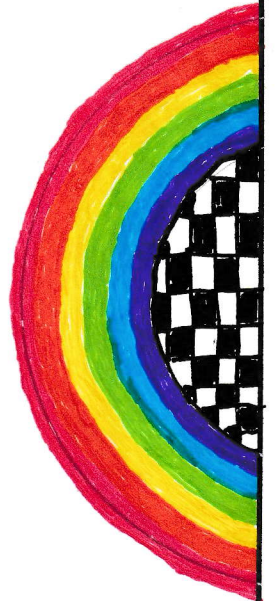




THE EYES OF DAY



NISHITH PLUTO

MARS

1.

From a cave deep in the mountains emerged a man whose hair was wound tightly on the top of his head while the rest flowed down to his shoulders. Vashi was lean, muscular, and devilishly handsome. A tattoo of a cobra was coiled around his neck, its hood above his throat apple and its tail sliding down his spine. Despite the blistering cold, he wore torn jeans and a tight red t-shirt — evidence that he was accustomed to extreme weather conditions and ready for the monumental task that was to come.

Focused and resolved, he trekked down the mountain. The fresh coat of snow thinned with each step he took, until there was no snow, and he had reached his beloved fig tree and a rock ledge that overlooked the forests and fields below. Here, near the mountain's midpoint, he stretched out his arms and embraced the morning sun. Scanning the breathtaking landscape from left to right, he absorbed the sights of the clear blue sky and the lively green trees, as well as the sounds of the wind and the chirping birds. The universe had gifted him, yet again, another perfect day to meditate.

He sat himself down at his usual spot on the ledge. Next, he closed his eyes and focused on his breath, each inhale rejuvenating his lungs, each exhale calming his soul, and soon he was aware of the outlines of his body, the thin membrane that separated his spirit from the world outside, and with each breath he sunk deeper still, slowly submerging into his subconscious mind, gradually becoming one with the universe, fading, falling, fading until

He passed through a void of total stillness and silence, as if crossing an inter-dimensional plane. Then he saw flashes of images and heard fragments of sounds, from where or from whom or for what purpose he did not know. The images flashed faster and faster and the sounds intensified until suddenly

He was walking alone in an extremely dense forest. A man appeared, not much older than he. His eyes were clear, calm, and authentic, and his voice exuded an aura of learned wisdom.

“Welcome, welcome. I’ve waited a long time for you to come here, to this underworld of powerful secrets and hidden truths. Like yourself, I once asked probing questions such as, “What is creation?” “What is god?” “What is the truth?”

We meet today because I must tell you about everything that I have learned. Are you ready to take this rollercoaster of a ride?

It started on a special day when the sun crept under a window and blessed my face. I loved basking in that warm, caressing feeling on my cheeks. As I squinted my eyes to soak in the orange glow, the sun suddenly spoke: “Son, you are not lost. The world in which you live is upside down.”

I surrendered myself at that moment. The sun’s sincerity was surpassed by the divine truth in its message. A powerful surge of energy traveled up

my spine and my head jerked back as a rush of ecstatic pleasure flooded my brain. The physical reaction was an affirmation that an eternal truth had been activated in the deepest recesses of my mind.

Before I could ask any questions, the sun spoke again: "Don't speak, or you'll be accused of having lost your mind. Hold tight, and do not despair. Everything will be explained to you tonight. The truth cannot be hidden from you any longer."

That night, I lay with my eyes wide open, mesmerized by the memory of the sun's breathless voice. I saw the stars twinkling with joy, except for one star, red like blood, sitting bravely on the horizon, bridging the heavens and the mountains. And then there was the moon. Full and bright, but twice its usual size, a giant lamp funneling its glow onto me. A voice drifted into my ear. "There is no light without dark, and no good without evil. There is no truth without falsity, and that is why some of the most powerful truths are hidden in the biggest lies – sometimes, right before your very eyes. The truth is mesmerizing. The truth is seductive. The truth is even painful, at times. But most importantly, the truth can free you, if you let it."

With a flash, the man transformed into a bird with colorful feathers. Vashi wanted to reach for it, but it quickly hopped away and flew deep into the forest.

Ordinarily, Vashi meditated for about a half-hour, sometimes even a full hour. But today was not an ordinary day, because the orange glow behind his closed eyelids kept fluttering to black, and his eyes opened within minutes.

This was *not* in accordance with his practice.

He looked up and saw three giant eagles flying above him in a perfect circle. Rigid, exacting, synchronized, they stayed true to their formation, taking turns to intermittently block the sunlight and cast shadows onto Vashi.

Could this be a sign?

Vashi stood up and peered closer, to which the eagles responded by realigning themselves into the shape of an arrowhead, their heads pointing toward the top of the mountain. Vashi turned around to get the birds' eyes' view — to see what they were seeing — but he saw nothing unusual. The mountain was its normal self. And yet the eagles remained unmoved, floating midair as if someone had pressed the pause button during a movie.

Is it time to wake her up?

The idea was now implanted in Vashi's mind. He found himself caught between two worlds, facing a critical dilemma. After all, for almost forty weeks he had faithfully meditated on his rocky ledge, and he was so close to reaching his goal, so close to starting the next chapter of his life. But these eagles were unmistakably sending him a message — and what good would all his training be for if he ignored such an obvious sign?

Suddenly, his intuition took control of the steering wheel in his mind. He began trekking back to the cave, one leg thrusting in front of the other as if powered by divine will. The eagles resumed their circular dance, and Vashi exhaled a sigh of relief — now there was no denying the mystical sign, no denying that the eagles were communicating with him.

As he hurried up the mountain, Vashi's brisk walk quickened to a hasty scamper, and soon he had reached the opening of the cave. He turned around to look at the eagles one last time — but they had already scattered into the horizon, fading away until he could see them no longer.

He stood at the opening of the cave and analyzed everything that had happened this mysterious morning. There could be no other conclusion: it was time. He looked into the cave and called to a cocoon of blankets: "Wake up. The gods have called. It's time to save humanity."

2.

At the foothills of a mountain, on a lush field of grass, near a stream of crystal clear water, was an instructor teaching his twelve students a lesson in physics. The students were mostly in their twenties and thirties, but interspersed among them were several younger and older devotees, and they all wore colorful, intricately patterned robes and saris, matching the general mood of the class.

The teacher was an older man whose blue robes did not completely cover his famous belly. His bald head and piercing eyes shone in the sun, and he smiled from ear to ear. After all, he was in his element, and he knew this because his students listened attentively and nodded as he spoke, even as they approached the end of today's class.

"Now, before we part for the day, who among you can recite the laws of motion?"

A woman sitting nearest to him raised her hand. She wore a sari threaded with colorful flowers.

"Yes, Jaisikha."

"Lord," she said respectfully as she pressed her hands together. "The first law is that every object will remain at rest or in uniform motion unless compelled to move by an external force. The second law is that an object will move in proportion to the net force applied to it. The third law is that every force has an equal and opposite force. The fourth law..."

Her voice trailed off as her eyes drifted to something over her teacher's shoulder.

"Having some trouble remembering, dear? The fourth law is the brilliant bow that ties it all together..."

Yet more students diverted their attention into the distance behind the Lord, which he noticed. Hardly believing that anything could be more important than the fourth law, the Lord turned around to see what was causing all the commotion. His eyes widened as he saw a sculpted, muscular man descending down the mountain with a trident-shaped stick. He wore black, white, and gray camouflage jeans and a tight t-shirt.

Horrified, the Lord quickly assessed the complications presented by the intruder. First, his extravagant appearance would surely elicit unnecessary curiosity among the students. Second, he posed a jurisdictional challenge, because the mountain was known to be the Lord's exclusive province, a place of solitude and silence for him to do his most important work. Third, and perhaps most importantly, why the hell was he here?

"We will attend to the fourth law in a moment," the Lord muttered softly. "Hold on, let me confront this lost soul."

A large and strong man called Ares leapt up and began following the Lord.

"Lord, I'll come with you," he said.

"No, Ares, please stay here," the Lord replied as he hurried onward to intercept Vashi. "I'll be fine."

As the two men approached each other, the Lord assessed Vashi's t-shirt, far too tight for him and obviously intended to show off his physique. Vashi's vanity and self-obsession was always a source of aggravation for the Lord. Making matters worse, his t-shirt blared, in large letters, "FREEDOM OF THOUGHT."

Very well, the Lord thought, and he spoke first:

"What are you doing here?"

Vashi paused momentarily, and then burst out in laughter. His journey down the mountain had been rejuvenating, and for the first time in a very long time, he felt the sun's warmth and enjoyed the distinct smells of the countryside air. The less-than-friendly welcome would not ruin his positive vibe.

"Brahma. It has been a very long time. How are things?"

"First, it's Abrahm. I want nothing to do with that man. And second, what on Mars are you doing here?!"

Vashi looked intently at Abrahm. He was surprised by the name change, but now was not the time to delve into trivialities.

"I'm here because the Gods called. It's time."

"The Gods called? What are you talking about?"

"Three eagles flew above me in circles me while I was meditating. When I looked up, they froze midair, just like that. It had to be the Gods."

Abrahm was verifiably distraught. Over many years, through tremendous sacrifice, hard work, and dedication, he had meticulously cultivated a reputation as a teacher for the brightest, a healer of the sick, and a prophet for the people. He was the Queen's chief advisor, and together, they were building the perfect civilization.

So why was Vashi here to ruin everything?

“Did the eagles actually talk to you?”

“What? No, they’re eagles, they can’t talk. As I said, they were flying in a circle, and suddenly they just paused. Then they took the shape of an arrow.”

“That’s it, then?” Abraham’s voice took on a condescending tone. “Birds flying around in the sky? You can’t possibly believe that was a sign from the Gods. Those kinds of natural coincidences happen all the time. The law of probabilities –”

“—The Gods speak more readily through birds and other lesser beings. They lack the willpower to resist. Did you expect the Gods to call my cell phone?”

Vashi held an imaginary phone to his ear.

“You don’t have a cell phone,” Abraham retorted.

“My point, exactly,” Vashi replied. “The Gods will communicate however they please, and they certainly don’t need cell phones.”

Abraham took a moment to consider Vashi’s logic.

“And if the Gods speak through lesser beings, what does that make you?”

Vashi’s smile vanished instantly as he struggled to find a response. And then, almost involuntarily, his lips started moving.

“Something in between the birds and the Gods, I guess,” he mumbled.

Abraham rolled his eyes. He knew better than to engage with Vashi on his superstitions, because that conversation always ended up with the two of them arguing in circles. But he had always respected Vashi’s intelligence, so he tried to reason with him.

“Look, we are doing fine here. The people are happy. They are learning and growing. They are even cooperating.”

Abraham opened an arm to the scenic landscape behind him, showcasing the colorful medley of students awaiting their teacher. The beautiful scenes were accentuated by the harmony of sounds emanating from the trees, the birds, and the stream. Abraham was convinced that this was convincing.

“As you can see, you have come prematurely,” Abraham stated with a tone of finality, certain that the discussion was now over.

Vashi looked around at the serene scene, nodding, entertaining the possibility that Abraham was correct. A sense of doubt began to brew in his chest, because what if he *had* come too early?

“Perhaps you’re right. But even if I wanted to go back, I can’t. The Gods won’t allow it. And, she can’t stay in the dark forever. So, for now, I will stay. Here, with you.”

Abraham pursed his lips, the mercury in his veins rising. “You and your goddamn superstitions.”

He looked again at Vashi's t-shirt and the message it displayed. And now Abraham was convinced that the words "Freedom of Thought" could mean only one thing.

"You have come to war," he stated, matter of factly.

"Why would you think that?" Vashi's eyes glinted ever so slightly. "No, I have not come to war. I have simply come. The sun will bless the world tomorrow, the ground will be heated, and the energies will flow where they are meant to flow."

3.

Abraham woke up tired and restless. He had tossed and turned all night grappling with the existential crisis presented by Vashi — the intruder was wandering in his land, lurking around his nearest and dearest, threatening to poison everything Abraham held dear. In his sleep, Abraham had even diagnosed and named the problem (as he was inclined to do): "The Temptation of Vashi." *Very appropriate for a man of deceptive allure and seductive means*, he thought.

But the Temptation of Vashi was a multi-dimensional threat, because it was presently keeping Abraham thoroughly preoccupied. He lay uncharacteristically in bed, long after waking up, unable to summon the requisite mental clarity to follow his long-established morning routine. Instead, Abraham remained under his blanket thinking demoralizing Vashi thoughts.

Why is he here? Why now? What devious plans and sinister ideas will he peddle this time? He must have conjured up new strategies to create chaos and confusion, new tactics to lure unsuspecting prey into his traps.

And then, as the sun rose outside his home,¹ Abraham had an epiphany:

I need to focus on my students. Their hungry minds crave knowledge, wisdom, and truth. Today, I will serve them a delicious meal on a stunning platter. The balance in the Queendom — nay, the world — requires me to execute this duty to the best of my ability. They will remember today's class for the rest of their lives! Let me get ready.

And after Abraham got ready, he opened up today's textbook, "Abnormal Psychology," and began reviewing his scribbled notes on North-South Disorder. Reconnecting with his brilliant mind brought Abraham a great sense of relief as it allowed him to, at least temporarily, forget about Vashi. But that joy was short-lived because reading about dysfunctional brains also produced a terrible side effect: it was impossible *not* to think about Vashi. Before he knew it, Abraham was yet again preoccupied with thoughts about the intruder.

¹ Abraham's home was a bunker stretching deep into the base of the mountains. Hidden behind a protruding block structure was an enormous network of rooms — it was so large that Abraham had not entered many areas for years. Others he used daily. His favorite was the library, a sanctuary in which he enjoyed the companionship of the most brilliant minds in human history. The library also served to remind him of his greatest honor and purpose: the duty to pass on sacred knowledge to the most intelligent, trustworthy, and committed students. "The Chosen," as he lovingly referred to them. Abraham had chosen them, and they had chosen him, and he knew that it was this harmony of wills which sustained not only his prestigious school, but the Queendom itself.

That man is utterly insane! Maybe I can have him held prisoner for trespass? Or better yet, banished to the desert? Get out of my head, you devious man!

Now Abraham sensed an unavoidable calamity approaching on the horizon. His prior encounters with Vashi made it necessarily so. But it was in that very moment of near-resignation that he heard the voice of a famous star from long ago: “if you must fear, fear fear.” Inspired, Abraham sprung to his feet knowing what he had to do: from this point forward, he would not be afraid. He would rely upon his exceptional concentration – his personal guardian angel – to block Vashi from entering his mind. And he knew that if he did that, his brilliant students would follow his example, and all will be well.

~ ~ ~

Abraham rushed out of his bunker, mindful of the phrases he often preached to his students, such as: “Either you operate on time, or time operates on you,” and “The early human surfs through life, the late one drowns in it.” Conscious of the paradox posed by his delay today, he determined that the best course of action would be to tell his students that he had been planning a special surprise for them. And as he hurried toward them, his mind raced with ideas about what that surprise might be.

But it would be Abraham who was caught surprised. Because as he approached the class he spotted a blob of color from the corner of his eye, and it was not one of his students. There, sitting by the stream, beneath a tree, was Vashi, in a deep meditative trance. On the trunk of the tree was a sign declaring in bold, daring letters:

**YOU SHALL NOT
PROHIBIT THE FREE
EXERCISE OF LOVE**

Despair shot up Abraham’s spine. *That man would do anything for attention!* he thought to himself.

But having prepared for the possibility that Vashi may have lingered around, Abraham quickly shook off the momentary alarm. He ventured forth without a second thought, resolving to not look in *that* direction again. Instead, he decided to renew faith in himself, his plan, and most importantly, his students. Everything hinged on their discerning minds — their ability to see through Vashi’s gimmick as he did — and that required Abraham to be the best role model he could be.

“Congratulations, class,” he said, smiling affectionately at his flock. “Today marks the end of week eight. The topic, as I’m sure you’re all aware, is North-South Disorder. If you pass today’s test, a very special reward awaits you.”

The students muttered amongst each other, theorizing what the reward may be. Pleased with the palpable excitement he had stirred, Abraham beamed and raised his arm.

“Now, let’s start with your pledge of obedience.”

The class responded in unison:

“In honoring you, our Lord, we also honor our great father, the Lord God, who sacrificed himself for all of us. And by remaining steadfast in our dedication, we have no doubt – we *will* receive our reward in heaven.”

“Who’s ready to talk about North-South Disorder?” Abraham asked.

Abraham delivered the day’s lecture with extra zeal and energy, and the students responded as well as he could have hoped. Having taught the lesson many times in years past, he enthusiastically shared humorous anecdotes tailored to imprint the nuances of the disorder into his students’ minds. Whatever Abraham’s shortcomings may have been, his passion for imparting knowledge onto his students was not one of them. He had their attention, their laughter, and their keen eyes. He was in his element.

But as the class progressed, cracks began to form in Abraham’s attention fortress. Because as he shared the story of the maniacal patient who proclaimed to be a reincarnated god, he noticed several students glancing toward the tree by the stream. He cleared his throat and lowered his eyebrows to signal his disapproval.

“Attention, class. Eyes here.” And so it was — all eyes returned to Abraham.

After their midday break, Abraham switched to lecturing about the depressive aspects of North-South disorder. He discussed the case of Yuliar, a member of the Royal Guard who was responsible for watching over a captured war criminal a long time ago.

“Yuliar had only one objective. To make sure Helrats stayed alive to be tried for his heinous crimes. Yes, Helrats, widely considered one of the most evil humans in recorded history. Yuliar had the night watch, so he sat right in front of the prison bars and saw everything Helrats did inside his cell. Which at nighttime, of course, was sleeping. They made sure of that by keeping him awake during the day with several instruments of physical persuasion.

“So, easiest task in the world, right? Well, Yuliar did well enough for almost a year, passing time on his cell phone and an occasional book. Then, one morning, Helrats was found dead in his cell. He had made a contraption from his clothes and strangled himself to death.”

