

2 The Mind Is Its Own Place

He awoke with a start before the first signal sounded. Blindly, eyes still gummy with sleep, he slid off his bunk, his bare feet slapping the floor, shift position once, and arch as he kneeled to grab his gear underneath his bunk.

In the rare privacy of his own space, feeling the follicles of his skin rising in goose bumps in the cool air, he began to pull on the first of many layers of his gear. First was the skinsuit, light and soft. Next was the polymerized oversuit, a one-piece uniform that shimmered with a pale, iridescent white. Once suited, he left his private quarters.

Personal privacy ended as he headed down the short corridor to the briefing room. Others silently joined him. Once there, they heard their commanding officer review their current progress of their mission, finishing the intricate details of the newly created spacetime that burned brightly in a special containment room on the edge of timeless space. The briefing, as always, was blessedly short, and the small team of Celestial Engineers reported to their assigned stations in the containment room.

He stood before the small but rapidly expanding bubble of spacetime, tweaking its rate of particle acceleration. Too slow, and the bubble would collapse upon itself. Too fast, and it would diffuse into a homogenous smear. Once he achieved the requisite rate, following Central’s specs that Alpha Omega had given his team, he paused as the other members of his cohort put into motion the next stage of the process.

In his small pause, he noticed the ring of sentries along the perimeter of the containment room. As far as he could tell, their only task was to stand guard, although against who or what, he didn’t know. They all stood, their eyes forward and still as statues, except for one of them, a creature who had taken on a female gender. She looked at the white-hot, blazing bubble in puzzlement.

“Something the matter?” he asked.

She turned to him, somewhat startled. “Oh – nothing.” She glanced furtively at the other Sentry guards, but they appeared not to notice her outburst.

“It’s not nothing if you’re bothered by something.”

“Well --” She shrugged. “I know I don’t need to know, since I haven’t been briefed --”

“Yes?”

“But what is that supposed to be?”

He raised his brows, wondering if he was allowed to tell her. But she was part of the Sentry unit and so was already witnessing the event. Also, her curiosity surprised him, as sentries and engineers usually had nothing to do with each other, their duties being wholly different. “It’s a new world.”

“That thing?”

“Wait – and you’ll see.”

The initial expansion completed, the haphazard quantum particles began to coalesce, forming larger particles – subatomic and then atomic. Then he stepped back into the process, tweaking the background noise for any coding errors so that the movement of particles followed its choreographed pattern as they began to dance around each other.

“What’s that sound?”

“That? Oh that – we call it ‘the music of the spheres.’”

Her face opened into a surprised smile. “It’s beautiful.”

Taken aback by her response, he replied, “There’s more.”

The fabric of spacetime still bright with radiation, the particles began to form clouds of matter, in accordance to gravitational coding, and these newly formed nebulae began to wheel across the fabric, pulling in more of the brightness until, at their very centers, they began to glow with titanic fusion, forming quasars and galaxies. Following rigidly the specs set forth by Central but executed by Alpha Omega through the Celestial Engineers, the galaxies spun and crashed and spun again, each time forming denser spots of matter in the waves of spacetime with each successive explosive fusion.

One particular oval smear of a galaxy had wispy spiraling arms, one of which spun, like gears within gears, a little accretion disk of heavy, gaseous elements. He pointed out the disk fading into little pinpoints rotating around themselves while also rotating around their central star.

“They’re tiny,” she said, frowning as she strained to see.

“Hold on.” He conferred first with his commanding officer and then the Sentry unit’s CO. When he returned to her position, he said, “You want to see this up close?”

“We can?”

“We have permission, yes.”

He and she dipped forward and then slipped into the fabric of spacetime. Adjusting their relative spatial dimensions along the way, they flew around the newly formed planets of the star Sol, until they came upon its third planet, convulsing in its birth pangs, its moon newly formed after being nearly sheared in half by a hapless asteroid. They hovered in outer orbit, witnessing the Earth cool and then the rains start. Soon the next phase of the coding began, as the waters began to churn not with gas

but single-celled algae and phytoplankton, transforming the poisonous air into an atmosphere habitable to oxygen-breathing life. Meanwhile, the land flowed, hardened, and buckled, seizing with every tectonic slide and crash.

“How *interesting*,” she murmured. Spontaneously, she flew over the waters as she witnessed the evolutionary process of life, from sea-based plants and animals to land-based ones, the many millennia of asexual and sexual reproduction, of selection and survival.

He followed at a discrete distance, finding himself as interested in her as the new world forming around him. They arrived at the navel of the world – the terran portal where Earth met Heaven – at the center of a beautiful, lush garden. Hovering just over the dark green surface, he asked, “Would you like to feel the Earth?”

