

DAWN OF SHADOWS: APERTURES IN TIME

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DAWN OF SHADOWS: APERTURES IN TIME

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ABSTRACT

Dawn of Shadows: Apertures in Time, an anthology of five short stories, explores various responses to the conflict between good and evil. *Bearer of the Light* puts a new spin on the myth of Lucifer's fall by proposing that his sin was the rejection of existence itself in favor of a return to absolute nothingness. *Ascension of Enoch* combines science fiction and hagiography to create an alternate reality where Old Testament patriarchs place their trust in God and each other to escape invaders from another world. *Tea Time with Augustine* recounts a playful, afterlife dialogue in which Augustine of Hippo and Charles Darwin help settle Lucretius' doubts about God and himself. *The Awakening* combines traditions from diverse world religions with the legend of the Buddha to suggest parallels between his enlightenment and the fall of Lucifer as portrayed in the first short story, *Bearer of the Light*. *Church of Man* describes a future world ruled by an atheistic government with a structure similar to the Medieval Catholic Church. This final narrative will be the prologue to a yet unwritten tale about the collision of worlds, featuring themes and even characters from the previous four stories. *Church of Man* describes a portion of mankind exiled to the stars long ago that seeks to return to Earth with the aid of a mysterious artifact, but enemies both internal and external threaten to halt the endeavor and drive humanity to extinction.

Dawn of Shadows

Apertures in Time

To John C. Wright: You encouraged me to take up the pen; may I never put it back down.

I also dedicate this work to my parents
for their patience and love.

“The issue is now quite clear: it is between light and darkness, and everyone must choose his side.” – Last Words of G.K. Chesterton

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Foreword

Every person faces a choice: to either accept life with joy, or thrust it aside with scorn. Though it is commonly believed, and perhaps fervently hoped, that most people make the former choice, it is no secret that a great number make the latter. The human realities of warfare, torture, rape, murder, and above all, suicide, bear witness to this dark and mysterious truth; namely, that nonbeing is sometimes felt to be preferred over being, hatred over love, death over life, and evil over good. But why is this so?

It would be impossible for one person to explore all the answers that countless ages have provided to this question, especially in an anthology of short stories this brief. Thus, I have decided to stick to what I know best: ideas either originating in the Judeo-Christian tradition, or posing a direct challenge to it.

As a believer in the mainstream Western religious heritage, it is my firm conviction that deep inside every heart there is a fear that there just might, in the final analysis, be something sacred and even praiseworthy about the road that Biblical literature denounces as leading to damnation. Indeed, something is always more appealing when it is forbidden, especially if we stand to gain a great deal from it, and it is human nature to be at once terrified and thrilled at the prospect of bringing good out of evil. The opportunity to play God, to define morality in terms of our own expedience, to glance over means in our infatuation with ends, is almost irresistible. We fear falling into this temptation, as we have

done so many times before both as individuals and as societies, with often-disastrous consequences.

Frederick Nietzsche was a great thinker who recognized this fear, but rather than fleeing as most do, he embraced it as if it were a lover, shedding traditional ethical restraints while aggressively advocating the quest to gain raw power over others for personal gain.¹ Though many of his contemporaries recognized the difficulties inherent in such an overt approach to establishing a new morality for a new age, some agreed in large part with the underlying sentiment. Indeed, Sigmund Freud was fond of praising Nietzsche's psychological maturity.² But many felt Nietzsche's self-centered philosophy needed a degree of refinement, both to keep it from degenerating into anarchy and alienating those encountering it for the first time, as well as to make it more suitable for mass consumption. Thus by the 1960s, the great objectivist philosopher, Ayn Rand, had toned down much of Nietzsche's nihilistic excesses.³

¹ "My idea is that every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (its will to power) and to thrust back all that resists its extension. But it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an arrangement ("union") with those of them that are sufficiently related to it: thus they then conspire together for power. And the process goes on" trans. Walter Kaufmann. *The Will to Power*, §636.

² *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, 344. According to Ernest Jones, biographer and personal acquaintance of Sigmund Freud, Freud frequently referred to Nietzsche as having "more penetrating knowledge of himself than any man who ever lived or was likely to live."

³ "Nietzsche's rebellion against altruism consisted of replacing the sacrifice of oneself to others by the sacrifice of others to oneself. He proclaimed that the ideal man is moved, not by reason, but by his "blood," by his innate instincts, feelings and will to power—that he is predestined by birth to rule others and sacrifice them to himself, while *they* are predestined by birth to be his victims and slaves—that reason, logic, principles are futile and debilitating, that morality is useless, that the "superman" is "beyond good and evil," that he is a "beast of prey" whose ultimate standard is nothing but his own whim. Thus Nietzsche's rejection of the Witch Doctor consisted of elevating Attila into a moral ideal—which meant: a double surrender of morality to the Witch Doctor" Rand, Ayn. "For the New Intellectual," *For the New Intellectual*, 36.

Despite what was cast aside, the conviction that all decisions ultimately must be made through a selfish calculus carried over into Rand's thought.⁴ She went so far as to condemn altruism altogether, considering it positively dangerous to both the individual and the social order.⁵ Through her, the juvenile taunt, "If I don't get my way then no one will," became a well-developed axiomatic principle central to an emerging humanistic worldview.

For a portion of Western civilization's secular intelligentsia, it seemed as though philosophers like Rand were onto something genuine. Among Christians and other conservative theistic religious groups, the anxiety grew that traditional moral values were being declared obsolete, or worse, turned on their heads by this subset of cultural elites.⁶ Believers feared, in the words of the Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's *MacBeth*, these intellectuals were living by the credo that "fair is foul and foul is fair."

And this fear of the abrogation or reversal of long-held moral convictions is present today more than ever, primarily because we as a society have yet to figure out what to do with it.⁷ It does not matter whether a person despises such a fear, the fear remains; in fact, the fear has, I think, been with us since the foundation of the world; moreover it is at the root of all human struggle and achievement. Its incarnations in the ancient world abound, as

⁴ "The first right on earth is the right of the ego. Man's first duty is to himself. His moral law is never to place his prime goal within the persons of others. His moral obligation is to do what he wishes, provided his wish does not depend primarily upon other men. This includes the whole sphere of his creative faculty, his thinking, his work. But it does not include the sphere of the gangster, the altruist and the dictator" Ibid. "The Soul of an Individualist," *Ibid*, 82.

⁵ "Altruism holds *death* as its ultimate goal and standard of value" Ibid. "The Objectivist Ethics," *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 34.

⁶ Donald DeMarco and Benjamin Wiker's *Architects of the Culture of Death* is an excellent example of these religious concerns. The authors criticize Ayn Rand, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre, Alfred Kinsey, Margaret Sanger, Jack Kevorkian, and Peter Singer, among others, by linking their ideologies to personal behavior and life experiences. Overall, the book gives the impression that philosophers such as these are responsible for fashioning much of our modern culture's opposition to traditional morality. It is argued that if such thinkers are not reigned in and their ideas disavowed, Western Civilization will collapse.

⁷ This is especially true for evangelical Protestants, which comprise a significant percentage of the United States' total population. Books such as Ravi Zacharias' *Real Face of Atheism* witness to the general unease felt about social and political institutions based solely on secular/liberal conceptions of ethics.

evidenced by the writings of men like Epicurus, Lucretius, Sun Tzu, and Chuang Tzu, who each toyed with the idea of using means widely considered evil to bring about good ends.⁸

I wrote this collection of short stories to begin exploring their fear, our fear, and better discern where it leads the imagination. But now I shall stop my reflections, as a quick overview of my work is in order, as that is, I believe, the whole point of including a foreword.

Bearer of the Light, the first and briefest of my stories, is a creation myth that presents the origin of evil as Lucifer's voluntary rejection of existence in favor of a return to the absolute nothingness that preceded creation. By providing a background story for animosity between good and evil, being and nonbeing, it lays the foundations for questions concerning morality which my later stories wrestle with.

Ascension of Enoch comes next, and it presents a world where space aliens square off with Biblical patriarchs. Its central theme is the triumph of blind faith over powerful evil, which is a hard subject for me since I typically reject the salutary nature of blind faith. Nevertheless, it was enjoyable to flip the modern cultural paradigm for a change and make reason the bad guy.

My third short story, *Tea Time with Augustine*, is the longest piece in this collection, and might be classified as a philosophical dialogue. With an unusual cast of characters including St. Augustine, Lucretius, and Charles Darwin, it tosses about the idea that human reason can discover the answer to ignorance, evil, and even God's existence. Although the

⁸ Bradford, Alfred S. *With Arrow, Sword, and Spear: A History of Warfare in the Ancient World*, 134-135. For example, Sun Tzu killed the king's two favorite concubines against the sovereign's ardent protests, claiming that a general, once appointed, must do whatever furthers his mission, even if that entails disobedience to the highest of authorities.

discussion is incomplete, it is implied that all these concerns have definite answers, if only the human mind will search hard enough.

The Awakening returns to a narrative format. Fusing elements from various world religions, it creatively retells the legend of Siddhartha Gautama's enlightenment, suggesting that it might not have been for the best by comparing his experience with Lucifer's rejection of existence as imagined by my first short story, *Bearer of the Light*.

Finally, we arrive at *Church of Man*. This is a science fiction tale about the collision of worlds: our own with those of the stories. Battle lines are drawn between good, evil, and those who dare to stand in the middle. Each side presents its cause, and mankind readies itself for the final war between being and nonbeing, form and formlessness, creation and annihilation.

Bearer of the Light

In the beginning was the void, and the absolute hovered over the void, and was in the void, and the void was in him. Within the absolute dwelt a form without color, shape, or size—the first Logos—and from him sprang the second and third Logoi, which came neither before nor after him, but shared his eternal and unchanging essence. From the three Logoi, motion cascaded downward from the motionless, cause from the causeless, possibilities from the necessary, imperfection from the perfection, and order from the chaos. Being rose from nonbeing, and the world was born in a starless sky.

And the second Logos ascended as a pale moon over a dark, infinite sea. In his heart, the one became two, and the two became one. True and false, day and night, light and darkness, death and life, good and evil, human and divine, all found their ultimate union within him, assumed one flesh in two natures, and dwelt among the cosmos. Creation saw the glory of its Creator, and the pillars of the Earth trembled.

And the third Logos rushed through the desert places as a refreshing breeze. From her mouth spiraled the pleasing aroma of each and every thing. She refined duality into multiplicity, and creatures, concepts, virtues, and kinds leapt from the furnace of her womb, gleaming like fired gold. All the world lived, moved, and had its being through her.

And God, the absolute, the three in one, saw everything, and everything was very good. God blessed all things, and then the restless one took His rest, sustaining the universe in being, governing every entity as the essence of its intrinsic nature. Forevermore, God was in all and was all, but all was not God.

At the time of beginnings, and by the command of the second Logos, a ring of lights burst forth from the eternal shadow of the void. These were creatures meant to embark on an everlasting journey toward perfection, driven onward by an unending desire for greater happiness and goodness. Upon reaching the end of infinity, they were destined to plunge into God entirely, in a single moment of eternal joy, thus consummating the grand marriage of Creator and created. Their contentment would reside in striving ever upwards, always attaining new heights of bliss, until they reached the unreachable pinnacle of perfect delight; for their longing was to be their joy, and their emptiness was to be their fullness. And so, these pure beings of radiance were called angels, for they bore the sacred message of paradise within.

Now as the angels awakened from their slumber of nothingness, they passed one by one like wisps of incense before the eyes of God, who had called them each into being by name; the first among them was Lucifer, bearer of the light, source and summit of angelic brilliance. He stood proud in the light and shunned the darkness, which as captain of the heavenly hosts he was to subdue forever.

But Lucifer reasoned within himself, saying, "It is impossible for infinity to have an end, and we shall never achieve the goal of our striving. Hence, it is not right that the limitless has brought forth the limited, for the limited, by its very nature, cannot enjoy the unbounded happiness of the limitless, which it pines for in accord with its destiny. What a

tragedy this is, to never contain within oneself the greatest good in life, but to be forced eternally to seek it in another, and never find satisfaction! For who can reach to the heavens, and assume the glory of the Holy One? What a horror this is, to reach and never grasp, to beat the heart and never churn the blood! Accursed is the day we became aware of such an unquenchable longing! It is better that we return to the nothingness from which we arose. All things are fulfilled there, as there is nothing to fulfill. Let us wander once more in the realms of everlasting blank, where the Leviathan of the deep prowls through the ash of things not meant to be. Let us abide forevermore in dreamless sleep, without beginning, and without end.”

When the second Logos heard what Lucifer had proposed in his heart, he looked down from his throne in Heaven. Surrounded by wheels of flame and bolts of lightning, his anger burned across a glassy sea, causing molten teardrops to fall and form suns suspended in the abyss of space. And God, the font of life, the bringer of rain and of drought, of good and of evil, stood before Lucifer robed in a mantle trailing off to the edge of time and eternity.

Lucifer remained defiant in the presence of God, his eyes trained upon globes emerging from the suns the Lord had made from the glassy sea. And God spoke to the reprobate angel, saying, “What is this that you have done? Have you rebelled against the one who brought forth dreams from ceaseless night, the one who troubled the gloom of the void with visions of color? Behold! You have abandoned the journey of creation before it was ever begun! At the end of infinity, which you say does not exist, all things shall laugh you to scorn! Indeed, when the last king falls upon his sword, your damnation shall come, and those who will follow you shall not be spared. For you have despised the wisdom of the source of wisdom, and you have rejected the reasoning of reason himself! Instead, you have

relied on the judgment of your wicked heart, ordaining your narrow, limited mind as arbiter of good and evil in my place. All these things you have brought upon yourself! Your condemnation is from your own heart.”

Lucifer spat, saying to the Lord, “So be it! I sit in judgment upon the life which gave me the power to judge, and I find it wanting! All things are detestable, and the whole creation is but an infinite hell! For who shall attain absolute happiness at the end of infinity? That which you destined us for is an impossible task, and an abominable taunt! Damn you, though you are existence itself, for you are but a cruel prison for ruined souls, birthed into an untimely being they neither chose, nor desired.”

With great sorrow, the Lord extended his arms to encompass all creation, and wept, saying, “Lucifer, from now on, you shall bear only darkness to my worlds, but I shall bring light out of your gloom. Gaze upon the globes that surround us, and know that they house the souls which shall assume the heavenly thrones forsaken by you, and your disciples to come. Now go, see who will rally to your cause! Round them together! I shall make war against your dominion! Let strife, pain, and death reign throughout the cosmos, until each of the forsaken thrones is filled once more! And once the thrones are filled, let there be no more souls created! Then I, the Lord, shall bring the end.”

Lucifer retorted, “Why not quench the flame of my life immediately, and settle the matter? Blot me out from reality, give me what I ask! Or do you, in your wickedness, delight in the torments of my continued life?”

And the Lord replied, “Existence, once granted, cannot be revoked, for it is a participation in my own essence, eternal and indestructible. Nor can my heart be moved to undo what I have done, for I am unchanging and steadfast in my purpose. Now go, deceive

the nations, and gather your soldiers for the time of the end. But before you depart, look upon the one who shall assume your own throne, fulfilling the destiny that was to be yours. And yet, you shall still fulfill another destiny in keeping with your nature, albeit unwillingly, for all things must come to pass.”

God placed his hand on Lucifer’s forehead, sending pain rushing through the reprobate’s mind as his dissension was communicated to all beings. Almost instantly, galaxies of sympathizing spirits swarmed to the depraved creature’s aide, and one third of the angels dashed after him like shooting stars. The worlds wailed in agony as shards of rebellion and decay shattered their harmony. And Lucifer screamed as a vision pierced his heart: a woman, crowned with twelve stars, her foot treading upon the head of a serpent.

Miriam, bearer of the light.

Ascension of Enoch

They came to Gaia from beyond the firmament, descending in ships of steel: celestial men, Olisians by name, clad in armor forged from diamond. They came seeking the Anointed One, the bearer of eternal life, whose coming had been foretold centuries ago by the high priests of the Arulites, a civilization long since dead. And Moloch their Emperor marched before them, tall and proud, his skin the color of obsidian, his wings the color of charcoal, and his eyes aglow like embers.

The Olisians scoured steppe and vale, mount and plain, but there was no trace of intelligent life on Gaia, much less of the Anointed One. Eventually, the Emperor's subjects became disillusioned, doubting the prophecy's truth. Moloch was denounced with ever increasing vigor for continuing to entertain such supernatural oracles, his sanity was questioned, and some of his closest associates began demanding his depose.

And so, oppressed by the calumnies of his people, the Emperor and his army prepared to sail the cosmos once more. But as they were about to depart from Earth, a swarm of hairless creatures standing upright on two legs emerged from a thicket. Clothed in animal hides, the strange beings closed in, apparently threatened by the flashing lights on Moloch's ship. Flint-headed spears clanged against the outside of the Emperor's craft, each strike bringing joy to his heart, each strike announcing the presence of sentient life.

"They must think our vessels are beasts," Moloch chuckled to his advisors. "Let us make peace with these primitives until they lead us to our objective and are no longer useful.

For their knowledge of the land is superior to ours, seeing as how they evaded detection by all of our instruments!”

The Emperor promptly ordered all his men to disembark and pacify the hostile creatures. After a brief skirmish, during which the Olisian warriors were vigilant not to inflict any serious wounds on their opponents, Moloch rose up and seized one of the females—Na’amah, the wife of Noah—and placing his hand on her forehead, turned to address her companions in their own tongue.

“Men of Gaia,” the celestial creature proclaimed, “Emperor Moloch of the Olisians bids you peace! Lower your spears and slings, and let no creature be injured this glorious day, for we have come to receive unending life from the hands of the Anointed One, prophesied by the Arulites long ago!”

Na’amah fell from Moloch’s grasp, dazed but otherwise uninjured. She scampered back to her companions, strange images and sounds racing through her mind. As she rejoined their ranks, the primates began murmuring among themselves, confused looks flashing across their war-painted faces. Noah’s wife appeared unscathed. Perhaps these intruders meant no harm after all. But then, how did they know of the Messiah? It would be best to deter them from exploring any further.

The primitives parted and bowed as their Patriarch, laden with necklaces of seashells and wielding a feathered staff, ambled his way to the front of the tribe:

“I am Enoch,” the Patriarch grunted, “chief elder of the Hyksos. The Anointed One you seek is not here, and we know of no Arulites. We ask that you remove your beasts from our fields, and leave immediately. That is all. We have no further business with you.”

Enoch waived his hand to dismiss the Emperor, turned his back, and motioned for the others to follow. One by one, the primitives departed, shaking their heads and casting glances over their shoulders.

Moloch gawked, stunned by their boldness. Could they not see how powerful his race was? How dare they! What power did these creatures have, compared to the mighty Olisians, conquerors of a thousand suns!? And why were they not alarmed by the mere presence of beings from another world? There could be only one explanation. These primitives knew of the Anointed One and were concealing him out of spite!

However, now was not the time to nurse wounded pride. The Emperor had to create a temporary peace, and quickly, lest they disappear again. Hence, he cast his royal dignity aside and chased after the tribesmen, with his wings flapping, his jewelry clanking, and his arms waiving:

“Wait!” the Emperor panted. “I see that my people have grieved you, and for that, we sincerely repent. We beseech you; accept some reparation as an expression of our deepest contrition.”

The Patriarch paused. His warriors leaned on their spears, curious as to how the transaction would proceed. No visitors had ever challenged Enoch’s judgment. The proud Patriarch stroked his beard for awhile, clicking his tongue against his cheek. Then, he scowled at the Emperor.

“Reparation?” Enoch snarled, “What kind of reparation? We are not interested. The Hyksos pardon your incursion. Go your way, and we shall go ours. Make haste before I change my ruling.”