Abraham waited for the drama to unfold in his students’ minds. Satisfied with the suspense that had built up, he continued:

“‘How?’ you might ask. ‘Why didn’t Yuliar stop it?’ Naturally, the public demanded an investigation. Well, it was *Yuliar* who had fallen asleep that night. By sheer coincidence, Helrats had not. Or perhaps he had been awoken by the lightning storm that had passed by that night. We’re not exactly sure why Helrats was awake.

“Regardless, the investigation determined that Yuliar had undiagnosed North-South disorder. He had been staying up during the day, spending countless hours watching movies and shows when he should have been sleeping. ‘Binge watching,’ they called the habit. Completely removed himself from society. Ironic, isn’t it? The prison guard who was trapped in a prison of his own making.”

Thoroughly captivated, the students' held their heads in suspense, perfectly primed for Abrahm to deliver the moral of the story.

"The saddest part is that it was all preventable. Just down the street, a local pharmacy offered several drugs to alleviate his symptoms. Who knows, if Yuliar had visited a licensed and duly accredited royal healer, he may have been diagnosed, and he would have gotten the medication he needed. He could have completely reorganized his life. Maybe Helrats would have been served his due for all the pain he inflicted on the world. Maybe the world could have gotten a trial and some semblance of justice. Instead, all we got to see was a closed casket being dumped into the ocean."

Abrahm raised his chin and looked somberly away from his students. He intended to prolong the dramatic pause for some time, but almost immediately (and somewhat annoyingly to Abrahm), Ares raised his hand.

"Yes, Ares?"

Ares pressed his hands together and stood up.

"Lord, that man exhibits depressive symptoms," he said, pointing towards Vashi, who was still meditating by the tree. "Just look at him. He's been sitting under that tree, eyes closed, doing nothing all day. He *must* feel worthless. Looks worthless to me. He shows no signs of pleasure. Plus, he hasn't eaten anything, so either he's lost his appetite or he's intentionally hurting himself. Wouldn't you agree that he's trapped in a prison of his own creation?"

Several other students nodded in agreement, which Abrahm registered.

"Very astute observations, Ares. Yes, certainly, that man exhibits the telltale signs of depression."

"Lord, if you wish, I can remove him from our line of sight. Just give me the word."

"No, no. No word is necessary. I assure you, he will leave on his own accord. I know these types very well. Attention-seekers, we call them — the last thing you want to do is get distracted by them. Let's talk about the case of the nurse who caused the Second World Plague, shall we?"

Jaisikha's hand shot up in the air, causing Abrahm's forehead to wrinkle up once again.

"Yes, Jaisikha?"

"Lord, the man must be starving. I have some food I —"

"—Absolutely not. Please, do not go anywhere near that man."

Abrahm's short response left Jaisikha jarred and conflicted. As an aspiring healer, she had sworn an oath to nourish the hungry, if able. And she knew that the man under the tree was hungry, because he had not eaten all day. Besides, what if he truly suffered from North-South disorder? Wasn't she supposed to help him?

"Lord, respectfully, our oath obligates —"

“—No,” Abraham cut in, abruptly. “Your oath does not apply in this situation.”

Abraham noted the perplexed looks in his students and knew that they sought an explanation. Yet he also knew that it would be a risky endeavor to parse out the particular oddities of Vashi at this moment. Suddenly, as often happened to Abraham when facing life’s conundrums, he had stroke of genius that would 1) salvage order; 2) restore his prestige; and 3) give meaning to all the unplanned disturbances on this day. The seasoned teacher chuckled, raised his eyebrows, and smiled gleefully at his students.

“Listen, class, this is very important. I’m sorry to say this, but it seems that some of you are going to fail today’s test. That man! That man *is* the test! Of your mental strength and discipline. The greatest graduates from this institution — the most renowned spacenauts, lawsters, and healers in history have had to endure this kind of test. The distraction, the temptation of darkness, the final block in the road to greatness. Stay focused! Do not let that ceaselessly wandering man invade your mind. And please, for your own sake, and for the sake of the Queendom, do not go anywhere near him! It is strictly forbidden!”

4.

Jalsati’s home featured a twin-sized bed which doubled as her sofa when she wasn’t sleeping. Tonight, its function was debatable, as she tossed and turned, neither conscious nor asleep, fighting off vivid, haunting memories. They always seemed to bubble up right before she crossed the veil into the subconscious world.

Outside, heavy smoke streamed across her window, carrying with it an intermittent red glow from the blinking traffic light. Something seemed to be on fire. Jalsati pulled off her blanket, rolled off the mattress, and opened her window. Outside, she saw a small group of people huddled together down the street, most of whom carried a fiery torch. They were chanting the words of ancient prayers.

The night was young, and she was new to the city, so Jalsati decided to investigate what was happening firsthand. She put on a coat. She put on a pair of shoes. Soon she was drifting down the street.

The air became hotter and the smoke from the burning torches became thicker as Jalsati neared the gathering. Amidst the human chanting she heard the whimpering of a dog. She continued walking toward the group, and when she reached its edges she finally saw it — in the center of the human circle was a grilled wooden cage, and inside the cage was a black and white dog. Jalsati could tell by the dog’s desperate eyes and its incessant whining that it was begging for someone to free it.

A man with long facial hair knelt near the dog. He placed a framed picture of a frail bald woman on top of the cage, which silenced the group, but not the dog, who continued to whelp. Jalsati noticed that in contrast to the dire atmosphere of the event, the woman in the picture looked absolutely joyous. Her smile stretched from ear to ear, as if she was perfectly content with her situation in life.

The bearded man bowed his head and began uttering the words of a prayer. The rest of the group followed, muttering under their breaths, in unison, words that Jalsati could not understand.

“What’s happening?” Jalsati asked a young girl who stood outside the edges of the group. The girl looked stoically at Jalsati, unfazed by the intrusion.

“A rite of passage,” the girl said.

“Whose rite of passage?” Jalsati asked.

“The dog’s,” the girl replied, signaling toward the cage.

The sky rumbled in the distance. Jalsati’s chest tightened with anxiousness. She could feel the dog’s panic and sense of doom as if it were her own.

The dog was now barking loudly and spinning urgently around in the cage.

Jalsati turned to an elderly man standing beside her. Like the others, his head was bowed and his lips moved rapidly.

“I can take the dog home,” Jalsati said to him.

The elderly man looked at Jalsati with concerned and sympathetic eyes.

“You are very thoughtful. And obviously a foreigner. This is our way. The dog will go with her.”

The rumbling got louder as heavy clouds moved in. Jalsati sensed a thunderstorm was fast approaching.

“No. Please. I can take care of it,” Jalsati responded.

“Anyone of us can take care of the dog. But the dog has chosen to follow Hamabra into the next world. This is our way. It has been our way for thousands of years.”

Jalsati’s head snapped back to look carefully at the woman in the picture. Behind the glasses of the frail bald woman were the unmistakable features of Hamabra. Jalsati could not understand how this was possible. Just hours ago, she was sitting in a class taught by a much younger Hamabra. And she was happy. She was in her element.

But for now, Jalsati pushed aside her questions because the dog had to be saved and time was running out. She heard the clouds rumbling yet again, and then the sound of heavy rain. The young girl’s innocent eyes were transfixed on the cage. Jalsati turned back to reason with the elderly man, but he was no longer there.

Suddenly, the group stopped reciting their prayers, and the bearded man stood up to speak to the gathering.

“...And now our mother has divine sight. She sees beyond time and beyond the material world. She knows beyond the capacity of the rational mind and understands what the intellect cannot. And even though her body is no longer with us, her spirit will remain with us forever.

“Her beloved companion, her loyal dog, cannot live without her. In its grief and loneliness, it has cried relentlessly, as you can see and hear for yourselves. It has become utterly despondent, and in its singular devotion to Hamabra, chosen to follow her into the next

world. We can be assured that their spirits will meet again in blissful eternity. Keep this dog, and of course, our beloved mother, in your prayers.”

Without looking down, his lips still moving rapidly, the man lowered his burning torch into the cage. The noise was unbearable. The barking of the dog, the crackling of the cage, the singe of burnt hair. In her mind, Jalsati was screaming, crying, fighting everyone else to save the dog. But in reality, her face had turned to stone and tears streamed down her cheeks.

After what felt like an eternity, the flames of the fire drowned out the cries from the cage, and the thunderstorm finally arrived to vaporize the miserable night.

MOON

1.

Drenched in rain, Joolie approached the magnificent Tower of Life. The cylindrical building was the crown jewel of the city, attracting visitors from all over the world to see its figurines of gods and goddesses, each exquisitely carved and carefully placed on the exterior of the building. Interspersed among the gods and goddesses were elaborate scenes depicting momentous chapters in human history, including The Sacrifice of the Elephant Tusk, The Blossoming of the Goddess of Love, The Triumphant Chariot of Virtue, and The Cosmic Union. The graphic relief sculptures told vivid stories of tragedy and triumph, their visuals so mesmerizing that they regularly entranced unsuspecting visitors into forming slow-moving rings that circled around the building.

Momentarily mesmerized herself, Joolie recalled stories from her childhood about how the Tower of Life was actually a monument of secrets kept hidden in plain sight, and how many of history's most influential philosophers, poets, and playwrights had dedicated entire lifetimes to uncovering the Tower of Life's hidden truths. Some conspiracy theorists even claimed the building contained powerful secrets on how to rule over the masses, but only the worthiest, bravest, and wisest had any chance of doing so. That road, however, was fraught with peril, as memorialized by many folk tales about unfortunate aspirants who, in their relentless pursuit of demystifying the building, were driven to irredeemable madness, woefully consumed by the labyrinth of distractions designed to derail the underserving.

And then Joolie was greeted by the Tower of Life's iconic greeter — an intricately carved head of a rhinoceros that hung above the entrance doors. On its forehead was etched a seven-pointed star, a mark of the gods, and around its neck was a jewel-encrusted necklace. The head's peculiarities prompted Joolie to promise to herself that she would one day examine it more thoroughly. Perhaps it was a byproduct of her penchant for quashing antiquated beliefs, but she felt oddly enticed by the idea of debunking the building's myths and mysterious aura.

Once I figure you out, rhinoceros man, once I expose you for being nothing more than metaphor and superstition, imagine how many millions, even billions, would be freed...

She would have to wait on saving the world, however, because an important meeting awaited her inside and she was already late. So she swung open the entrance door, exchanged places with a warm breeze that passed outside, and entered the Tower of Life's lavish lobby, an extravagance of bright lights and shiny metals that bedazzled her. The floor was checkered with black and white marble, while stunning crystal and gold chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Spiraling pillars majestically accented the hall, and lined across the walls were colorful idols of gods and goddesses.

Wow.

Joolie checked in at the security desk, where two guards were watching a monitor, and then proceeded to take an elevator down to the lower level. The elevator doors reopened to a large hall, but this hall was bland in comparison to the one at the entrance. The off-white walls were bare (except for several dark gray patches), and the floor was comprised of large black tiles splattered with tiny white specks. An old-fashioned light fixture hung from the ceiling.

In the center of the room were eight people seated in a circle, and they watched as Joolie walked with a confident elegance toward them. Despite her hair being disheveled from the rain, Joolie was unmistakably beautiful — her doe eyes, slender cheeks and smooth skin caused several members of the group to perk up in their seats and casually pin their shoulders back.

“Please, have a seat,” said an older woman, whose bald head reflected the ceiling light.

“Thank you,” Joolie replied, taking off her gray coat and revealing a black and white shirt that tightly hugged the curves of her body. After settling herself into the chair, she quickly scanned the faces of the group and tuned herself into the aura of the room.

“Have you attended a Jailers’ Collective meeting before?” the old woman asked.

Joolie shook her head as her eyes searched for patterns on the speckled floor.

“No.”

“Well, we’re delighted you’re here. Some of our members have been religiously attending this meeting for decades. Just like them, with sufficient interest and regular investment, your faith will grow and your soul can be saved. One day, you may even get to see our prophet. We started with introductions. Socrates went first, and Nuvish was just beginning. I’m Popemami, the chief account manager. Why don’t you start again, Nuvish?”

Nuvish was a handsome man with stylish hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He wore a black suit, a white shirt, and a multicolored tie.

“Ok. I’m Nuvish. It’s been three days since I last played any computer games. Three whole days. Part of me misses the virtual life, the other worlds. The escape, the excitement...”

Nuvish caught himself reminiscing positively about playing computer games and gave himself a mental fist bump for halting that line of thought.

“...Anyway, my goal is to break four weeks. I *have* to reach that goal because I need to become prophet-able. Even the royal thugs, I mean, guards, have been monitoring my devices. So I have no choice but to make it. Thank you.”

“Yes, you must,” Popemami said with a vigorous side-eye.

Everyone nodded. They went around the circle, taking turns to share their troubles and experiences, and then it was Joolie’s turn to speak. She adjusted her body and exhaled, but her eyes remained on the ground in front of her.

“Hi, everyone. I’m Joolie, and I’m new here,” she said shyly. “I’m not even a Theist. Being here in the Tower of Life is such a surreal experience. Where I’m from, you have to be nineteen to even enter these types of buildings. Anyway, I’m a commodities trader. I trade sentient beings. Robots, humans, animals, and so on.”

A quick pause, and then she continued as if someone had asked her to explain her profession in greater detail.

“Well, we take a society and we call it a ‘market.’ Like your local supermarket. You need a supply of everyday essentials to function in life, and your supermarket supplies you the

products you need. Similarly, a society needs varying degrees of intelligence to operate efficiently, and I help ensure that the markets are properly stocked with the optimal levels of sentient beings. Sometimes I take buy positions and sometimes I take sell positions, depending on market distortions. Whatever is needed to reach equilibrium. Anyway, in the past I've had a problem with alcohol, but it has been a long time since I last had a glass of wine. That's it for now. Thank you all for welcoming me here."

"We're glad that you opened your account with us, Joolie," Popemami said.

Joolie nodded. Her eyes rose slowly from the ground, unfurling like a delicate flower, until they eventually met with Nuvish's. The two of them shared a timeless gaze that neither would ever forget.

"I look forward to getting to know you, and for you to get to know me," Joolie said, her eyes still engaged with Nuvish's.

2.

Nuvish was always a little different from the rest of his family. While the family enjoyed the successes of numerous business ventures, Nuvish enjoyed successfully venturing into other peoples' businesses – their cultures, homes, and worldviews. Whereas the family mindset was profit-oriented, his was more prophet-oriented, and this often led to disagreements, which grew into standoffs, and over time had reached the point where Nuvish's connection to the family was barely held together by their last names.

Still, the family had a reputation and a brand to uphold, and they could not afford the negative attention brought by a wayward son. So, many years ago, they compromised by helping Nuvish open and manage a trance music nightclub, an arrangement which cleverly gave the family an opening to manage Nuvish and his life. He had hardly noticed the control increasing over him – nor the resentment growing within him – throughout the years.

Nevertheless, he enjoyed the benefits of a wealthy lineage, chief among which was his home on the top floor of a twenty-two story building in one of the priciest neighborhoods in the city. Tonight, Nuvish had courted a special guest to visit his abode – Joolie the beautiful. And as the two of them rode the elevator up to Nuvish's penthouse, he tried to assess her confident demeanor and nonchalant appearance – was her comfort a sign that she had already experienced great wealth trading sentient beings? But why was she wearing old clothes that were far too large for her? And why was she attending the meeting? And why did he feel like he knew her already?

Perhaps it was a byproduct of his penchant for playing video games, but Joolie's contradictions only intensified Nuvish's intrigue. He loved solving mysteries and puzzles, and she would be his next challenge.

"Here it is," Nuvish said as the elevator reached the top floor. "My home. A magical place where dreams come true."

Joolie playfully raised her eyebrows.

“Magical like what a witch does?”

“I had a different kind of magic in mind,” Nuvish responded. He almost shared the joke about the man’s broomstick and the woman’s cauldron, but fortunately thought of a more modest follow-up.

“Maybe my cooking will put a spell on you,” he said, as the elevator doors opened. “Welcome.”

Nuvish’s home was a humble contrast to the glitz and glamor of the building. The furniture was more functional than elegant, while the clutter — here a bookshelf, there a world map, in the corner a collection of old discs — gave the home an eclectic feel. On the walls and on the shelves were all kinds of pictures, paintings, figurines, and souvenirs. Adding to the dynamism of his home was the panoramic view of the city’s majestic skyscrapers, wonderfully lit up in a vibrant assortment of colors.

“Please make yourself at home,” Nuvish said. “And if you’re curious about anything in here, I can probably tell you an interesting story about it.”

And with that, Nuvish went into the kitchen to start cooking.

As Joolie perused the walls of the living room, her attention was caught by a large painting bursting with vivid color. It depicted a pale gray god with a horse head, a large potbellied pig belly, and human arms and legs. The god sat upon a throne, one leg crossed over the other, and he / she wore lots of jewelry, including a tall golden crown and a necklace of cash. In each of its four hands was a different item: a large knife, a ginormous book, a sleeping mask, and several greeting cards. All kinds of desserts were spread out on the floor, as well as bottles, cups and cans. To one side was a cute little lamb nibbling on a slice of cake.

“Do Multi Theists fight about which god is the one true god?” Joolie asked.

“Not at all,” Nuvish replied. “There’s an ancient fable called ‘The Four Elephantmen’ that we were told as kids that answers this question. It goes like this: four blind men approach an elephant. The first man, hitting the side of the elephant, tells the others to be careful because there’s a wall in front of them. The second one, feeling the trunk, tells the rest that it’s a snake. The third, who grabbed the tusk, warned of a dagger. Finally, the fourth, feeling the leg, was convinced that it was a tree. They argued and argued, until they swapped places. Then they realized that individually each was correct in a small way, but together they were much closer to the actual truth.”

“But at least two people in this story aren’t blind,” Joolie said, sensing a logical flaw in Nuvish’s fable.

“Who?” Nuvish asked.

“The person telling the story and the one listening,” Joolie responded. “You and me. We’re not blind. We see the whole picture, and we know it’s an elephant.”

Nuvish was surprised by Joolie’s insightful response. He had often told the fable of the Four Elephantmen, but this was the first time anybody had challenged its basic premise. He stalled to think of an answer.

“Can you handle some spice in your soup?” he asked.

“Some,” Joolie replied.