“How?”

In answer, he concentrated, switching his energy in a brilliant show of light and heat, which dissipated as he set down on the Earth’s surface, his bare feet as solid as the grass underneath him.

She stared at his naked embodied form. “How did you --”

“Energy transfer into matter. Just like how we embodied Central’s specs.”

She shook her head. “You Celestial Engineers always get to know the good stuff.”

“Look – it’s easy.” He held out his hand at the hovering creature before him.

She grimaced at the flesh before her, unsure of what to expect. “Does it feel – weird?”

“What – are you scared?”

She pulled herself tall and straight. “Of course not.” She took hold of his hand.

With his touch triggering her nascent ability, her form switched to matter, and he saw her embodied form abruptly drop onto the soft, verdant ground, breathing fast and hard. “Jeez – are you okay?” he asked, kneeling down before her.

She looked up, her violet eyes staring straight into his dark blue ones. “Wow. Oh wow.”

He stared at her eyes, his mind clamoring with new emotions. “Are you hurt?”

“N-no,” she replied, shakily. With her free hand, she patted down her face, her arms, her chest, her belly. Then, unexpectedly, she patted his face, as if to make sure he was there. “That was... amazing.” She stood up, her long, blue-black hair falling almost to her waist. “Everything’s been amazing.” She breathed in deeply, her chest rising and falling. “Thank you for showing me this new world.”

He continued to stare at her. “You’re welcome...”

“Miranda.”

“You’re welcome – Miranda.” He looked down and noticed he was still holding her hand.

She looked around. “What’s next?”

“What?” He released her hand. “Well – there’s humanity’s creation. But Alpha Omega personally wanted to oversee that process, so we’ll have to wait here --” He stopped, noticing that she started to frown as her head leaned to one side. “What’s wrong?”

“Switch your comm. To band 2.”

He did, and then he heard clearly through his mind, “All personnel report back to stations. All personnel report back to stations. This is a Code Crimson. I repeat – this is a Code Crimson. This is not a drill.”

#

He saw the explosion all the way from tactical, the soldiers flying up like so many ragdolls.

With the bellowing orders “Fall back! Fall back!” in his comm, nearly deafening him to the outside sounds of battle, he sped from tactical, through the opposing valley of retreating forces.

The sky was on fire. He stared, agog. How was it possible? How was it allowable?

Someone grabbed him. “Sir! What are you doing?! Remain at your position, sir!”

He fought to break free. “Miranda! She was squad leader at Beta point! Is she – is she --”

“Medi-vac’d to point seven-niner, sir! Behind suppression fire, sir!” Then the subordinate flew off, rushing to take his new position ahead of the new line.

The sky was bright with explosives as artillery fire and short-range ordinance tore through the brightness. “Take cover!” screamed his comm as another explosion churned the ground and set the air on fire.

He had felt like a coward, ensconced in the relative safety of the tactical tent, while his beloved –

“What are you doing here?” he heard her demand as he stumbled into the field hospital tent, his eyes crazed as they roved over the moaning wounded.

“Miranda! Oh thank God, you’re okay!” At her side, he saw her bright face, sullied with dirt and sweat and blood from a nasty gash on her head. “Wait – you’re hurt...”

Her hand caught his hand before it could touch the wound. “Yes. Hurts like crazy. But thanks to Michael yesterday, we now know what’ll happen. Watch.”

Under his eyes, the deep gash that ran from the crown of her head to her ear slowly sealed up, leaving a dark, angry line. Then, the line grew lighter and brighter, leaving a faint, silvery scar. Healed but dirty, she swung her legs off the cot and sat up straight. They were now eye to eye.

“You know what Michael did – nearly cleaved their leader *in half*. But intelligence reports say that after he was evacuated, he didn’t die. It took him a long time to regenerate, but he made a full recovery by nightfall – unfortunately.”

He stared at her, just happy that she was okay.

She recognized that look. “Hold it, loverboy. Do your job. You’re needed in tactical.”

“I’m not a soldier! I’m a composer, a choreographer, an engineer. My job --”

“Your job is to do whatever Central wants you to do. And what He wants you to do is figure out how to zig when those rebels zag. We’re at war. What did you expect?”

He frowned. “You’re going back.”

Miranda snorted in exasperation and then cradled his face between her hands. “Listen. We. Cannot. Die. We can get hurt. We can get wounded. But we’ll always heal. So there is no way – no way – that you can lose me. Understand?”

He was still frowning. “Wait. We can’t die.”

“Right.”

“That means *they* can’t die.”

“True.”

“So how --”

“How will this war end?” She smiled. “God only knows.”