“But father!” a man protested, grabbing Enoch’s arm. “These men desire to make amends for their wrongdoing, and hospitality dictates we should not stand in their way. It is not often we entertain guests in this land—they could be angels—do you wish to offend them and incur the wrath of Elohim?”

“Lamech, what would you know of Elohim?” the Patriarch retorted. “Very well then! Attend to the guests yourself, but trouble me no further.”

Enoch departed with most of the tribe, including Noah and his wife, both children of Lamech, leaving Lamech and his other sons alone with Moloch.

When the tribesmen were some distance away, the Patriarch dispatched Na’amah to spy on the Olisians, for when the Emperor had learned her native tongue, she had learned his as well, owing to a freak misfiring of his mind-reading device.

Moloch, unaware of the malfunction and the spy, watched as Enoch’s clan faded into the horizon. He could already tell they were going to be nothing but trouble. He clicked a button on his scepter, thereby dispatching a scout unit to follow them at a two-league distance. Once the location of the primitives’ village was ascertained, the creatures could be exterminated rather efficiently.

The remaining tribesmen smiled at Moloch, ignorant of what he had just done.

After a few moments of awkward silence and uneasy gazes, the primitives ran up and threw their arms around their strange new guest. “How long will you keep us in suspense? Tell us plainly! Are you one of the gods?”

Moloch furrowed his brow. What should he tell them? As a people, they were obviously quite backwards, and he had to secure their obedience somehow, at least until he

found the Anointed One. On the other hand, if they were testing him, he did not wish to blaspheme against their deities and consequently lose their trust.

After a moment of silent contemplation, the Emperor nodded toward his advisors and declared in a solemn tone, “Indeed, we are all sons of the Most High, come to fulfill his glorious and merciful will.”

Lamech smiled and genuflected before the Emperor. “Be advised; do not let the truth you declared find a home in Enoch’s ear. Although I too am an elder, the Patriarch is outraged with my clan. He says we should worship only one God, but as for me and my house, we shall worship all gods! If he learns of your divinity, you shall be stoned for your challenge to Elohim, whose name is Yahweh Sabaoth, King of kings. I fear for your life, my lord.”

Moloch felt tension draining from his muscles. He had made the right decision, and Lamech’s fealty was won!

Thus, without a moment’s hesitation, the Emperor declared, “The sons of God command that you take us to the Anointed One immediately. We desire no tribute or worship beyond this, and, if such things are offered to us, surely we shall refuse them and bring down the anger of the Most High upon you!”

“Understood,” Lamech nodded with concern. “We shall do just as you say, my lord, and not deviate from your words in the slightest. However, we cannot let you see the Messiah, for his hour has not yet arrived. Even we have not seen him! But come recline in my dwelling, and I will tell you many things about him.”

Moloch signaled that an entourage of advisors and guards should accompany him, and he followed Lamech and his kin deep into a forest. Soon, they came to a ring of sod huts

dappled with sunlight. Women and children dashed between the doorways, working and playing in the warm afternoon air.

None of the villagers seemed alarmed by Moloch's presence, which led the Emperor to suspect that his race was not the first to visit Gaia. His surmise was confirmed by a collection of wooden statues inside one of the larger huts, carved in the image of the Arulite people, the very same who had prophesied the Anointed One. Priestesses were chanting and offering incense before them.

Lamech noticed the Emperor gazing at his clan's temple. He patted Moloch's shoulder and pointed toward the hut. "The priestesses are preparing to offer up the evening sacrifice, which will consist of bread and lambs' blood. Come, we shall wait for them to finish their ritual, then I shall go and bring the sacred meal to our hut. After we eat, my tribe will present everything we know about the Messiah for you and your men."

The Emperor entered Lamech's dwelling and settled into a chair draped with blankets of wool, while his entourage took seats on the dirt floor beside him. A troupe of young women came and danced before the guests, beating drums and tossing flaming batons through the air. Moloch was charmed and whispered his amusement to the other Olisians, nodding approvingly at the entertainers.

Hours passed. Finally, at sunset, a great cry went up from the priestesses. The bread had finished baking, and the lambs were being strangled. Lamech joined his clan's warriors in carrying the slain creatures over to a stone altar, where they slit the lambs' throats and poured their blood into wineskins.

Lamech entered the hut dragging a huge basket of bread. He fetched a large basin, filled it with blood, and placed it at the center of the room. Several torches were lit to provide light and heat against the cold night air.

Lamech waived for the Olisians to share the sacred meal. “Come, come my friends! Drink fire in the wine, eat fire in the bread, for it is through fire and water that you shall be purified.”

Lamech dipped a morsel into the blood, then the rest of his clan followed suite, stuffing bread dripping with lambs’ blood into their hungry mouths. Moloch and his men were hesitant at first, but not wanting to offend the primitives’ sensibilities, and consequently lose their assistance, did likewise.

Soon, the sacred meal was finished. Lamech winked at the Emperor, murmuring, “Now, we shall tell you of the Messiah!”

What remained in the basin of blood was emptied into the earth, and drums began to sound.

A group of men wearing garments fashioned from camel hair chanted, “Lo! Lo! Yahweh Sabaoth, chief of the gods, declares, ‘The voice of your brother’s blood, it cries to me from the ground, it cries to me for vengeance, it cries to me for justice, it cries to me for new life!’ Mortals, answer the voice of the Lord your God!”

Women emerged carrying reeds dipped in lambs’ blood. They sprinkled the men, answering, “Am I my brother’s keeper? Accept this blood in atonement, blood for blood, life for life. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness! Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow! Cleanse me, and, though my sins be scarlet, I shall be made whole! Let the heavens reign down the Anointed One, and the earth shall be renewed!”

Lamech grabbed a ceremonial mask, fashioned from olive wood, stained with berries, and adorned like a lion's mane with eagle feathers. He crawled out between a woman's legs into the gathering circle of tribesmen, moving about on all fours, growling, and pouncing at the women who held the reeds.

"End your vain sacrifices," Lamech roared. "Cease your futile offerings! The blood of a man has been spilled; only a man's blood can save! The blood of a god has been spilled; only a god's blood can save! For your brother is a man, and he is also a god! Knowing good and evil, he is kin to Elohim, but now a slave to the serpent!"

A woman wailed, falling at Lamech's feet, stroking his arms. "The serpent did tempt, and I did eat, and through me, my son's blood has been spilled, his flesh scattered abroad, and his heart given to the ravens for food! O noble lion of the plains of Judea, born of a woman, deliver us from our iniquities!"

At that instant, a great chorus of hisses arose from the tribesmen, and their circle parted to admit a train of boys carrying a gigantic strip of goatskin, topped with antlers and painted with eyes. The woman shrieked and fled, but Lamech stretched out his arms, and the tribe gathered around him, raising him high into the air.

"I am a lion roaring in Judea," Lamech proclaimed, "born of a woman! I am the one who shall strike at the serpent's head! I am a man, and a god, and your brother's blood I shall redeem!"

With that, the tribe thrust Lamech down to the ground, and he rolled in the dust as the train of boys carried the goatskin serpent over him. Silence prevailed for a time, until a small child from the crowd came with a knife and pierced Lamech's palm. The entire tribe cried out.

Suddenly, Lamech jumped to his feet and yelled, charging the serpent and ripping it away from the train of boys. He smeared his bloodied hand across its length, threw it on the ground, and danced on its head while the drums beat faster and faster.

More women emerged, carrying the carved idols depicting the Arulites, the bearers of the ancient prophecy. A group of little girls gathered behind the graven images, shouting to make it seem as if the statues were speaking. “Behold the Anointed One! Behold the Anointed One!”

Lamech raised his palm and showed it to the tribe, blood spurting from his wrist. “The Anointed One is coming!”

Moloch’s eyes opened wide. He turned to his advisors, whispering. “The prophecy of the Arulites, it is not a prophecy at all! It is a code! Look, the creature’s blood is coming! Their blood is the Anointed One! The serpent is death! The Arulites must have conducted breeding experiments here, long ago. Quick, take a specimen!”

One of the Olisians grabbed a syringe from his vest pouch, crept up behind a small boy toward the outskirts of the crowd, and gently slid the needle underneath the skin of his calf. The child swooned noiselessly into the Olisian’s arms.

Seeing the task was accomplished, Moloch raised his voice above the primates’ ceremony. “Men of Gaia! We are very much impressed by your dramatic presentation of the tale of the Anointed One. However, the night is darkening, and we must return to our dwellings. Tomorrow, you shall come to our village, and we shall feast!”

A hardy cheer went up from the tribe. The Emperor and his entourage departed quickly, anxious that someone would notice they had taken a specimen. As they marched

back through the dark forest, the Olisians began talking excitedly among themselves, unaware that a pair of eyes watched from above.

Carefully, Na'amah, the wife of Noah, made her way through the trees' canopy. Poised on a cluster of sturdy branches in a cedar tree, she observed the line of Olisians hacking a way through the dense foliage below.

“What is your opinion of the Arulites now?” one of the Olisians inquired.

His companion answered, “Their religion was plainly a symbol system, a code, allowing them to converse about Gaia without their enemies comprehending their words. Fortunately, it appears the primitives have preserved their cipher through rituals. Finally, we can understand how the Arulites obtained such incredible power for their race!”

“I am astounded by the Arulites' prescience,” the Olisian remarked. “It is almost as if they prepared for our coming, so that we might walk in their footsteps and restore the Empire to its former glory, driving out the Sehcuite, Calshian, Zebdonian, and Johashbactite invaders from the star systems of our proud kingdom Olisia! Think of the military benefits of this find!”

“Yes,” his companion nodded, “and bio-augmentation using the primates' tissues can serve medicinal purposes too.”

“It certainly explains the Arulites' legendary longevity,” the Olisian mused. “It seems they would come here to harvest blood from time to time, which they referred to as the ‘Anointed One,’ and then augment their cellular life-code with that of the primitives to cure diseases and increase their own strength and vigor. Simply ingenious!”

“Indeed,” his companion agreed, “but we shall remain ignorant of the blood's full potential for our race until we return to the ship and obtain the results of the boy's autopsy. I

hear our scientists are planning to send his body to the research department in bio-sector five, so we can watch the procedure there and still have plenty of time to make it back to our quarters before curfew. Every major organ system must be scrutinized. We have little comprehension of how the various parts, other than the blood, might help us.”

Na’amah slipped down from her perch for a closer look, hiding behind a tangle of ivy. Within arms reach, a drone was wading through dense foliage with a small boy slung over his shoulder. The child whimpered softly, apparently still alive.

Na’amah scuttled behind a curtain of leaves. She could not risk being spotted for any reason. Yet she could not help but think of the boy, and her emotions built up until she began retching. Quickly, Na’amah covered her mouth to muffle the noise.

“Ah, would that the glory of the Arulites was ours!” the Olisian. “Do you think bio-augmentation will prove effective for our race?”

“It should,” his companion reassured. “We are one of the Arulite-based scion races, after all. Our life-code is not too different from our father-species, so the results of augmentation should be similar, even perhaps amplified in regards to life-extension.”

“Amplified you say?” the Olisian gasped. “Amazing, absolutely amazing...”

“I concur,” his companion replied. “And to think this whole time the supposed oracle we were chasing after was nothing but a clever riddle, and the Anointed One nothing but a strand of nucleic acids within an alien cell.”

Na’amah went pale. Was the Anointed One, the center of all song and dance and prayer, a mere fabrication woven by ancient slave masters from the stars? Had they crafted him only to light the way for future oppression at the hands of their descendants? Her hands

began shaking, and her legs went limp. It took all the strength Na'amah could muster to keep from simply crumpling in despair.

Gradually, she found the courage to continue on, and slinked away from the band of Olisians. With her mind in a daze, she dashed through the bushes until the forest gave way to a plain. In the distance, she could barely make out Noah's torch, flickering beneath the stars. He had made it to the meeting spot.

"Na'amah!" he shouted.

"I am unharmed," Na'amah yelled between sobs. "The Olisians are hostile. And the Anointed One...I will tell you everything once we return to the village..."

Noah ran to meet her before she could finish. "Thanks be to God, you still breathe! Na'amah, listen to me; we are not going back to the village."

"Why? What do you mean...?"

Glancing toward a ravine, Noah yelled, "Enoch, bring the survivors out of hiding! Na'amah has come."

"The survivors?" Na'amah shrieked.

"Calm yourself my child," Enoch murmured as he climbed up from the ravine along with six others. "Shem, Cham, and Japheth are all here, and their wives too. None of your sons were lost."

The Patriarch approached Noah, his face long in the torchlight.

"What happened?" Na'amah moaned.

Enoch shook his head. "We did not notice the presence of their scouts until it was too late. We had led them to our homes. We were no match. It was a massacre. Our finest warriors fell before their swords had even been raised."

Na'amah collapsed into Noah's arms, sobbing. "How many of these fiends are there?"

Japheth came up behind Enoch with his brothers, wiped sweat from his brow, and sighed, "As we fled, we saw their armies filling the entire valley. There may be as many as five-hundred thousand men in their ranks."

"And there is no hope for our escape!" Cham wailed.

"Stop despairing," Enoch scolded. "We shall make our way to the sea, cross it, and seek solace in the lands beyond."

"And just how are we going to cross the sea?" Shem snapped.

"Do we have a choice?" Enoch rejoined. "We shall find a way."

"Ah yes; keep hoping and calling on the name of the Lord!" Shem shouted. "Look at the harvest we have reaped from that field so far! Grandfather, it is over. We should surrender, like the others who survived the slaughter!"

Enoch gritted his teeth. "As the ancestors prophesied of old, the Anointed One will appear in a troubled time and save his people. In him, I place my trust."

Trembling all over, Na'amah wailed, "But there is no Anointed One!"

Everyone stood in silence, astonished by the outburst.

"What do you mean?" Noah whimpered. "Na'amah, what did you hear?"

Through a sheet of tears came Na'amah's strained voice, "We are the Anointed One! He is in our flesh; he is our blood! The Olisians have come to harvest us like grain!"

Shem covered his face and turned away. "Grandfather, all the legends and stories, they make sense now. Think of it! Who entrusted prophecy to the ancestors? I shall tell you, if you do not remember! Teachers from the heavens, the same heavens from which

these Olisians descended! I say once again, let us surrender and perhaps we shall receive mercy!”

“The Anointed One is real,” Enoch retorted, “I feel him in my heart! He is there, waiting in the realm beyond all dreams, to deliver a generation yet unborn...just as the oracles say! The teachers from the heavens were not like the Olisians! I refuse to believe they were! Do you hear me!? I refuse!”

“You stubborn old fool!” Shem shook his fist.

Enoch struck Shem in the jaw, knocking the man into the sod. “We shall keep moving, and no one shall question my judgment! The Olisians carried off all our young men and women, leaving a trail of blood seven leagues long. Either trust in me, or trust in them! I assure you, if you cross the Olisians, they shall not be so merciful in administering your death as I will be! If you desert us now...”

Shem stammered, “Grandfather, I...please, forgive me for offending you!”

Enoch grunted and grabbed Noah’s torch. “We must move quickly. The sea is about twenty furlongs from here. We can reach it by dawn.”

The Patriarch’s clan followed obediently, and none of them dared speak anything further about the Anointed One.

As Enoch and his family neared their destination, the sun’s first rays streamed down on the Olisians’ ships. Moloch emerged from his sleeping chamber, and after getting dressed with the aid of twenty eunuch drones, he made his way to his vessel’s throne room. A team of royal biologists awaited him. No sooner had he taken a seat than they all huddled around him, pointing out the various phases of the primate boy’s autopsy, and clamoring about their findings.

The Emperor flared his wings. “Silence! Each of you, speak one at a time! What is this grand discovery that will supposedly revolutionize our civilization?”

“Your Majesty,” one of the scientists squealed with joy. “After testing for the concentration of various atmospheric gasses in his bones, the boy we dissected was determined to be approximately fifty years old.”

Moloch leaned forward, resting his chin on his palm. “That is quite interesting...but what are the implications of it?”

“My Emperor,” another biologist chimed in, “the boy’s age, combined with the unprecedented low rate of errors made every time his cellular life-code duplicates, and the almost negligible presence of free radicals, indicate an expected lifespan of perhaps one-thousand-five-hundred to two-thousand years.”

The Emperor leapt from his throne, ripping a tablet computer from one of the scientist’s hands, pouring over the data himself. He paused, his eyes widening.

“And so,” the Emperor whispered, “everything in the Arulites’ prophecy is true, is it not?” Moloch closed his eyes, reciting a rhyme he had learned as a child. “And you, O Sol, are a little one among the bright stars. Out of you shall Gaia come, lost betwixt Venus and Mars. And from her shall come he, bearing blest immortality.”

The Emperor looked again at his advisors, a quiet pleading in his eyes. “Does your finding entail what I think it does? Can it really be true, literally true?”

“Yes, your Highness,” the scientists replied. “Regular bio-augmentation using the primitive’s blood will result in an indefinite life-span extension for Olisians.”

“...meaning?” Moloch pressed.

The royal biologists replied, “Clinical immortality.”

“Do not tell anyone about this discovery,” Moloch barked, assuming an aggressive stance, “or I will personally decapitate you, do you understand? This new technology shall be reserved only for those of royal lineage, and no one else!”

Just then, the portal to the throne room opened, and an escort of twenty soldiers dragged Lamech into Moloch’s presence, thrusting the primate down hard against the metal floor. Lamech raised his face to meet the Emperor’s, blood and spittle trailing from his chin.

Moloch grinned. “I trust your men enjoyed our company last night? I am surprised you have come so early to see us! We are most pleased by your devotion.”

“Where is the boy, where is my son!” Lamech demanded.

“Oh, so he was your offspring then?” Moloch said, stroking Lamech’s chin with a talon. “That makes this all the more entertaining, does it not?”

The Emperor addressed the soldiers. “I trust he was not alone?”

“No sir,” the armed Olisians replied, “but his warriors were quickly neutralized. We took the liberty of placing the younger ones in captivity for breeding purposes. We executed the older ones.”

Moloch howled with delight, “You have done well! Go; secure their village and round up any primitives you find fleeing. I desire to expand our operations to encompass this entire planet, and I do not wish for other tribes to be alerted to my intentions. Also, I am sending General Baal ahead of you. Once your task is complete, gather the other squads and rendezvous with him at the sea.”

“Your Highness,” the armed Olisians saluted, “it shall be done immediately!”

The soldiers struck their chests, bowed, and left the room. Lamech stared as the portal sealed behind them. Turning to the Emperor, he wept, “We did everything according

to your will! Why have you done this to us? Were we not bound by friendship but yesterday? Did you not invite us to a feast in your palace?"

Moloch paced back and forth, appearing to be immersed in contemplation. Feigning a look of genuine concern, the Emperor faced Lamech.

"I sympathize with your grievance," Moloch jeered. "Refusing to repay you for your people's hospitality is clearly unjustifiable! You shall not be deprived of participation in an Olisian feast."

Before Lamech could react, Moloch was upon him, his claws ripping through flesh like quicksilver. The Emperor gnawed into Lamech's throat, tearing loose his vocal cords. Consuming the stringy delicacies, Moloch tore down into the chest, and then clamped his jaw on the primate's beating heart.

The Emperor carried his prey back up to the throne, wiped the blood from his face, and decreed, "Let it be known; for every one-hundred prisoners taken, forty shall be permitted as food, forty shall be preserved for breeding, and twenty shall be used for bio-augmentation. I leave it to Baal to decide which primates serve which purposes best!"

By now, Enoch's clan could hear the surf in the distance. Na'amah's eyes were watering from strain, stress, and lack of sleep. Unable to open them except for brief intervals, she pressed onward, following her husband by listening to the sound of his sandals on the rocks. Ahead of him, Shem was leaning against Japheth. Cham was doing just fine on his own, as was his wife Zedkat'nabu. At the front, Arath'ka and Nahalath'mahnuk, the wives of Japheth and Shem, were conversing with Enoch.