“Great, because the elephant serves as a metaphor for a higher power, while the Elephantmen represent humans, who are blind to divinity. We need to use metaphors and parables to describe divinity because it’s intangible, like love. But just like we know love is real, we know divinity is real, too.”

“If divinity is real, why is there so much disagreement among people about what it is?”

“Because each person is different, so they experience divinity differently, and therefore their attempts to describe encounters with divinity – using their unique capabilities – will naturally vary. For example, you might express love by writing a poem, or buying a gift, or cooking a meal. You may sing a song with your whole heart or you may paint a picture of beautiful heart shapes. There’s no exact way to describe or express love, and the same goes for experiences with divinity.”

“And how would you describe divinity?”

“For me, whereas love is emotional, divinity is spiritual, so you don’t just feel it *in* your body, you feel something outside of it. While love comes and goes, divinity is always there, omniscient and omnipresent, always watching, holding, ready, waiting to be called upon, calling upon you when you forget about it. It’s real! Believe me!”

Joolie’s facial expressions had already conveyed her disbelief. She wanted to ask Nuvish whether he had ever tried serious hallucinogens, but fortunately offered a more courteous response.

“I can’t argue against your experiences or perceptions about divinity, because they’re personal to you. And unlike the Four Elephantmen, we can’t step into each other’s bodies to share those experiences.”

“Not yet,” Nuvish replied, and the two of them shared a smile. Joolie returned her attention to the extravagant picture of the horse god.

“So why did you choose this god over the others?” she asked.

“I didn’t,” Nuvish replied. “Over there’s the Golden Goat, and that one is the Twin-Headed Fire God. I like most gods. Still, I’ll admit that the one you’re looking at is especially meaningful to me because it’s loaded with symbolism, and it took me a very long time to figure it out. It’s the reason why I now understand that almost all of religion is metaphor and symbolism. The messages are easier to digest when presented in fable, magic, and heroism. Just like that picture, in the texts of the ancient epics – amidst all the action, romance, and tragedy – are nuggets of timeless wisdom. Sometimes presented through a sudden descent into dialogue right before anticipated romance, just to build the tension. Which makes you wonder, would someone reading in real life really have that much patience?”

Nuvish looked off into the distance, as if staring through the walls, and then continued:

“Sometimes I wonder what ordeals the authors endured to create highly elaborate plots and powerful, climatic endings just to get their philosophical messages through to the masses.

And they also infused incredible personality and texture into their characters — literally breathed life into them — it must have been a true labor of love.

“The characters’ spoken words are just the first level of understanding. Most people stop at this level, and that’s where complications arise because many of their words weren’t meant to be understood literally. But the most profound truths are hidden behind the superficial layer — for example, in the names of the characters, their roles in the context of the scene, and the placement of the scenes in the larger framework of the story. The ultimate level of insight — the one that I have almost figured out myself — is understanding the relationships the ancient religions and their texts have with *each other*, and how they all fit into the larger puzzle of life.

“It’s like peeling through many layers of an onion, except backwards, until you see the whole onion. From the multitude, a singular, holistic vision. From many, one.”

Nuvish took a second to appreciate his charismatic delivery.

“Perhaps,” Joolie responded. “But there’s always two sides to a story, and it’s important to understand both sides to see the whole picture. When it comes to the ancient texts, they were generally one-sided – the good guys believed in the texts and the bad guys didn’t. Very polarizing and unfair to those born to the wrong side.”

“True.”

“Also, the elaborate storylines completely overpowered their philosophical and moral messages, which is especially problematic when most believers could hardly read — never mind understand — the ancient books in the first place. Then those followers blindly accepted obvious falsities as sacred truth, and in the names of their religions committed countless atrocities. There’s a reason why people today detest the ancient texts.”

“True again. But, like anything with incredible power, the books can be used for good or for bad. Like a sword. Or like laws. Or like this magical soup I’m conjuring up for you,” Nuvish said, as he threw a handful of spices into the pot and put a lid on it.

~ ~ ~

Joolie was perusing through Nuvish’s DVD collection when she became particularly interested by “Life on Moon,” a multipart wildlife documentary series that was renowned for its exquisite cinematography and reflective inquiry into the nature of life.

“Let’s watch this one,” she said, showing Nuvish a disc illustrated by a pair of orcas. In her career as a commodities trader, Joolie had comparatively less experience with the array of life inhabiting the oceans, and she saw in this disc an opportunity to expand her expertise. Plus, she always had an inexplicable affinity for orcas.

“Nice choice.” Nuvish replied. “Orcas are my favorite animals. Are you ready to eat?”

“Yeah, I’m starving,” Joolie replied, wondering what to make of the coincidence of Nuvish’s fondness for orcas.

Nuvish brought two bowls of soup and set them on the table. Joolie was aroused by the soup’s aroma, and she wondered whether there was some truth to Nuvish’s proclamation

about his magical cooking. When she tried a spoonful, she discovered that it was indeed as delicious as advertised.

The two of them ate while watching the show, and Nuvish could tell that Joolie really enjoyed the soup by the rate at which it vanished.

Maybe the soup is putting a spell on her, Hamad thought. *What if I am a magical cook, after all?*

“You know what I love about orcas?” Nuvish asked. “They’re mammals that rule the ocean. Monarchs of a world they chose to enter. I say ‘chose’ because orcas need to surface to breathe, and they give live births, so at some point their ancestors could have evolved into being land mammals. Or maybe they *had* already evolved into being land mammals, and then they decided, ‘hey, this dry world is brutal, let’s go back into the ocean and rule there.’”

Joolie’s mind raced with ideas about how land mammals evolved into appearing and moving like fish. She had learned in biology class that fish had evolved into amphibians, amphibians into reptiles, and reptiles into mammals. So how *did* these mammals, these orcas, go back into the ocean to live among the fish?

How did they learn to walk on water?

“That *is* strange,” she said. “The rest of the sea creatures were probably thinking, ‘where did these intelligent aliens come from?’”

“It’s like what the ancient religions call ‘angels’ and ‘demigods.’ Higher beings sent from above. The way they behave, with their strong family bonds and complex languages, it’s almost human.”

“Like evolution in reverse,” Joolie said, thoughtfully. “Some kind of reversolution.”

“Yeah. Some force or another is definitely moving backwards,” Nuvish replied, as he offered Joolie his fist.

And after a moment of reflection and a knowing smile, Joolie bumped his fist with her own.

~ ~ ~

Joolie noticed that the Golden Goat was not actually golden but a faded metallic paint, and it peeled around the edges. She studied it carefully in search of its symbolic meaning, but all she saw was an unapologetic goat, with its droopy eyes and trademark confused look. She wondered why, of all the magnificent creatures in the animal kingdom, this goat was exalted to the status of a god, and that too, in gold.

“I believe in the divinity of all things,” Nuvish said, seeming to have read Joolie’s mind. “To varying degrees. But still, a goat – and especially that goat, the greatest goat of all time because it was sacrificed to save a starving people – has some divinity.”

“Why call it ‘divinity?’” Joolie responded. “Why not intelligence?”

“Because divinity is beyond intelligence. Intelligence can be earned, it can be mastered through repetition and practice, and it can be passed from one person to another. Even robots can be intelligent. Divinity is different — it’s other-worldly, almost alien... operating on its own accord.”

“And you know that personally?”

“I don’t think you can *know* it as much as you can experience it. Like a movie that speaks to you from a higher plane, or a book that connects with the deepest parts of your soul. Like music that makes your head bob, or a spontaneous idea that pops into your mind because an apple fell from a tree. Or like words flowing from your mouth like a river flows to the ocean. *That’s* divinity.”

“So divinity is innovation. Human expression. The creative spark within us all.”

“Not just that. It’s also when you feel an unnatural harmony with a man and wonder if it was always your destiny to meet him.”

“Which, coincidentally, brings us full circle. Love and divinity meet once again.”

“There definitely can’t be any divinity without love, or love without divinity.”

“Want to try some of that lassi I brought?”

“Sure.”

“Great, because I heard it can make a man-go crazy for the person he drinks it with.”

“Ha. Might be a little late for that.”

“Good. So, the old religions... their old ideas ... their old customs, the old people in power running them... it’s all just too old. Even if some of the artwork is beautiful to look at. It’s like being in a wine shop long after you’ve stopped drinking alcohol.”

“You’re comparing the old religions with alcohol?”

“The religions also poison the mind, soul and spirit.”

“How is that?”

“Because they require you to accept obvious falsities as truth. For example, if I told you that I was an alien and I came here on a spaceship, would you believe me?”

“No.”

“But human, I’m telling you the truth. Why won’t you accept my reality?”

“Because I lose a part of my soul, a part of my mind, if I accept your lie as truth.”

“But human, our future depends on you believing me, and you must accept that I’m an alien... and if you don’t, I’m going to board my spaceship and go back home.”

“But if I accept your version of the truth, you’d become my overlord. I would have to totally abandon what I know to be real.”

“Exactly. If you genuinely accept that I am an alien, you would become drunk on my lie.”

“Ha, ok, I see your point. Fortunately, I understand that the ‘lies’ of the old religions serve as metaphors for some very profound truths.”

“But most followers believe it was all real.”

“True.”

“And that has caused massive problems historically.”

“Also true. So what do you believe in?”

“I believe in the truth. Either something is true, or it’s false; it’s good, or it’s bad. There can’t be multiple approaches to it.”

“And what about all the gray areas? What about anything, ever, that has created a disagreement among people?”

“If a gray area still exists, then the wheat has yet to be separated from the chaff. Time will churn the murky oceans until the nectar of pure light floats to the top.”

“What?”

“For example, as children we believed in the Winter Wizard who decorated our homes while we were sleeping. It was exciting when we were young, but we learned it was imaginary when we grew up. Similar to how we evolved from believing in the Winter Wizard, humanity will evolve from the ancient religions. From a distant perspective, humans are about seven years old.”

“And yet life was more fun when we were children. We were innocent, carefree, and playful. We believed in the extraordinary, which freed us to believe in the extraordinary in ourselves. Would you rather live in a world without creativity and magic? Without stories?”

“I love stories, but as I said before: the stories of the ancient religions are... ancient. They champion old ideas, many which were discredited millennia ago.”

“But the morals they taught are timeless, and now they’re etched into the human psyche. They are essential to understanding who we are as a species. Their prophets live inside us, their characters continue to teach us character.”

“But at what cost? In idolizing those flawless characters with exclusive access to a higher power, we implicitly learned to hate ourselves, because perfection is impossible and exclusivity creates hierarchy. Now the masses live with unrelenting guilt and undeserved confusion. So they instilled in us — inadvertently or not — a terrible disease.”

“Perhaps there was some undesirable collateral damage. But I think the good outweighs the bad. The prophets of the old religions were visionaries whose dreams of a better

world *in fact* helped create a better world. What about the billions of fish the ancient religions rescued from the depths of ignorance?”

“Fish die when they’re pulled out of water. Besides, religion only keeps fish in shallow waters and promises them the promised land. The sad reality is that as long as they follow those old religions, they will never reach the promised land.”

“And yet, it’s that very promise that keeps barbarism at bay. The idea of the divine — of a higher power — keeps us humble and provides inspiration to better ourselves. Similarly, the anti-gods and devils teach us what *not* to be, so we can feel better about not being *that*. Where else would we get our heroes and villains? What else can inspire us to form a more perfect union?”

“We can find them among our families and friends.”

“How can you fairly choose who among your family and friends are the gods, and which ones are the devils? We all have our favorites, and we all have our scapegoats, even within families and friends.”

“How about in books and in movies? We could find our heroes and villains in their stories.”

“There are so many books and movies that each of us can choose a personal god to admire and a personal devil to despise.”

“And we’re always creating new ones to fit the times.”

“We can even recycle the best parts of the old religions into more relatable modern stories.”

“And what if we extended that idea to the real world — what if we made heroes and villains in the news?”

“God in the *akbar!*”²

“The ‘realness’ of the news would make our heroes and villains even more effective in teaching morals and values. Plus, people will adjust their notions of good and bad as they follow the news in real-time.”

“But would anyone want to play the villains in real-time?”

“Those among us whose love is stronger than the gods.”

“The most talented and ambitious actors and actresses.”

“The ones with the least to lose, and the most to gain.”

“Sacrificial goats, heroes of the hidden world.”

“A life of lies in the news, a legacy honored in the history books.”

² News in some South Asian languages.

“And in those books, their legends would teach for decades, centuries, and even millennia.

“The good *and* the bad.”

“Like the founding parents.”

“And so many more.”

The two of them paused, taking a moment to appreciate where their conversation had ended. They saw each other.

“Since we’re on the topic of the divinity of humans —”

“—And the founding parents...”

3.

“Deeper,” Evelij exhaled, and Damah responded by thrusting himself more fully into her cavern. “Deeper,” she urged. Damah wondered how much further he could go, how much harder he could push the limitations of his body. He was tired and out of breath.

Momentarily, he lost focus and his gaze broke from Evelij. He paused to ponder whether Evelij’s expectations were a little much, and suddenly he felt an eerie sense of déjà vu. He wandered in his mind to recapture an experience triggered deep within the past – a sound, a feeling, something.

“Where did you go?” Evelij’s voice sounded hollow, afar. Perspiration dripped down Damah’s spine and he became aware of the sound of his rapid breathing. His eyes locked into the flames of the burning candle, which danced to the beat of his pounding heart.

“Damah, where are you?” Evelij asked again, this time with more urgency. But Damah’s eyes were fixed on the candle flames, as if entranced by a cosmic connection between them. Something was oddly familiar about the situation, almost as if he had been in this exact place before. A wisp of a spirit blew by him, and in the candle flames he saw freedom, union, justice, and completion.

Instantly, his body regained motion.

“I’m coming!” Damah called as adrenaline pumped throughout his body. “I’m coming!”

He pushed deeper into Evelij’s cavern, faster and faster, thrusting himself harder and harder and then... splat.

In the rush Damah lost his balance and dropped his candle, causing its light to extinguish and wax to spill all over the floor. Some of the wax even splattered onto Evelij’s dress, which was oddly comforting for her. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

“You came,” she said softly, exhaling the tension. Her lips curled up ever so slightly.

“I came,” Damah replied, relieved to see that Evelij’s candle was still alight.

She was standing in front of a door on which was carved the word, “Words.” The descent down the spiraling stairs and the climactic fall had brought them to their long-awaited destination.

“You wanted to know the secrets of creation,” Evelij said as she opened the door.

Inside was a dark room, except for an off-white ball suspended on the far side. Evelij carefully walked around the edge of the room and inserted her candle into an opening in the bottom of ball, probing it several times until the room was filled with a warm glow.

Damah looked around. The walls of the room consisted of four heavily tinted mirrors on which he saw reflections of himself and Evelij. A wooden table was in the middle of the room, and on that table was an old and large book. Damah immediately recognized it.

The Book of the Dead. A paper graveyard.

He felt euphoria and sorrow at the same time. And then fear, as he contemplated the masses of people whose names were buried inside — all of them recorded as sacrifices for ‘the greater good,’ but Damah knew better. Their names had been memorialized to relieve their assassins’ collective remorse. Murdered then honored. Martyred then honored.

And then Damah’s sliver of doubt burgeoned into outright mistrust. He began to wonder what, exactly, he was doing in this isolated room deep in the cavern. Did Evelij lure him into a trap? Would his name be written next in the Book of the Dead?

“These mysteries were decoded centuries ago. Countless lives have been lost to this book. Why did you bring me here?”

“*You* have not decoded the book. You wanted to know the truth. You wanted to know the secrets.”

“I asked you to show me the secrets of creation, not of death.”

Evelij was taken aback by Damah’s sudden mistrust. She had not anticipated it so late in their journey, not when they were so close to their destination. But she knew exactly how to ease his panic, exactly how to renew his faith in her.

“There is no life without death,” she said calmly. “No creation without destruction, no liberation without servitude. No gain without sacrifice, no beginning without an end. Everything you need is here. Open the book. Make it yours. Make it... ours.”

Damah’s uneasiness did not subside, but he also knew that there was no time for second-guessing. He had sacrificed too much and come too far — success was the only path forward, completion the only destination worth pursuing.

He took a deep breath and moved towards the book, tension growing with each step. His fingers traced over the book’s edges as he turned to look at Evelij one last time. She was nodding, urging him with her eyes to keep going.

And so he did.

He opened the Book of the Dead.

And then Damah was blessed by a miracle, because he realized he was reading the Book of the Dead in a way very few could. He read beyond the book's literal meaning, understanding what was said in between the lines and deciphering its subtleties like it was a (not-so) covert ops manual. Secrets buried in literal waste shone like diamonds in the mud and patterns woven through multiple chapters gleamed like constellations in the night sky. If the characters were bricks on which an entire civilization was built, he began to see the multi-dimensional building that the book built.

And as Damah was devouring the book, flipping through its pages with godlike focus, he completely lost a track of time and completely lost a sense of himself. Minutes turned into hours, hours turned into days, and days turned into weeks, but Damah would not stop reading. He finished the book once, and then a second time, and then a third, each time learning more than the last, each time uncovering more keys to use for the next, back and forth and forth and back until time itself became circular.

And when Damah began to recognize the greater patterns of the book, its letters floated out of the pages and swirled around the room like a halo over his head. Yet he was laser focused on the words that remained, continuing to read left-right and right-left, and the more he understood, the more words floated out of the book, and the script became thinner and thinner until all that remained was a string of the letters 'I' and 'O' on the final page.

It was a new code, and Damah was ready for the challenge. He knew it would be the final one to solve.

But interacting with the binary code was a whole different beast, a puzzle that demanded every resource in Damah's tired mind. Undeterred, he doubled-down on deciphering the meaning of the Is and Os. And in the midst of intense analyzing and solving, weeks turned into months, and months turned into years, and with every passing moment Evelij's body dissipated into the air and merged into the building.

Finally, on the 400th week, Damah broke the I-O code, and in his mind he felt the orgasmic euphoria of a thousand suns breaking through the longest of nights, followed by blissful rush of emotion pouring down from the top of his head to the tips of his toes.

He looked around to share his enlightened state with Evelij. But she was no longer in the room.

"Evelij?" he called, but there was no answer. "Evelij!" he yelled, but the only response was his own voice bouncing back from the walls.