She moved to stand up, and he stood up with her. The others who had recovered fully were already leaving the tent, while the gravely injured stayed in their cots, waiting for the healing process to finish. As they reached outside, Miranda pointed up, at the large, flying forms crossing the sky, their payloads heavy with mountains.

“Ah!” an appreciative Miranda remarked. Then she tilted her head to the side, listening to her comm. A wider smile spread across her face. “Go back to tactical,” she said. She gave him a brief kiss and then turned away from him.

“What?” he called out across the widening space between himself and Miranda, the space quickly filling with a river of soldiers.

“I need to report to Michael. And you’re needed in tactical. Go! You’ll see!” The river swallowed her up, and he raced towards the tactical tent.

“Sir,” a subordinate greeted, and he gave a small nod, still unused to the formal military niceties. Standing before the tactic’s table, he saw in realtime the air response to the rebels’ artillery attack, taking out the military targets with each successive air drop. The enemy attempted to respond in kind,

but their air onslaught was shot down in mid-air, their payload dropping short of their targets, churning up the strip of land separating the enemy forces and themselves.

“We’re equally matched,” he murmured, “so how are we --” and then he received word from the main War Room. “What?”

“Alpha Omega, sir.”

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing from tactics, so he, as well as his fellow tacticians, stepped out of the tent.

To see the flagship *Chariot* blot out the sky.

Below in the valley were seemingly endless waves upon waves of soldiers, bristling with arms, on the march. Between them and *Chariot’s* firepower, they brought the war to the rebels' position. Even at tactical he could see the rebel army fleeing – running, flying, racing, screaming – before they were mowed under. When it looked as if they could go no further, barely seen at the far horizon, a slit in the sky appeared and then widened, revealing a darkness totally unknown to himself and those around him.

All he could say, to nobody in particular, was “I didn’t know we had an exit from Heaven.”

The rebels surged backwards, horrified of this great unknown, but the known forces behind them guaranteed pain, humiliation, and worse. So with a tsunami of screams, they surged through that dark doorway until the *Chariot* and her forces reached it, it closed and sealed itself shut, and the *Chariot* and her foot soldiers continued on as if it were never there.

In his comm, he heard Miranda’s voice. “Gotta admit: Junior sure has style.”

He dropped down onto the ground, still staring at where the dark doorway had been.

#

Even though they didn’t have gender the way the humans did, they still took on gender – just as if they were play-acting or putting on costumes. So the being who thought itself as “he” chuckled at the being who thought itself as “she.” He chuckled at her, at her alarmed face, as she turned her head away from the garden scene below.

“Don’t feel embarrassed for him,” he declared, waving his hand before the view screen. “Imagine, to be embarrassed by a human’s question about sex. Look how red he’s turned!” He gestured below. “And look how red *you’ve* turned!” He patted her on the knee, which made her feel even more embarrassed.

“Well... those are personal things. Why does he need to ask such personal things? He was very philosophical just a moment ago.”

“Oh, come on! The boy is a pure innocent, just newly married. *Everything's* going to be personal for him, and who better to ask than those who are more experienced in these things, that is, us?”

She shifted. “Still... it's not as if he can take anything from what we say. He and the woman are embodied. That's a big leap.”

“I think they'll figure out a way,” he said, a smile evident in his words. “And they're not little children. He's a man, and she's a woman. True, an innocent man and an innocent woman. But man and woman, nevertheless, and they halfway figured it out already.”

“It's still different – of course it must be different. Having bodies – it must be an awful limitation.”

“Now *that*, my dear, doesn't seem to *them*. Look.”

“No.”

“Oh, come on, you're not getting all squeamish on me, are you? You nearly witnessed their creation, after all, and we look just like them when we're embodied. Also, we'll probably be sent there someday – new policy of providence and all.”

“You know something that I don't?”

“Don't change the subject,”

“I'm not. Really, you think we'll be sent, just like Raphael down there?”

“Sure. That's part of our jobs now, isn't it?”

“Well... I'd rather stay here.”

He looked sharply away from the scene below to him. “Don't you say that. You sound like Lightbearer over there,” and he nodded his head angrily towards a far distance.

“No no no! I mean, errmmm...” She turned an even brighter red. “Well, *you're* here... and all...”

The angry cloud over his face dissipated, and light shone through. “Ah – Miranda.” He reached over and tapped off the feed to Raphael's conversation with Adam. Before she could protest – because she really was a timid creature when it came to him – he reached out and pulled her onto his bunk. Even though made for one, two could make do if they really tried.

Soon, the two forms were one, he a shining whiteness, she blushing red even more such that the effect was like a deep vermilion shot through with delicious sparks.