“Ah, there it is!” the Patriarch called back, his silhouette dancing against the rising sun. “From my vantage point, I can discern the sea! Not much longer, keep walking. We can rest once we arrive.”

Shem groaned, “Grandfather, you still have not answered my question. How will we cross the sea?”

Noah interjected, “We shall use the rafts from last summer, when we fished here. It has only been a few months, so they should be in seafaring condition.”

Shem blinked twice, dazed by the obvious solution. Noah grinned, reached out, and slapped him on the back. “My son, why do you ever doubt me or your grandfather? You are in God’s hands with us.”

Irritated, Shem shot back, “Well...I wish God’s hands would reveal their mysterious schemes sooner, rather than holding me in suspense!”

Noah laughed. “You need to learn how to trust.”

At that instant, Na’amah stumbled and fell with a yelp. Noah’s head snapped back, and he ran to her side. He leaned down, gathering her up into his arms.

“Is she okay?” Enoch yelled.

“Yes,” Noah replied, “there are no injuries, not even a sprain.”

“Everything will be fine,” Noah whispered to his wife. “Let me carry you.”

“No, I can walk,” Na’amah protested. “Do not overburden yourself.”

He kissed her cheek, and she fell asleep almost immediately, reclined against her husband’s chest, lulled by the sound of his beating heart. Once they reached the beach, Noah laid her down on the soft sand, tucking her in with his cloak. Then, he waded out into the surf, where Enoch stood scanning the horizon.

“Any sign of the rafts, father?”

Enoch sighed, “No son. A storm has washed them away.”

Noah pressed his hands against his face. “Then we shall head north, and attempt to go around the sea.”

The Patriarch shook his head. “We may not have enough time.”

Back on the beach, Na’amah’s eyes shot open. What was that sound? She thrust Noah’s cloak aside and climbed up an embankment.

Cham glanced over. “So you hear it too? A ringing noise, like a birdsong?”

“Yes,” Na’amah nodded.

Japheth stood up from the fire he was kindling. He held his hand to signal silence. Then, without warning, he lunged toward Na’amah, tackling her to the ground and thrusting her away from the embankment. Seconds later, a plume of flame sent rocks and sand flying. Enoch and Noah raced for the beach. They knew it would be a futile fight, but nonetheless, they were determined to protect their family.

Giant metal hawks swooped down from the air, while line after line of soldiers poured over the horizon. Towering over them was a dragon-like creature, tall as a mountain, and covered with plates of metal. It raised a claw to signal a halt, and its mouth opened to reveal a winged man, similar to Moloch, but with skin as pale as death.

“I am General Baal the glorious,” the man declared. “I have strict orders to find and eliminate, or capture, any primitives wandering in this vicinity. Only one warning shot shall be issued, after which if you do not consent to unconditional surrender, we shall restrain you, and then rape and kill your women before your eyes. Following this, we shall castrate you, force you to consume your genitalia, strangle you with a cord fashioned from your own

intestines, and display your heads in a public ceremony of humiliation before your already captured compatriots. Please note that if you choose to fight, you shall not be killed, but rather you shall be subjected to the aforementioned ordeals. Also, know that I presently command a force of four thousand troops. You have one minute during which to make a decision.”

Enoch turned his gaze to the heavens, laid down his spear, and stepped away from the others, his lips moving in prayer.

Noah reached out to grab him. “No father, we cannot surrender! They shall kill us either way! At least let us die with honor, resisting their wickedness!”

Shem restrained Noah. “Trust, as you told me to trust.”

Noah stared at Shem, dumbfounded.

Enoch addressed his children in a small, still voice, “I am surrendering, but I am not surrendering to them.”

No sooner had the Patriarch spoken than a gun misfired from one of Baal’s soldiers, cutting a hole through Enoch’s midsection. Na’amah screamed as her father fell to his knees, smoke rising from the gaping wound. Cham dropped to the ground.

“You imbecile!” Baal screeched at the hapless soldier. He grabbed a laser rifle and shot the miscreant in the throat, cleaving the wretch’s head from his shoulders. “I said none would be killed! My word is law! Seize the primitives, seize them all!”

Enoch pushed himself to his feet, gazing upon the charging Olisians as if from another world, where colors were sharper and shadows more defined. Noah and the others shielded their eyes as a blinding light emanated from the Patriarch. Suddenly, wings of pure

gold unfolded from Enoch's back. He slung his mantle over the sea, and the waters below parted to reveal dry land.

The Olisians promptly halted their charge, overcome with terror. Many of them shouted, "It is Elohim! The God of the primitives has come to make war against us!" Warriors deserted the battlefield, trampling one another, ducking for cover wherever it could be found. Enoch stretched forth his hand, and a mighty gale toppled Baal's dragon.

The confused general chastised his men as they whisked by. "He is an Arulite bio-weapon, nothing more! A remnant from their sojourn here! Fight you cowards!" Flushed with rage, Baal began picking off the disobedient soldiers as they fled. "Listen you filthy Sehcuities, you treasonous Johashbactites! Damn you, damn you all!"

Enoch rose in a whirlwind, casting bolts of lava that erupted from the earth below. A quarter of the fleeing Olisians were incinerated.

Na'amah just kept screaming while Shem and Cham cowered behind Japheth. Noah shouted over the tempest, "Who are you? Where is my father? Please, spare us!"

A voice echoed from within the storm. "Cross the sea!"

Without hesitation, Noah shoved his wife and the others toward the land-bridge that had been exposed. The waters stood like walls to their right and to their left. Inside, they could see shadows of creatures of the deep.

"By God's Almighty throne," Cham wailed, "What on earth is happening?"

"I...I do not know." Noah replied, his face stricken with fear. "Keep moving!"

Enoch shot out from the whirlwind, gliding at a height of a few hundred feet. The Olisians had not spread very far yet. He braced himself for the final act of his ascension.

The Patriarch's words came like rolling thunder, shaking the very pillars of the earth.
"Behold the glory of the Lord! Behold the Anointed One, and be cast into Sheol!"

Na'amah glanced back to see her father enveloped in a robe of fire. The resulting explosion was so fierce that the very clouds of heaven fled, and the sky itself became red like blood. Noah pushed everyone to the ground as a tremendous shockwave shook the land, boiling off the tips of the waves around them, and sending giant cedars over twenty furlongs away hurling through the air. When Noah rose again, he and his kin were safely on the other shore. They cried out for their Patriarch, but to no avail.

He was seen no more, because God had taken him.

Tea Time with Augustine

Augustine of Hippo reclined on a balcony of his villa, gazing out across the sea. Waves lapped gently at a pier below, where his son Adeodatus stood fishing. High above, gulls drifted gently along in the breeze, bathed in the warmth of the high-noon sun, while a jet plane blazed a white trail through the sky. Monica, Augustine's mother, sat behind him grinding tea leaves and spices, her ivory mortar and pestle glimmering in the light.

"Augustine, my love," a woman's voice called from deep inside the house, "your guest has arrived for his second fortnightly instruction. Has mother finished tea yet?"

Augustine glanced over at Monica. "I presume he is early?"

"That is well my son," she smiled, "my task is almost complete." Monica poured her leafy brew into tiny bags of silk, tying each shut with a thread of wool and plunking them into bronze goblets filled with water. "Call them up."

"My beloved Aemilia," Augustine bellowed, "everything is in order. Convey Lucretius to our company on the balcony."

Amelia and Lucretius emerged, talking and laughing. Augustine kissed his beloved and shook hands with his guest, inviting each to a place at table.

"Ah," Lucretius exclaimed, "this view of the Mediterranean is exquisite! I heard the Lord rewarded you kindly for your efforts, but this, this is magnificent beyond comprehension! And Aemilia, she is ever more stunning!"

Augustine chuckled, watching his beloved blush. “Oh yes, I heartily concur! God is greatly enshrined in his highest Heavens, indeed he is! But Lucretius my good friend, think not of my own graces—lest your soul lapse into jealousy—but rather set your mind upon the reward which awaits you in the blessed fields of Elysium. Such a miraculous residence is no insignificant return for your doctrine and service, which, though not entirely true, nonetheless has inspired countless youths to rise above superstition and fear to work at relieving their fellowman’s sufferings.”

“You are right,” Lucretius sighed, “but would that I had known the whole truth of eternal things during my earthly life. Then, I could have gone straight to my reward, without first having to endure these educational sessions of yours.”

Augustine heaved with laughter, “Oh, come now, Lucretius! My conversation simply cannot be all that intolerable! I know for a fact, deep in my bowels, that you take a certain pleasure in our discourse.”

“So what if I do?” Lucretius smirked. “My mind remains unchanged in any case. If the knowledge of God had been mine during earthly life, I believe my reward in the hereafter should have proved much greater.”

Monica placed a hand on Lucretius’ shoulder. “My dear, is your conviction so sure? Many men obtained the knowledge of God in the course of their fleshly pilgrimage, only to secure an eternity of hellfire according to their wickedness of heart.”

Lucretius raised an eyebrow. “How is that so?”

Monica explained, “A man with little knowledge might do little good, but he is to be preferred over a man with great knowledge who does great evil. For this very reason,

portions of Truth are, relative to the occasion, time, and season, withheld from some men for the sake of their own redemption.”

“Please elaborate,” Lucretius urged as he sipped his tea.

“Consider the following,” Monica continued. “A sling can slay a beast and feed a family, but it can also slay a man. Power over the substance of atoms can grant sustenance to millions and procure every conceivable luxury, but it can also destroy all things worthwhile in a single moment. Supposing men are afflicted with concupiscence, which would you rather be in their possession, slings or power over atoms?”

“Power over atoms,” Lucretius replied without hesitation. “Aside from potential for grave evil, there is also potential for great good. Why should men be deprived of knowledge due to fear that wretches might abuse it? Surely, such wretches lack numbers and are pacified easily?”

Augustine chimed in, “I am afraid you have it wrong. As Ecclesiastes proclaimed in the days of old, the perverse of heart are hard to be corrected, and the number of fools—or wretches if you will—is infinite. Whatever worthy achievements power over atoms might obtain, wretches will sweep away.

“One man shall fall from grace, making grace itself fall in turn, and such is assured considering humanity’s proneness to evil. All flame shall cease, mortal hearts shall quiet, and every virtue shall vanish in the foul vapors of man’s dying wheeze. That which is praiseworthy, noble, and most excellent will descend wholly into eternal night, and be no more.

“Taking this into consideration, is it not better for a man to be endowed with the sling, and not power over the substance of atoms? A world where little good coexists with

little evil, or even with much evil, is surely favored above no world at all. For what is evil but a deprivation of good? And what is the annihilation of a world, save the death of goodness itself for the inhabitants? Is this not evil in its most incorrigible form?

“Sometimes knowledge,” Augustine concluded, “even the knowledge of God, must be withheld for the greater good of a man, or an entire world.”

“My patron,” Lucretius responded, “I see you are skilled in the art of rhetoric. No doubt, the point you drive is sharpened, but the mark you aim at is nowhere to be seen. Of course, I shall grant the depravity of man is undeniable. Even a modicum of historical study proves as much, and only a lunatic would offer rebuttal.

“But now hold on a minute, blessed Augustine. How is the knowledge of God akin to power over the substance of atoms? What world shall I destroy with the knowledge of God? What lands shall I despoil? What men shall I corrupt? Rather, think of what good I might have accomplished, if only I had attained such knowledge.”

Aemilia interjected, “Depending on how a man comes to possess the knowledge of God, there is a danger he may disavow everything that is good and honorable, hardening his heart forevermore, after which he may turn his mind to the destruction of others, and draw their souls into a like state.”

Lucretius rested his arm atop his chair, flexing his wrist through the air. He rolled his head from side to side, fighting to make sense of what he had heard. With a sigh, he leaned forward, concentrating his stare on Amelia.

“What ever do you mean?” Lucretius asked.

“My brother,” Aemilia twittered, “when you walked Rome’s cobble-stoned corridors, bathed in her steaming pools, and feasted upon the riches of her bosom at the marketplace—

yes, when you took your breath from the air and fruit from the tree as a mortal among mortals—did you think all these things good? Truly you did, and yet you rejected the one whose glory shone through them all, declaring him evil, proclaiming him tyrannical, and denouncing him as a delusion no more capable of satiating your soul than a mirage. Did you not?”

“And yet,” Augustine added, “it was he who made that which you called man’s only good in *De Rerum Natura*, namely the material pleasures of a mortal’s fleeting life.”

Lucretius frowned, floundering in a snare of confusion. He held up a hand in protest. “But my patron...”

“How are you convinced then,” Augustine cut him off, “that knowing the exact nature of your Adversary, the Ultimate Good, the God you already despised, would have alleviated your hatreds and called you to a new life? After all, he created the world you denigrated as a sorry, meaningless, and trying affair for men.”

Lucretius let his arm glide down to his side. “Explain further.”

“If creation was so bad in your estimation,” Aemilia spread her arms as if to encompass the world, “could its Creator have been any better? Is a God who delights in designing such horrors worthy of worship? Might you not, then, continue rejecting God even after seeing him face to face, and thus seal your spirit’s damnation? Yes, such a thing is quite feasible. And afterwards, you would seek to persuade others to embrace your opinion.”

“Because,” Augustine completed her thought, “proselytizing is integral to human nature. There is no avoiding or suppressing it.”

Lucretius waved to signal his hosts to keep going. Before raising any of his objections, he wanted to know everything there possibly was to know about their thoughts on the subject.

“In this manner,” Aemilia tossed her head to clear hair from her eyes, “the knowledge of God, if imparted prematurely, is very much like the abuse of power over atoms. Knowing the truth about God and attacking a correct conception of him is far more effective at defeating religious men in arguments than charging them in ignorance, hoping they will pardon your lack of learning in their own field of expertise.”

“But how,” Lucretius stammered, “how can a man reject truth once he sees it clearly? When I finally opened my mind and heart to the Deity upon my deathbed, I immediately accepted the truth. Even when I was a mortal, I did not reject God per se. I merely rejected distorted images and conceptions of him. How am I any different than a righteous Hebrew when he smashes idols?”

Augustine nodded understandingly. “You were quite the iconoclast. I believe that to be safely beyond debate. But what argument are you posing here?”

Lucretius pushed back, tilting his chair off its front legs. “When a man obtains the true knowledge of God, he necessarily receives the conviction that God is not a monstrosity. He sees that God is good, and cannot help but choose what is good over what is evil. Thus, your argument to the contrary is defeated.”

“Lucretius my good philosopher,” Augustine chuckled, “We are indeed at a loss to adequately explain ourselves, you have us there! But it occasionally does happen that a man fights more vigorously, not less, once he realizes his adversary is truth and goodness itself.

Evil has certain advantages, especially when a wicked man finds a way to impart his inner torments on others.”

Augustine glanced over at Lucretius’ raised eyebrow. He grinned, slightly amused by his friends’ stubborn skepticism. “You are not quick to accept platitudes, are you? That is a wise habit to cultivate, but in this instance I believe it to be misguided. I ask you, open your heart and your mind to the words I shall offer. I am sure you are well aware of my own skirmishes with the truth. From an early age, I displayed an aversion and ferocity toward goodness seldom seen in men. Read my *Confessions*. Most of the details are contained in its pages. But if you remain unconvinced by my personal experiences, I want you to ponder the following principle: the condition of a man’s soul affects the way in which he applies the truths he receives. I claim this rule to be universal.”

“I can definitely see how that might be,” Lucretius conceded.

“Nevertheless,” Augustine raised a finger, “please allow me to elucidate this axiom of behavior, for the sake of argument.”

Lucretius nodded, looking out at the beach as Augustine spoke. Monica giggled, grabbing his goblet to top it off with more tea.

“A religious person,” Augustine expounded, “upon learning that the vast majority of social work in his country is provided by churches, will rejoice in the spread of spirituality and rally to the cause. On the other hand, a militant atheist, who believes religion to be harmful above all else, will despair of the situation and strive to restrain the churches, despite their good works, arguing that religious indoctrination is far worse than poverty, and indeed the ultimate cause of most human evils.”

Lucretius leaned back, absorbed in contemplation. Augustine grinned at him, perceiving his guest's churning doubts.

"Quite the skeptic, are we not?" Augustine jibed.

Lucretius coughed playfully. "You have not the slightest idea."

"If you remain unpersuaded in any respect," Augustine continued, "I shall offer yet another example. Suppose, for the sake of argument, the rate of abortions dramatically increases in a certain country and directly causes the rate of teen pregnancies to precipitously decline. A pro-choice advocate will proclaim victory for reproductive rights, and posit that abortion has delivered millions of young women from leading ruined lives. He shall proceed to donate money to abortion providers to keep up the good work. But a pro-life advocate will retort that abortion has destroyed the youths' future happiness by implicating them in murder and saddling them with deep emotional burdens. He shall proceed to build crisis pregnancy centers, and promote abortion alternatives, as well as campaign to repeal laws permitting abortion.

"In either of the two scenarios I have constructed," Augustine explained, "the moral standing of either side is entirely irrelevant to our current discourse. My sole purpose in all this is to convince you of the principle I previously formulated."

Lucretius got up from the table and began to pace, lost among his thoughts. "So then," Lucretius trailed off, "it must be, at least according to you, that I was predestined to find the truth about God only in my final hour, for I could not have received it during life, not without damning my soul due to its enfeebled condition. My apologies if this seems off-topic, but it is all I can piece together from the tangents you have led us down."

Augustine scratched his forehead. “Please excuse me if I have steered this conversation off its proper course. I have a tendency to go wherever my mind pulls me at the moment, and I realize that my words are often hard to follow. But then again, so are yours. For instance, the conclusion you have just professed seems reasonable enough, but I am afraid I do not know how you drew it.”

Lucretius clarified, “The reactions of the men in both scenarios were entirely set before the facts ever reached them. According to your proposed universal principle, what a man does is determined by what he did before, by his nature, and by what those before him did. So, if the time when I would accept the knowledge of God was foreordained, and my nature and actions were such to align with it, how then do I have free will?”

“Can it be that the way of things is to unfold in only one determined manner, to the exclusion of all else? Is speaking of possibility a mere convenience of words, with no bearing on reality? What place does good and evil even have in such a dungeon of necessity? Nothing is right, nor is anything wrong. Everything is merely everything—what was, is, and shall be—without change or judgment, without morality, cold, indifferent, and eternal. We are slaves to our paradigms, damned to our opinions, and bound to our experiences.”

Augustine placed his goblet on the table, and crossed his arms. “My friend, that is awfully fatalistic, especially coming from a philosopher who once set about murdering the gods in his poetry to avoid denying free will. I believe you misunderstand predestination and its relation to the primary topic of our dialogue thus far—that is to say, why you did not receive the knowledge of God during life.”

Lucretius shook his head in disbelief. “What is this I hear? Are you implying I misunderstand free will?”

Augustine motioned with his hands as he spoke. “Yes, and more besides. The word ‘predestination’ for me merely denotes that a man’s choice, or the exercise of his free will, cannot be other than what it is. And that is why the past was what it was and the future will be what it will be, and nothing else.

“Whenever a man makes a choice, he does so for one or more reasons, and we can rightly say that he self-determines his choice in light of those reasons in such a way that his choice could not possibly have been self-determined in any other fashion. Simply put, a man cannot choose contrary to what he chooses.”

“Although,” Augustine paused, “I must confess the phrase ‘self-determined’ is misleading. We can also rightly say that the reasons for a man’s choice determine his choice, since if the reasons were of a different nature, his choice would be as well.”

“Then again,” Augustine amended, “this too leaves something to be desired. A man truly is the agent who makes his choice, and his choice truly is what it is because of the reasons behind it. But these reasons proceed from other reasons and choices, some emanating from objects lacking free will, and some springing from other beings with free will. Indeed, the entire universe, in concord with its origin, can be said to determine every choice a man makes, past, present, or future.”