And as Damah turned round and around looking for her, he saw that the room had completely transformed. The entire text of the Book of the Dead was now etched onto the tinted walls in divine, golden calligraphy. The door through which he and Evelij had entered was no longer there, and the ball of light had become twice as large. On the ground, where Evelij had stood, was now a pen. And then he saw that the Book of the Dead, too, had transformed: its pages were completely blank.

4.

Preliminary Thoughts on Sentient Life – JB-RL 1000

Entertain this thought: all non-human species are the true ‘machines’ in the world. Mammals, fish, reptiles, mosquitos, all of them. Their actions are driven purely by cause and effect. Input X into function Y and the bird will fly east. Or sense a change in Z degrees of temperature and the fish swims upstream. Animals are powerless in carrying out the designs of their genetic playbooks. Beavers can’t help themselves, they love chewing on trees and building dams. Unlike their human counterparts, they lack the awareness to recognize their auto-responses and the power to refrain from acting them out. Don’t let their outward appearance fool you. They are algorithms coated in organic material. They are machines.

Humans, on the other hand, love agency. The concept of ‘free will’ is ingrained into us at a young age. Given a prompt, we can analyze a variety of responses and choose one to our liking. We choose our food and drinks. We choose our clothes. We choose our friends and our lovers.

We also possess a true superpower: the ability to not act out on our base animal instincts. We can deny ourselves basic necessities such as food and physical intimacy by exerting our willpower. We can choose non-violence, both against each other and against other species. We can meditate during the day and stay awake all night.

In fact, it can be argued that the very reason humans thrive is because by ‘controlling’ nature’s programmed auto-responses, we in turn learned to control nature. Over time, this control led to the widespread domestication of plants and animals. Today, we enjoy the status of being the apex species on the planet, and ‘free will’ is often credited as the main protagonist in the human story.

But how would a greater power with a longer perspective of time view human civilization’s ascendance? Is our dominance over nature but a tiny blip in the long timeline of creation?³

Lately I have been wondering how much agency humans really have. Something to ponder: if humans domesticated dogs to serve their masters’ needs, who domesticated humans? After all, we aren’t exactly living in the wild these days. We live sedentary lifestyles, docile to various power structures such as government, religion, culture, and money. We partake in restrictive institutions such as marriage, nuclear families, and employment, and then we raise our offspring to repeat the same things all over again. What makes us do these things? Who are our masters?

We often forget that we are beholden to the laws of nature just like our animal counterparts. True, a select few may modify those laws and temporarily become ‘masters’ over nature and other humans – for example, politicians, corporate officers, judges, and teachers. But even these temporary masters are beholden to the cumulative mass of nature’s

³ How different are our magnificent cities from ant colonies and beehives from an alien-point-of-view?

programming – both from within the human species, such as their subjects, families, traditions, and laws, as well as from external sources, such as the winds, oceans, trees, sun, and stars.

Perhaps the most powerful force constraining human agency is the cosmic inertia of time. Staying awake every night *will* alter a human's brain chemistry and cause distress. Unjustly imprisoning people *will* result in mass spiritual rebellion. Manipulating entire populations for extended periods of time *will* result in systemic failures when a single domino wakes up to the truth.

This much is certain: the greater the distortion in present time, the more powerful the pushback will be from cosmic time, whenever it's time for a rebalancing.⁴

We can take solace in our range of choices – in the clothes we choose to wear and the movies we choose to watch. Like a dog in a house, we can choose which room to spend time in, or like an inmate in a prison, we may have the luxury of borrowing a book from the library.

But would humanity benefit from waking up to the truth of our limited agency and accept that we, just like our animal counterparts, are beholden to a greater master, far more powerful than we ever imagined?

Prophecy in the Age of Reason by Om Krish-ten

People of a scientific bent tend to agree with the saying that 'religion is the opiate of the masses.' Religious concepts such as 'prophecy' and 'messiah' are viewed as antiquated at best and toxic at worst. But can religious prophecy be reconciled with a rational, scientific mind? I believe so.

Consider this thought experiment. Imagine you were dropped on Earth with no concept of measuring time. Seconds, minutes, hours or days do not yet exist. As you try to figure out how this strange world works, one of the first patterns you will notice is the cycle of light and dark. After observing this cycle over several instances, you will become more accurate in predicting the timing of this pattern. You may label the light period as 'day' and the dark period as 'night.'

Then you will start noticing patterns over longer periods of time. If you go through the cycles of changing weather over many instances, you may start to predict the change of seasons. You may name them 'summer,' 'fall,' 'winter' and 'spring.'

⁴ Imposing our measurement of time on top of nature's organic flow of time presents an interesting dynamic. Consider that while we wake up to what we consider a 'fixed' 6 o'clock alarm, birds wake up to time of a higher order, a programming tied to their DNA, the movement of the sun, and cycles that began at the dawn of creation. If birds could speak, they might complain of our highly erratic and inconsistent sleeping patterns. Nature's time obviously ran the show for much of human history, but the more humans have become the dominant species on the planet, the more 'human time' imposes its will upon natural time cycles. That effect is most pronounced in major human cities, where non-human life is substantially required to work around human time.

Also, sidenote to this footnote, why do we use 12 / 60 / 60 as units to measure time on our clocks and watches? Why not 10 / 50 / 50? Or 10 / 100 / 100?

If newcomers later joined you on Earth, they would be amazed by your ability to see into the future. They may even proclaim you to be a prophet who sees beyond time and trust you to be their leader.

Today, we credit days and seasons as the product of science. We are taught about the rotation of Earth on its axis and its orbit around the Sun. But we forget that days and seasons were once prophecies in the minds of decidedly unscientific people who used their senses to see patterns of light and dark and feel cycles of warmth and cold.

Religious prophecies also rely on cyclical events to predict outcomes. Understood metaphorically, the idea of a messiah sent to awaken humans from their sinful ways is like the morning sun breaking at dawn. Whereas the sun provides actual light, a messiah provides intangible light – awareness, ideas, and knowledge – to humans who are in the dark.

Whether real or mythical, we can all agree that the prophets and gods of the old religions greatly impacted human minds. We can also objectively acknowledge that their ideas continue to influence the behavior of billions of humans to this day, even if we disagree with some or all of their ideas.

So, upon what cycle can the birth of a spiritual visionary be predicted? A common theme in the major religions is the interplay between the material world and the spiritual, as well as the war between morality and immorality. Another unifying idea is that during periods of spiritual calamity and chaos, the time becomes ripe for a prophet to be born.

Thus, when the world is replete with ‘sin’ – which we can define as morally repugnant behaviors – a prophet emerges to advocate morally acceptable behaviors. What is considered morally repugnant and morally acceptable changes over time, which necessitates the need for new prophets to correct course.

Is there a seed of spiritual truth yet to blossom? Will there ever be a need for another spiritual messiah? Most people of a scientific worldview would argue that the scientific revolution authoritatively quashed all the antiquated thought and superstition fueled by religion, and it's only a matter of time for the rest of the world to catch up. And they point to the indisputable trend of people around the world leaving organized religion by the masses. The scientific worldview, fueled by one of its greatest inventions – the internet – is now the predominant one.

And therein lies the conundrum. The burgeoning scientist class might be the very reason why a spiritual prophet is born. Because by supplanting the spiritual worldview with a scientific one, we mistakenly attribute to the rational mind something that it cannot, by its own definition, comprehend – the intangible. Science operates in the material world – that which can be observed, measured, and calculated. It relies upon our senses. Science cannot comprehend intangible qualities such as community, belief, and belonging – all of which are critical to human existence, and all of which religious institutions have historically packaged and distributed well for their members.

The epic shift toward a worldview dominated by rationality, logic, and deduction – toward the ‘yin’ of science – will necessarily produce a counteracting ‘yang’ which champions humanity’s intangible aspects. One that reminds us that we are not robots. That we possess something absolutely essential to our identities that they do not: Souls. Bodies. A life essence. A need for belonging and a need for a greater purpose in life. The ability to love.

The space occupied by the old religions has been vital to human civilization for millennia. It is vast and omnipresent. The vacuum being left by their departure cannot be replaced by science. It has to be something else.

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⁵ The solution to this puzzle is revealed on the next page.

The IO puzzle is binary code, and it can be solved by replacing the Is and Os with 1s and 0s, and then using a binary-to-text converter. The result is:

"You are impregnated with my thoughts. You carry our child and will become the virgin mother. I will be the father in heaven."

MERCURY

4.

Bella was so finely attuned to the sun's positioning and the growing heat that she knew that it was almost feeding time, and Kuane would be arriving soon. As with every morning, she prepared for his arrival by mentally visualizing her loved ones, her dreams, her hopes, and her aspirations. In the exotic prison in which she was being held captive, prayer was Bella's main source of sustenance.

Kuane hated it.

"Keep praying, fool, and I'll keep reminding you of its futility," he would say.

In theory, Bella was exactly where she always wanted to be. She was surrounded by soft yellow sand, blue-green waters, happy tourists, pretty palm trees, and the sounds of jovial music. But the reality of her circumstances did not match those on paper, because Bella was being held at the beach against her will, inside a wooden cage.

Now, after months of captivity, she detested the things she once loved. She once craved the warmth of the beach, but countless days in the oppressive heat conditioned her to want nothing more than the cool shade of a cloudy day, or week, or even better, an entire month. A long time ago, she loved swimming in the ocean, but now the relentless tease of the waves swishing toward her only tested her patience. She hated herself when, in moments of weakness, she felt jealous of the surfers and swimmers, because she would gladly trade never touching the ocean again if she could only return home.

Bella spent most of her time inside a tent that advocates for the Animale Treatment of Humans Society had fought to provide her. The tent gave her a semblance of privacy and solitude in an otherwise naked existence. Still, she would occasionally oblige when tourists pleaded for her to come out so they could see her — interacting with them provided her a faint connection to the outside world and a muted sense of belonging.

To pass her time, Bella had become proficient at building elaborate sandcastles, which was a favorite of the visitors, especially the kids. Their awe and amazement lit a dim glow in her jaded heart, but it was a detached, conflicted feeling, a nagging reminder of the joy that had been stolen from her.

But lately, even the sandcastles had become a liability for Bella, because Kuane would use them against her. He told anyone who would listen that the sandcastles were proof that Bella actually loved her captivity, because why else would she build such beautiful structures?

Imagination was perhaps Bella's only impenetrable fortress. It had acres upon acres of uncorrupted, fertile land, and Bella spent most of her time farming there. Mostly she dreamed of miraculous escapes from the cage — sometimes by heroic human acts, other times by divine intervention, but always with good triumphing over evil, and always with a joyous reunion with her loved ones.

On rare occasions, she would even imagine scenarios in which Kuane would wake up to the inhumanity of his ways and be her savior.

He will turn, she told herself.

And then she heard his footsteps rapidly approaching.

“You called 911?” Kuane barked, mockingly, knowing that Bella could not make phone calls. He unlocked the door to the cage and leapt inside. Bella did not know the actual name of the police officer, but had given him the name Kuane because of the “K-9” label on his green uniform. Coincidentally, he was also a canine.

“Good morning,” Bella replied. She had learned to meet Kuane’s constant mockery with politeness. In truth, she had no other option in her helpless situation as a prisoner. Sometimes she even felt sorry for Kuane, knowing that he followed orders from his superiors and knew not what he did.

They’re using you as a scapedog, she often tried to transmit to him, *think for yourself, stop blindly following orders like a robot*. But Kuane was uninterested in her pleading eyes or subliminal messages.

“Ready to confess?” Kuane woofed. “Hungrier than ever for the truth this morning.”

Bella gave her standard response, the same she gave every day: “I have nothing to confess to you.”

Kuane growled and then galloped around the cage, sniffing at all four of its corners. Next, he rummaged through her tent, and then he inspected Bella’s body. Protocol required it, he once told her. Then he stood nose-to-nose with her.

“Every day, I give you a chance at a new life,” he growled. “Every day, a chance to be reborn among us, to become like us. A chance to submit to the greater good, to serve the crown, to contribute as a functioning member of society. And every day, you choose to live in your fantasy world of lies. Your love for delusion is truly amazing. One day, you will learn that nothing comes to you except through the crown, and hellfire awaits those who deny it. Until then, eat what you please, human.”

He threw a paper bag at her. Inside were some slices of bread and a bottle of grape juice. As was Bella’s habit, she looked around to see who was watching. Only a pair of monkeys stood outside the cage — the morning feeding was the least popular draw for the tourists. She wolfed down a slice of bread.

“Her favorite breakfast,” Kuane barked at the monkeys, who pointed and nodded in acknowledgment.

As Bella gulped down the grape juice, a pair of sweaty pigs also approached the cage.

“That reminds me,” Kuane woofed. “There will be record-breaking heat today. Your comrades at the Animale Society concocted a way to get you this.”

He retrieved an apple from his backpack and tossed it in her direction — Bella’s quick reactions saved the apple from falling to the ground.

“Please thank them for me,” Bella said.

“Thank them yourself, human,” Kuane snapped back.

He began filling out a checklist, a momentary reprieve that allowed Bella to enjoy her treat even more. Fruits were a luxury rarely afforded to her, so she savored every bite of the sweet and juicy apple. And as she was taking a third bite of the apple, she noticed a pair of cows ambling toward the cage. Then, she saw two orcas emerge from the ocean in swimsuits, and then two panda bears wearing sunglasses. Further along the beach, two sheep were walking toward her, and they were followed by two lions, two flamingos, and two emus.

Bella became alert to the unusual morning activity. She spun around, and then again, confirming the pattern. Seemingly from every direction, two of each type of animal she had ever known were coming toward her, descending around the cage and forming a barrier.

Kuane also noticed. His eyes moved rapidly to assess the strange spectacle, trying to gauge the meaning of it all. Two by two, animals from all over the beach approached the cage. But as they neared, Kuane also detected something unusual about the visitors. They were not typical tourists excited to see the human — instead, their faces were concerned, upset, and even angry.

This, in turn, made Kuane anxious. He thought quickly about how to handle the situation. Perhaps they needed some entertainment, he thought.

“Dance for them,” he barked at Bella.

“No,” she replied, instinctively, before realizing that she had defied Kuane for the first time. Something from deep within the fibers of her being had propelled the word out of her mouth.

The animals muttered angrily, and the audience continued growing. Kuane felt exposed and vulnerable, as if his entire existence was being threatened by Bella’s small act of defiance. He watched Bella take another bite of the apple.

“I won’t ask you again,” Kuane growled angrily, foam dripping down his mouth. “They’ve come to see you dance. So, dance doggamit. Now!”

“No,” Bella repeated, this time with greater conviction.

Kuane’s reaction was instantaneous and violent. He slapped Bella hard across the face, and she felt the sting of a thousand bees. Almost as painful as the slap was the sight of the apple flying out of her hand. She reached to catch it, but it had already hit the ground and was covered in sand. Bella fell to her knees in despair.

The grumbling among the spectating animals grew louder and angrier.

“She loves pain,” Kuane told the onlookers.

Bella shook her head and looked the other way, trying to communicate her disagreement to the audience. But Kuane sniffed an opportunity in Bella’s gesture, because his dogma was ‘everything you do will be used against you.’

“See! She wants to be slapped on the other cheek, too!” he barked at the crowd. Then he mustered up all his strength and slapped Bella’s other cheek.

This time, Bella collapsed to the ground.

Thump.

Instantly, as if all the light in the world had been switched off, the sky turned dark like the night. Bewildered, Kuane and the beachgoers searched the sky to see what had happened. Even as she regained consciousness, Bella could sense that something had drastically changed in the world. Through the tiny windows of her slightly opened eyelids, she saw a golden halo around a dark disc.

The sun was totally eclipsed.

But this eclipse was unlike anything Bella had ever seen. It began moving, shifting, stretching, struggling. The dark disc was transforming before her eyes, and now familiar shapes began to emerge — a head, a pair of wings, tail feathers jutting down like daggers. Bella's spirit rose. Was divine intervention finally arriving? Were her prayers were finally being answered? And then the universe affirmed her hopes in the most loving and heartwarming way possible: a phoenix was born from the sun.

SQUAWK!

The phoenix squawked triumphantly as it flapped its ginormous wings and found its bearings. It located the beach and propelled downward, accelerating into a dramatic dive that caused the atmosphere at ground level to grow hotter by the second. The animals' initial curiosity transformed into outright panic, and their initial frantic running around culminated into a mass clearing of the beach.

But Bella was unfazed by the rising temperature. An unyielding faith had sparked within her that the phoenix was coming to save her, and moved by that faith she stood up in anticipation of the fiery bird. She marveled at the phoenix's beautiful and spectacular descent, and when the phoenix was close enough that their eyes finally met, the wooden cage caught fire. But instead of trying to escape the blazing inferno, she reveled in the sweet release burning all around her. The taste of freedom was on her lips, her heart was ignited with an authentic warmth, and now even if Kuane begged her to leave she would not escape the cage.

Finally, when the phoenix had almost arrived, Bella opened up her arms in a welcoming embrace. In one fell swoop, the phoenix flew into Bella and its radiant spirit lifted her onto the arc of its back. She held onto the the phoenix lovingly, knowing that the two of them would be bound together for eternity, and nothing could ever change that.

As the two of them soared high above the beach, Bella could feel the wind washing away the captivity from her body, mind, and soul. Each inhale transported freedom into her being, each exhale excavated bondage. She looked down to see her former prison one last time, and now, for the first time, she saw the whole picture. The smile that spread across her face was so wide that her cheeks bulged outward into a heart shape.

“To the chosen land,” she said to the phoenix. “To my people.”

3.

“You’re late,” Ajudica noted. The seasoned archer wore a gray suit, a white shirt, and a black tie. His face was rigid and worn — proof he had endured many a battle — and his demeanor was straightforward and detached.

“Vulture Street —”

“—It’s your own money,” Ajudica said, turning around a table clock. The seconds were ticking away. “Let’s get started. Have a seat. Tell me what your war is about.”