After a moment, she said, “And if I go below like Raphael --”

“Then I follow.”

#

He hadn't meant for that much time to pass, and he hoped – beyond all reason – that he was not too late when he finally was able to slip away from Heaven.

The garden was still beautiful.

He intended immediately to seek out Miranda as soon as he arrived on Earth, but he couldn't help but divert his arrival point to the long-forgotten place of humanity's birth, appearing at the headwaters of the river of the Tree of Life.

His substance shimmering a little as he got used to the alien Earth atmosphere and climate, he walked through the silent garden, empty of animals that fell when their stewards fell. Although abandoned, the garden was never overgrown, the footpaths clear and smooth as the day they were created. Every fruiting tree still held their bounty – ripe but not rotten, waiting to be plucked by hungry hands.

When he came to the forbidden tree, he saw that it was nothing extraordinary – just a fruit tree heavy with round, ruby orbs. He sat down underneath the close branches of that tree, smelling its sticky sweet fragrance.

Nothing extraordinary except for that easy edict, as a parent would say to a restless child: Don't touch. Leave it. Much easier than a parent who had loved a favorite grown son and then replaced that son with another, saying, “He is my only begotten Son. Serve Him.” How could a creature *not* be tempted by jealousy, by revenge?

He shook his head from this reverie. “Don't go there,” he said out loud. He stood up, giving the tree's trunk an assessing slap. A red orb dropped from one of the branches. He caught it easily, turned it over in his hand, and then suddenly threw it as far as he could.

He didn't need a piece of fruit to know the difference between good and evil.

“Too easy. They had it too easy. And they failed,” he murmured. Walking back to the center of the garden, he looked up at the many-branching Tree of Life. Unlike the other trees, the Tree of Life had different kinds of fruit, a diversity beyond counting. But the fruit all had the same smell, the ambrosial, other-worldly fragrance of Heaven.

“Not yet.”

Following the river outward, he arrived at the now unguarded gate of Eden. The arrival of the cherubim, after over a millennium of vigilance, had alarmed him when he was in Heaven, that a great change was about to happen on Earth. After news of the Reboot spread throughout Heaven, he slipped away, unable to wait.

He pushed open the gate and saw the river split into four rivers, flowing out into an inhospitable world. Knowing that he didn't have much time, he chose one of the rivers on a hunch and took flight, his hopes focused on one thought.

Miranda.

He flew over rocky desert; high, brown mountains; rolling dunes of fiery sand. He flew until he saw the outskirts of a primitive city – run-down shantytown shacks of the very poor, and then great fields of farmland, irrigated by its life-giving neighboring river, besides which were great corrals of domesticated cattle, goats, and sheep. Passing over the high city walls, he saw the crowded warren of buildings, buildings stacked upon buildings, shimmering in the heat of the summer season. In the center of this crowded maze was the tallest building, its many floors terraced with balconies decorated with reclining benches, overhanging awnings, and cooling vines.

On the rooftop garden, overseeing all, was Miranda.

He alighted before her. If she was surprised, she didn't show it. But he was surprised, for Miranda's material form was not the spiritual form she had in Heaven, the last time he saw her over a millennium ago.

She had taken on the material form of a man.

“Go away,” she said, her voice a sharp baritone.

“Miranda, listen --”

“Don't call me ‘Miranda.’ I haven't been Miranda in centuries. Where were you when I was deployed here with the Watchers after those two idiots fell? Where were you while we were forced to protect these immature creatures from themselves? It's like watching ants – building, fighting, dying, building, fighting, dying – so where was Heaven? Where were *you*?”

He stood, dumbstruck. “You sound... you sound...”

“Like Lightbearer? Like hell I do! I don't want to rule Heaven. I – *we* – wanted to go home. But since we were stuck here, we tried to help those broken humans the best we could.”

“By giving knowledge humanity wasn't ready for? By injecting the gene pool with non-human DNA? You call *that* improvement?”

“Well, what would *you* call it, Mister High-and-Mighty?”

“I call it playing God!”

Miranda's eyes flinched, as if she had been slapped. “Go away. Now.” She turned to walk away.

He suddenly felt desperate as he remembered why he was there. “There's going to be a Reboot.”

She stopped. “You're lying.”

His entire body slumped, as he realized that Miranda was lost, lost and gone away, for how could she possibly say that? “Angels can't lie.”

She gave him a withering look.

“All right. All right – I don’t care if you believe me or not. But a Reboot’s coming, and all of this” – he angrily swept his arms out – “will be wiped, to start all over. I thought I could save you, but I see that I was wrong.”

“I don’t need saving,” she sneered. “I --”

“Love, is someone up there?”