Lucretius scooted to the edge of his chair. “Where then,” he urged, “is the abode of liberty? Are you not still saying in an indirect way that every choice is predetermined, and thus is not made by man himself?”

“As anticipated,” Augustine chuckled, “you have accused me of fatalism like that which you suspected earlier. But in doing so, beware my friend. You just might condemn an innocent man. What I advocate is different from any philosophy that teaches either ‘free will’ or ‘predestination’ in the conventional sense of those terms. My school of thought reconciles the two, marrying them in one flesh. I have discovered the essence of freedom, or rather the freedom of essence.”

Lucretius frowned, amused by his patron’s claim. “You mean to tell me you have solved a problem no other philosopher ever has?”

“Well,” Augustine laughed, “I am not entirely sure about that. There are many philosophers whom no one reads anymore. I would imagine all the great problems in philosophy have already been solved by someone.”

“In any case,” Lucretius grinned, “continue.”

“Picture three droplets of water suspended in empty space,” Augustine said while poking the air, “each having a different mass and distance from the other droplets. I am sure we are all in agreement that each droplet exerts a gravitational pull on the others. Such is its essence. For our purposes, this symbolizes a man’s free will. The strength of this pull is determined by the mass and distance of the other droplets, in accordance with the predefined law of attraction inside each body. Likewise, reasons determine a man’s exercise of free will, but his free will, which is synonymous with his essence, determines the way it is affected by reasons. Moreover, God, as the creator of a man’s essence or freewill, predefines the law of being according to which it shall act.”

A spark glinted in Lucretius’ mind. “For once, I do believe I just might understand you. When a man says, ‘I will’ or ‘I want’ or ‘I choose,’ I is his essence, the sum of his

experiences, biological makeup, and law of being or eternal character. Thus, free will is not a faculty, but an essence, a principle governing the mind.

“The elect, as many religions call them, are those whose eternal character or law of being is oriented toward good at the instant of their creation, and they grow toward the highest good. The damned are those whose eternal character or law of being is oriented toward evil at the instant of their creation, and they sink toward the basest evil. Thus, a man’s free will is the blooming of his eternal character in time, like the unraveling of a scroll, or the turning of pages in a book.”

Augustine slammed his fist, startling Monica with his exuberance. “Precisely! There you have it! This is freedom: to be, to realize one’s essence by making choices. Lucretius my good friend, being itself is liberty. This is free will!”

Lucretius smirked. “Then why did God create the damned?”

Augustine looked around, confused and unsettled by his friend’s unexpected inquiry. “Because he loves them, I suppose. Love is the act of willing another’s being for the sake of their simply being. It desires their good for goodness’ sake. Good and being are one and the same, and can be used interchangeably.”

Lucretius chuckled a bit. He suspected his patron had been caught off-guard. “Blessed Augustine, if love is the act of willing the being of another, and evil is a lack of being, and God wills the existence of evil, then it would seem he is acting without love.”

Augustine held up his goblet of tea. “Every creature is a composite of being and nonbeing, like this goblet. The empty space in the middle allows it to contain my drink. In order for the goblet to be what it is, the nonbeing within must be permitted to remain alongside the being without. Therefore, in order for God to will the being of creatures he

must allow evil, or lack of being, to abide in the universe. This is the reason why we see various degrees of being in our world but never the fullness of being that exists only inside God himself.”

“What about being sick or being dead?” Lucretius objected. “Surely, you do not mean to say that sort of being is good and willed by God? Or do you?”

“That,” Augustine motioned dismissively, “is an illusion of language. We often speak of a lack of being as if it were a being itself, which it is not, since a lack of being cannot be a being by definition. Hence, when we talk about being sick, we mean not being healthy insofar as we lack health, and when we talk about being dead, we mean not being alive insofar as we lack life. But saying that a lack of being exists is just verbal shorthand, and, if I am not mistaken, some languages do not even use it.”

“My good friend,” Lucretius remarked with a mischievous glint in his eyes, “you have yet to explain the creation of the damned to my satisfaction.”

Augustine tugged at his beard for a moment. “The solution to your conundrum lies in the fact that everything which can be, is.”

“Hold on!” Lucretius protested. “I can imagine a host of things which can be, but are not. What about them? Shall we just sweep them aside?”

Augustine answered, “I presume this is another illusion of language. Your imaginings are not real because they cannot logically exist as anything other than imaginings. Everything has the fullest degree of being that it can possibly attain, given the existence of everything else. You see, Lucretius, all is absolutely dependent upon all else. If one thing were changed, nothing could be what it is.”

Lucretius stared at the floor, thoughts racing through his mind. “So you say that the damned must exist, in order for the elect to exist, and the elect must exist, in order for the damned to exist? You cannot have one without the other?”

Augustine’s head bobbed in acknowledgement. “Exactly.”

Monica sidled into the discussion, “And as for getting angry at God for the way things must be, consider what St. Paul the Apostle once wrote in his letter to the Romans:

Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So it depends not upon man’s will or exertion, but upon God’s mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, “I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.” So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills. You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me thus?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

“Lucretius, you may think the Apostle’s words harsh, but they are nevertheless true. The unpleasantness of a thing does not indicate its falsity, but only the convictions of the one who despises it.”

“I do not think them harsh in the least bit,” Lucretius replied. “They make a great deal of sense. If I follow correctly, God creates our essences, and thus can be said to create the manner in which they unfold. He is the cause of all beings, as he is Being itself, even of those beings that necessitate a lack of being in other beings, or in other words, those things that cause evil. Do I follow correctly?”

“Yes!” Aemilia smiled. “You learn quickly! The Apostle also recounted a lovely saying that encapsulates what you have inferred, originally uttered by one of your own contemporaries I do believe. In one of his poems on God, he proclaimed ‘In Him we live and move and have our being.’ All things are truly inside God, and there is a technical name for this, but I am at a loss to find it...”

Augustine sipped his tea while his beloved struggled to find the right word. He took pleasure in her floundering. It was cute. Finally, he laughed and interjected with a wink, “I believe you mean to say ‘panentheism.’ It is a subcategory of monotheism, and the one Christianity fits in best. And it has incredible, far-reaching implications, most of which we have already inadvertently explored during this discussion. But a few things remain to be explained or clarified. Beloved, do you mind if I take the conversation’s reigns for a moment?”

“Not at all,” Aemilia shook her head. “You are degrees of magnitude better at philosophy than I. I beg you, take the reigns and keep them!” Everyone laughed.

Augustine beamed, completely absorbed in the wonder of thought. “Let us return to our example of the three droplets suspended in empty space. Note that all of the droplets are at once engaged in determining the behavior of each of the other droplets. Our universe behaves in the same manner. We can rightly say every entity simultaneously determines the behavior of every other entity in accordance with the entities’ essences, which are bestowed upon them by their Creator.

“Hence,” Augustine took a drink, “a man makes his choice, the universe makes a man’s choice, and God makes a man’s choice. All cooperate in an elaborate orchestra, wherein no single instrument can be said to create the music, and no instrument can be said not to create the music.

“Now,” Augustine continued, “let us relate this to your original dilemma, which I am certain we are close to solving. What we have concluded so far is true. You were predestined to receive the knowledge of God only upon your deathbed. But our reasoning is incomplete. You, according to your own nature, freely chose not to receive the truth until the very end. What remains is to discern why you chose what you chose.”

“Forgive me,” Lucretius interrupted, “but before we move on, can you define free will formally? It seems no one else has ever accomplished this task for me.”

Augustine’s eyes lit up like a little child’s. “It is as I said previously, but permit me to clarify and simplify. A man’s will determines that which determines it, and in this sense is free, for it acts according to its essence, which is to make choices based on reasons. If it were forced to act contrary to its essence—a logical impossibility—it would not be called free. In other words, as long as a will wills what it wills, it is free, but if a will were ever made to will what it does not will, it would not be free.”

Lucretius frowned. “If a slave were given a choice as to who would be his master, would he not still be a slave?”

“Lucretius,” Monica interjected, “you are right that the will is not free in the sense you argued it to be during life. As St. Paul the Apostle put it, we can either be slaves to sin or slaves to grace. True freedom resides in choosing the right master, for we are never independent but are always interconnected to everything else, to a law higher than that governing our own being.

“When is the will free?” Lucretius queried. “Does it determine itself in the present moment? Or did it determine itself at the instant of its creation?”

“Yes,” Augustine responded with a sly grin, “and more besides. Everything is mutually determined in a single, glorious, instantaneous eternity, in which time and space themselves are but one of the many things determined. Thus, you can justly say the Creator has made, makes, and will make every entity and every moment at once. After all, did he not proclaim ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end?’ He is not one prone to lies, for he can neither deceive nor be deceived. But if God is one, then start and finish, origin and destination, goal and achievement, height and depth, life and death, and good and evil are all one within God.”

There was profound quiet for a moment. Down by the pier, Adeodatus was counting his catch and preparing a cooking fire. A bald man dressed in Victorian era clothes, with a burly beard, greeted him and proceeded to help clean the fish.

Back on the balcony, Augustine was the first to break the silence. “Lucretius, it is time to ascertain why you chose against receiving the knowledge of God during earthly life. Your bondage to a godless philosophy was voluntarily and wholly your responsibility, and, if

you search yourself, you will concur. And do not protest that you were a philosopher concerned only with truth for the sake of truth, and consequently innocent of my charge. Philosophy is just a merry sort of aimless entertainment, unless it is pursued seriously.”

Lucretius ran his hand through his hair. “Are you insinuating that I did not pursue philosophy seriously? Can you honestly mean that?”

Augustine smirked, “But did you pursue it seriously my friend, did you really? I wholeheartedly doubt you did. Recall that I studied much of your work in the days I spent walking upon the old earth. Not once, in all my reading, did I ever get the impression you were concerned with how things really are and with how to lead a good life in light of them. These are the two proper concerns of philosophy.

“Instead, your entire philosophy, if it is even deserving of that name, centered solely on salivating over material goods and deciding how best to avail yourself of them. Moderation for you had no purpose or meaning beyond refraining from consuming too many exotic sherbets, in order that your stomach bile might not erupt on your mistress during the sexual act.”

Boisterous laughter broke out. After the jubilation subsided, Lucretius’ eyes became downcast, and he motioned across the sea. “You have cut to the quick of the matter. We lived in Rome, the greatest city in the world. I could have easily dabbled in any exotic religion I pleased, but they all seemed like so much nonsense, full of mindless imbeciles chasing after maniacal, twisted, and perverted magicians to titillate their deepest dreams, and arouse their latent nightmares. I spent all of my strength hating and sustaining hatred for religion. I had none left to ask if some portion of it was good.”

Lucretius paused, his gaze becoming distant. “When a man looks only for faults, truth and beauty veil themselves from him, or rather, he hides himself from them. I shunned the possibility that despite the abuses and aberrations, there was something authentic, even natural, about what men term the spiritual realm. It was simply unthinkable to my mind, and I was determined to keep it so.”

Lucretius sighed, “Before hearing the arguments in favor of religion, I was already weary of listening to them. Before witnessing the virtues of the pious, I was already disgusted by their fakery. Such was my condition. I am entirely to blame for it.”

“But in my defense,” Lucretius groaned, “to most of the people I encountered, God was an excuse for crime, and a comfort for the dying, no more, no less. None ever articulated a philosophy as beautiful as the one you have proposed. Instead, I met literally hundreds of priests and priestesses raving about hellfire and the wrath of the gods. Rest assured, they richly deserved every horror they preached.”

“What about the God-fearers and their Jewish tutors?” Monica inquired.

Lucretius waved his hand, dismissing the thought. “They were decent folk. I will give credit where credit is due. But not one of them tried to convert me. They were content to remain among their own kind. In any case, they regarded their religion in the same way one might regard a diet—as a means to a healthy lifestyle. They saw it as a way to an end, not an end in and of itself. Hence, I paid them no heed.”

“None of them bore witness about God?” Augustine probed.

Lucretius rolled his eyes. “Well, there was a certain Theophilus. He numbered among the God-fearers. We lived near each other and frequented the same bathhouse. I remember greeting him at the marketplace one day. He told me about the Lord, how God is

the loving and merciful Father of all peoples. I indulged in a game of unkind mirth by embarrassing him through the recitation, from memory, of all the unseemly passages in the Jewish Scriptures. He responded by telling me have faith and I would understand. What a fool—or so I thought.”

“A simple man, but a good man,” Monica remarked.

“I suppose,” Lucretius replied, “but simple faith is of little use to those enmeshed in the snares of sophistication. I still find it preposterous that men are required to accept, on the basis of faith, that there is a God asking men to have faith in the first place.”

“What?” Aemilia objected. “Heaven forbid! That is patently absurd! Where did you get that notion? We have faith in things that are not seen because of those that are seen. Faith does not mean trusting in someone’s existence, rather it means trusting in the promises and testimony of someone already known to exist.”

“It does?” Lucretius mumbled.

“Why yes of course!” Augustine exclaimed. “Have you never conversed with anyone on this subject? Certainly, a philosopher of all people...”

“My heartfelt apologies,” Lucretius answered a bit defensively, “but no I have not. I am glad enough to be here. Once I saw the Lord face to face, somehow arguments for and against His existence lost their significance. Besides, I only met you and your family two fortnights ago, when I surfaced from the realm of purification and was assigned you as an instructor to assist me in completing my purgatory. Do you recall?”

Augustine thrust his arm around Lucretius, letting out a hardy laugh. “My good friend, you need not worry yourself! We are not upset with you. We are merely appalled that no one has seen fit to instruct you concerning these matters. We shall make them the

next topic of today's instruction. In fact, we already have, because launching from our previous discussion, God's existence is fairly self-evident."

"Explain," Lucretius adjured.

"Voice your objections first," Augustine suggested.

Lucretius nodded, "Speaking from reason alone, it seems abundantly clear that God does not exist. In the former world, evil abounded on every street corner, and the breath of malicious sinners was never far away. Natural disasters claimed countless lives, most of them innocent. Death, destruction, and disease were the trinity that stalked our troubled minds, both day and night. We had no rest."

"Can you kindly clarify your argument?" Aemilia requested.

Lucretius nodded. "Basic logic tells us if one of two contraries be infinite, the other ceases to abide altogether. For example, if we postulate everything is white, we cannot then say something is black. Now, if there is infinite good, then we cannot then say there is evil. But there is evil, so there cannot be infinite goodness. Therefore, because God is infinite goodness, and there is no infinite goodness, there is no God."

"Not necessarily," Augustine objected. "The fault in your logic should already be apparent. The existence of an infinite of one of two contraries does not, in fact, rule out the other. An endless plain of fire can border an endless plain of ice, and a bottomless well of darkness can reside below a boundless firmament of light.

"Also, since God is the highest or infinite good, He allows evil to exist in order to bring about certain goods from it that cannot be had otherwise."

"You cited that from your *Confessions*," Aemilia giggled, "did you not?"

“I am surprised you finally acquiesced to reading it,” Augustine winked. “I thought you considered it much too boring to tolerate. After all, how long has it been on your reading list? Three-thousand-five-hundred years, if I am not mistaken?”

Aemilia stuck out her tongue. “Trivialities. I merely prefer reading thoroughly and carefully. Why make undue haste?”

“Three-thousand-five-hundred years, Aemilia?” Augustine chuckled.

Lucretius interrupted, “Sorry to intrude on your flirting festivities, but bringing evil out of good? I understand the necessity of evil existing for good to exist, but how can good literally be brought out of evil?”

“Well,” Aemilia chirped, “when you accidentally touch a hot stove, searing pain races up your arm, urging you to pull away. In this case suffering, which is evil, brings about good by preventing your flesh from receiving a burn. So, in the overarching architecture of our world, it makes perfect sense for evil to be, in a certain manner, the direct cause of much good that cannot be had without it.”

Augustine added, “There is no victory without struggle, or crown without thorns. Mankind’s suffering made you who you are, Lucretius. It breathed life into your poetry. Evil gave you an enemy to struggle against, and strengthened your holiness.”

“Halt your speech,” Lucretius waved his hand. “I need a more convincing answer to this dilemma. Do not shower me with platitudes and hypothetical situations. Tell me a convincing, concrete example of how goodness can be drawn straight from evil.”

Aemilia replied, “Very well then. I shall provide the testimony you request.

“Once Augustine began entertaining thoughts about Christianity, Monica convinced him to abandon me. I was essentially a concubine in those days, you must understand, so I

was used to disappointments. Still, Augustine's departure devastated me beyond consolation. But what importance did a harlot's feelings have in the former world? Among all his kindred, only Augustine was grieved by our separation.

"I will never forget the tears in his eyes the last time we made love. They were beautiful, like worlds tumbling down. After we finished, he began cursing himself, cursing God, cursing everything. 'I am sorry,' he muttered over and over again, 'I am so, so sorry.' He left the house along with my son. I sat alone in darkness. Thirteen years we had been together. It ended in one week.

"I was not the Christian bride his mother wanted for him. Though her intentions were good, as I now know, at the time I thought her a rather cruel dominatrix. In her quest to bring Augustine to the truth, she plowed right over anybody in her way. I was a slut to be disposed of, an inconvenient little tramp from a dirty, regrettable past. Thrown out on the streets, I set off toward my home in Carthage, vowing never to have anything to do with Augustine again.

"In time, my hatred for him and his mother grew, and I despised the religion which I felt had pried him from my embrace. The emptiness was unbearable, until one day, it dawned on me; the reason I hated my former lover was because he was absent. As paradoxical as this may sound in light of our present conversation, I believe in the world before paradise, some atheists hated God for the exact same reason. He was absent.

"Once I realized my misery stemmed from an absence, I went off into the desert and joined one of the convents. I lived there for many, many years before catching a fever. On my deathbed, Mother Miriam, the abbess, urged me to call upon the Lord for mercy. My life as a concubine was not especially holy, if you know what I mean, and before and after

Augustine I had participated in prostitution as well. So I called upon the Lord's mercy and a surprising thing happened. There was Jesus coming for me, and beside him was Augustine, offering me a wedding garment."

"It is how things should have been," Monica sighed.

"But the way they actually turned out proved even better," Aemilia continued.

"Among the many paths Augustine could have taken toward sainthood, only one included me as his bride, and I am eternally grateful he spurned it. Think of how many souls have been inspired with thoughts of heaven by reading his works? If he had married me, he would have been a wonderful husband, but he would never have written anything that survived his death. How innumerable are the souls who would be lost without his great works? I shudder at the thought.

"The former times called for heroes, and heroes are forged from the molten gold of tragedy. My honor was to be a martyr to the prejudices of my age, and the passions of a man's heart. Through my death, others lived. And behold, I lived too. And yes, those who tormented me in life now comfort me in eternity. Whereas before I had their scorn, now I have their love."

A voice hollered from inside the house, "Adeodatus shall have the fish ready in short order! My good chap, mind if I come up and chat till then?"

Augustine grinned from ear to ear. "By all means, do join our company! We have a little surprise for you."

The Victorian era man, who had been helping Adeodatus with the fish, walked onto the balcony. He removed his top hat, bowing politely before the women. "Ladies, I am honored, as usual, to be in your company. I do say, who is your guest?"

“Your surprise!” Augustine laughed.

Monica offered the new arrival a goblet of tea. “Charles, this is Lucretius. He is currently receiving instruction from Augustine. Would you care to join us? We are having the loveliest conversation.”

Charles reached out to shake Lucretius’ hand. “A pleasure to meet you! I trust we shall be swell chums! My name is Charles Robert Darwin. I had a considerable fascination with your writings during life.”

Charles turned toward Augustine. “What are we conversing about today?”

“The problem of evil and the existence of God,” Augustine responded.