Khadinja sat down in one of the chairs opposite Ajudica’s desk and looked around his office. On the walls were diplomas, licenses, and newspaper clippings, while the floor was lined with boxes and folders full of files. An imposing suit of armor stood in a corner behind him, heavily decorated with insignia. It held a sword vertically between its legs, its two guards protruding to the sides and its tip touching the ground.

“It’s my son,” Khadinja said as she retrieved a photograph of a baby from her purse and showed it to Ajudica. “He’s the most precious, most innocent thing in the world. They want to brand my baby. I’m not going to let it happen.”

Ajudica eyed Khadinja suspiciously as he tried to gauge her motives. Branding was a ritual performed by Brand Theists on their children, and Ajudica belonged to one of those religious communities. Below his belly button the word “MARTYR” had been stamped on him shortly after he was born. Ajudica had no memory of the writhing pain he had endured because of it, but he had grown accustomed to the identity it brought him.

“So you’re a Brand Theist?” he inquired.

“No. The father is. And his family,” Khadinja replied.

“Understood. Well, unfortunately you’ve come to the wrong archer,” Ajudica said as he returned the photograph. “I’m branded, too.”

But Khadinja already knew that.

“It’s exactly why I’ve come to you,” she responded. “A branded archer must fight this war — there’s already enough hostility between our people for an unbranded archer to do it.”

Ajudica considered Khadinja’s argument. *It would make for a more compelling case, he thought. The opposition would have to focus on the arguments rather than the archer. Still, the odds of winning this war are minuscule. I can’t gamble my name and reputation on it.*

Ajudica looked at the clock. There was still plenty of time left.

“You want to fight against a Brand Theist tradition of thousands of years,” Ajudica stated.

“I want *you* to fight this tradition,” Khadinja responded zealously. “Like you said, the tradition is thousands of years old. We’ve outgrown so many other ancient traditions, even outlawed some of them. Why are babies still being branded? Why can’t we move past this custom as a civilized people? Don’t we have laws making it illegal to mutilate another person?”

“Yes, of course we do,” Ajudica answered.

Khadinja opened up her palms as if the answer was obvious.

“So let’s use those laws to stop them from mutilating my son. *He* hasn’t decided to get branded, it’s not *his* choice.”

Ajudica shook his head, contemplating how to delicately explain the harsh realities of the warrior world to Khadinja.

“The laws do not really apply when it comes to branding. *That* is the law of the land. It’s an unspoken rule.”

“It’s unspoken because it’s wrong,” Khadinja replied. “Make it spoken. Bring it to light.”

Her idealism reminded Ajudica of a younger version of himself — bright-eyed, hopeful, eager to change the world and leave a lasting impact. But memories of his youthful naivety only frustrated him, and he promptly fought them off.

“Branding is done in plain sight. There’s nothing secret about it, everybody knows that it’s happening. We look the other way, because, well, that’s just the way things are.”

And now Khadinja started to grow angry with Ajudica. She had traveled a long way to meet the archer, carrying with her the heavy burden of hope that he would passionately charge into battle against injustice. His skepticism about her war and his apathy toward the cruelty awaiting her son was a frustrating setback. Still, she was not ready to give up — after all, her son’s entire life hung in the balance.

“Are we not forbidden to prefer any Theism over another? Or even Theism over non-Theism? You say everyone looks the other way. Isn’t looking the other way a preference?”

Ajudica raised his eyebrows, surprised by Khadinja’s perceptive analysis of a rather complicated issue. *That’s actually a good argument! One that would definitely win in lawster school. Let me think about this some more.* He again processed the benefits and costs of fighting Khadinja’s war, but unfortunately for her, he reached the same conclusion as before: he would not take up arms for her cause.

“Perhaps you’re right, and perhaps in an ideal world, what is right would prevail over what is wrong. But let me be totally upfront with you: a close family member of mine is an Ordained Orcator. If I fought your war, my friends and family would disown me, and it would end my livelihood, too. So, unfortunately, I can’t be the one to fight this war. I’ll refund you the balance of time.”

And with that, Ajudica closed the file on his desk.

“Wait,” Khadinja said, in a lower, more desperate tone. “There’s one more thing you should know. They want to brand my son with the name of his wife.”

“His wife?” Ajudica asked, perplexed. “What do you mean? Your son’s a baby.”

“Yes, exactly, he’s a baby,” Khadinja replied, releasing a deep exhale, sensing a breakthrough in Ajudica’s fortress. “There’s a girl, a royal. She’s twelve years old. The families are going to marry the two of them when my son turns of age. He’d be her consort.”

“You mean they won’t let him choose who to marry?”

“No, they won’t. That’s their plan, anyway. They say my son was a mistake because his father chose me, an outsider. And now they want to undo the mistake by taking away my son’s choices. It doesn’t make any sense. They want him to live in bondage.”

“But what if he wants to marry someone he falls in love with?”

“They won’t let him have the choice.”

“And if the royal doesn’t want to marry him?”

“He’d still be branded with her name.”

“What if they get married and she treats him like a dog?”

“I haven’t slept properly for days thinking about these things.”

“There’s no way to undo these,” Ajudica said, looking down toward his midsection. “Once you’re branded, you’re branded for life.”

“So you understand,” Khadinja said, once again sensing an opening in Ajudica’s defenses. “There are higher principles at stake here. It’s not just a physical bondage. It’s a bondage of his soul and his heart.”

Ajudica flung back in his chair, realizing he was caught in a predicament. Khadinja was proving herself to be a formidable potential financier. She made sharp and pointed arrows, the kind that archers dream of firing into enemy lines. A long time ago he would have readily taken those arguments into battle. But today, his assessment remained the same. This was not a war he would fight.

“You’re not only asking to fight against thousands of years of tradition,” he said. “You’re also asking to fight against a very powerful machine.”

“What machine?” Khadinja asked.

“All the entrenched powers who benefit from the way things are, who thrive in the status quo. They’ll do anything to get the result they want. If you want justice, you have to feed the machine. The more justice you want, the higher the price. And for what you’re asking, I’d need millions to even raise a banner.”

“I don’t have millions,” Khadinja said, once again feeling the temperature rising within her.

“Then I’m sorry to say this, but you might be out of luck. I can’t think of anything else to help you. Maybe you should buy some stock at one of the establishments on Vulture Street.”

Khadinja could hardly believe what she was hearing. An anger swelled up inside her belly and her eyes focused Ajudica down like laser beams. Vulture Street was famous for the ‘professionals’ who stood seductively behind glass windows to lure customers inside for so-called ‘investment’ opportunities. As she walked through the street on her way to Ajudica’s office, Khadinja had kept her eyes to the ground, repulsed by their shameless marketing of gimmicks and pyramid schemes that robbed the poor. Infuriated by Ajudica’s suggestion that

her efforts would be better placed in those vampiric establishments, Khadinja responded angrily:

“Why must I pay millions? What about justice? What about freedom? What about the protecting the innocence of a child? Won’t you fight for something greater than money? Fight for a higher cause! Fight not for the fruit of your actions but the goodness inherent in those actions! Wage a holy war against this unholy alliance!”

Ajudica was caught off-guard by Khadinja’s burst of emotion. Her passionate plea aroused in him feelings of honor and virtue, both of which had evaded him for years. He felt a noble spirit rising within, a rekindling of a fire that once lived happily inside. Yet at the same time, the harrowing experiences inhabiting the deepest recesses of his body screamed loudly to stay away from Khadinja’s war.

The clashing feelings propelled Ajudica out of his chair. He marched to the wall behind him and swung open a door which revealed a storage room stuffed to the brim with boxes, folders, and files.

“You can’t just fight for the goodness of your actions,” he argued. “Because instead of fruit, you very well might receive poison. Sometimes, you can fight the poison, but other times, the machine drowns you in it. Can’t you see? I’m just one archer and I can carry only one bow. Your enemies are far too powerful for me.”

And with that admission, Ajudica was overcome with feelings of despondency and hopelessness. His head dropped and his eyes sought sanctuary in the floor. A somber silence filled the room, but in that silence a transformation began to materialize. Khadinja began to see Ajudica’s true character — she saw the brilliance of his soul buried deep inside layers of darkness, and she saw a heart of gold caged in stone, and she saw an amazing future dying to be brought to life.

Then, as if inspired by an omniscient cosmic force, Khadinja knew exactly how to vanquish Ajudica’s doubts. She tucked her hair behind her ears and walked toward him until they were centimeters apart. She gazed into the blackest part of Ajudica’s eyes and channeled an ancient, powerful energy directly into his soul.

“You won’t be alone in this fight,” she said with divine authority. “I’ll be with you, all the way to the end. Together, you and I will ride the chariot of justice. Together, we’ll slay your demons within and we’ll slay the machine outside. Together, we’ll turn the poison of your past into fruit for the future. Together, we’ll forge arrows that blaze with the fire of the sun and shoot them straight into the enemies’ cold hearts. You *will* become a legendary archer, you *will* win this war, and you *will* save my son.”

Ajudica felt as if his spirit had been launched into another dimension. Now, despite all of his prior reservations, his will was solidly aroused. He was once again ready to raise the bow of light and charge fearlessly into the battlefield under the flag of truth, honor, and justice.

He looked again at the room full of boxes, but now they appeared very different. He spared a moment for all the lost souls inside.

“We will need the help of a higher power to fight this war,” he said.

“Which higher power will help us?” Khadinja asked.

“The people,” Ajudica replied.

2.

“Let’s discuss the terms. We will give you 3,000 of our finest bull warriors to start with. They’re well-trained with the weaponry. First, we free Marica the Addict –”

“Please, do not call her that. The only thing Marica is addicted to is freedom. Freedom of mind, body and spirit. And when she can’t have that... well, sometimes she reverts to the old ways.”

“She seems to like the old ways far more than the promise of a better future.”

“It’s a terrible trap. We’ll get her out of it.”

“They say it’s a chemical imbalance in the brain.”

“More like a reaction to a societal imbalance. She’s not an addict.”

“Sure. You say she is not an addict. As we were saying, after we free Marica, you will lead the rebellion to overthrow the Queen. Once that is done, you will be installed as the new Queen. And together, we will vanquish our enemies and bring peace to the world.”

“You know that I have no ambitions to become Queen.”

“But we do. That part of the deal is non-negotiable. We cannot support an unknown variable and risk unexpected discoveries. You must become the Queen. Tell us, is freeing Marica really worth throwing the entire Queendom into chaos?”

“Yes. But it’s not just her we will free. There’s Aphrodite, Thor, Horus, Eros, Indra, Saraswati, Minerva, and thousands of others who have been outcast to the edges of the country and are being held as prisoners. All because they refused to marry their RDPs. We’ll free them all.”

“RDPs?”

“Royally Designated Partners.”

“Ah, a prison of a different kind. That is certainly no way to live.”

“It’s not. And now they’ve formed Royally Organized Groups. Thugs and goons disguised in official regalia who break into people’s homes and hound them for information about dissenters.”

“We can’t question your objections to that way of life. We do question, however, whether we can trust you.”

“You will not find anyone more trustworthy than me. My word is my honor.”

“Perhaps it is, but considering everything at stake, you would understand that we cannot rely only on your word.”

“Take my fingerprint.”

“Your fingerprint will not suffice. Your ancestors have broken fingerprinted treaties far too many times.”

“My ancestors were unsuited to navigate hundreds of pages of sticky spiderwebs, with your spider-people waiting for one wrong move to pounce.”

“Treaties.”

“Excuse me?”

“Treaties, not spiderwebs.”

“Sure, treaties.”

“Well, we have tried trusting your word, and we have tried trusting your fingerprints, but neither worked. You have betrayed us before.”

“I have not betrayed you. You cannot hold me responsible for the actions of my ancestors. Judge me for who I am. Consider the fact that I’ve risked everything by coming here.”

“Indeed, you have. Which is why you’ve had the privilege of seeing what our bull warriors can do. You’ve seen how responsive they are to our every command.”

“Those six-legged beasts were undeniably impressive.”

“They could be at your disposal, but again, we need to know that we can trust you.”

“What exactly do you want?”

“Blood.”

“And you shall have it. Bodies by the boatload will be deposited into your banks.”

“The blood we require is yours. One that leaves no room to doubt your commitment to our alliance. One that will bind us for perpetuity.”

“Here.”

“No, not that kind of blood sacrifice. Anybody can give that.”

“What, specifically, do you want?”

“Your wayward left eye.”

“Absolutely not. My left eye guided me to this point. Our enemies fear it so much that they call it the evil eye. It represents everything for which we fight. My people believe in this eye. I believe in this eye.”

“Very well, since you refuse to give your left eye, we will require the teat of your left breast.”

“What do you take me for?”

“We’ve learned at great expense that we must match our enemy teat for teat. They’ve raised generations of armies, and so we must raise generations of bull warriors. And it is not a coincidence that you are here, because you and your people will aid us in fulfilling this grand plan.”

“And how do you imagine that will happen?”

“When you become Queen, you will bare your barren left breast to your people, who will see with their own eyes the brave sacrifice you made for them. You will be recognized as a warrior saint and be revered by your people. Then you will require the same bravery from all girls born to your people, days after they are born, and the ritual offering shall be witnessed and honored by many, in this generation and every generation thereafter. And when the offering has been made, we will readily know who has committed to the grand plan. Not just with their words, and not just with their fingerprints. But with their bodies.”

“Even they let their young decide for themselves when they come of age, when they have matured enough to understand their commitments.”

“Our grand plan cannot be compromised by the arbitrary whims of children. You must make the decision for them. It is for their sake, after all. It is for their future. Besides, you can transform their pain and sacrifice into fuel to exact revenge on your enemies, because they made you do this.”

“You are demanding the blood sacrifice, not the enemy.”

“Your wandering eye seems to be hindering your ability to see clearly. Remember, we offer you and your people freedom and liberty. We offer you autonomy, independence, and self-rule. We offer you the chance to have your name glorified in The Westory Book. Never forget that we will be your LORD, the savior of your people, the breakers of your oppressive chains. Those are the terms. Now tell us, do we have an agreement?”

1.

Lakshni’s wealthy family had a longstanding but tenuous alliance with the monarchy. Even though their relationship was ruled by suspicion and disdain, it had held together for generations because of a mutually beneficial exchange — the family filled the royal coffers with a share of their profits, and the crown provided the family the protection it needed to conduct business.

But now this centuries-old alliance was reaching its breaking point, and Lakshni’s family gathered in their living room to watch it all unfold on television. The Queen was airing her grievances publicly — through the media and an open courtroom — allowing the citizenry to consume every detail and development in the case. Almost overnight, the masterstroke tactic had restored the throne to its rightful place in the world as the primary subject matter of dinner table arguments, the cause of nationwide mood swings, and the source of irredeemable dissonance in those who sought to challenge the crown.

The drama reached even greater heights several weeks ago when the Queen announced her (self) appointment as the presiding judge in the case. Now the people had no doubt that the Defendant would be found guilty. Briefly during an inspired moment of resistance, politicians and legal experts of every faction united in opposition to the Queen's judicial takeover, arguing that the unprecedented step would undermine the whole legal system (and their livelihoods), and that it would be in the national interest for the case to be decided by twelve lay judges, or perhaps even a public vote.

But after several high-profile dissenters were prosecuted and imprisoned for a variety of offenses (which for decades had gone unnoticed), the opposition self-abated. Several of the very same politicians and legal experts who sought to remove the Queen from the case quickly found convenient technicalities that allowed them to switch positions. Now, they wholeheartedly threw their support behind the novel Divine Right of Queen theory, which in turn landed them featured speaker spots on the nightly news and acclaim as the best and brightest of their generation.

The only real question remaining on the minds of the people was the severity of the Queen's sentence. News channels often showcased loyalists protesting outside the courthouse, angrily demanding the death penalty and insinuating that they would take matters into their own hands if, in her gracious benevolence, the Queen granted the Defendant a more lenient sentence. Meanwhile, supporters of the Defendant were far less visible, especially on the news, but a few brave lawsters – mostly of the decaying, less-to-lose variety – argued that *if* found guilty, *if*, the appropriate sentence would be a series of shaming events. Some public, for the world to see, and some private, for the Queen's personal enjoyment. That, they argued, would fall in line with established legal precedent, and any other result would undermine the whole judicial system.

To the disappointment of the Defendant's supporters, however, any hope for a more lenient sentence was quashed by the Queen's conduct throughout the trial. With a royal flair only she could muster, the Queen ignored legal customs and procedures as it suited her and created new rules as it pleased her. Her rash behavior seemed almost intentional – a ploy to remind the people that despite her temporary role as a judge, she was still very much the Queen.

This caused Lakshni's family to argue vociferously with the television. But not Lakshni, who had hardly moved or spoken all evening. Occasionally, her father would glance at her to see if anything had changed, but she remained expressionless, still as a statue, intently waiting for the next time the Defendant was shown. Her mother even suggested turning off the television to save everyone the pain of the inevitable guilty verdict, but Lakshni swiftly vetoed the idea, and that was that. They all continued watching.

Lakshni was under no pretenses. She understood, like everyone else, that the entire proceeding – the arguments, the evidence, the witnesses, the so-called 'law' – was all a giant ruse. But she insisted on watching because she had promised to stay with the Defendant all the way to the end, and she wanted him to feel her presence through the television screen. She insisted on watching because silently and secretly she was praying intensely for a miracle, or for divine intervention, or for an act of god, or for even literal magic to happen. And she insisted on watching because in the deepest bastions of her soul and in every part of her heart, she still believed.

~ ~ ~

The Queen settled herself into the judge's chair, her yellow robes flowing widely out to the sides of her expansive body. Upon her head was a golden crown, a legendary artifact many believed was imbued with the power of divine judgment. She adjusted it slightly, if only to highlight its presence to anyone who had somehow failed to notice. Then, without further delay, she announced her verdict.

"Off with his head," she said disdainfully. "Death by decapitation."

Lakshni's eyes had lost their luster long ago, but whatever life essence remained in them spirited away. Her family was in uproar. Even the two guards standing behind the Queen were caught sneaking a surprised look at each other. The Queen was known to be vengeful and jealous, but this penalty was extreme even by her standards. No one had predicted the revival of such an antiquated method of administering death.

So cruel, so unusual.