Both fallen and unfallen angels turned towards a doorway, in which stood a young woman holding a very large, pale baby. Before she could see him, the unfallen angel de-materialized, now looking like one of the shimmers of heat rising from the exposed rooftop garden.

“No, Mara, no – just talking to myself.” The tall, handsome king held out his arms for his queen and young son, ignoring the shimmer that rose forlornly from his great city.

I’m sorry, Miranda... for not following you, he sent, but the king hardened his heart and refused to hear the angel’s message.

He took a long and slow flight path to Eden, surveying the cities dotting the Earth here and there, the members of humanity toiling and feuding under the watchful eyes of their powerful rulers, seen and unseen. If there were Watchers and other fallen ones, they seemed to ignore him, as their rapacious attention was drawn to the doomed people below. Only in one place did he find the bright light of Heaven among all of humanity – a small family consisting of an old man, his wife, his three sons, and their respective wives. As the men folk in the family were undergoing construction of a gigantic ship beyond the outskirts of a small city, and as the womenfolk tended to their men folk, their neighbors jeered at them for their lunacy, for building such a thing in the middle of a desert.

One of the womenfolk – a young woman already heavy with child – curiously glanced up, as if she could see him pass above. In alarm, he flew higher into the atmosphere until she had faded into the background of the rocky desert.

He arrived shortly at the garden – through the unguarded garden gates (for who, afterwards, would know where to find Eden?), following the river to the Tree of Life, which was the gateway to Heaven.

But as he stretched his form upwards, he felt blocked. He tried again, but he could not enter the gateway. Stunned, he stepped back, and the Tree of Life seemed to fade before him, transparent and beyond his reach.

“Dammit,” he swore, realizing his mistake.

By his own free will, without giving word or gaining permission, he had left Heaven. By his own free will, he had the audacity to try to save a fallen angel through his meager powers alone. By his own free will, he had damned himself.

Before the inaccessible Tree of Life, he cried bitterly for what seemed like a long time. Then he stood, sought out the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and engorged himself on its fruit until – if he had been able – he would’ve thrown up. Like Adam and Eve before him, he left the garden, closing the gates behind him.

He waited for God’s Judgment.

#

We. Cannot. Die.

As he drifted, a disembodied spirit throughout the eons on Earth, he tried not to feel bitter that his immortality – a blessing when he was unfallen – became a curse in his fallen state.

With the rise of human civilization again after the Reboot, he could see the proxy war of Lightbearer’s army and Heaven’s army resume amongst the humans. Sometimes, he witnessed Lightbearer’s lackey possessing wholly a human soul, subtly to influence human historical events or even obviously to terrorize weak human beings.

In rare but dramatic occasions, a few would even take on material form, masquerading as some extraordinary human. They were like the fallen Watchers of old, who fashioned themselves bodies to pass themselves off as human. But unlike those former Watchers, whose goal was to improve mankind before mankind’s acceptable time, the goal of these fallen angels was only predatory, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, to wreak havoc amongst humans. A fallen who would chose that route of earthly existence would need to feed off a susceptible human soul as an energy source, for such mimicry required a power source to keep the fallen angel from shifting back into energy. Hence, he would overhear the increasingly frightened whispered rumors of incubi, succubae, and even vampires, prowling the land, and all he could do was witness their sad, powerless ignorance.

Oh, you poor humans.

For he knew that the ending was always the same for these malicious spirits, whether possessing humans, terrorizing humans, feeding off humans, or needling humans in their subconscious states: once separated from their bodies in death, Lightbearer’s lackeys would claim as war prizes the souls originally created for Heaven.

Even in his fallen state, Lightbearer and his lackeys disgusted him, and he refused to throw his lot with them, avoiding other fallen angels and their work on Earth as much as possible. Fortunately, they seemed not to care, seeing him as an inferior sort – unwanted not only by Heaven but also Hell, since he fell not through glorious rebellion against Heaven but through a stupid, absent-minded mistake.

Cut off from Heaven, he was as ignorant of cosmic events as the humans were. But unlike the humans, whose inalienable bodies could sustain their life, he had no natural source of energy, that is, his connection with Heaven. He was as insubstantial as air and light, a weak and starving intelligence buffeted by slow time.

It was almost enough to drive him insane.

He sometimes saw a few of the former Watchers try to stay on Earth post-Reboot, while refusing to do the Lightbearer’s work, by residing in trees, rivers and seas, and even animals. Like parasites, they would weave themselves into living matter and feed off the trees’ photosynthesis, the waters’ kinetic energy, and the animals’ digestion. At first, the ex-Watchers’ spiritual state would still be aware and active, energized by their hosts and even worshipped by certain civilizations as nature and animal gods. But the longer they resided there, the less aware they became of their former state as angels, until they became dumb and silent, as close to self-annihilated as an immortal spirit could be.

