C. He’ll be on the Eighth Circle somewhere. Appoint him to operate this car. He will ascend back to his circle of origin and then return to this level once again. Have him repeat this addendum for one hundred consecutive years, and notify him when his task is done I will not simply grant him dispensation but absolution. After you’ve relegated said duty meet me on the Fifth Circle.”

#

Lucifer stepped out of a service elevator parking it at the Fifth Ring. The mist was thick, the tide high. The pope regained his miter thanks to Its Karma Police, who kept the land sharks at bay.

Satan landed soft eyes upon Its Father, the scrolled parchment in Its hand. “Your deed.”

Yahweh smiled through Hell’s first rainbow. “*Your* deed. I locked the Pearly Gates behind me. *This* is Heaven now. You are the war’s victor. Let the wealthy inherit the

wind. Their perfidy earned them and your siblings aeons of darkness. They'll soon see Paradise is a curdled dream without me. Poor Samuel. He may have the most difficult time adjusting. I informed the hosts about his fraudulence just before I left."

The dark angel smiled. "Locksmiths don't concern you, Lord?"

"There *aren't* any up there, Morningstar."

"...What will become of Gabriel?" asked Lucifer as Nimiel materialized from another service elevator.

The most holy reached into His frock producing two glimmering annulettes (Gabriel's and Mammon's, which circled one another) and gave them to the Light Bringer. "He's asked for the same boon as Cain. He knew he'd be a pariah in the Silver City, so he's been cast down to walk an ice age on the planet he and his brother chose to exploit. Hopefully his shame and mark will wear down like a young mountain in the interim. Bearing them are already his greatest punishment."

Lucifer looked down with regret as the pink mists spun. "Wherever will you go?"

The Creator smiled and reached deeper still into His frock. After a little fishing He pulled out a smaller jangling circlet and gave It the keys to Heaven's gates. "I'll be here. In your shadow. Always."

Then without warning, a shot rang out from the mists, tearing through the pontiff's chest and caving it inward. Sun Tzu triumphantly cried out from his boat, "**SHI!**" and laughed.

Lucifer: "**FUCK--!**" Nimiel's and the

Karma Police's arms jackknifed, discharging a sustained volley back into the simmering lake, but the warlord already receded into the mauve almost as quickly as he'd emerged. Their pistols smoked, their magazines exhausted. Gulls wheeled about, screeching.

The pontiff gasped, "...I'll be here...in your shadow...always." Blood cachinnated from His mouth as He bled internally. Tears welled up, as He knew this was goodbye in this form.

How could He die? the angel furiously asked Itself. *NO* soul dies here. The *screeching...* Morningstar cried, "**SHUT UP!**" and the gulls fell instantly silent. The sun, after eras of paralysis, finally unfroze and began to slowly descend. Lucifer stooped and mourned, "Every last damned I tormented..."

"...Was a little piece of me." Even though Its Father was gone, the angel heard Him in Its mind, "The pain you inflicted I felt. I *made* myself feel it because each lash of hatred was actually anguish. And anguish is merely tortured love. You thought it not required, but it was. It always was."

"...I *hurt* you," Satan said with a cracking voice, "and I am ashamed." The sun was being swallowed by blood. Red twilight was dimming.

"I *hurt you*. But you were needed here, and I couldn't trust another. The responsibility was too profound. Yours was the toughest row to hoe, but climactically you did get your birthright: the Garden. I've never bequeathed freer will to anyone. Not

like you. A father tends to beat hardest the children he loves most. A man nailed to two planks could tell you. Bury your shame in the same hole as your hatchet. You needed to learn power isn't what We take from others, but what We endow. And you *did* learn. You have so much to endow, Lucifer Morningstar. More than any cosmic being. More than me."

Satan held Its Father as His vessel's body bled out. And It wept.

Nimiel's gnarled hand landed on Its shoulder and the archdaemon observed, "Your Disgrace...your tears."

Lucifer felt the heat on Its face and wiped Its eyes. Its palm came away red. Demon tears. They bit into Its six fingered hand like acid. "My *heart*..." Satan marveled, Its chest hammering as a swelling took residence in Its throat. "...I think it's bleeding."

And it was night, accompanied by Hell's first lunar presence. Full.

That week Lucifer had Nimiel reattach Its original wings. The surgery took over six hours per pinion. Ensuing a day long search, It finally found Its Desert of Burning Ash. Somehow it wound up in the Sixth Circle, like a tumbleweed. The angel forgot It left it there.

"*Lo*," said Lilith. "Well met, Your Disgrace. It has been some time. Is all sound?"

Satan greeted her with an embrace It didn't indulge in many centuries and whispered, "It *will* be, Lilith. I've neglected a dream, but no longer. I absolve you of your past sins. Please forgive Us, as well as oth-

ers. And above all others, yourself."

It walked into the desert leaving her speechless, though, smiling in bewilderment.

It spent that week striding into the middle of Its desert and then removed Its bleeding umbilicus. The crown shriveled in the sand. Removing Its garments It walked a few leagues beyond there and sat, allowing the teeming ash to singe and cleanse Its body. Thence, It fasted for 40 days and nights with Gabriel's and Mammon's enwreathing haloes hovering over Its head. Through blazing day and star fall. And one day: a thick green cloud drifted over to Lucifer.

Lilith found It after a sandstorm, and they knew one another once again. Violet lightening whipped forked electric fractals across a sea green sky. The thunder rumbled the sand. Once more it poured searing ash. Ash balls of hail descended like meteorites, and Lilith parasoled them both with the membrane of her batwings. A sirocco blew their sweat dry. Soon, the cloud lifted, the sun re-bathed them, and they gradually rose with pleasant twinges. The Morning Star spent a long moment drinking in her most powerful naked presence. "So typical, Lilith. Adam seeking divorce because you had the temerity not to take the knee and expect equal rights and treatment from the spouse who was made of the same clay substrate and at the same time."

She responded, "His loss was your gain. Of course God had to disfigure me and your realm wound up becoming the only recourse where I could choose my own

form.”

“I assure you, Yahweh’s outlook has since evolved over the years. Just like mine.”

She asked, “Wherever will you go?”

“The First Circle. And of course I’ll return. But a part of me is with you now, and forever will be. She will only hasten my return. Name her what you will, but, for a middle name, ‘Ganymede’ has a nice ring to it.”

She whispered it to herself, “Ganymede Morningstar,” and Satan’s smile widened to her as he heard it issue from her lips. His feathery appendages now fully healed, He took wing out of the desert – resanctified. Lucifer looked down at His shadow, roving over the sand like a ghost. He decided It

was holy. And good.

#

Pope Clement XV was canonized by 2230 A.D. His suicide was ruled a homicide after the body of an unidentified (but ancient) asian man was implicated as the one who’d pushed him from the Vatican’s tallest balcony. St. Clement of Metz became the patron for parishioners who deliberated euthanasia.

*“The very first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment did it so effectively that he won his own kingdom — Lucifer.”*

– Saul Alinsky



**END TRANSMISSION**