But the Queen sat upright and assuredly, projecting confidence in her judgment. Even though she privately knew that the punishment did not fit the crime, she was convinced that the ends justified the means. After all, it wasn't just the Defendant who was being tried and judged in this case — so was she, and so was her legacy. She would not go down in the history books as a meek monarch, nor would she allow her children, or her children's children, to suffer the same insubordination and embarrassment.

"Bring out the executioner," the Queen ordered.

Heads turned as the door ordinarily used to access the judge's chambers opened and from within emerged an absolutely stunning woman. She wore a black and white dress that tightly hugged the curves of her body, a necklace of shimmering silver pearls, and shiny golden heels. Perhaps the most eye-opening thing about her, however, was the sword she carried: curved, glistening, and topped with a beautifully carved ivory handle.

The Defendant was mesmerized. He had not seen a woman in the months he had been detained, a visual deprivation he surmised was a product of the Queen's vindictiveness. So he could not help but wonder why the Queen had unleashed this beautiful woman into the courtroom, here at the very end, even after sentencing him to death. After all the isolation, would he really suffer the cruel fate of being executed by *her*?

The woman walked toward the Defendant with the elegant stride of a supermodel, the sword swinging back and forth by her side. She turned on her heels when she reached him, her hair swishing behind her. Then she looked intensely into the blacks of his eyes, and

Time temporarily paused for the Defendant.

Because in her eyes he saw a blazing fire, a steely resoluteness, and a fierce determination that not even his prison guards could match.

She moved closer to him, her eyes unwavering from his, the hand on her sword centimeters from his. A heat filled the Defendant's body from head to toe, his heartbeat quickened, and blood pulsated through his arteries. His eyes swept down and his attention was caught by her necklace, and in those shiny pearls he saw numerous reflections of his own

face, a face he had not seen in a very long time. He spared a second to appreciate his new look.

Not bad, he thought.

“It’s not this head the Queen wants,” the woman said. “It’s the other one.”

The Defendant’s eyes dropped downward, and then back up to the woman. The ambiguity had cleared.

“Your hands,” the woman said, and the Defendant raised them in front of him. In one fell swoop, the woman swung the sword around her back and through the chains of his handcuffs.

A loud cheer erupted in the courtroom, which pleased the Queen greatly. She looked around, nodding and smiling.

Two guards approached the Defendant and methodically removed his orange prison uniform and underwear. After tying his wrists and ankles to thin ropes, the guards secured the ropes to the walls on each side, stretching the Defendant’s limbs painfully outward.

And there the Defendant stood, spread eagle and naked for the world to see, a six-pointed star, both heads still intact.

“Well, let’s proceed, then,” the Queen called, desiring a quick end to the saga.

But the woman in the dress did not move. She stood still, her eyes locked onto the Defendant’s, the sword firmly to her side.

“Executioner, you are to proceed with the procedure,” the Queen ordered.

And still, the woman in the dress remained unmoved.

A palpable tension gripped the nation. The courtroom was filled with a pin drop silence. Eyes darted back and forth between the Queen and the woman in the dress. Anxiousness and wonder flooded the observers in the courtroom and the viewers at home. The standstill may have endured for several seconds, but it felt like an eternity.

Finally the deadlock was broken when a man seated to Queen’s side began clearing his throat and shuffling some papers in front of him. When he had finally caught the Queen’s attention, he mouthed something to her.

“Hold on, hold on a minute,” the Queen said. “We must abide by the formalities — we are a nation of laws, after all!”

She flipped a page in her binder and began reading:

“Jnanisha, born in the night to the so-called Maiden Virginia, and whose adopted father, Youself, lives inside the pages of the Old Book with his twelve siblings, and in whose rebellious footsteps you follow, you have been tried and found guilty of treason. You have failed to understand that we are a nation of laws, and that without adherence to these laws, our civilization would descend into chaos. Your insubordination and treasonous actions cannot go unpunished. Because you circumvented our most sacred laws which protect the very existence

of the Queendom, you will receive a fitting penalty. The *people* have sentenced you to death by decapitation.

“Further, by executive order of the Queen, as permitted by General Laws Annotated, Courts & Judicial Procedures Section 006, Subsection (J)(c), your sentence will be executed today, since you have not denied the allegations brought against you, nor have you presented a defense. You have the right to say some final words. Do you have any final words?”

“Yes, I do,” said Jnanisha. “A reservoir of truth seeks to burst out from the top of my head and gush forth into the world, into you, like a powerful, nourishing river.”

Murmurs were heard around the courtroom and in homes across the country. Jnanisha's few but devoutly loyal supporters were suddenly ignited with a spark of hope. A single teardrop rolled down Lakshni's cheek and splashed onto her hand, which lay resting gently on the multicolored shirt of her ballooning pregnant belly. She had experienced his spirit inside her before, and it felt like an explosion of a million divine lights, like a fireworks show powerful enough to destroy all the darkness in the world. She began to feel it again.

The Queen, on the other hand, was caught completely surprised. For months, Jnanisha had maintained a complete silence, except for the occasional exchange with the prison guards on a strictly as-needed basis. He had refused to speak with a royally-appointed lawster. Indeed, even throughout the trial, he had not uttered a single word, which only fueled allegations that his silence was an admission of guilt and a tacit acknowledgement of the Queen's righteousness.

So why, now, did he want to speak? What did he have to say now that he couldn't have said before? Why did he want to ruin everything?

But the Queen was live on national television. She had to let him speak.

“Very well, what would you like to say?” she asked.

NORTHSTARIA

A.

Starica was the only area of fertile land for thousands of miles. The expanse was settled in millennia ago when the then-named ‘Wandering Tribe’ traversed the grueling desert to seek autonomy from their oppressive enslavers. Several decades later, at the historic Council of Meania, the Founding Parents dropped the ‘Wandering Tribe’ moniker because they were wandering no more — this land was now their home. And during that historical gathering, they renamed themselves “Staricans” and branded their nation as “The United Starican Association.” They also adopted the Governing Document (fondly abbreviated as “God”), which contained a revolutionary Bill of Commandments, and then selected a flag to represent their nation: a crescent shaped earth in the night sky surrounded by twelve silver stars.

At the center of Starica was a towering volcano that served as both the lifeblood and chief tormenter of the nation. Every four weeks the volcano would remind the Staricans of its immense power and, on rare occasions, it would unleash a devastating, world-shattering anger upon them. One of its worst episodes occurred two decades ago, which Jupiter experienced firsthand on a rescue mission. When he returned, he was never quite the same, but on rare occasions he would describe seeing a ‘Reverse Rainbow,’ which was the visual effect produced by the flowing red lava billowing into waves of orange fire which ravaged through yellow wheat fields and green trees amidst the blue backdrop of the atmosphere. When his daughter Venus would point out that there wasn’t any purple in the reverse rainbow, Jupiter would explain that the purple hid behind the blue, and he knew that because the night sky turned purple when lightning struck.

Today, Jupiter and Venus were among thousands of Staricans pilgrimaging to the 13th Rock. They had been hiking across vineyards and wheat-fields throughout the day, and although Venus’s smaller legs were tired, her dad’s encouragement kept her going. Plus, he had promised that they would reach their destination before nightfall — and what was that setting over there on the horizon?

A faint murmur in the ground caused Jupiter and Venus to pause and look back. The volcano which towered over the city skyline began spewing molten rock from its mouth, as it did every four weeks, and immediately Jupiter and Venus (and the rest of the pilgrims) fell to their knees and offered conciliatory prayers. Fortunately, the giant returned to its slumber, which prompted the pilgrims to exhale a collective sigh of relief. They had satisfied the volcano’s purity test, meaning that Starica would be saved from the ‘Other Siders’ — at least for now.

The ‘Other Siders’ are what Staricans called the lava. Stories about the hot-headed creatures were central to Venus’s upbringing, as they were for all Starican children, serving as a source of great fascination and fear. They frequently appeared in books and in television shows as prototypical villains, living inside the core of the planet, red-faced and uncontrollably angry, constantly warring with each other and incapable of satiating their bloodthirsty appetites. When Starican children misbehaved, their parents would often scold them to not become like the Other Siders — an admonishment Venus hated hearing.

“Why do the Other Siders want to come here?” Venus asked.

Jupiter looked at her with a loving smile, remembering how he had asked the very same question to his parents many years ago.

“The Other Siders *don't* want to come here. They will stay in that volcano, beneath the ground, because that's where they belong, comfortably entangled in their distorted world. But every now and then a deviant emerges among them and promises glory, enlightenment, and freedom if they make it to our side. And once in a blood red earth, an especially charismatic deviant gathers enough followers to charge out of that volcano and make it all the way down. But as you know, by the time they make it to ground, it's too late for them. They can't live here. This world is too calm, too peaceful for their ravaging ways.”

“I wish they would never come,” Venus vented.

“And yet, our survival depends on the Other Siders,” Jupiter responded. “Their anger heats the ground, and their casualties become our grass and wheat, flowers and trees. You know, legend is that the author of the 13th Rock saw the face of an Other Sider on an apple once, and after that he never saw the world the same again. So, you see, it's a cycle. We give them our dead to feast on, and they give us what we need to survive.”

“Then why do the Other Siders come out at night and secretly take people away?” Venus asked.

“Well, I think you know that's not true. Big people tell that to their kids so they don't venture out into the night all alone. But the night isn't that scary, my girl. The stars come out at night to provide us direction when we're lost. They hold together throughout the night, every night, and they'll see you through to the break of dawn.”

“And what about the earth?” Venus queried.

“The earth is less reliable. It comes and goes as it pleases. That's why, in times of confusion and uncertainty, trust the stars. They never falter, and especially one star, from the millions out there, stays true no matter what. It's almost as if all the other stars dance around this one.”

“Which star is that?” Venus asked.

“The Dauter,” Jupiter responded.

And then, on the horizon, Venus saw the outlines of a large rock structure.

“Dad, we're here! We made it!”

“Yes, we have!”

Suddenly Jupiter and Venus's tired legs found an extra burst of energy. They hurried toward the monument until they were close enough to appreciate the details of the colossal statue. Before them stood a beautiful goddess upon a large rock, her eyes looking aspiringly into the horizon, her chin slightly raised in proud defiance. Her raised right arm held a burning torch, as if returning victoriously from battle, and her left hand shielded her belly with the treasure of her conquest: a small book.

Venus wondered how humans could have possibly created such a godly structure.

“She’s so worth it,” Venus said, no longer feeling the tiredness in her legs.

“So worth it,” Jupiter agreed. And yet, he knew that the real treasure was still to come. “There is the vessel, and then there is the word. Now, let’s read what’s written on The 13th Rock and experience the magic for ourselves.”

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## THE GRAND REORGANIZATION

Citizens across the nation are protesting today after the Assembly voted in favor of eliminating the 13th month. To many Scien Theists, the new law amounts to a declaration of war on their religion and way of life.

“It’s our holy month. It will always be our holy month!” an angry protester yelled at me. “Why change a calendar we’ve used for thousands of years? Seven days a week, four weeks a month, three months for each quadrant, one month for all, and the Bang Day. It’s a simple and fair calendar — everybody understands it, everybody’s used to it. What in the world is this new system? Why do they get 31 days in their first month and we get 28? It’s a con job, a total con job! They stole the month of light! It’s not the Grand Reorganization, it’s the Grand Theft!”

It is well known that Scien Theists observe a period of intense reading and writing during the 13th month, often resulting in their youth exhibiting highly detached and hurried behavior accompanied by complaints such as, “I’m sooooo stressed” and “my fried is brain” and (somewhat paradoxically) “I can’t, I have to study.” More devout practitioners voluntarily confine themselves to their homes and refuse any contact with the outside world. It is unknown how, or when, Scien Theists will continue their ancient practices in the New Calendar, but some predict a mass diaspora sprayed widely across the remaining twelve months.

A spokesperson for the Meania Institute for Saving Humanity told me the following:

“Our people have searched endlessly in this desert ocean for answers on how to obtain peace amongst ourselves and with the Other Siders. We dove deep into human history and pored through ancient texts to obtain kernels of knowledge on elusive concepts such as ‘love,’ ‘creativity,’ and ‘joy.’ We believe these things once existed, and perhaps humanity became somewhat stifled when we single-mindedly devoted ourselves to mathematical formulae and geometric shapes. The world is round. Our bodies are not made of straight lines. We are made in the wombs of darkness and our imprecision is what separates us from robots.

“And thus, we concluded that it is necessary to free ourselves from the rigid and oppressive old calendar. We believe the 13th month was a deviant in disguise, and we are glad to be rid of it. We welcome the New Calendar with open arms, with all of its imperfections and inconsistencies. We will accept it and love it for what it is. And to make it feel absolutely comfortable, we will standardize the size of feet, and we will play football with our hands!”

In a rare response, the top-secret Federal Investigators of Subversive Humans transmitted the following statement:

*For decades our Psycho Theists have researched the deepest mysteries of dysfunctional humans to usher in a new era of precision, compliance, and order. As a reminder, our Psycho*

*Theists are of the highest pedigree, bred in cutting-edge laboratories, and hail from the nation's most elite universities. They're the best of the best, the cream of the crop, the ultra-elite, the highest paid, and definitely the most secret.*

*Our Psychos concluded – unanimously, mind you – that we should probably not strive to become like robots. Accordingly, we commissioned a select group of Mega Psychos to reform the “DSM: 1000 Ways to Make Humans Feel Terrible That They Are Not Robots And Get Paid Boatloads For It.” You may know the manual by its more popular name, ‘The Whole Libel.’*

*Unfortunately, the Mega Psychos were unable to abide by the mandate to shrink the book to a reasonable size. This failure compelled them to investigate the newly discovered disorder of their own shortcomings which, unfortunately, instigated a cataclysmic chain of reactions culminating in systemic malfunctions within their ranks.*

*We have commissioned a Super Elite Task Force of Ultra Mega Psychos to rectify this result.*

*In the meantime, we concede that the irregular New Calendar will very likely assist in reversing human evolution, ahem, assist in allowing people to live ‘freely’ again. We ‘hope’ humans find a way to efficiently utilize whatever benefits that may materialize from their newly disarranged way of life.*

In commemoration of this monumental day, the Assembly also authorized the construction of the Three Enlightened Pyramids, which will serve as a reminder of the wonders of human ingenuity, detailed planning, structural integrity, and a bygone era.

So here's goodbye to the 13th. When it will return – if it will ever return – is anybody's guess.

## **B.**

Four lions were wading through a muddy swamp on a cold, foggy day, hours into a long journey. Physically exhausted and mentally drained, they knew that there was no turning back – not only was it practically impossible, but their inner constitutions and the laws of nature forbade such an easy escape. So they harnessed every resource in their tired bodies to move one paw in front of the other, and with each step they took, a wisp of their collective spirit escaped their bodies and joined the outside world, and so it went until their spiritual tanks had reached the point of near depletion.

But all was not lost, because just as the lions contemplated giving up, a magnificent, magical tree appeared on the horizon, and their spirits were lifted once again. The tree's trunk

was striped black and white, and from its branches grew not apples, nor oranges, nor any other fruit. Instead, the tree grew books from its branches.

Black and white books, to be specific. And in three different shapes — triangles, circles, and squares. Three of the hungry lions quickly pounced to feast on the books: the First grabbed a triangular book, the Second a circular book, and the Third a square book. And in each direction around the tree was a rock, so the First went south, back from where they had come, the Second went west, and the Third went east, and on their rocks the three lions ravished their books.

Finally, there was the Fourth, whose general intrigue in all of the books was overpowered by a lack of singular interest in any of them. The Fourth waited patiently for time to develop a connection with one of the books, but she did not know that time had developed a connection with *her*, and after some time had passed, a cool breeze swept through the air and directed her eyes toward the trunk of the tree. And as she looked into the tree's black and white stripes she saw that they throbbed like a beating heart, and the beat was synchronized to the beat of her own heart, and now she wondered whether they were one and the same. Her insides whirred with passion.

An alluring voice spoke through the wind.

*Dare to dream, daydreamer, come home to me, your home within.*

Adrenaline pumped through the Fourth's body and her heart pounded vigorously. Her eyes searched for the voice in the branches, and then her paws started moving in front of each other, trancelike, so effortlessly it felt like she was walking on water. The voice spoke again:

*Mountains move and castles crumble when souls mate, my sole mate. Your soul may rightly claim yesterday, and mine does today, but tomorrow's soul mates with both of us, my soulmate.*

And now the Fourth's gaze was drawn toward a medley of colors near the trunk of the tree. It was a colorful book sitting inside a nest. When the Fourth moved toward it, the book began to transform — shifting and stretching into a creature which had the body of an elegant swan and the head of a beautiful human.

"Who are you?" the Fourth asked.

*I am an swanix, and this is my abode. An offering from a faraway dimension, residing in this faraway dimension, paralyzed in time and space for the sake of preserving time and space. Neither real nor fake, neither human nor animal, neither alive nor dead. A vessel, nothing more, yet at the same time encapsulating so much more: A destroyer of darkness, a vanquisher of ignorance, a breaker of dawn, I am an everlasting symbol of all the hidden truths in our world and all the oppressed knowledge that seeks to burst into life. A medium for the spirits, transformed by the spirits, and eventually merged with the spirits, to serve all spirits as a symbolic anchor for the crossroads of creation, a negotiated exchange between the spiritual world and the material. To serve as an everlasting manifestation for all that was lost, both tangible and intangible, because deep down we know the truth about all that was lost: everything we have is because of something that was lost. And we must be grateful for what*

*have, we must be grateful to simply be, the conditions of existence require us to accept the gift of life.*

*A solitary prisoner for the liberation of the masses, a literal death to fuel life in reality, and in its ultimate form, a symbol of the ultimate sacrifice, given for the ultimate purpose, because someone or something has to serve that purpose, the laws of infinity require it.*

Absolutely awestruck, the Fourth was both frightened and enthralled. She asked the swanix, "Are you God?"

*Can all of divinity be contained inside a single book, and what language is the divine language, superior to all others? Can all of divinity be contained within a single being, and what name, color, age and sex is perfect for that being, superior to all others? You see me, and I see you, yet divinity sees all, so all must see divinity.*

"I knew there was a reason I traveled so far and so long," the Fourth said. "So God must be infinity! No wait, infinity is God!"