Witnessing that self-annihilation frightened him enough to remain drifting. But even he grew tired of his eternal unmoored state, and he discovered a compromise when he floated past a beggar, a filthy man with a mind half-destroyed by mental illness and malnutrition. He was not much older than thirty, but he looked like a battered old man, hair matted and gray, dressed in thrown-away rags. Here was an embodied human soul whose mind was already filled with disjointed, clamoring voices, none of them demonic.

What harm could one more voice do?

With one intake of breath, the beggar inhaled the fallen angel and immediately flew into convulsions as the spirit at first struggled, feeling suffocated and claustrophobic, as if he were buried alive. Then the man’s soul retaliated. Since the man’s soul – as tormented as it was by his human-made demons – was still Heaven-bound, it recognized him as a foreign substance, rejecting him as a body would reject a transplanted organ. But he slipped, weaved, and settled amongst the disjointed brain chemicals and the various material parasites infesting the man, and the man’s soul eventually left him alone.

He was only along for the ride – a mute, still passenger on a very long journey, for however long this man’s life would be. However, although filtered through the man’s madness, he was able to share the man’s albeit constrained experiences of the world around him. The sense data helped him keep anchored in this space and time, as he learned what the world of man was for that human and what it would later become.

In possessing this mad beggar, he was able to keep his own sanity.

Where am I?

From the traffic of domestic slaves running errands for their masters, and the all too few who would pity the beggar and drop pieces of food into his grimy, claw-like hands, he learned that he was in Ur. His existence was the beggar’s existence. He would sleep in a back alley somewhere, in the hard-packed dirt surrounded by mud-clay walls, then awake, urinate or defecate only a little ways from where he slept, shamle to a public corner, and beg for food and drink until the sun went down. Then he would shamle to a back alley – sometimes the same place, sometimes not – and sleep off the effects of barely surviving.

He remained in Ur until the beggar died from his various diseases. When the beggar’s soul left his body, the fallen angel found that he also easily slipped out of the body, as easily as breath. Where that soul went he didn’t know, for it said not a word to him, not even acknowledging that they had even shared the same body all of those years.

His next host was a young boy, but he was also suffering from many voices as a result from his mental illness. This time, he waited until the boy was asleep, when he slipped in amongst the nightmares that had been tormenting the boy. A son of a rich merchant, he was sent to Damascus, on the advice of a priest who believed that the source of the boy’s mental illness was a demon possession.

Not quite, holy man.

A seer in Damascus sacrificed a goat, peered into its liver, burned it and its meat with various resins and herbs as a burnt offering to the gods, and forced the boy to inhale the reeking smoke. The only effect it had was a boy who smelled terrible and retched into the burnt offering, to the horror of the seer and the unfortunate servant whose job it was to bring the boy back, cured.

Uncured, the merchant’s son returned to Ur, and the servant was whipped for his failure. Afterwards, the boy spent his days indoors, rocking in a corner, while the spirit within him listened to the gossip of the servant women around him. When the boy eventually died from a fever that had swept through the city, he flew clear of the house, drifted a little bit, appreciating the sky and sun that the boy hadn’t seen in months.

Then he settled into the age-addled mind of a snowy-haired and snowy-bearded shepherd, who was traveling with his family to Jerusalem. Unfortunately, once in Jerusalem, the old shepherd found himself in the middle of a turf war amongst enraged, armored men, bristling with spears and horses. Instead of just stealing his family’s flocks of sheep, they massacred all the men folk in the family first, and then they stole the women for themselves, in addition to the sheep.

Wasn't this supposed to be stopped by the Reboot?, the fallen angel sighed as he drifted above the butchered bodies of his previous host and the host's family.

In spite of this setback, he decided to remain in Jerusalem, as there were plenty of psychologically damaged human beings that he could harmlessly possess. With each passing possession, he lost track of how long he was in Jerusalem, until, one day, he saw something impossible.

He was in yet another deranged but harmless beggar – this time, suffering from syphilis-induced madness. While begging on yet another public corner, he noticed an increase in traffic and activity along the main street in front of him, as people crowded in front and along someone walking down the street.

That can't be... can it?

He saw a man, still young even as he approached early middle-age, obviously a popular rabbi and teacher, as seen by his followers. But the light of Heaven shining from him was not the reflected light often seen in truly holy men. Instead, *he* was the source of that light.

Alpha Omega.