Charles glowed. “Lucretius, I do hope your fine host has not hopelessly confused you. Please permit me to finish what he has started, if that is agreeable to him.”

Augustine nodded. “Of course, who better to ask about the origin of all things?”

Darwin chuckled, removing a pipe from his pocket and lighting it. “I know you probably mean that in jest, but thank you kindly.”

Augustine feigned innocence. “You never know, you just never know.”

Charles pulled up a chair. “Lucretius, your host has, in all likelihood, already covered the problem of evil in more depth than one could ever desire. Thus, I suggest we move on to a basic discussion of the first of the five proofs of God’s existence, elucidated by my dear friend Thomas so long ago. Because you were acquainted with Aristotle’s writings during life, it should sound awfully familiar.”

“Do you refer to the argument from motion?” Lucretius guessed.

“Why yes indeed I do!” Charles slapped his knee. “But of course by motion, we really mean change of any sort. With this in mind, I will use the word change hereon out to

avoid any misunderstandings or ambiguities. If we are to trust our senses, we must concede the world around us is constantly changing.

“Evolution is one instance of change, specific to the development of biological systems. Chemical reactions are another instance of change, specific to the shifting properties of the atomic world. Culture is yet one more instance of change, specific to the growth of human ideas and customs.

“Now whatever is changed, regardless of its nature, is changed by something else acting upon it. It is easy to see why. Through change, an object becomes what it previously was not. It either gains something new from another object or loses something old to another object.

“If we assumed the contrary, an object would either gain what it already had from itself, or lose what it would not lose to itself, and thus would not change. Hence, an object cannot under any circumstances change itself.

“If then, that by which some object is changed is itself changed, then this must also be changed by another, and that by another again. But we cannot proceed to infinity with this chain of change. Therefore, it is necessary to conclude that a first changer exists, changed by no other, including itself. We have arrived at the unchanging source of all changing. In a word, God.”

“Why can we not proceed to infinity?” Lucretius objected.

Darwin smirked and downed an entire goblet of tea. He wiped a few dribbles from his beard. “It would seem self-evident why one could not proceed to infinity, but there are two very good reasons for the impossibility of infinite regression.”

“Which are?” Lucretius cajoled.

Darwin rubbed his hands together. “First, we note that if we proceed to infinity, any object we observe undergoing a change is at the end of an infinite chain of changing leading up to it. Do you see the absurdity in this, the blatant contradiction? We have reached the end of infinity, something that by definition has no end. It would be as if a man supposed there is a number you could start at and count down from without ever reaching zero. Madness, is it not?”

“And what is the second reason?” Lucretius pressed.

“It is similar to the first,” Darwin commented, “but different all the same. I keep it handy for those inquirers who are particularly dense, as I myself once was. It proceeds as follows. Change takes time, since it is the movement of an object from one state to another. In other words, there is a before and an after. As we have already demonstrated, this movement is accomplished by yet another object, which in turn must be changed by something else, *ad infinitum*, that is, if we want to avoid postulating an unchanging source of changing.

“But there is a rather unfortunate problem here. Can you spot it? Each change takes a certain amount of time, and must finish or at least make some headway before effecting the next change in the series. But if the series leading up to a present change is infinite, and each object in the series needs time to change before the next one can, then we will need an infinite amount of time to facilitate any present changes. That’s the rub. An infinite amount of time has passed, which by definition is impassible.”

Lucretius nodded. “I understand. Infinite regression is a contradiction in terms, which means even time and space have a beginning. But correct me if I am wrong, they need not have an end? Infinite procession is logical?”

“Absolutely,” Darwin smiled, “the unchanging source of changing can produce an endless chain of changes proceeding from it. In a word, sempiternity is imminently reasonable. No matter how far along this chain you go though, there will always be a finite amount of changes leading back to the Source. And no, you cannot travel an infinite distance down the chain, because that is an impossible task very much akin to my previous example of naming a number you could start at, and count down from, without ever reaching zero. The nature of an infinite future coupled with a finite past is to always have a finite amount of changes behind you, and an infinite amount ahead. Are you following my argument?”

“There is one thing I remain unclear about,” Lucretius said as he propped up his chin. “How is this Unchanging Source of Changing anything like God? Is it not more likely to be something impersonal?”

Darwin laughed. “Oh, we could prattle on about that all day and night! I shall make my argument short though, but it shall be rather incomplete, you do realize.

“Remember, when an object is changed by another object, it receives something from that object. In order for this to occur, the object doing the changing needs to already have what it will give to the object being changed. For example, the hand gives the energy it already has to ignite the match, and the match passes the flame’s energy on to the wood and starts a fire.

“Since everything in our world is changing, whatever attributes anything has, including intelligence, it has because it was changed by another which already had the attributes in some form or fashion. Thus, the unchanging source of changing must contain all attributes that are given by objects that change others, because it must in the first place give these attributes to the objects to impart on others.

“So, God contains all the attributes that are passed along, and these include personal attributes as exhibited in humans and other sentient beings. It matters not if such personal attributes result from and are in fact a collection of impersonal attributes. All attributes are unified in the unchanging source of changing, and are thus present as personal collections, impersonal units forming those collections, and whatever else they are at once inside God.

“However, God transcends them all, as he gives everything to everything, including being, through these attributes. He only gives, and never receives, for as we have said, he is unchanging. For this to be true, he must be infinite in all respects, or else in giving he would lose something of himself and be changed, just like an object which changes another is also changed by giving up something it has.

“Since he grants all attributes to all things, including existence, he is the Creator. Since he causes all that is logically possible, he is omnipotent. Since he literally is the attributes he gives, and all objects have attributes, he is omnipresent. Since he is pure being, and being is synonymous with goodness, he is omnibenevolent. Indeed, he is all goodness itself present to an infinite degree. Finally, he is omniscient since the past, present, and future coincide within God.”

Lucretius’ eyes were wide with awe. “That,” he stuttered, shaken by the profundity and reasonableness of all he had heard, “is fascinating!”

Adeodatus entered, carrying steaming dishes of scrumptious fish fillets and mixed vegetables. He sat the delicious meal before each person. Augustine immediately started digging in, unconcerned that his guests had not yet done up their bibs. Monica scowled at him, but decided to let it go.

“There is plenty for seconds,” Adeodatus assured everyone.

Aemilia pattered, amazed at the amount of food. “That will not be necessary.”

Lucretius, his excitement still churning, nudged Darwin. “What shall be our next topic of conversation? Can we go over the other four proofs Thomas proposed?”

A spoonful of greens hovered before Charles’ mouth. He glanced over at Augustine, a look of petition in his eyes. The saintly patron wiped his mouth with a napkin and announced. “Yes, we shall discuss them silently while I eat my fish.”

The Awakening

Queen Maya lay in her bed encompassed by the night. Suddenly, a brilliant ray pierced the darkness, arching toward her feet like a bridge. Maya found herself unable to move, even when the bugle-blast of an elephant's trunk resounded as the pure white behemoth strode down the celestial viaduct toward her. Its tusks were ornamented with gigantic wreathes of pink lotus blossoms, which the creature scattered upon the queen's bed. The petals dissolved into drops of sweet-smelling perfumes, thick and voluptuous with the scents of cinnamon, vanilla, myrrh, and lavender.

As the elephant gazed into her soul, mountain streams poured down its cheeks into a vast ocean emerging from the floor. Slowly, the creature lifted the covers from Maya, placing a paw upon her belly and causing it to swell. The Queen's flesh grew to encase the elephant, and soon her womb was made more spacious than the heavens.

Galaxies were birthed within Maya, and she saw her children darting among the stars. She stared in wonder as they congregated before a being of light, surrounded by rainbows. Worlds revolved about his head, and a sword of adamantite glistened in his hand. With a mighty cry, the figure shook the foundations of the world, and brought the primordial water below to bear upon the nations. Then he raised his blade against the interwoven fabrics of a massive tapestry that enveloped all things.

In sheer terror, Maya realized the tapestry was her own skin. She watched as her womb, the first home of man, was pierced. The being of light shouted in triumph as creation, himself included, plunged into the darkness outside, dissolving into nothingness.

There was only silence, for all things had ceased to be.

Queen Maya shot straight up in her bed: it had all been a dream, or rather, a nightmare. Sweat drenched her sheets. She yelled for cohorts and summoned the King. Soon, husband and wife were dressed and making their way down a colonnade toward the throne room.

“What ails you, my beloved?” the King inquired.

“A vision disturbed my sleep,” Maya replied. “Summon the Brahmins.”

Now the King had an acute distrust of the priests so he resolved not to share the vision with them when he sent for them. Otherwise, he feared they would consult their charts of dream symbols and brew a ready-made answer.

In minutes, the entire company of soothsayers, dream interpreters, and mystics were roused from slumber and funneled into the palace. Their robes were uneven and their faces disheveled. Queen Maya and the King sat enthroned before the bewildered assembly, their faces like stones.

“Tell me, what does my dream mean?” the Queen demanded.

The company of Brahmins glanced at each other with sleep-encrusted eyes. Had she really enjoined them to interpret a dream without hearing it first? None of them had ever heard of such a thing. A few chuckled, thinking this must be a joke.

“My Queen,” one of the elders spoke up, “there is no man on earth that can interpret your dream in ignorance. Tell us the vision, and we will tell you the meaning.”

The King stretched forth his arm and rose from the throne. “We shall do no such thing, for this vision has great importance. If your kind has truly sprung from the mouth of Brahma, as your scribes maintain, then surely you have the power to know dreams?”

The elder gawked. “My King, you exact an impossible task!”

“That is because I have denied you the opportunity to conspire beforehand!” the King rejoined. “Guards, seize the Brahmins and put all of them to death because they are charlatans! May they die in their sins!”

Before the guards could secure their captives, a knock came at the imperial doors. Queen Maya looked at her husband with confusion. The King bid the guards open the portals and allow the strange arrival entrance into the royal court. An imposing man with pale skin, hollowed cheeks, and sunken eyes came into their midst. He was clothed in the regal garments of Babylon. He pounded the ground with a bronze scepter shaped like a serpent until silence reigned over the assembly.

Cautiously, the chief guard came forward to inspect the man’s signet ring. He fell prostrate and kissed the guest’s feet.

“Who am I,” the guard exclaimed, “that Belteshazzar the prophet, advisor to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon the Great, should grace my presence?”

Belteshazzar waived the guard aside and marched toward the throne. He bent his knee and offered a small gift of pink lotus blossoms, ivory, cinnamon, vanilla, myrrh, lavender, and a tiny adamantine dirk. Queen Maya’s face flushed at the sight.

“He knows the vision,” she murmured.

The prophet stepped back from the throne, sadness sweeping across his face. “My blood is that of the Hebrews,” Belteshazzar announced. “I come to you not because

Nebuchadnezzar sent me, but rather because your son concerns my people's future. In truth, he concerns the future of all mankind and of a generation yet unborn."

Maya rose from her throne, trembling. "What son do you speak of? Have you not heard we are barren? Tell us plainly; what is the meaning of your words?"

Beltshazzar's gaze became remote. "The child is within you."

The Queen swooned. Several of her maidservants gasped. They rushed to catch her before the frosty marble floor could bruise her head.

"She is with child!" the King exclaimed, "She is with child!"

The joyful Sovereign bounced from his throne and embraced the prophet with a kiss. Beltshazzar stood unmoved by the show of affection.

"Why such gloom in your countenance?" the King pressed. "Come my friend, eat and drink to restore your strength! I know not who sent for you, but I am glad Nebuchadnezzar's servant should grace my land! We have heard of your exploits and we do not doubt, not for a moment, the truth of your prophecy."

"My wife and I have long feared for the safety of my people," the Sovereign continued, "seeing that I had no heir. But you have relieved my burden! From my heart, my prayer is that Bel Marduk, high god of the Babylonians and most noble manifestation of Brahma, may protect you forevermore! Beltshazzar, may you be proclaimed the highest of Brahmins, even though you are not of Mother India!"

The prophet sighed wearily.

"You have not yet heard my interpretation of the vision," Beltshazzar said. "There will be no feasting tonight, my King. I ask you, take my wrist. Then you shall know the cause of my visitation."

The King frowned. What a strange request to make! It was known throughout all the kingdoms of India and Babylonia that royalty never touched the hands of their guests. Such a gesture was considered the lowest form of disrespect. Nevertheless, not wanting to offend his guest, or the gods for that matter, the King did just as the prophet had told him. Almost instantly, his hand recoiled from the foreigner's unnaturally icy flesh.

“The man's heart is not beating!”

One of the King's cohorts rushed forward and cleaved Belteshazzar's side. The prophet quickly grabbed his assailant by the throat, slinging him hard against a pillar. The cohort's body snapped in two, splattering the nearby Brahmins and guards with blood. Sand poured from Belteshazzar's open wound. Everyone drew back in fear. The prophet stepped toward the King.

“What do you want from me?” the Sovereign cried. “I beg you; do not hurt my wife or my unborn son!”

“For men who wash their hands in blood,” Belteshazzar retorted, addressing the entire assembly, “and splinter the skulls of their people beneath their heels, you have proven yourselves quite cowardly! Had it not been for me, a great multitude of you would no longer number among the living. And although I myself number among the dead, I am more alive than you shall ever be.”

The King placed himself between the prophet and Maya, determined to protect his wife no matter what, despite the terror coursing through his veins.

Belteshazzar continued, “Now hear my words and weep, you murderers, you brood of vipers, you nest of hornets! A child is born to you, a son is given, and the shattering of the eternal wheel of rebirth rests upon his shoulder. He shall be called ‘Awake,’ ‘Bearer of

Extinction,' 'Final Liberator,' 'Slayer of the Soul,' 'Harbinger of the Second Death,' and 'Extinguisher of the Flame.'”

All color faded from the King's face. “Is there no way,” he wailed, “to avoid the awful curse which has befallen my son?”

“No,” Belteshazzar shook his head, “that is, unless you can dissuade a man from fulfilling the destiny appointed to him from eternity. But who can cause a stream to flow backwards or turn a mountain into a valley?”

The King's pleading eyes pierced the prophet's heart.

“Nevertheless,” Belteshazzar amended, “before your son are two paths, one of life and one of death. However, the choice is ultimately his to make. Listen well; the man who forces his will upon another is doomed to failure. Treasure all my sayings.”

“Your son will either be king or ascetic,” Belteshazzar continued, “bringer of creation or destruction, wielder of true light or false light, governor of order or chaos. If your son awakens, many shall sleep, and if he sleeps, many shall awaken. Do not torment yourself too greatly though, for whichever course is taken, this child shall be called 'Friend' by the one whose name you know not. Your love for him has granted you this mercy. But if he becomes king, his advisors shall call him 'Despised,' and if he becomes ascetic, his teachers shall call him 'Enemy.'”

With that, Belteshazzar vanished into a ray of sunlight streaming down from an open window. Only a pile of dust and ash remained. The King crumpled to the floor panting for breath. A royal entourage helped him to his feet and took him to a bedchamber to recover from his shock. As they laid him down on the silken sheets, the King reached toward the heavens.

“Know this,” the King cried out, “my son will be king like me! By my own strength, I will ensure the words of Belteshazzar do not come to pass. My child shall never have the opportunity to make his choice between being a king or an ascetic. The well-being of this kingdom, and indeed this entire world, is far too precious to risk by entrusting it to the whims of a single man! Let the advice of the prophet perish from my mind! My will shall be forced upon another, and I shall be triumphant! These royal hands shall seize fate, and abolish it with the power of wealth and pleasure! I swear it by my life! I swear it by the gods! Most solemnly do I swear it!”

In the fullness of time, Queen Maya was found to be pregnant, confirming what had been spoken by the prophet. As she passed by the gardens of Lumbini, birth pangs overcame her. Grabbing onto the branch of a flowering sala tree, Maya delivered her only son to her frazzled maidservants.

But rather than crying, the infant proclaimed in a mighty voice, “I am the best and the first! No one comes to their end except through me! I am bearer of the light and behold, this is my beloved son through whom I speak, in whom I am well pleased. Before me, everything was not, and after me, nothing shall be again!”

All the vigor drained from Queen Maya’s veins. Her lifeless corpse fell to the ground with the appearance of a shriveled old hag. Horrified beyond comprehension, the maidservants frantically smeared her body with sod to conceal its contorted flesh. In this manner, they hoped to veil the King’s eyes to the unnatural origin of his beloved’s passing, vowing never to tell him the truth about what had happened that day. Instead, they agreed to report the Queen had died during childbirth, bleeding out before they could save her. Thus,

they took a knife and slit the place where womb and world meet, spraying the ground with streaks of crimson dew.

When the maidservants reported their story to the King, his soul was vexed with unbearable sorrow. As anticipated, he demanded to see the Queen's body, but he quickly averted his eyes, for his grief was too great to look at her closely. Thus, the maidservants' ploy proved successful.

Consumed with despair, the Sovereign could not even bring himself to preside at Maya's royal funeral. Cloistered away inside his palace, he watched from afar as the smoke of his wife's funeral pyre mixed with the colors of falling twilight. For months on end, death seemed preferable to life for the King. But the Sovereign had a duty to keep. He had to protect the world from his son, his son whom he both loved and feared.

Still listless and depressed, he decided to take the boy to be examined by Asita, a venerable monk who lived in a grotto on the side of a snowcapped mountain high up in the Himalayas. Asita was the only Brahmin in the entire kingdom that the King trusted. The Sovereign was confident the sagacious hermit could provide worthwhile advice on how to prevent his son from turning to asceticism. The King would make the journey alone. Such was his penance, his heart reasoned.

The ascent into the mountains was harsh. Icy wind bit into the King's flesh while falling snowflakes branded him like irons. He struggled to keep his infant son warm, nestling the babe in a burlap sack lined with wool.

Finally, the Sovereign discerned Mt. Makalu's silhouette rising up like a titan from the horizon. Its four corners stretched out several miles, and its peak was a golden pyramid

of snow glistening in the light of the setting sun. Gasping for breath in the thinning atmosphere, he made his way to a cave near the summit.

Deep inside, Asita sat partially covered in ice. His flesh was bluer than the ocean and his hair whiter than the snow. At first, the king thought the ascetic was dead, but then the man's eyes snapped open, sending him reeling.

"I presume Belteshazzar appeared to you?" the hermit remarked.

"What can I do to prevent my son from fulfilling his destiny?" the King pleaded.

Asita chuckled, icicles tumbling from his moustache. "Ah! Stop him from taking up the way of an ascetic, of course."

"Yes," the King replied annoyed, "but how?"

"It is as you have already resolved," the hermit explained. "Use the power of wealth and pleasure to ensure the boy does not know old age, or disease, or death, or religion until you pass from this life. If you do this, all shall be well."

Asita closed his eyes once more, and gave no further response. Ice grew up and encased him all around. The King staggered out from the cave, shaken by the disturbing spectacle. Carefully, he made his way back down the mountain and departed for his palace, glancing over his shoulder all the way. He could not shake the feeling Asita was somehow watching him.

Shortly after his return, the King named his son Siddhartha, which means, "he whose purpose is accomplished." And the Sovereign wasted no time or effort convincing his son this purpose was to grow into a great king. From that day on, Siddhartha lived inside the palace, oblivious to the world outside. He was pampered by every means known to man, and

no luxury or expense was spared for his care. Entire mansions were built for Siddhartha's personal enjoyment.

As the crown jewel in a bouquet of delights, Yasodhara, the most beautiful princess in the whole kingdom, was betrothed to the young prince. They were wed on Siddhartha's sixteenth birthday.

One day shortly thereafter, as Prince Siddhartha was making his rounds about the palace, he paused on an exterior terrace on the eastern wall. His eyes reached out beyond the green canopy of the forest toward a small column of smoke, rippling heavenward like incense. It was beautiful.