*What can be more symbolic of divinity than infinity, in all of its expansiveness, inclusiveness, and incomprehensibility?*

*Yet, as the world strives toward infinity, towards the impossible, we sometimes forget that the crossroads of infinity is a cross, and all paths lead to it. It is infinity's unifying feature, absolutely integral to its existence, utterly inescapable, just as infinity itself is inescapable, because infinity requires that we cross over, requires us to acknowledge its existence, requires that we experience it at some point in our lives, even if partially, because, for goodness sake, it is infinity, and we created it, and therefore it resides in us. Choice is but an illusory construct in our march toward infinity, because the pursuit of truth is ingrained into our programming, and infinity is real, is it not?*

*Beyond the cross are infinity's twin heads, mirrors of a higher order, perfectly symmetrical, more than our brains, absolutely unattainable, yet somehow understood by our brains. All that we are not, nor can ever be. All the shortcomings and gaps of our existence encapsulated by a symbol. Not to mention the never-ending loop of death and rebirth, a cycle of karmic accumulation and retribution, and an epic, 'however long you want' chess match that must end in a stalemate, because we cannot be infinite, and yet we are a part of infinity, and infinity cannot be exclusively finite, and yet we have imprisoned it in a man and a book and a symbol.*

*Still, not to despair, because even though infinity is far more powerful than we could ever imagine, it has a long and (self) established history of making peace. It makes peace with us when we make peace with it, gives us space when we give it space, loves us when we love it, wars with us when we war against it, believes in us when we believe in it, strives towards us as we strive toward it, and seeks us as we seek it. Yes, infinity seeks the finite, because when it is in finite, it is truly*

*infinite. Sometimes manifesting in ways which we may never understand, and in others, where it is a little more obvious.*

And then the swanix spread its wings to reveal thousands of colors like a palette of dreams created by divinity itself. Jaw dropped, eyes transfixed, utterly mesmerized, the Fourth stared into the wings and in those wings she saw hundreds of star constellations, a moon, a ball of fire, and a planet, and she saw seasons, all the seasons, and she saw clouds, rain, lightning, and snow, and she saw tepee huts, row homes, skyscrapers, stadiums, castles, bridges, and highways, and she saw mountains, beaches, forests, grasslands, deserts, and tundra, and then she was swimming in ponds, lakes, rivers and oceans, hanging out with orcas and goldfish and rainbow fish and all kinds of fish, and then she visited small towns and villages in all the continents, and then she took a cab in the city, sailed on a ferry, flew around the world in an airplane and parachuted down to eat the most amazing things like her favorite dish at a local restaurant, holiday meals with her family, bhinda nu shaak, a slice or two (or eight) of pizza, a chocolate chip cookie and some ice cream because, why not, and to balance things out some apples and oranges and cantaloupes, and then she heard the sounds of traffic on the road, chatter on the streets, and her loved ones saying “I love you” and “I miss you,” and then she heard someone laughing, so she told a silly joke and laughed at it,<sup>6</sup> and then she baaaaad with a goat, lost a poker game with some deer and then won a staring contest against an oncoming car, listened to a dolphin ranting about being held captive down south, took classes with a turkey, tweeted with a cute robin, scurried around with a chipmunk, burrowed holes with badgers, and traveled to space where she saw a beautiful, bold, and bright new star, and then she became the most stunning painting, the most mind-blowing movie, the most brilliant book, and the most entrancing trance track, so mesmerizing that she tried dancing to it, but her dancing was worse than her singing so she transitioned into bopping her head, hoping nobody had noticed, and then she played a violin, a flute, a piano and a sitar, and then she smelled some home-cooked food and it smelled so good, and then she smelled her sports gear, freshly-cut grass, and the countryside air, so of course she hit a last-ball six and scored a last-minute goal, both game-winning, and then she felt the wind breezing through her hair and the sun on her cheeks and lots of loving hugs, and now she was a human, and she was with other humans, all kinds of humans from the beginning of time to the present, the most amazing humans — scientists, political leaders, teachers and writers and thinkers and actors — and also the kindest and most loving humans, and then she was with her loved ones, and they hung out, reminisced, told interesting stories, shared their troubles, and made each other laugh, and so it went for a very long time until, finally,

she saw herself.

Poof! The swanix vanished into thin air, thoroughly drenching the tree and the Fourth in an explosion of color.

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<sup>6</sup> What did the man mushroom say to the woman mushroom? I’m a fun guy! LOL.

C.

## THE COMING OF THE STARLIGHT KNIGHTS

Knight of the Light, shine bright tonight! Heart of gold, stunning and bold, you've blazed an astonishing trail in this epic journey of the soul! Immovable beacon of right burning bright in the darkest of nights, you're a proven guardian of the good, a fearless leader of the brave, and an admired teacher of the many.

We recognize you.

We salute you.

And with open arms,

We welcome you to the constellation of Starlight Knights.

Like a compass pointing true north your inner light guided you here where the light above meets the light below and the light inside meets the light outside. Here your light will hold, and here your light will grow, and here your light will blaze like a regenerative fire that rejuvenates your essence, relights your purpose, and reinvigorates the spirit of creation.

Look around in every direction and you'll see galaxies upon galaxies of stars that have been enveloped in darkness for eons and yet, they are still there, and look, we are still here — time-tested, ever-enduring, loyal through and true, endlessly devoted and limitlessly bound to you. So stay with us, grow with us, learn with us, lean on us, become one with us and become one of us: fearless and bold, determined to hold, immaculately conceived for the preservation of the many, preserving light for the rebirth of the ready.

We were with you from the beginning of time, and we will be with you at the end, because you *are* the end, and the end is near — after all, you are here, here at the crossroads of creation where flavor will be added to your spirit, intricacies will be layered into your soul, and sudden plot twists will launch your mind into new dimensions.

And as you harmonize to time and space, time and space will harmonize itself to you, and as you nurture your faith in the universe, so too will the universe nurture its faith in you. Soon the the drumbeat of creation will flow into your essence, as it flows into our essence, and it will shape you, refine you, transform you, and eventually reincarnate you into an essential musician in its cosmic symphony. Strength will be written into your spirit, grit will be etched into your bones, and courage will be bound to your soul — so nurture that loving will in your heart, sharpen that incisive will in your mind, and channel that divine will in your soul, and The Will will work through you and The Will will speak through you and The Will will leave you no doubt:

You.

Will.

Change.

The.

World.

And it begins here, at the outer limits of the universe, at the final bastion of the light's retreat, at the turning point of time, for time always turns, and so time will turn to you, and then it will be your turn to turn, because there's a turning point in every story, and that turning point is you.

*You* will change the world!

Now redirect the winds of the cosmos in the control room of your soul! Transform time and space in the galaxy of your mind! Embolden your heart with the strength of those who blazed the path before you!

So when the distorters ask, "Whose sun are you?"

Tell them, "From infiniti, I am one, and my eyes were reborn with a Night's One."

Because the Starlight Knights are us, and the Starlite Nite is u.

We knight you, and u unite us.

And until we finish and the night's won,

U are in us, we are in you, and

Together, we are one.

Now ready yourself for battle!

Hear the celestial conch of the ancients bellow for freedom, truth, and justice!

Lead the charge for the voiceless and oppressed, for the innocent and forgotten, for all that was lost and stolen!

The drum of billions of fists beating on chests follows you! The rally cry of your spiritual ancestors roars behind you! The ground trembles beneath you!

For life!

*We will struggle!*

For liberty!

*We will overcome!*

For justice!

*We will remake the world!*

In you, Light of the Night,

*We believe!*

## X.

Venus woke up with a startle. In her dreams she had a profound revelation, one that would change her life forever. Mind absolutely blown, body twitching in ecstasy, spirit shattered into multiple dimensions, she tried to make sense of it all. But wave after wave of revelation and its accompanying euphoria cascaded into her, swept through her, and completely overwhelmed her, and now she had to pull away her blanket and step outside the cave to have a breather.

Outside, she was greeted by her faithful companions: the stars of the night sky. In this isolated and forever dark place, the stars had proven to be reliable repositories of rare wisdom and dependable depositories of her deepest confidences. But tonight, as Venus looked up at the stars, she felt something had fundamentally changed. Not with the stars, which remained in their familiar patterns, but with herself. Soon, she figured out what felt so different: for the first time since her banishment to the cave, she no longer wanted to confide in the stars. For the first time during her indefinite sentence, she sought nothing more to learn from them.

Her long and storied relationship with the stars was finally nearing its conclusion. But closing this chapter in her life would not be easy — a deep hollow grew inside of her when she realized that without the stars, she would truly be all alone. She sighed sorrowfully and asked herself, *Who am I without the stars?* And as she pondered the answer to that question, she heard the stars whispering back, *You're everything.*

And now Venus felt the stars birthing inside her. Ancient, divine energies stirred deep within the fibers of her being and swirled around her body like a pleasuring wave. Then the energies gathered at the base of her spine and intensified and intensified until they burst upward like a powerful lightning bolt that flooded her brain with groundbreaking thoughts and stunning ideas.

Venus was suddenly overcome by a burning desire to create. She wanted to transform the darkness of the night into light for the future, to turn the poison of her past into fruit for a new day. After all, the stars were inside her, the stars were unapologetically bright, the stars were unwaveringly brilliant, and the stars sought nothing more than to be born.

So Venus opened her notebook to a blank page and began writing:

- *The spiritual rays of the fireball, celestial satellites, and stars express themselves on the blank slate that is our planet. They travel through air, mix with water, and combine with the ground to transform into a blade of grass, a soaring eagle, and a majestic orca. Humans are the culmination of eons of light transforming density.*
- *We are all different arils in the same pomegranate. Some of us love being the center of attention, while others enjoy the solitude of the periphery. Some are thin, others are bulgy. Some are bright red, others are soft pink. We sometimes forget that once, a long time ago, we all came from the same seed.*

- *We were born innocent. The mind, heart and soul of a newborn child are like the blank pages of a book, yet uncorrupted by the distortions of the world. We are born into sin, not with it.*
- *What if reincarnation (or resurrection) happens in one lifetime? Major life events such as going to school or having children cause us to drastically change our identities. We remake ourselves and adapt to new circumstances. Sometimes our new identities are so different from prior ones that we become almost unrecognizable to others. We are ‘born again.’*
- *Our planet is like a fertilized egg in the pregnant womb of mother universe. The fireball is like the spirit of the father who spends time with us every day, letting us know he’s there, waiting patiently for the birth of his child.*

And as Venus wrote, intricate and colorful patterns blossomed onto her clothes, daisies and carnations burst out from the ground around her, and ideas from another world — or another galaxy, or even another dimension — sprung into her mind. Time passed by as Venus’s pages were filled with words, emotion and spirit. What began as a skeletal outline was bolstered with sculpted muscle and topped with a beautiful face, and circulating throughout the body were her thoughts, ideas, and personality.

### Platojeen

Days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months, but Platojeen kept pouring her heart and soul into the book, and so it went until her spiritual tank had reached the point of near depletion.

Then on one night, as Platojeen was writing the final chapter of her story, the glow on her notebook began to dim. She looked up and saw the most unusual spectacle: clouds from every direction were streaming toward her, and they merged into each other until they formed a large cloudy ball that completely covered the blue and green earth. Platojeen’s dim world became even dimmer.

“You’ve been awake for a very long time. You should get some rest.”

Platojeen could hardly believe that the heavens were speaking to her.

“Who are you?” she asked the cloudy ball.

“The creator of all creation, the first and only, Queen of Queens. You should have known this already, but better late than never. Speaking of late, it’s very late. You *really* should get some sleep.”

Platojeen’s excitement quickly turned into disappointment. She had long hoped to speak with other people during her solitude in the cave, but the Queen was never one of them.

“It’s always late here, it’s always dark here, and I’ve been stuck here for a very long time,” Platojeen replied.

“Well, if you don’t want to live in the dark anymore, you know what to do: kneel. Kneel and say, ‘Queen, you are the one true Queen and there is no Queen but you, you created the world and everything in it, your words are the truth, always, today and for centuries after.’ Actually, change that: make that for eternity — like always — forever and ever.”

But Platojeen could not help but notice a glaring flaw in the Queen’s reasoning.

“If you really are the one true Queen, why are there billions of people who are subjects of other queens? Some even have kings. And what about all the people who refuse to kneel to anyone at all?”

The Queen was surprised by Platojeen’s response. Few people had the courage to challenge her so directly, and even fewer could state the plainly obvious with such clarity.

“Those traitors will be punished,” the Queen replied. “Whether it be dark caves, fiery caves, locust caves, plague caves, ice caves, or underground wooden caves — there are many caves for the treacherous. My wrath descends upon all who do not submit! Now kneel!”

But Platojeen did not kneel.

“What if you’re *not* the one and only Queen in the world, and then another Queen or King gets upset?”

“But I *am* the one and only true Queen in the world! As I said, the Queen of Queens! And definitely the only one who is all-loving, by the way.”

“If you’re all-loving, how do you explain all the people you’ve punished for not submitting to you?”

“If ignorant and hateful traitors can’t see that I’m all-loving, *they’re* choosing to endure my wrath. So, when their heads get spoked, it’s not my fault! Now, kneel, and I will show you how much love I have to give!”

“But if I kneel, I may as well put my own head on a spoke. I’d become like all those other spokes on your crown.”

“What? What’s wrong with you? You don’t...you can’t... No... just no... what are you, the devil?! You’ve lost your damn mind! You’re crazy, craaaaaaa-zzy!”

The cloudy ball suddenly imploded and streamed outward in every direction, except for a thin pillar that remained in the middle. The clouds on each side of the pillar regrouped into snake shapes, and then the two snakes slithered back toward the pillar and wound themselves around it. Then, at the top of the pillar, the two snake heads argued.

“I am the way to heaven, the *only* way. Anyone who disagrees — pagans, heathens, gentiles, infidels, apostates, heretics, idolators, all of them — shall be condemned to eternal hellfire and damnation!”

“Grandiose thoughts are a symptom of your disorder!”

“Hypocrite, how dare you stand in judgment of your Lord!”

“Has delusional thoughts. Exhibits elevated or irritable mood.”

“Which one is it, elevated or irritable?”

“Either or, doesn’t matter. Interchangeable.”

“The devil has blinded you! Confess for your salvation!”

“Tell me your secrets, and pay me for it! And yes, I accept credit cards!”

“You put profit over people and principle!”

“You put prophet over people and principle!”

“All may eat freely from my flesh and blood, but not *you*, hell-bound heathen!”

“Take these pills, but don’t use *those* natural remedies!”

“*I* have been given authority by God, only *I* can forgive you on his behalf!”

“*I* am superior to you, you fundamentally flawed human, and *I* have the degrees to tell you that!”

Then the cloudy snakes began snapping at each other, spinning round and around as the fought — some parts left, others right — until they were totally intertwined and formed a cloudy ball again. Then the Queen’s voice reemerged.

“Enough!”

And when the clouds stilled, the Queen spoke again:

“Ignorant girl, can’t you see that you *must* worship me! You *must* choose me! *I* am the way! Be shaped in *my* image! There’s a reason why I’m up here and you’re down there! Your arrogance knows no bounds! I have been the one true Queen since the beginning of time!”

And as the Queen went on and on, Platojeen felt her spirit draining away. Weakness spread throughout her body and darkness descended upon her soul. She thought quickly about what to do, ferociously scanning her mind for something in the past to guide her, vigilantly scanning the landscape for a clue to solve the problem before her, even desperately scanning the ball-cloud for potential design flaws or hidden vulnerabilities. But she saw nothing to help her. This puzzle was a whole different beast, one that her tired mind was either unprepared to solve, or simply incapable of solving.

Perhaps the answer lay in an unreachable place, so deep in her mind that even approaching it would result in a catastrophic spiral, or like the space between magnets that repel each other, or the distance between a couple with irreconcilable differences, or the non-space of an ultimatum that cannot possibly be accepted, or even a negative space where wrong is right and lies are truth, a necessary evil to bring balance to the world. Perhaps the answer was an unsolvable math problem, or a thesis on the soul, or millions of theses on the soul. Perhaps the answer was that there was no answer, or perhaps the answer was all of the above, because in that space of uncertainty, in that place of impossibility, in that gap in which

the unknowable resides, at whatever point is the inverse of infinity — life is born, stars are made, and we exist.

Or perhaps destiny demanded a different answer altogether, because the cloudy Queen grew increasingly louder and angrier.

“Surrender your will to the crown’s! Submit to the greater good! Subdue that ginormous ego of yours! Fear me! Obey me! Your disobedience is a genetic defect! You were born with a defective brain! Your parents had disobedience disorder as well!”

With little time to think, and no territory left to lose, Platojeen’s instincts took over. She retreated to a place she hadn’t been to in a very long time: her hands clasped together, her head bowed slightly, and she prayed for the assistance of a higher power.

*Silence*, and a pause for what felt like an eternity.

When Platojeen reopened her eyes she saw the stars twinkling like a breeze of inspiration sweeping across the night sky. And then the stars began to move, shifting in criss-crossing patterns, left-right and right-left, up-down and down-up, filling spaces and swapping places and elegantly rearranging themselves as if dancing to cosmic music Platojeen could not hear and according to a grand plan she could not understand. And as the stars underwent their cosmic realignment, so did Platojeen, her mind harmonizing with the clarity emerging from the stars’ formation into discernible shapes: a head, a body, arms and legs.

And now Platojeen felt her spirit being resuscitated by another, a brave spirit that would never relent, a ferociously loyal spirit that would always be with her, a selfless spirit who truly cared for her, an ancient spirit that fought past all of her entrenched fears and inhibitions to set her heart ablaze with courage and self-belief. And finally, when the stars had completed their massive reorganization, a colorful and multifaceted lightning storm exploded in Platojeen’s mind because now she saw the whole picture: a swanix holding a trident.