This was not possession that he was witnessing. Central did not possess. This was a miracle, a miracle that, if he hadn't been in humans for as long as he had been, he would've remembered that he had known was coming, ever since humanity's loss of Eden. He had been briefed on it, before his own fall from grace. But now, he didn't quite know what to do in the face of this. Should he stay and watch? Would He recognize him? *Stupid, of course He would.* What would happen if He did? Would He try to cast him out of his host, like any other exorcism? What would He do to him if He did?

For the first time in his fallen life on Earth, he took control of his host and fled from this miraculous Man of God.

He didn't know if He would follow. Looking behind him, he half expected to be blasted out of the human's body. Oddly enough, he almost wanted to be blasted out of the human's body, as he felt that deep ache of loss of Heaven, of being cut off from that light. For a brief moment, having the touch of Heaven – even as a form of punishment – was something he desired. But that didn't stop him from running, and the miracle standing in the crowded streets of Jerusalem did not stop him, for reasons he didn't and couldn't know.

A few days later, he felt a tearing in his essence, and even his mad host wasn't so mad as not to realize that a heinous and unspeakable crime had been committed. Eyes wide with fear, he stood with the rest of the gawking people as they watched the public execution of three men. In the center was

the miraculous Man of God, and the fallen angel within him struggled to understand why He didn't save Himself that day.

When he saw the light of Heaven sputter and die, as a flame flickers and then is snuffed out, leaving only a piece of meat for the ravens to pick at, he again took over his human host, forcing him to run away into an isolated, grubby alleyway, leaving the stinking hilltop of crosses and rotting bodies behind. There, in the privacy of darkness, the fallen angel screamed in grief and loss and with such hate against mankind that he ripped out of his host's body, as a slick baby is ripped from its mother's womb, killing the poor beggar in the process.

Horrified at what he had done, he did not possess another human for a very long time. After a time, he drifted across the dark Mediterranean Sea to Rome when, again exhausted and weakened from being without moorings, he sought a populace with enough mad people in it. There, he settled into the dark mental crevices of a slow-witted, minor soldier in the Roman army, whose leaders were following a mad emperor. For the next few years, he saw behind the frightened and confused man's eyes murders committed in the name of Caesar or the Republic, and when he died from dysentery in far-flung and barbaric Londonium, in Britannia, the trees lining the River Thames were starting to look appealing to the human-weary spirit.

Then a long, continuous line of poor, sick, illiterate rural peasants and village beggars housed him, each host dying either through disease, casualty of war, or simply exhaustion, as the life expectancy of each human being at that time and place seemed not to go beyond age forty. Tiring of the narrow-minded beggars and peasants who seemed to dull his intelligence with each possession, he settled upon a harmless schizophrenic who was serving on a sailing ship heading for the New World, to the Port of Charleston. There, he witnessed the slave trade, a business as old as prostitution and murder, and he suddenly felt soiled and corrupted, being in the employment of slave traders. As soon as his host fell asleep, he left him, settling on short-lived but relatively innocent old humans suffering from dementia, of which there were plenty in supply.

It was in Charleston that he witnessed another massive war, feeling helpless as the city was laid siege, blockaded, and bombarded. One of his hosts actually died when his house was set afire when one of the bombardments struck a nearby building housing munitions and the resulting explosion spread fire throughout the city. Being burned to death was the most painful way he had ever left his host, and he primarily stayed within the trees near the tail end of the war, as the battles continued to wage on, feeding the ground with more blood, urine, and feces than he would ever care to witness.

For him, risking self-annihilation in the trees was preferable to having his human hosts be ripped away from him, over and over again and at random.

After the war, he wobbly departed an old oak and slipped into the brain-damaged child of a former Confederate soldier who used to be a farmer before the war. In desperation, to save his large family of six children and his own shattered sanity, the former soldier was returning to that life. With his family in tow, he traveled west, settling in Memphis, Tennessee, when the money to travel further west ran out. His young child spent his days lolling on the porch of the family house, staring at the dust motes dancing in the air. After witnessing much horror, the fallen angel within the child was grateful for this simple life, and was even grateful that the child grew into a simple-minded young man, a gentle giant who could do simple chores, like dig holes and pull ropes, which his more able older brothers patiently taught him how to do. When his brothers grew up and left the homestead, he followed them, traveling further west, where there was more work. The brothers finally settled in the growing town of Dallas, where he and his brothers did hard but simple manual labor. When he died of an accidental drowning after a particularly bad spring-time flash flood, the weary spirit was sad to see him go, but he was certain that the man’s soul was Heaven-bound.

Between the crazy, the brain-damaged, and the age-demented, he found a cornucopia of human souls living in relative freedom from violent war and political strife. So the ancient spirit dug in, like a tick finding a perpetually renewable source of blood. It was there, at the tail end of the twentieth century, that he found a middle-aged man, homeless and crazy.