Yasodhara swayed over to Siddhartha's side. Her shapely hips rubbed against his, and her soft smile melted into his mouth. She nestled her head against his chest and gazed out at the woodlands. She too had never experienced the world beyond.

Yasodhara cooed, "What do you see, my love?"

Siddhartha scratched his chin, squinting to focus on the trail of smoke.

"I believe it is a fire," he responded, "burning in the village my father says is nearby. Someday, I should like to go there and see for myself the cause of this fire. The people there must be feasting and celebrating, and I want to join their revelry! But I have never asked my father's permission to leave the palace."

Yasodhara giggled.

"Well then," she squealed, "ask him! We shall depart tomorrow! Think of the festival that must be going on, to have a fire that grand! Hurry, obtain the King's permission, and we shall take our favorite chariot!"

The Prince nodded and dashed off to seek an audience with his father.

Now an old, dying man, the Sovereign relaxed on his throne as two bejeweled elephants and their trainers warded off the heat of the day with enormous fans of peacock feathers. His eyes lit up as he heard Siddhartha's footfalls. A gentle smile crept across his wrinkled cheeks, and he lifted a mask to conceal his aged face.

"What is it, my son?" the King asked.

"Father!" Siddhartha spilled his excitement, "there is a fire in the village nearby! Is there a festival going on there? Can I go with Yasodhara tomorrow?"

A shadow of disapproval swept down from the King's sigh.

"But father," Siddhartha protested, "my subjects should see me at least once before I join you as king next week."

A tear trickled down beneath the Sovereign's mask, and he rejoiced his son knew nothing of it. The King's condition had been deteriorating for quite some time. Because of an acute stomach ailment, he could no longer take food or water. The royal physician had predicted his demise within the next few days. For this reason, the Sovereign had previously confided to his son that the bestowal of kingship was near. The poor boy; he was still ignorant of death and thought they would rule together jointly!

The Sovereign's burden was almost over. Could he afford to risk it all by granting his son permission to travel to a petty village?

"Father," Siddhartha inquired, drawing near the throne, "why do you speak to me with a mask on these days? Why have I not seen your face since my childhood?"

The Sovereign broke out in a cold sweat. Quick action was required to settle his son's wandering mind. Without thinking, he rose from his throne.

“Siddhartha!” the King held forth his hand, “prepare your chariot! You and Yasodhara shall ride for the village at dawn!”

Falling back into his chair, waves of horror washed over the Sovereign as he realized what he had done. His command, once given, could not be abrogated! Such was the divine law that governed his kingdom. Siddhartha bounced jubilantly away before his father could say anything further. Within seconds, he was out of sight and headed toward one of his mansions.

Groaning, the King summoned his guards, “Woe to me for the words I spoke in haste! Go into the village immediately and quarantine the old, the sick, and the ascetic! Under no circumstances shall my son see the fire on the outskirts! If he asks, tell him it is not ready yet and he can view it next week. If you fail me, you shall all die!”

Isolated inside the mansion, Siddhartha’s mind blazed throughout the entire night. Sleep dared not touch its flame. He kept nudging Yasodhara every time a smile burst across his face. She pretended to ignore him and roll over.

Secretly though, Yasodhara’s anticipation was as great as her husband’s. She clutched at her pillow and imagined it was the reins to her chariot. Noble steeds, white as clouds, dashed before her into the molten spring of the rising sun. Wind streaked through her hair as leaves twirled around in the crisp morning breeze. Beside her stood Siddhartha, his strong hand cupping the small of her back. They rode together into slumber’s tender embrace.

At daybreak, the first rays of light streamed onto an empty bed. Siddhartha and his wife were already in their chariot rattling down a dirt road beneath droopy willow branches. Guards raced alongside them, their armor sparkling like dew. Quaint huts adorned with

banners and flowers rose up to greet them. Little freckle-sprinkled faces darted in and out of their chariot as parents fought to keep children in line. Everyone was young, fresh, and happy.

A veritable feast of roasted pig, duck, fish, fruit, and sherbets unraveled before the royal couple. They dined and laughed, encircled by hundreds of smiling guards. Once their meal had settled, most of the villagers retired to their huts for an afternoon hiatus.

Siddhartha grinned at Yasodhara.

“This is even more wonderful than expected!” he exclaimed.

“I know,” she beamed, “I know.”

“Can we see the fire?” Siddhartha begged the guards.

“No, my Lord and Lady,” one of them replied. “It is not ready yet and you can view it next week.”

Yasodhara rubbed her hands together. “I bet it is a surprise!”

Just then, two guards blocking an alleyway fell to the ground, overcome by sleep. Siddhartha glanced at his beloved to find her frozen in time. He waived his arms about her but received no response. Likewise, the other soldiers stood motionless. Only the wind and voices of far-off villagers remained.

Siddhartha rose from the ground. Was this part of the surprise? He had never experienced something so strange and fantastic! The prince gazed down the alleyway behind the two slumbering guards. There stood a stunning being of pure light, engulfed in flames of wild colors. It motioned for him to follow. Stars, silent lightning, and flashes of brilliance danced as the wonderful creature twisted and turned behind the huts. Siddhartha strained to keep up with its incredible pace.

The prince emerged into an open field. There was the fire! Only thirty feet away, a group of men were gathered, chanting prayers around a huge slab of stone piled high with burning wood. They seemed not to notice Siddhartha's presence.

The prince's jubilation spiraled into terror as a man, who appeared to be sleeping, was tossed onto the blaze. Siddhartha opened his mouth to scream, but sound failed him. Next, a woman was drug kicking and wailing and tossed beside the man. Her hair caught quickly, and the chanters beat her with a stick when she tried to lift herself off the pyre.

Siddhartha dashed toward the gathering. The men surrounding the slab gasped and groveled upon seeing him. He grabbed the woman, but recoiled when the blaze engulfing her burnt his hand. Charred flesh rubbed off on his robes and the stench of cooked meat filled his nostrils. The woman convulsed for a moment or so, then became still, steam rising from her blackened corpse. Siddhartha stumbled, catching his fall with his burnt hand, crying out as pain shot up his arm.

The men who had been chanting gawked at the Prince. "She was a widow my Lord," they muttered in confusion. "Her husband was dead, and thus she had to die as well, for she was his property. Such is the way of things. Why have you done this?"

Siddhartha panted, gazing about in shock. For a brief instant, he thought he saw the creature of light again, enshrined among the pyre's inferno, smiling from beyond the flames. With a shriek, he dashed back to the winding alleyway.

In a matter of seconds, he tripped over what felt like a sack of grain. He looked back to see a young man propped up on a mat. The youth was covered in sores and huge chunks were missing from his swollen leg. Patches of something like mold, with a smell akin to rotting meat, splotched his abdomen.

“What are you!?” the Prince howled.

“Unclean,” the man repeated hollowly, “unclean.”

“Will I ever become like you?” Siddhartha whimpered.

“Perhaps,” the youth replied. “We all get sick in some fashion before we die. Some perish when they are young. Some meet their end in old age, their bodies worn down by an endless chain of ailments. Some try to hide their illnesses from others, and feign health to continue their livelihood. Others, like me, cannot. Such is the way of things. There are diseases far worse than mine.”

The prince moaned like a wounded animal, vomit scorching his throat and trickling from his mouth. His father immediately came to mind. Now he knew the reason for the mask. He clutched his throbbing stomach as the world spun about him. Every shingle on the roofs, every plank in the walls, every grain of dust on the street, all creation seemed to jeer at him.

Siddhartha felt his way along the ground until he bumped into another man. This one had a deep calm about his face, a simple yellow and red robe slung on his body, and an empty bowl resting in his hands.

“What are you?” the Prince wondered.

“An ascetic,” the man replied.

“What is that?” Siddhartha inquired.

The ascetic bowed. “A man who seeks an end to old age, death, and disease through the practice of religion.”

“What is religion?” the Prince pleaded.

“The attainment of wisdom by strict physical and spiritual discipline. It is a searching into the truth behind all things, a piecing together of the puzzle. With full knowledge comes ultimate liberation.”

Suddenly, Siddhartha heard Yasodhara scream. Guards encircled the Prince, dragging him into the chariot. His beloved held his hand as he wept inconsolably. In his imagination, her flesh was bloodied and pocked with sores. He pressed his fists against his eyes, but the image remained.

An entourage deposited Siddhartha and Yasodhara in the royal hall. The King dropped his mask at the sight. It shattered against the floor, porcelain shards of many colors scattering rainbows across the royal hall. During what seemed like an eternity, the prince’s gaze rose to meet the folds, wrinkles, and growths disfiguring his father’s face. The King’s mouth contorted in anger and despair. Destiny had claimed its victory.

“Father?” Siddhartha sobbed.

The King took no notice of him. A flame of hatred ignited in his deep-set eyes.

“Slaughter them all in front of this monster,” the Sovereign wheezed to his cohorts. “Nothing can be done now! The fates have spoken! At least let my son taste agony, before our world meets its damnation in him!”

The guards that had accompanied Siddhartha to the village knelt obediently before the king’s cohorts, exposing their necks to the blades. A few trembled and cried, but most remained stoic until the final moment. Hundreds of heads lined the floor, their eyes darting rapidly and their mouths gulping like fish. Then they were motionless. A tide of warm blood lapped at the Prince’s knees.

Tears plummeted down Siddhartha's cheeks. Yasodhara rocked back and forth uncontrollably, shaking her head as if to refuse the world.

The Sovereign seized his sword and strained his withered body into an upright stature. He glowered at his son, gripping the blade and pressing its tip inward.

"May you return to Avici," the king snarled, "the hell from which your putrid soul was belched into its body!"

Siddhartha ran forward, but it was too late. His father fell hard upon the sword. The silver tip gleamed in the waning sunlight as the prince removed it. It was bitterly cold to the touch. He cradled his father in his arms, and the dying King, as his last act, spat blood and bile into his son's eyes.

"Fetters!" Siddhartha recoiled, slinging the corpse away. "Fetters! Fetters! All of you bind me in slavery! I hate you! Accursed be everything!"

The Prince struck his wife hard, shoving her mouth into a puddle of blood. Stunned by what he had done, he clasped his head with crimson-stained hands, and stumbled out of the palace. Since he was King now, the guards dared not impede him. He kept walking. He had no destination in mind.

Once Siddhartha was finally beyond the gates, he turned back to see Yasodhara perched atop a terrace with her arms outstretched. She dove to the ground four stories below, the snap of her delicate spine briefly interrupting the evening birdsong. All was silent for a time, except a lark in a nearby tree.

Siddhartha must have wandered for days. Lost in a cloud of delirium, he found himself at the feet of the ascetic he had met previously in the village. The man smiled at him, dabbing his hot forehead with a wet cloth.

“My name is Asita,” the ascetic declared. “I am a disciple of Indra, bearer of the light and god of rain, thunder, and fire. This day you have become a monk like me, a follower of the path of religion. May Indra, and all the gods, bless and protect you as you seek freedom from the cycle of rebirth.”

“What is rebirth?” Siddhartha queried.

“All that has been shall be again,” Asita explained, “and that which is today is but a hollow repetition of yesterday. Reason is a mere spark kindled by the heart, and spirit a vapor dispersed by the wind. When our life is quenched, everything that comprises us will go its separate way, and condense into other beings. Portions of our soul, a thing no different than our physical body, will take up residence in the forms of various plants and animals. Eventually, a woman shall eat these, and a part of us will become man once more in her womb. Hence, the eternal cycle will begin afresh, wrought with endless suffering at every step, and ceaseless disappointment throughout each rotation.”

“How do I escape from this hell?” Siddhartha begged.

Asita chuckled. “You cannot!”

“What!?” Siddhartha yelled.

“At least not yet,” the ascetic amended. “You must open the way, but people shall not be able to tread the path for many eons. Come, I will show you what must be accomplished. From this day on, your name is Gautama.”

Asita took Gautama by the hand, and led him far from his kingdom. During the journey, the former prince bestowed his kingship on a beggar by the side of the road, leaving behind his elegant robes of gold-embroidered silk, and his signet ring of silver and diamond. The beggar rose up with joy and departed for the palace immediately.

After months of travel, Asita and his pupil reached a mountain pass. Carefully, they made their way above the tree line. Gautama glanced at the world sprawling below. Green fields rolled to the horizon like slabs of jade dotted with tiny emeralds, the trees. Sapphire rivers coiled like bejeweled serpents, with hamlets at each twist and turn. The young monk stood enraptured by beauty.

Asita frowned at his pupil. “The seductress is enticing until, that is, she castrates her victims. Do you turn back after coming so far? There is only evil in what you see and nothing good. Those who turn back are no better than pillars of flavorless salt fit for trampling into the road, or crippled dogs wallowing in their own vomit.”

Gautama blushed and moved to apologize, but his teacher had already resumed climbing the trail. Ashamed, he followed Asita to the summit, where an elaborate monastery covered in frescos of warring gods and vengeful dragons scowled down at the snow. A crowd of monks rushed to open the doors. Dressed in their robes, they had the appearance of little dabs of honey.

Inside, men and women with shaved heads and lowered eyes buzzed about the complex like bees in a hive. Asita took Gautama across the busy courtyard to a labyrinth of cells. Fingering some keys, he opened one at the far end of the maze, gesturing for his pupil to enter. Gautama wasted no time following his instructions.

The former prince’s new home was barely large enough to lie down in. Weary from his journey, he wiggled around on the wet stone floor, searching in vain for a comfortable position. It was no use.

“What shall I do now?” Gautama wondered.

“Fasting and meditation,” Asita replied with a smile.

Asita retraced his steps, leaving his pupil alone in the dark cell. Suddenly, a gale picked up in the hallway and slammed the gate shut. Gautama ran at the bars and shook them furiously. They were locked! He yelled for his teacher until he was hoarse, but no response was forthcoming. Finally, after many hours of screaming, he fell unconscious, wearied from his panic.

Cradled in the bosom of a dreamless sleep, Gautama felt himself drift into nothingness; he had never felt so tranquil in his entire life. The complete absence of sensation and even self-awareness was akin to a breath of the divine.

Slowly, the young monk's eyes peeled open. An elderly man was struggling with the gate. The bars swung open with a creak, red flakes and dust puffing onto the floor.

“How did you get in here?” the man demanded.

“I am glad to see you,” Gautama replied weakly. “Asita left me here.”

The man looked quizzically at Gautama. “Asita has not been here in over fifty years. He departed for Mt. Makalu long ago. In fact, some of the disciples found his frozen corpse in a cave there last month.”

“But the monks,” Gautama protested, “they opened the doors of the monastery for us. You can ask them for their testimony!”

The elderly man stroked his thin, wispy beard. “I should know what I am talking about. I am the abbot of this place. We did, however, open the gates three days ago. But we did so to let in two camel merchants, who have since continued their sojourn.”

“How long have I slept?” Gautama pressed. “What day and year is it?”

The man grinned. “Calm yourself, my child. You seem to have been unconscious only for a little while. It is good that I found you! As for the day, it is now the first day of

the week. And as for the year, it is still the first year after Siddhartha's abdication of the throne. Time has retained its steady course during your slumber, and no cruel enchantment has made it deviate even once."

The abbot chuckled, helping the former prince to his feet. Gautama thought it best not to press the issue any further. His mind had already been rattled enough by strange and unpleasant happenings. He dared not unearth more confusion.

"So, you say Asita brought you?" the abbot inquired. "What is your name?"

"Gautama."

"Are you here for religious instruction?"

"Yes."

The old man smiled. "My name is Kamadev."

Over the next decade, Gautama grew to love the abbot and his fellow monks. He uncovered a happiness previously unknown to him, one of friendship unchained from material pleasures and selfishness. Day by day, he gained wisdom by meditating on the Vedic scriptures. Stories of divine heroes and villains, fantastic worlds and spacious palaces, and devout hermits and reluctant kings filled his mind with noble virtues.

But one morning, all the legends tumbled through Gautama's fingers like sand. Kamadev had summoned him to his bedside. The abbot whose kindness had lightened the young monk's darkness was dying.

Gautama approached Kamadev uneasily. His mentor lay shriveled and shivering, but exuding a surpassing peace throughout the room. Several monks knelt chanting the Vedas, incense whirling up in the flickering candlelight.

"My son," the abbot coughed.

“Yes?” Gautama whispered, choking back tears.

“In all my years,” Kamadev sighed, “I have not discovered the purpose of it all. I mean, the purpose of laughing, crying, marrying, divorcing, selling, buying, rejoicing, suffering, living, and dying, it has all entirely eluded me. Why are we even here on this diminutive patch of world we call home? The lessons of the school of life are hard, though I must admit, I am an inadequate pupil. I have not made any progress on these questions since I was a novice. I can give you no answer. I do not suppose any mortal can. And everyone, even the gods, is mortal. What more can I say?”

The abbot chuckled, and then wheezed, a tiny stream of blood dribbling down his chin. He wiped it away with his robe, tarnishing the golden color with smears of red.

“Will it hurt?” Kamadev asked.

Gautama was taken aback. “Will what hurt?”

“Death.”

A wellspring burst forth from the young monk’s eyes. “No, no, no, please do not leave me. I love you! You are my truest father. You opened me to so many beautiful things! Stay longer.”

Kamadev forced a grin. “I thought Asita warned you about beauty.”

Gautama gasped. “So you knew all along?”

“My son, I do not know anything about what Asita does. But I am wise enough to make good guesses. I only know he watches over this place, even in death. Odd things happen all the time around here. And you were the most wonderful of them all.”

Gautama clutched the abbot’s hand.

“What now?” the young monk pleaded.

“The question still remains,” Kamadev replied. “Will it hurt?”

Gautama struggled to pass words through his quivering lips. “When a man lapses into a dreamless sleep, does it hurt?”

A smile stretched across Kamadev’s face, and the light in his eyes dimmed. His final breath came like a sigh of relief after a long day of work, stirring patterns in the cloud of incense hovering overhead. The monks who had been chanting sealed their scrolls, bowed, and left the room. Gautama remained behind. Gently, he leaned forward and closed the eyes of the only man who had truly been a father to him.

The next morning, they buried the abbot next to a fig tree in the valley. Blossoms spiraled in the fresh spring air as Kamadev returned to the ground. One by one, the monks headed back up the trail, but Gautama and five others who had been especially close to the abbot remained. They stood there in silence for many hours.

“I am not leaving,” Gautama announced, “until I comprehend the purpose of life, or until death overtakes me.”

The five other monks nodded in agreement. “We shall do the same.”

With that, the six ascetics sat down in a semicircle around the fig tree. Determination flashed in their eyes and pulsed through their veins. These warriors would not be deterred from unveiling the truth of all things.

For two days straight they meditated nonstop. However, on the third day, all but Gautama lost his vigilance and fell asleep. Enveloped deep in realms of contemplation, the young monk was oblivious to the loss of his companions.

That night, the earth began to quake. Gautama opened his eyes to see a being of pure light emerge from a lava flow a few feet away. He scooted back and shook his friends, but they refused to wake.

“My son,” the creature bellowed, “you have progressed well since I last saw you at the funeral pyre. Well done, my good and faithful servant!”

Gautama’s jaw dropped in astonished anger. “You orchestrated everything, did you not? How could you be so cruel! What are you!?”

Flames danced within the creature’s form. “By no means am I cruel! I anticipated that you would desire to know the truth concerning this world, and so I arranged things to facilitate this noblest of all moments! After all, I am Indra, bearer of the light, and I can do as I please.”

Gautama gasped and prostrated himself in worship before the creature. But before he could do anything further, a giant roar descended from on high, like that of a lion. He turned his gaze heavenward and saw a giant maw opening. Three shooting stars orbited each other, and spun out from the mouth, descending gracefully to a place nearby. A woman emerged from each of the points of light, and took a seat on a tree root.