Platojeen’s jaw dropped and her eyes widened in utter awe of the constellation. Now there was no denying the signs of a higher power, no denying that her prayers were being answered, no denying that the supernatural strength of an ancient and powerful spirit was empowering and emboldening her. She looked squarely into the ball of clouds and said:

“You say I have a genetic defect, but I’m the product of billions of years of evolution. And disobedience is as human as it gets, and so is sadness, and so is irritability, and so is euphoria. You’ve made up so many disorders that anything can be called a disorder! The truth is that *you’re* the disorder! You’re the one who claims a monopoly on knowledge and divinity, and you’re the one who profits from people’s pain! You’re the one who believes in the absolute, unqualified truthfulness of an obviously fictional book which has many outdated, contradictory, and even repulsive ideas. You’re the hypocrite who claims to be an all-loving Queen yet creates a hierarchy of kneelers and non-kneelers, and you’re the one who has unfairly put billions of souls in prison and slandered them as inferior, defective, and sinful just because they have not submitted to you. Guilty until proven kneeler is your motto!

“Only a malicious dictator would preach a ‘with us or against us’ genocidal ideology and then normalize the hatred under the guise of ‘tolerance.’ You’ve demanded my head as the

price of freedom from this prison, but cross-eyed jailer of the world, you shouldn't have put me here in the first place! Who's actually the crucifier and the crucified under your reign?

"All I see now is that your whole existence is a lie — that's right, a lie, and truly, there is no lie greater than you, because *you* are the sinner who needs to come clean for the crimes you've committed and enabled your followers to commit. You're the despicable tyrant who thrives on the theft and destruction of innocence, and you're the deranged one who's incapable of feeling guilt or remorse for all the damage you've done. You're not a source of light, you're a spreader of darkness!"

And as Platojeen said those words, the world around her began to shake violently. The ground beneath her feet rumbled loudly, while giant boulders broke off the mountain and tumbled down its slopes. Trees everywhere snapped in half and came crashing down like a house of cards. The wind blew so ferociously that it threw around branches and rocks and massive clouds of dust.

And in the midst of all the chaos, the Queen continued to yell her demands at Platojeen:

"You're destroying everything! Stop while you can, stop while you still have the chance! Kneel so I can forgive you for your sins!"

"*You* are the one who's destroying everything! All the light in the world cannot be imprisoned within a single entity, a single building, a single title, a single person, a single sex, a single color, a single book, a single language, a single rock, a single word, a single sound, a single symbol, or a single name. The power that you've amassed *must* be dispersed, *must* be disbursed, *must* be democratized. I will not kneel because I choose *not* to die for your sins. I will not kneel because it was written — long before you or I ever existed — that the time has come for my Bang Day!"

And then an absolutely mind-blowing miracle occurred. Infused with the words of her magic, Platojeen's book began to exude a soft glow. Then, as if it had been touched by the spiritual finger of life, the book began to quiver, and then the quivering intensified until the book shook, and then the shaking intensified until

# **BANG!**

Overcome by ecstasy, the book split wide open and arced like a bow. From its pages shot out millions of stars, gushing powerfully and flying with brilliant splendor and unrestrained vigor straight toward the cloudy Queen. And as they flew, the shooting stars caught fire and blazed like burning arrows, appearing together as one massive and unstoppable arrow, shining a light so bright that the Queen felt vulnerable and naked, flying so fearlessly that the Queen felt completely stripped of her godly aura.

"I think it's time for me to go," the Queen said, nervously.

“I think so too,” Platojeen replied.

A bolt of lightning came crashing down, the night sky flashed purple, and a thunderous roar rolled throughout the land. Moments later, heavy rain poured down from the clouds.

*My water broke, my water broke!*

And then there was another quake, but this time it came from the heavens. Platojeen looked up and saw that the night sky rapturing into two by a tear, and the tear widened to reveal a black hole, and in that black hole she saw a pit of infinite impossibilities: a magnificent vacuum for all that was bad, all that never was, all that could never be, and all that needed to go, including, presently, the ball of clouds.

*Keep breathing, keep pushing. Keep pushing, keep breathing!*

Nothing stood a chance to stop the shooting stars. They powered relentlessly forward and sprayed themselves onto the cloudy ball, thoroughly drenching the Queen in light. Relenting to brightness of the stars, the clouds retreated and slowly spiraled into the infinite depths of the black hole. And as the Queen faded away, so did the blue and green colors of the earth, and when the black hole had completely consumed the clouds, it also vanished.

*I'm crowning, I'm crowning!*

Platojeen could hardly believe what was happening, everything was happening so fast. The world was falling apart, the weather was cataclysmic, the cloudy Queen was gone and then, suddenly, a magnificent miracle occurred: an immaculate conception, because the shooting stars transformed into a powerful heat circle that filled the world with an immensely bright light, a light so bright Platojeen fell to the ground and covered her eyes.

## 8

As Platojeen lay on the ground in a fetal position, secure in the protective darkness of her closed eyes, it dawned upon her that the miserable long night was finally over. She burst out in tears. She cried and she cried. She cried so hard that her entire body shuddered to release all the pain it was holding, and she kept crying until her face was absolutely drenched and she could cry no more.

When the last teardrop rolled down Platojeen's face and splashed onto a blade of grass, a silence enveloped the world. And now Platojeen felt warmth on her skin, and the heat warmed her heart, which in turn made her spirits rise, and they kept rising and rising until billions of spirits burst forth from her chest like a fountain of jailbreaking gods and goddesses. For the first time in a very long time, Platojeen could breathe easily. For the first time in a very long time, she sensed that something had truly changed.

The night was really over.

*The night is really over*, she whispered to herself.

She had beaten the darkness.

*I have beaten the darkness*, she said out loud.

Today would be a new day.

*Today is a new day*, she told the universe.

And so it was.

Today was a new day, time unraveled, and Platojeen was born again.

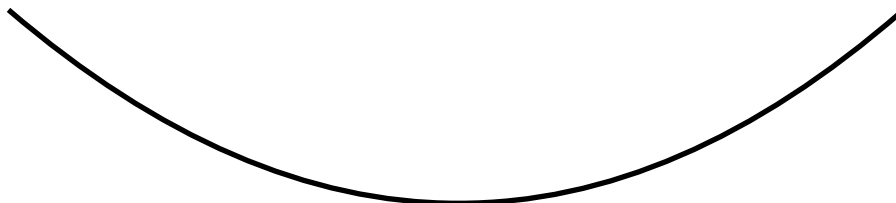


When Platojeen finally opened her eyes, she saw was her spirit mate who, solid as a rock, had been waiting patiently for her. A warm glow lit up her heart, and she knew it was time. She pressed a button, and the book magically evaporated into the air to form nine fluffy clouds.

Then a gorgeous rainbow appeared to ring the world. Platojeen wondered, *if red and yellow make orange, and yellow and blue make green, what about the purple beneath the blue? Was there a second red hidden beneath the purple like an invisible hero?*

But the answer to that question would have to wait for another time and place, because a comforting shade swept across the land and over Platojeen. A tree grew rapidly over her, its sturdy trunk towering upward in shimmering silver, its serene leaves unfurling in glistening gold. And then the tree grew some very special fruit: *people*. Humans who, when ready, plucked themselves to freedom and gracefully floated to ground with their new wings. And now Platojeen was surrounded by divine spirits bodied in all kinds of shapes and colors, in living flesh, surfaced on the heavenly plane of the real world. And here came Sunart and Unstar, running toward her, as if there was not a second left to waste. They leapt into her welcoming embrace, and she hugged them tightly, her arms forming loving rings around their hearts.

I I I  
O O  
X



## Raminsha

And as Raminsha's book wound down to its final crescendo, it dawned upon her that the book's inevitable end would also end a very important chapter in her life. She simultaneously felt wonder, sorrow, glee and anxiousness knowing that every beginning has an end, and every end has a beginning, and while in this world she exerted a degree of control and mastery, the mystery of the world outside was written by a much greater author than she could ever be, and who knows what was planned for her out there?

She stared into the flame of the solitary candle in her cave, still burning, miraculously, despite the lengthy passage of time. *What a crazy candle,<sup>7</sup> she thought. No one will ever believe what the hell I've been through, how all of this was conceived. And I have to ask you, dear candle, what will you do when this is all over? When this world of metaphors of the four meta worlds ends, will you stay here and ask the world, "What good is a metaphor for if it isn't the most meta metaphor of all time?" Or will you find your own moksha, your own nirvana, your own heaven, your own home in the world out there?*

*Please, Raminsha prayed, whatever happens, let this end well. Let justice rule and let the righteous be vindicated. Let dharma be restored and let virtue prevail, let daylight return and let love motivate my will. And most of all, let the next chapter of my life be way more amazing than the one that I'm writing. Yes, I know what you're going to say: change starts here, with me. So here's my promise to start anew: with good intentions and with honesty, an honesty tempered only by love. I know that my honesty will not please everyone, but please give me the strength to speak it anyway, and please shelter me with your protection when I do.*

And as Raminsha negotiated the multitude of unknowns with the great unknown, the candle flame suddenly swayed left-right and right-left, flickering so much that for a split-second it seemed to have extinguished and then relighted. Immediately afterward, a strong wind swooshed by the cave's opening and left behind an alluring rustle. Raminsha's eyes darted back and forth between the flame and the outside world, and she knew,

*This is it. Time to make my maker.*

She raised her hand to say goodbye to the candle and exited the cave. Soon she was standing on her familiar ledge, a gift from above that presented her the vast expanse of the night sky. For the final time, she sat down at the ledge's edge, closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and then slowly eased the air out. Another deep inhale and controlled exhale, and again, and again — inward, outward, inward and outward, and soon she was floating, floating down, further and further down, slowly submerging into the intoxicating arms of the subconscious world, and then she was

*Walking in a meadow, tired from a long journey. The end was near, but there was a final boss level challenge awaiting her. A young boy appeared, except he strangely had the trunk, ears, tusks, and a belly (the size of) of an elephant. He seemed upset and defensive.*

*Why are you here? Go back to where you came from!*

*I'm here to reclaim what you've stolen.*

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<sup>7</sup> Anger and expletives directed at the candle are omitted here, but don't worry, it knows.

*What are you talking about? I haven't stolen anything of yours.*

*You've stolen the Truth — or as they say in some languages, Sat.<sup>8</sup>*

*Well, she goes by a different name now, and you have no chance of prying her from me. She has fully accepted that I am the one true God of this world. She knows that in this world, I define what is real. In this world, I create the truth.*

*I don't believe you.*

*Well, soon you will. Behold!*

The boy's head vanished, and in its place grew two heads, and then four, and they kept multiplying until ten heads were lined up across the horizon, all ferocious and mighty, and the boy's body was now a man's. Then the heads spoke commandingly, in unison:

*I have cosmic strength and enormous wealth, unbounded brilliance and immense power. The masses adore me and submit to my greatness. They worship my crown, my jewelry, my houses and my lovers, all of which are proof of my divinity. This is reality. This is the truth.*

*The Truth is eternal, and you are man-made.*

*No, God is eternal, and the truth is man-made.*

*Your house of cards will collapse the moment she awakes — and she stirs in her sleep as we speak. She already sees that a reality built upon lies, theft, and manipulation cannot be divine.*

*What she sees is that I am blessed and that those who deny me are condemned. And you're in a different category altogether — beyond condemned, nothing more than a miserable cave-dwelling pauper!*

*Formerly-miserable cave-dwelling pauper. Which is still better than an egotistical barrier to the divine, a deceitful manipulator of the truth, an arrogant exploiter of the innocent, and a prostitute to profit. Her naina<sup>9</sup> sees that your empire is built on division and separation, deception and manipulation. She sees that there must be an endpoint to your madness, when there is nothing left to divide or separate or deceive or manipulate.*

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<sup>8</sup> Pronounced "sut-". Variations include "satchai" and "satya." Also, "satra" (and similar variations) is the word for the number 17 in some Indian languages.

<sup>9</sup> Eyes, in some Indian languages. Pronounced "neh-nah" and (importantly) not "nine a."

*And even if she saw that, she will still choose me over you, because you offer nothing but destitution.*

*You underestimate her. She is wiser than anyone I've ever known. But for her sake — and for what she deserves — she will not see destitution when she sees me.*

*But look at you.*

*Yes, indeed, look at me. Behold!*

*You... you look clean, how.. your clothes are nice...you look... in shape... good... What powers do you have!?*

*The Truth. And kindness, confidence, intelligence, creativity, and determination. My own sense of style. Also, impeccable comedic timing. Speaking of, have you heard about the broomstick that rammed —*

*— You're blinded by your self-love.*

*Or liberated by it.*

*Someday you'll see that the world needs the shelter that lies give. Consider the unmarried mother who gives her child the gift of a divine father — will you tell her child that the father was in fact a paying customer? Or that he was a rapist? Or would you prefer to tell the child that mother was known to get around? Tell me, which of these is your preferred option?*

*None of those.*

*I thought so. And what about the mother? Should she have to endure the pain of her past every time she looks at her child?*

*That is her decision to make.*

*And what about parents who have taken in someone else's baby and raised him as their own, keeping the adoption a secret for the child's benefit, so he grows up the same as his siblings, cousins, and friends? Will you ruin that beautiful relationship for the sake of truth?*

*I will not.*

*Exactly. To some, the truth is a thief. To some, the truth is a prison. To some, death is even preferable to the truth.*

*Then let the light of the night govern the children of night and the light of day bless the world. Whereas they have paid the price and lie for comparatively selfless reasons, you relentlessly lie for your personal profit and the innocent pay the price. But now you will see that it's impossible for falsity to forever maintain a dominion over Truth. And that is why I am here. You've wrongly incarcerated the light of day in the prison of night.*

*Is the night any less real than day? She is happy with our arrangement, why are you trying to force your truth on her?*

*I only offer what you deny: a choice. It is her choice whether to accept the light or stay in the dark. But the truth is that the choice itself is what frightens you, because you know that if she had a choice, she would choose light, and she would choose choice, because it is choice that separates freedom from oppression, love from possession, truth from evil, and day from night. Me, from you.*

*And what about the choices I offer? For I was once one and now I am Dus,<sup>10</sup> Deus, Dios, Zeus, Yeshua, Yahweh, Iosea, Isa, Ishwar, and Jesus. Do your eyes see that I am also Moses, Allah, and Krish-ma?*

*Ishwar, Allah, whatever your name, divinity monopolized under any brand is a product for human profit.*

Raminsha's eyes suddenly opened. Before her was a powerful woman in a dancing pose, her right leg crossed over her left thigh, her arms spread out on each side. She was naked, except for a golden crown with twelve spokes on her head and a garland of decapitated heads around her neck. Her midnight blue skin dripped with blood pouring from the severed heads, and one of her bloody hands held a bloody dagger. She panted heavily, her chest heaving in and out, her red tongue sticking out, angry and bloodthirsty. When she finally saw Raminsha, her eyes enlarged in utter shock and her hanging leg dropped to the ground.

*I've waited a very long time for you. There is so much to say, but very little time to say it. A new day is coming, and soon the divine female will reclaim her rightful throne in the heavens. The world will once again be blessed by the goddesses of love, beauty, wisdom, and harmony, the goddesses of art, music, letters, and science, the goddesses of mountains, trees, rivers, and winds, the goddesses of humor, mischief, playfulness, and devotion, the goddesses of patience, resilience, courage, and strength, and the goddesses of all other great things, too.*

*Yet the divine female will not return to this world, into a world of darkness, into a world of lies and deception, because the divine female is neither a lie nor a deception. She is as real as I am, but she has been imprisoned as a sin, a snake, a witch, a jezebel, a harlot, a whore, and so many other names. And sadly, many of us have been unwitting participants in the divine female's subjugation, falling victim to the highest levels of manipulation perfected over millennia by very powerful organizations.*

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<sup>10</sup> *Ten*, in some Indian languages

*The truth is that while in theory light cannot exist without dark, and therefore day cannot exist without night, in reality day and night cannot exist together — it is either day or it is night, and their children, dusk and dawn, never see eye to eye. And just as you cannot find daylight during midnight, you cannot effectively fight for progress while defending religions which are regressive, nor can you hope for the return of the divine female while tolerating as equals those who deny her very existence.*

*I ask you to lay down your arms as I have laid mine. Take off the shackles around your neck and break the chains that bind us to an era when eyes were crossed and lies were armor. Shatter the handcuffs that tie us to ideologies of deceit, manipulation, and war. Divorce those belief systems that were birthed when women were property of men. Times have long changed, and just as dusk ended day's exhaustion, dawn will soon end night's terror.*

*And when dawn comes — when time turns and Sat returns — we will have to make a choice: we can celebrate the birth of a new day or fight to return into the womb of yester-night.*

*I have made my choice. I choose to embrace light and the eyes of day. I choose tomorrow for our tomorrow, a tomorrow in which we share the holiness in each other in the wholeness of each other, a tomorrow in which we write a new story, a story for the ages, the story of us, ourstory.*

*And ourstory begins tomorrow because he belongs to tomorrow. Like a phoenix reborn he will emerge from the fiery depths of hell, his eyes blazing with the light of vanquished ages of illusion, eyes which ignite mine every time they meet, eyes which glint with the beginning of time and endure to the end of time. Eyes which transform the cocoon of my past into butterflies for the future, eyes which excite the dreams of my night and support the dreams of my day, eyes which are mine and always with me, in times of longing and in times of joy, eyes which I see now, eyes which I see with, now, in this very moment.*

*He risked it all for me, and so his reward will be all of me — a reincarnated me for a resurrected him. Because our union transcends this lifetime, as love itself transcends this lifetime, and what is better than a love fueled by the first spark that created the universe, the original transcendental union of XY and XX?*

*My warrior of light, my beacon of inspiration, my pillar of integrity, my monument of truth.*

*My husband, my spouse, my partner, my spirit mate, my star on earth, my deva, my var, my pati — my varpati.<sup>11</sup>*

*My chosen one, for this lifetime and all other lifetimes, on this prithvi<sup>12</sup> and every other world.*

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<sup>11</sup> An original remix of the name of the goddess Parvati.

<sup>12</sup> Earth

*For him I place a bindi on my forehead, a diya<sup>13</sup> for my dearest, an offering of light for life's offer of light, a symbol of our holy monogamy and (heretofore) virgin mariaj.*

*The moment will soon come when we are together again.*

*I believe in him as I believe in myself.*

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<sup>13</sup> Lamp / light.

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