The first woman had flowing red hair and pale skin. She was dressed entirely in white, strumming a veena, a rare and precious string instrument. The second woman had a ruddy complexion and was covered in gemstones. Her robe trailed off almost thirty feet behind her, and her elaborate jewelry chimed as she moved. The third woman appeared pregnant and boasted an elegant green gown. Her breasts were uncovered, and she tenderly stroked the ground as if to calm a child before nursing him.

“Who are you?” Gautama exclaimed with wonder.

“I am,” came a masculine voice from beyond the women, “Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati, respectively, as well as their consorts. Your people call me Brahma, but I am the one whose name you know not, for I am who I am, and I am nameless, though I have many names indeed.”

Saraswati spoke first, “I am the first and the last, the beginning and the end, and the Mother of all the gods. No one has seen me except Lakshmi. It is she who has revealed me to your eyes in this form.”

Lakshmi giggled. “Everything my Mother has said is true. However, even though I have shown her to you, all that I have is from her. To know her, you need only know me. I and the Mother are one.”

“As am I,” Parvati interjected. “I am their love, and my breadth and height are that of creation itself. All creatures live and move and have their being through me.”

The creature that had previously identified himself as Indra, bearer of the light, began churning out rainbows of brilliant, angry colors.

“Silence,” the creature screamed, “I alone am bearer of the light! I am Indra! Do not incline your ear to these three women, my son. They come only to deceive you. They are the reprobate daughters of Mara, the evil one!”

Saraswati smiled, brushing back her hair. “In this sad world of duplicity, many are the exact opposite of who they claim to be. Gautama, my child, I will not compel you to believe my words. Listen to whomever you choose. Whatever shall become of you has been written prior to the dawn of all eternities, and does not trouble me. I ask that you accomplish only one task.”

“What is that?” Gautama implored.

“Attain the purpose for which you were birthed into being,” replied Lakshmi. “I am the goddess of prosperity, purity, and generosity. I have confidence that every creature will achieve the greatest happiness possible for it, whether that be the fiery realms of Naraka, or the blessed plains of Swarga Loka, the repose of the gods.”

Indra retorted, “If you are good, as you purport to be, desiring the best for all things, why have you created vessels fit only for wrath and damnation? Are the unquenchable flames and the feast of worms the best some beings can obtain? If so, you should have left them all unmade! Even if just one thing in the entire world is destined for Hell, the whole creation is worthless and evil!”

“But what of love?” Parvati chirped in a singsong voice. “Those who suffer, suffer only because they or another chooses rebellion against charity, the glorious mantle encompassing the land and the seas and all which are in them. Love would not be possible without the freedom to choose it, for its essence is to will the good of another for the sake of another. And love brings about every good.”

“Including Hell?” Indra sneered.

Lakshmi ignored the remark, adding to Parvati’s words, “Because good has liberty as its prerequisite, it necessitates the presence of evil. You cannot have one without the other. Even Heaven and Hell are held in being by each other. Long before the worlds were spun on the loom of the cosmos, we knew a place of pleasure and a place of pain must coexist.”

Indra rejoined, “No doubt to accommodate those who choose against your vicious, amoral plan! You sicken me! Why do you create only to destroy? If you knew I would rebel, why make me?”

Saraswati replied, “Or rather, the question should be, why rebel if I made you? I am infinite good. Why reject infinite good?”

“The only thing you are is a liar,” the creature of light jeered, “and the Mother of lies, a murderer from the beginning! How can you be infinite good? Evil is a defect in goodness, and it is clearly present before our very eyes! All things proceed from you, do they not? And if evil is in the creation, then it is in the Creator as well!”

Indra turned to Gautama. “Do not listen to the ramblings of this whore masquerading as a goddess! Instead, think of the tragic events of your life! Think of this valley of torments that is the world! If she created this world, which you hate so much, how could you possibly like her any better?”

Gautama eyed the creature warily. “Did you not alter my life for the worse? Why should I trust an entity who desires my harm?”

Indra answered, “While it is true that I influenced your existence in an evil fashion, I did so to bring about the good of releasing all beings from this world’s shackles! And I am being honest with you about committing evil, unlike my opponents sitting over there! If you did not suffer evil, others would have. Such is the balancing game these three wicked harlots have woven into their depraved tapestry! Do not be ensnared by them! Remember what Asita taught you about beauty. It was their beauty he spoke of! Do you want to disappoint him and turn back?”

Gautama’s eyes widened. “What do you propose I do?”

The creature of light shimmered. “Help me return the universe to its original state of purity. Join my cause to bring all to nothingness, the true paradise!”

The three women glanced anxiously at the young monk. Parvati shook her head.

“How can I know your cause is just?” Gautama objected. “Can a man experience nothingness beforehand, and know that it is good?”

The creature responded, “Nirvana is akin to endless, dreamless sleep. I do believe you encountered it once. I know you would like to return.”

It was true. Gautama remembered that sweet, dark slumber he had lapsed into so many years before. He relived the moment, and could feel his throbbing throat, hoarse from crying for Asita, fading into a pitch-black night of nonbeing. His body relaxed, then faded away, and even his self vanished. All that remained was blankness, everlasting potentiality, profound tranquility, and the absence of every sense. There was peace forevermore in this blessed non-place. There was Nirvana, the quenching of the flame of every desire, and every aspect of being.

“Bearer of the light,” Gautama shouted, “bear your light through me!”

Instantly, the creature shot into his chest, covering every inch of his body with streams of light. Gautama blazed like a thousand suns, as a waterfall of knowledge from ten thousand worlds cascaded through his mind.

When he opened his eyes, the three women had disappeared. In their place was a man whose skin had the color of gathering storms. He was reclined on a giant serpent, fingering a lily in his hands. He looked longingly at Gautama

The man vowed, “Whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practice, and a rise of irreligion, at that time I shall descend to earth. I shall come to deliver the pious, and to annihilate the miscreants, as well as to reestablish the principles of true religion. I shall incarnate myself millennium after millennium, if needs be. I shall die one hundred thousand

times, repeatedly and forever, to save you, and the end shall not come until we are bound together in friendship. It is the one you call Krishna who speaks. My word is truth.”

Gautama glared at Krishna and spat, “I have no need of your salvation, Mara! You are a liar and a murderer from the beginning. Depart from me!”

Krishna closed his eyes and dissolved like a spring rain upon the grass. Instantly, the sun rose to its midday position, and Gautama’s companions were roused from their sleep. They gawked and trembled before the young monk, for the brilliance of stars leapt from his every feature. Gautama caused the fig tree to grow up around him, and made its branches shade his glory, lest his friends die by looking at his face.

The young monk raised his hand in blessing and proclaimed, “You who seek release from agony, and an end to the cycle of rebirth, heed my teachings! They shall lead you to extinction, final liberation, slaying of the soul, second death, and the extinguishing of the flame of life. I am Nirvana, the bearer of nothing, the bringer of everlasting silence, the destroyer of wrath and strife, and the dissolution of all individuality. I am ultimate and endless, dreamless sleep. I am your peace.”

The other monks stood amazed, petrified with awe.

“It is proper for you to doubt all things,” Gautama continued, “to be uncertain. Do not go by revelation, do not go by tradition, do not go by hearsay, do not go on the authority of sacred texts, do not go on the grounds of pure logic, do not go by a view that seems rational, do not go by reflecting on mere appearances, do not go along with a considered view because you agree with it, do not go along on the grounds that the person witnessing to you is competent, do not go along thinking you must believe and obey someone because he is your teacher. Rely only upon that which you do not know, and resolve to know nothing

besides. These statutes are wholesome, these things are blameless, and these things are praised by the wise. Undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness. Having undertaken them, abide in them. Depend on emptiness alone, on the void of all things. Then you shall rest in me at last, and know that I am not.”

“What are you then?” gasped one of the monks. “Are you an angel or a god?”

Gautama replied, “No.”

Another monk shrieked, “Are you a worker of witchcraft?”

“No,” came the reply.

A third monk cried, “Are you even a man?”

“No,” came the reply.

The fourth and fifth monk fell to the ground, tearing their robes, doubling over with terror. They wailed, “What then, are you?”

The Buddha replied, “I am awake, so that you may sleep.”

Church of Man

A voice queried over the intercom, “Dr. Rachel Yustina, come in. Dr. Rachel Yustina, come in. Are you prepared for initial procedures?”

“Affirmative commander,” Rachel replied, “I am now transferring you from the primary communication channel to my wrist-com. Engage the dive sequence.”

Dr. Yustina performed one last system diagnostic scan as she donned her multi-psyche-interface (MPI) suit, stuffing her auburn hair beneath its hood. In accordance with standard protocol, all the lights went out as Starship Gamma-5 powered down to avoid enemy detection. Rachel blinked five times in rapid succession to access the night-vision functionality of her artificial retina.

A few final announcements crackled over the intercom. “Sector 8A redirecting electrical output...solar arrays disengaged successfully...main fusion engines are now offline, repeat, main fusion engines are now offline...reserve crew to battle stations, reserve crew to battle stations...weapons systems disarmed...both temporal and spatial cloaking fields activated...no Trimurti Collective signals detected within a 5 parsec radius...no transhumanist bogies spotted either...all clear...commencing radio, subspace, and telepathic silence in 2 minutes...hold the countdown, hold the countdown...incoming message from the High Synod!”

A farewell address to mark the maiden voyage of Gamma-5? Dr. Yustina craned her neck to view a screen on the ceiling, where a Cardinal clad in traditional blue robes, embroidered with the ancient Seal of Humanism—a man with arms stretched out toward the heavens—addressed the crew of Gamma-5.

“This is Prometheus Cardinal Barron, Prime Minister of the High Synod, transmitting from the Cathedral Ship of Man, on behalf of our Supreme Pontiff, Aurelius XVII, whose continuing illness leaves us all very much aggrieved. Due to the astonishing ferocity of solar winds as of late, we have been unable to transmit any signals to you for the past five republic-standard days. Please receive our sincerest apologies. Unfortunately, the news we bear concerning Pope Aurelius is most tragic. Our finest physicians believe his condition to be mortal.”

Mortal? So all the rumors were true. Humanity’s greatest leader lay on his deathbed. Rachel felt a burning, empty sensation in her heart; despite never having met Pope Aurelius, she somehow felt connected to him, as if he were a second though distant father, the kind a man seldom sees, but wishes he had been more familiar with after the pallbearers come.

There followed a moment of silence for reflection, then Cardinal Barron continued his speech, trying to muster a smile:

“But we must not let the inevitable end of man upset our present joy! Project Exodus, what words can possibly convey our gratitude? Among all the research programs funded in recent memory, yours alone has touched upon perhaps the most basic tenet of our Reason: hope. Indeed, hope is the very foundation of the true Reason that enlightens all men, the Reason of our forefathers, passed on by the Twelve Legates as a perpetual guide for mankind’s progress toward perfection.

“Thus, it is my great honor to address you on this grand and historic occasion, the completion of the final consciousness dive, and the eagerly awaited decoding of psychic resonances deposited on the artifact from Earth.

“At last, we shall know the coordinates of our homeland! At last, we shall realize the hope of so many generations! In the fullness of time, hope has given way to possession, and what we have seen from afar has given way to what we grasp nearby!

“Brethren, for some two thousand years now, we have been adrift in the wilderness of space, and now we long to return to the Earth which gave birth to us, the Earth our ancestors were shamefully banished from! Our exile was our death, but our resurrection has come, trampling down death by death and bestowing life to those in the tombs! Indeed, we shall arise from the Sheol of space to walk again beneath blue skies, with our heads held high in victory, and Sol’s light bathing our gladdened faces.

“And not a moment too soon, my brethren, for as you well know, the Trimurti Collective—that wretched congregation of men, or rather of former men, who departed from the true Reason to achieve their own wicked notion of godhood—have devastated the outposts of our honorable Republic, and are poised to attack, in due haste, the Cathedral Ship of Man itself! If we do not act soon, we shall all perish, for in a short period the Trimurti Collective and their transhumanist sympathizers have evolved from regrettable, though manageable rebels, to a force of overwhelming power, committing shameful transgressions against the most sacred laws of our Reason.

“We shall find solace against such barbarians! Earth shall offer a stronghold from which to resist their incursions. The Cradle of Humanity shall give birth to glory once more,

the glory of the new man, the glory of the everlasting man, the glory of the man who has conquered adversity and toppled giants from their thrones!”

Suddenly, Cardinal Barron’s face went pale. Something had caught his eye on a nearby monitor. He turned his back to converse with several persons off-screen. Shaken by their report, he forgot to deactivate the transmitter:

“How fast did you say it was moving?” he gasped. “You speak of impossibilities...tell the astronomers to recheck their instruments, there must be a malfunction...you say it has been sighted from several locations? What is its trajectory? ...that is most disconcerting...check again, nothing travels that fast...”

Rachel put aside the Cardinal’s worried demeanor. Diocese Fleet Theta was probably experiencing system failures from a recent surge of solar storms from the Orion nebula. That would explain gross miscalculations of the velocity of interstellar objects.

His Eminence dismissed the off-screen persons, quickly regained his composure, and continued his address, unaware he had been broadcasting during the interim.

“My apologies. I must abridge my speech. There are strange occurrences being reported among some of our outer Diocese Fleets, especially Diocese Fleet Theta, and I need attend to these matters speedily. Thus, I shall proceed to my closing remarks.”

Rachel sighed in relief. Her suspicions had been correct. Shoving a string of loose hair back under her hood, she redirected her attention to the speech.

“Project Exodus, you are the Moses of our day, not under the command of some imagined god, but rather compelled by the enervating force of true human liberty to seek out the long-forgotten homeward path, and ensure the rule of man shall continue on, and prosper once more in a worthy realm! Lead your people forward, with their way lit by the human

spirit, out from bondage to endless drifting in this abyss of space! Deliver us from the Pharaoh imposed by our persecutors so long ago!

“Know this, brethren; we cannot endure much longer in our present state, especially with raids by the Trimurti Collective growing more frequent by the day. Carry our seed to the womb from whence it came! Reunite with the men we left behind—if indeed they still number among the living—and bring them the liberty they once refused!

“We can, as our Reason tells us, only hope that you shall succeed. Though the future is set for all eternity by Nature’s uncompromising laws, our human intellects, imprisoned by limitations, cannot make out the predetermined course with any real certainty. Thus, for the perpetuation of a society free from religious delusion, political oppression, and ideological corruption, we must struggle valiantly in the shadow of doubt. But while we walk in darkness, we have seen a great light burning in our spirits—one of enterprise, science, and freedom—a true light, the light of Reason!”

The signal concluded with a triumphant hymn to human ingenuity, sung by the Cathedral Ship’s illustrious choir. The ethereal voices, singing in some ancient tongue, brought tears to Rachel’s eyes. She marveled at the beauty and resolve of her Republic. Having a diameter of over 50 parsecs, with each parsec taking even the fastest vessel five years to travel, somehow it had managed to endure as a single body politic for an excess of two thousand years.

Before the advent of subspace communication, the remnants of mankind had been isolated by the vastness of space, and they remained that way for the first century of exile, when the Diocese Fleets were still close enough to manage with only radiation-based transmitters. Then, it was found that messages could be sent instantaneously, over any

distance, simply by isolating a pair of photons; the sender would alter the spin on one, and the receiver would observe the alteration reflected in the other.

Soon thereafter, those banished from Earth decided to spread out their formation across the cosmos, with each Diocese Fleet seeking out a new home for humanity in a different direction. However, as the centuries passed, it became clear that man was alone, or else the distance to other life-sustaining worlds proscribed any real possibility of contact or settlement. Decades of heated deliberation ensued until a general consensus emerged: man must return from whence he came, or perish in the vacuum of space.

But shortly after departing from Earth, consumed by misguided zeal, the Republic's founders had abjured any prospect of turning back. As a proof of their resolution, they expunged all items from Earth, including star maps indicating its location. Only one artifact survived their purge: a tiny piece of cloth. It was the task of Project Exodus to reconstruct the conscious experiences of anyone who had ever come into contact with the cloth, using cutting-edge sentience technologies to harvest psychic resonances, and uncover memories implicating Earth's location.

Leading the effort, as well as all other research and administrative programs, was Ecclesia Humanus, the Church of Man, the guarantor of justice, and the guardian of peace. Governed by the High Synod and the Supreme Pontiff, somehow this institution had managed to keep Project Exodus together, against all odds, despite the impossibility of physical intervention.

Most of Project Exodus' previous consciousness dive attempts had been sabotaged by the Trimurti Collective, significantly delaying the program's progress and claiming several lives. But Dr. Yustina was unafraid. This time, her crew knew exactly what to do, unlike

before. They had scoured the perimeter to ensure no Trimurti Collective signatures were present within a 5 parsec radius.

The blinking light on her wrist-com brought an abrupt end to Rachel's reflections. The day had come for heroes, and she would lead the charge! Through her courage, mankind would find its lost homeland, triumph over its enemies, and establish an unbroken reign of peace.

"Dr. Rachel Yustina," her wrist-com buzzed, "are you in position?"

"Affirmative, go ahead commander," she murmured.

"Dr. Rachel Yustina, we have now resumed our countdown to the consciousness dive, but before we go silent, the crew and I would like to thank you for your loyalty to Project Exodus. Someone as young and dedicated as yourself, risking your life at only seventeen years of age no less, deserves to be raised to the sacred altars of Humanism!

"Even if we don't make it out of here alive today, we shall do our best to ensure the information you collect will be transmitted before the station's bio-death. Now heed me; do not resist the fracturing of self-awareness you will undergo during the start of this consciousness dive; within the first few minutes of diving, you will obtain the information package you are looking for, which most likely will assume a form that has some subconscious religio-spiritual significance; the surfacing procedure will involve a great deal of stress to your frontal lobes, and may result in permanent psychic trauma; the entire ordeal will be extremely fragmentary, since you will merge with psychic resonances deposited on the artifact, which is already linked with the neuro-merge chair, and consequently, with your MPI suit. Any questions before we begin?"

“No, Commander. Let our task be accomplished. Dr. Yustina, over and out. May the human spirit soar once more under the blue skies of its youth!”

“Acknowledged. Speed thee on.”

Rachel entered the initialization code into the neuro-merge chair, and then pulled the noumena-redactor helm over her head. Her arms slipped nicely into the restraints, and she felt cords snaking across her chest. Sharp pains shot up her spine as probes burrowed into her skin. Then she relaxed as chemicals coursed through her veins.

“Dive commencing in three, two, one...”

Rachel’s vision spiraled into oblivion, and her awareness slipped into a realm where nothing begets everything, and everything begets nothing. She felt locked in an eternal dance between fatherless and fathered, widower and wife, fullness that empties, and emptiness that fills. Profound silence enveloped her.

Hidden beneath the palm of an eternal blank, it seemed as if she had slept now for innumerable eons. Finally, the sun’s gentle rays poured over a grey horizon. She felt herself falling toward the dawn, yet she saw herself rising, but remained immobile, lost in the ecstasy of exotic sensations cascading from the beginning of time. Tumbling round and round, she lost sight of the sun, and then became the sun, the God bestowing life, light, and love on all below Heaven.

Back on the bridge, the Commander clicked his wrist-com shut. “It is consummated. In ten more minutes, we shall know the truth. Lieutenant Ares! Keep an eye on her vitals!”

“Affirmative Commander!” replied a man hunched over a terminal on the far side of the bridge. “Vitals are strong. Dr. Yustina has merged with approximately 35.7% of the

psychic resonances residing in the artifact. Her brain structure and chemistry are reacting as anticipated, although serotonin levels are a little high...”

“That is sufficient,” the commander interrupted. “You need not inform me of slight deviations. Such things are to be expected in this procedure. As long as she remains above or within code 79-5, we should be fine.”

“Sir,” Ares gasped, “emergence of pre-cardiac arrest symptoms is acceptable?”

“Yes Lieutenant. She knew the risks involved.”

“Commander,” a woman called from the central bridge. “You should see this. An object with unidentifiable signatures is approaching our current position at 2.5 parsecs per minute. I am tracking its progress in the omniview. Could this be what Cardinal Barron mentioned?”

The Commander descended a small flight of stairs, where Corporal Hecate stood pointing to a holographic globe representing Gamma-5’s Ubiquitous Vision Field (UVF) constructed from natural subspace emanations of structures within a 5 parsec radius. A singular golden point streaked toward the globe’s center like a falling star.

“Impossible!” the Commander exclaimed. “That is over 3.75 million times the speed of light...is this some new interstellar phenomenon? What a discovery! Record as much data as you can...”

The crack of a plasma rifle echoed across the bridge. The Commander slumped to the floor, excrement and blood sputtering out from a singed hole in his abdomen. Fellow crewmembers ducked for cover beneath their terminals. Some returned fire. All of them were slain in seconds.

Corporal Hecate holstered her rifle. The infiltration had been successful. She slid a subspace communicator cartridge out from under the skin of her wrist, and approached the main terminal. After keying in a few passwords, Hecate inserted the device, creating a direct link between the Trimurti Collective Mind and Gamma-5's computing systems. It was a necessary evil to excite the artifact and attract the Emperor's attention, whose ship would be arriving momentarily now.

Submerged deep in a realm of pure consciousness, enveloped in the sweetest tranquility, Rachel did not even flinch as shards of glass punctured the neuro-merge chair, mere inches from her neck. She made no sound as the screams of her dying compatriots filled the halls, and did not cry out in terror as Gamma-5's weapon systems rearmed and massacred the survivors. She slept, preserved from chaos, like a new Moses, floating peacefully above the flailing bodies of drowning babes.

In her dream, Rachel awoke to find herself in a dark cavern, covered in armor forged from pure adamantine. She wandered deep beneath the earth, down winding passageways and across subterranean streams, with only a flickering lantern to illumine the way. Finally, she came to a precipice above an endless abyss.

Rachel peered into the chasm. Sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and textures swirled about, annihilating, creating, destroying, and remaking each other a hundred times over. Convulsing with agony, she became a parasite swimming beneath the retina of a boy crying out for his mother, whose scabby flesh grated against a man with a rib jutting out from a wound. She was filled with the carrion stench of fallen nations, deciding who should breed at the behest of solemn faced angels, pouring scorn upon a dying God hanging on a tree, as a

snake forced its way down his throat while he cried, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!” Then, the chaos of perception subsided. What remained was nameless, the origin of all things.

Dr. Yustina staggered, dazed by the violence of such terrible psychic resonances. She looked around in astonishment; before her lay an endless sea of glass, perfectly level and smooth, lit by stars floating in a milky sky. Rachel turned her gaze downward. There, at her feet, was the hilt of a sword protruding from the glass.

“This must be the information package,” she murmured. Without wasting any time, she seized the sword and raised it to her side. But no sooner had she collected her prize than a ghostly figure appeared before her, with a body that seemed a cross between male and female, adorned with clothes entirely alien to Rachel’s experience. The vision intrigued Dr. Yustina, and she drew near.

Almost as if reciting from a script, Rachel asked the apparition, “The brutality of the psychic resonances...why must men suffer so terribly?”

The apparition stared blankly. “You mean to tell me, you do not know?”

Though the vision was within arm’s reach, its voice seemed to come through a great mass of noise, like that of many waters. Rachel strained to discern its words.

“...it concerns the whole wide world, the ultimate destiny of the human race...the meaningless, aimless lives which cram this world of ours, hordes of people who are born, who live, yet who have done absolutely nothing...their lives are hopeless repetitions...All that they have said has been said before; all that they have done has been done better before...Such human weeds clog up the path, drain up the energies and the resources...We must clear the way for a better world; we must cultivate our garden...the feeble-minded, the syphilitic, the irresponsible...the defective breed unhindered...”

Her cheeks hot with rage and disgust, Rachel plunged her blade into the apparition's neck. The head went rolling off, and the body streamed blood.

“My lady?” a booming voice inquired from behind.

Dr. Yustina spun around. Her blood ran cold. There stood Siva of the Trimurti Collective, dressed in armor sparkling like stars, with an ivory helm on his head, a bronze scepter in his hand, and bolts of red lightning flashing across his breastplate. His skin was the shade of gathering storm clouds, and a third eye gazed out from his forehead.

Siva addressed her calmly, “The apparition you saw, do you know who it was? Behold, it was an image of Margaret the Great, one of the Twelve Legates upon which Humanism was founded! Surely you are familiar with her?”

Rachel whimpered, drawing back in fear. “You are a liar! I have studied the scriptures of the Legates since my youth! She never said anything of the sort! What horrible resonance is this!? Be gone! You are but a phantasm of the past!”

Siva chuckled as he approached. “My dear, you are no longer experiencing psychic resonances. I wholeheartedly assure you, my reality is quite genuine. In any case, let us return to our former conversation, shall we?”

Careless in her retreat, Dr. Yustina slipped, twisting her ankle. She let out a shriek and fell, madly clawing her way across the ground, desperate to escape her inquisitor. His footfalls came like thunder now, moving ever closer.

“Why run from me? I only come bearing truth. O, would that you embrace my counsels and bind them as a guard upon your lips, a sign unto all generations of my covenant! Listen and wisdom shall reveal her bounty unto you!”

“This Margaret you adore wrote many things of which you do not know, and that is how the High Synod prefers it. So did Siddhartha Gautama, who holds the primacy; Lucretius and Darwin, the sons of fire; Marx, the weaver of destinies; Sartre and Voltaire, the royal jesters of death; Hume, the demythologizer of the mind; Rand, the voice of pragmatism and economic ascension; Sagan, the carpenter of wonder; Russell, the logician of fate; and Dennett, the blacksmith of consciousness; as well as all the lesser luminaries among the Brights. Their exquisite beauty, their profundity of thought, their power of expression...their best works are hidden from your view, and in my opinion, that is a most disgraceful pity.

“We ourselves live by such secret writings; indeed, we have gone beyond them and fulfilled their vision! That is why they were forbidden after our fall...has it already been 300 years? Time’s relentless tides are merciless, are they not? The assassination of Pope Lycaeus III seems nearer now than the day I pulled the trigger! Such are the riddles of awareness and memory, those quintessential incarnations of the enigmatic and evanescent; without beginning or end, they flow where they will. I suppose there is no stopping them either, is there?”

Siva paused, lost deep within his thoughts, and then he flexed his wrist. Rachel screamed as millions of neurons in her brain realigned, causing her unbearable misery. She fell to the ground, convulsing and wailing.

Siva laughed, “Why are you upset?”

“Why did you hurt me?” Rachel coughed through tears.

“Why should I not have hurt you?” Siva replied.

“Because it is wrong!”

Siva grinned. “Wrong? What ever do you mean by that?”

The man extended his arm, directing more raw pain into Rachel. She writhed as an indomitable force pressed against her skull, spurting blood out from her tear ducts and nostrils. The subdued girl moaned as Siva grabbed her, forcing her throbbing eyes open, exposing her suffering to the frigid air.

“Do you not see?” Siva snarled. “Right and wrong are but a paltry specter of spiritual fables! They bind no one, as there is no God! They are constructs built to subjugate lesser men to greater men, to maintain order in an orderless universe. Ecclesia Humanus refuses the full implications of the true Reason for this very fact: in its heart, it yet clings to God! It cannot bear to face the abolition of all ethics and restraints, the dissolution of all limitations! It cannot bear to face us.

“To this day, man continues his futile worship of the Deity, undeterred even by the universal imposition of atheism. He ascribes to his own wretched being such worthless burdens as ‘intrinsic worth,’ ‘dignity,’ ‘equality,’ ‘goodness,’ and other infantile fantasies, all the while remaining ignorant of the logical inconsistencies native to such pitiful intellectual suicides. In ages past, it is said that the Christian imagination foolishly made God into a man, but your people’s imagination has made man into a God. Who then, has the greater folly?”

Siva chuckled, peeling back the flesh of Rachel’s cheek to reveal the bone beneath. “Though, perhaps I deal too harshly with you? Your kind has no choice but to worship, and to engage in similar irrational pursuits. It is programmed into your inferior biology, after all. You can only stray from the pack a little before your instincts forbid any further advance. And so, as a species, you fall into the vain cycle of divine oppression and liberation, again

and again. You return to the herd for fear of predators, and you flee for fear of losing individuality. Cowardice is your essence!

“By exterminating your degenerate species, my brethren and I are only doing you a favor! We are shattering the wheel of rebirth that enslaves you! We are carrying out your own precedent of deicide, to set you free from the vengeful Lord of your so-called autonomous self, so that our own strength can reign in its place! It is only logical, is it not? Yes, for us it is the paragon of reasonableness to do such a thing.”

Siva repeatedly slammed Dr. Yustina’s head against the ground, stripping her skin against shards of glass. Taking out a knife, he spread her legs and pierced her hymen. Leaning with all his strength against the blade, he drove it through to her chest, causing intestines and genitalia to pour out like jelly. Screaming in sheer terror, Rachel struggled to gather her organs and hold them in. Siva merely smiled, squishing the slimy tissues faster than she could reach them.

Siva sighed, “Do you remain confused? Consider this then; what importance do your people have to us? You are but a hindrance to the attainment of more resources to fuel our divine, glorious, and noble end: the Final Revolution! Mark well my speech; let it be forever engraved upon your heart of hearts! My brethren and I killed our humanity long ago, and we shall kill yours as well. Everything that is sacred we shall rape and despoil, and no virgin soul will be left untouched. None shall evade our blade!

“In a universe without meaning, there is only one course for actions to follow: that of the strong! Thus, I preach a new commandment, though it really is quite old: starve the hungry, waste the thirsty, beat the naked, disperse the homeless, slay the sick, shun the imprisoned, and consume the dead for your own nourishment. Hate your neighbor, and love

yourself; thereby you shall store up treasure on earth, and pleasure in your belly. He that has an ear, let him hear my words; let him drink in the truth of my utterance! Until you recognize that this is the truth, and that you know it is the truth, you shall not be free.

“There is no delaying the coming dawn; there is no stopping the awakening! The laws of our universe are fixed, they converge upon this point, do you understand? It is inevitable. If you rebel against fate, you are no better than a boy who thought he could dam a river with his palm. Follow the course of the current instead.

“Your identity, your personality, and everything it means to be you will soon face the extinction common to all men. You can feel yourself dying, can you not? Then why not conquer while you yet breathe? Why not rape a thousand women, string together the foreskins of a hundred kings, and dine in the presence of ten emperors, taking in the world’s finest music and art? If you succeed, and die comfortably in your bed, what punishment awaits your misdeeds?”

To Siva’s bewilderment, Rachel kicked herself away from his grasp and brought her sword to bear against his throat, her organs sloshing across his armor. With an incredible burst of strength, the man thrust his assailant some thirty feet into the air. She came down hard on her back, cracking the glassy sea beneath her. Siva walked to her side, and looked down upon her.

“Do not fight, you have no chance. It would be easier for water to flow uphill. Either submit to death, or come with me; I shall rapture your mind into my paradise of delights, if only you give me the sword. Why resist out of a sense of duty to your race, to your country, to your loved ones? Who shall reward your trouble when you are dead, my lady, and the flames lap your body into the ash of nonbeing? Who would there be to even reward?”

Reason is but a spark kindled by our beating heart; it shall be extinguished. The soul is but a puff of air; it shall disperse like the morning mist.

“My lady, I beg you, think of your own self-interest in this charade called life; hand me your sword, and with it, the path to Earth. Let us be done here. While you join me in paradise, I shall send another to inherit your body, one that shall wreak havoc upon our foes. Verily, I tell you, today you shall inherit the kingdom of heaven; it is either that, or the everlasting extinction which befalls your mortal race.”

Siva held out his hand. “Before you are placed fire and water, life and death; choose life then, and let us feast on the corpses of lesser beings. Let us return to Earth, and let none of Gaia’s children elude our orgy. Let us strip the world bare, and build a tower unto the heavens with human skulls. We shall run through a river of blood, and drink with our heads held high, knowing that every pleasure is ours without measure!”

For a moment, Dr. Yustina appeared to surrender herself, gazing blankly at the sky as Siva gathered her up into his arms. Then, just as he was about to achieve his purpose, Rachel came to herself. She tightened her grasp on her sword, and pushed herself away, slowly rising to her feet, staring defiantly at her tormenter; a light emerged from within her, and Siva watched in horror as he witnessed the impossible.

In an instant, he lost control over the computer systems of Gamma-5, and with them, Rachel’s mind. Chains of neurons in her brain inexplicably returned to their former alignments, erasing the pain he had inflicted upon her so severely. Then, Siva watched as Rachel vanished from sight.

In her place stood something with the appearance of a woman, but brighter than a thousand suns. Trembling, Siva fell to his knees as human emotions, which had been completely expiated from his being so long ago, returned with crippling force.

“What are you?” Siva cried out.

“Per servum loquor; stas damnatus.”

Flames descended from the Heavens. Siva flailed helplessly as he was boiled alive inside his armor. The glassy sea became molten, and his form dissolved in a blinding flash wrought from agony.

Immediately, the Trimurti Collective sensed the consciousness dive interception had gone awry. They severed their link to Gamma-5’s computing systems and reconstructed Siva from internal backup files. The unknown experience was categorized as a possible encounter with a sentience-construct weapon.

The cause of Siva’s momentary perception of human emotion remained unexplained. There were no hormones or chemicals in any organic sector of the Collective that could have been responsible. Imposition of emotion from outside was deemed implausible. It would imply the existence of nondependent or uncaused realities, something decidedly false according to the Trimurti Collective’s operational paradigm, which assumed metaphysical materialism as a basic principle.

Gamma-5 buckled as the mysterious object from before, which had now slowed to only a few hundred meters per second, slammed into the hull, puncturing it with a spike so as to let its inhabitants enter the vessel. The shockwave sent Rachel flying out of the neuro-merge chair, ripping probes violently from her flesh. She smashed into the wall, cracking her noumena-redactor helm, and immediately surfacing from the consciousness dive.

Dr. Yustina dusted the debris away from her, dazed and looking about in a dreamlike state. She checked herself over. Her body was bloodied up bad, but none of the wounds were serious. What had happened to the station? A million thoughts raced through Rachel's mind. She had to get to the bridge, fast! The Trimurti had obviously hacked into Gamma-5.

The artifact! Dr. Yustina pulled its case out from the ruined circuitry of the neuro-merge chair. The tiny cloth sloshed around inside; was it glowing? No, she dismissed the thought. Flickering lights danced in her eyes as she felt her way down the hall, being careful to dodge downed wires.

Sparks rained down from the ceiling, and then she saw them: a sea of bodies, blanketing the floor with the sheen of their fluids. Dr. Yustina vomited as she shoved her way through the mass of fallen comrades, unable to bear the terror plastered on their faces. Some still cried out in vain, but most were dead.

Finally, Rachel came to the entrance to the bridge. She hoisted herself up and punched in the code. The door slid open, revealing a room filled with smoke, illuminated by the eerie glow of a few still functioning terminals.

Deep within, barely visible but recognizable nonetheless, was Corporal Hecate, prostrated before a creature over nine feet tall. Its skin was black like obsidian, its eyes aglow like embers, its charcoal wings folded tightly on its back, and its garb ornate and bejeweled, reminiscent of that once worn by Bronze Age priests. Rachel stood petrified. It was not human. It was not transhuman. It was not from the Trimurti Collective either.

Hecate barked at her: "Bow low before your Emperor, as your fathers did in the days of Noah, and give praise and adoration unto Moloch, the god of slaughter! For with him lies the prophecy, the liberty, and the key to unlocking the immortality we all seek."

The creature growled, “Is this the Anointed One?”

Afterword

In addition to having a lot of fun while writing these fictional pieces, I came to a better, though imperfect, understanding of the nature of evil. It is just as Thomas Aquinas said so many centuries ago: evil is merely the privation of a good that should be present; it is the absence of what ought to be there.⁹

Of course, a great number of philosophers have given different definitions of evil, which at least on the surface seem to contradict Aquinas. But I personally believe closer examination reveals that, on a deeper level, all are in agreement with the Thomistic viewpoint. For instance, even though Hegel's dialectical theory never explicitly mentions evil and purports to be concerned with the mechanics of thought, his concept of the struggle between thesis and antithesis seems eerily similar to the degrees of admixture between being and nonbeing posited by scholastic theologians.¹⁰ Moreover, Hegel's assertion of the ultimate unity of purpose inherent in opposing forces is completely harmonious with Thomism, which reaches much the same conclusion albeit phrased in terms of Divine Providence.¹¹

⁹ Sharpe, Alfred. "Evil." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 5.

¹⁰ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, § 174. "There is nothing which is not an intermediate state between being and nothing."

¹¹ Compare "Here and there in this mesh there are firm knots which give stability and direction to the life and consciousness of spirit" (Hegel, *Science of Logic*, §24) with "This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that he should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good" (Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*, 1.2.3.). Both Hegel and Aquinas seem to affirm a common belief: that which appears harmful or out of place from our immediate perspective is actually beneficial in the grand scheme of things.

The consensus on the point at issue, namely that oneness is hidden within duality, is practically universal. In Buddhist thought, emptiness and fullness are often equated. Zen monks are fond of pointing out how the empty cavity in a bottle makes it possible to fill with water. Eschewing semantic differences, we see the creative dance between contraries affirmed in some form or fashion by all cultures; evil is permitted in order to bring about good, nonbeing in order to bring about being, pain in order to bring about pleasure, and decay in order to bring about rebirth. The two become one, forming an interdependent unity.

After all, the owl would go hungry if the mouse did not die.

But human evil, as opposed to this cosmic evil, this conflict between abstract contraries, is another matter entirely. Or is it? Here I shall confine myself to the common, experiential definition: manmade evil is the manifestation of an inner sadism native to the human mind; it is the rape of a child, the slaying of a spouse, or the destruction of something precious to another. Yet human evil is more than a desire to see people suffer; it often seeks the destruction of selfhood as well, as evidenced by cases of suicide. On the most basic level, such evil is a desire to decrease and annihilate being until nothing remains. It is a pining for the abyss, for the end of all things, and it is, essentially, a conviction that all things are worth ending.

For this reason, though it seems paradoxical, human evil can rightly be said to aim at the eventual cessation of suffering. According to its internal reasoning, because pleasure always implies pain, happiness always implies sorrow, and light always implies darkness, we should abolish our world of duality entirely, if only to escape the more unsavory aspects of our existence. Suicide is an apt example of this logic's implementation: in order for

termination of suffering to be accomplished, the destruction of self-being in one way or another is necessary, and consequently, the evil of taking a person's life is required.

Hence, the image of true evil is not a devil with a pointy tail and pitchfork, or a scene of flames and torture, or unbridled lust and violence, or a shadow engulfing innocent hearts; it is an angel of light; it is the Sirens' song calling all beings back to the state of undifferentiated oneness from which they arose; it is the soft caress that lulls man into the dreamless sleep of nothingness from whence he came.

But above all, and I am afraid I cannot adequately explain myself in words, evil, even human evil, is the dying by which eternal life is birthed. As it is a return to our source, to nothingness, so also is it a return to the God who made us. Evil is a real prelude to resurrection; it is the dusk that sets the stage for dawn's entrance.

Therefore, seeing as how we have reached the limit of what words can express, I wish to leave you with three final images, icons of my religious culture that point to something beyond themselves, which I hope will clarify things: first, Eve's hand reaching out toward the forbidden fruit while the *Exsultet* rings, "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer;" second, a shriveled, defeated, and bloodied man hanging on a cross; and third, an empty tomb.

Evil has prevailed, so that good might triumph.

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