When he settled into the sleeping form and then woke up the next day, he discovered to his amazement that the spirit driving the man’s body was not the man’s soul, but himself. In searching for the man’s soul, he found instead a dark, encapsulated space, a prison of the man’s making. He marveled at it, unsure of what to make of it, for he had never seen such a thing before and didn’t even know that humans could create such a thing within themselves. But, for the first time in his earthly exile, he was in full possession of a body, not because he had wrested control, but because its owner had left it open for others to take.

And so he took.

#

He opened his eyes and saw a dirty, gray slab above him.

Where am I? he thought. *When am I?*

After fighting a brief wave of vertigo and nausea, he regained his bearings and, with care and deliberation, shifted his body such that he was now facedown on the concrete lip on which he had

been asleep. His bent arms in and clenched hands tight against his chest, he breathed deeply booze, pungent body odor, sharp exhaust fume smells, and then pulled his knees in, as his hands unclenched and arms straightened out until he was in a low kneel, careful not to hit his head against the concrete slab above him. He shifted his legs over the concrete lip and stared dully at the pre-dawn empty interstate highway below.

He was itchy, stinky, and greasy. He knew he needed to eat, but he had no appetite as his stomach hurt with a dull, deep ache that, over the past few weeks, had grown increasingly stronger and never left him.

He stared at the gray lanes below until the sleepy highway started to wake up with morning traffic. Pushing aside the soiled rags that served as his pillow, he scooted down the concrete lip until the underside of the bridge (his “roof”) met grassy hill. Then he scrambled up that hill, his grubby fingers reaching deep into the scrubby grass and dirt so that he wouldn’t roll off the hill to the concrete shoulder and access road below.

Standing at the bridge overpass, he saw two then three other men emerge from their sleeping berths, scrambling up their respective areas of hill like arthritic cockroaches. Before they reached the bridge, he set off, shrugging the grimy, stained trench coat over his thin shoulders. He ignored the shelters and soup kitchens – too much God-talk. Following a well-worn path, he trekked north, walking along the light rail tracks to the West End area of the city.

Like the highways, downtown was starting to wake up as well. More people arrived for work, for school, or for leisure, filling up the skyscrapered streets, the light rail stations, and the high-priced parking lots. This crowding he preferred, for only in crowds could he disappear as everyone ignored each other, focused as they were in their own itineraries and agendas.

He followed the flow of pedestrians and then sharply veered left, disappearing briefly behind an illegally parked van and into the loading dock area of the city’s downtown college.

With practiced eyes, he checked for campus police and any other member of the college as he headed for two large dumpsters. Early morning was always best – no campus police, and last evening’s cafeteria refuse would still be there, high enough in the pile for easy pickings.

Fifteen minutes’ worth of excavation and inspection yielded expired but unopened bags of corn chips, a couple of dented cans of diet cola, an empty water bottle, and a paperback book. He stuffed them in the deep pockets of his trench coat, checked again for anyone, and half-ran, half-walked out of the loading dock area, just in time to nearly run into a woman who was distracted by the ID badge she was putting over her head.

“Wh-ahhh!” she gave a little yelp as he cut left onto the street, narrowly avoiding a collision with a work truck laden with broken windshields.

Light-headed and sweating, he ran back into the safety of waiting light rail patrons. Taking advantage of an empty bench seat as they boarded, he tore through two bags of chips, chasing them down with warm diet soda, before the nausea of low blood sugar and hunger hit him. He tossed the refuse into a nearby trash bin, rubbing off the chip dust as best he could in a small attempt of personal hygiene, and left before the rail police noticed him sullyng the touristy part of town by his presence.

His stomach aching badly, he followed the rail to the Amtrak station, a cavernous place that car-hungry Dallas drivers rarely used. There, he made use of the public restroom, a task he always found infinitely disgusting but, since the advent of modern plumbing, bearable. As best he could, he washed his fuzzy mouth, his skeletal and beard-tangled face, his long, matted dark hair, and his calloused hands. He drank greedily the water and filled his water bottle.

His morning toilette done, he sat down in the waiting area of the empty station, but only to regain his breath and strength that he had expended to get to this part of his day.

Outside the station was busy with light rail patrons who never entered the train station building, so he blended in as best he could again, aided by people refusing to look at him or even acknowledging his existence. Still feeling weak, in spite of the food, water, and brief rest, he boarded one of the light rail cars, standing next to the closed sliding door behind him. At the second stop – and nary a conductor to be seen – he stepped off, walked a short way, and arrived at an unlikely small oasis of tall trees, flowing water, somber bells, and solitude.

Thanks-Giving Square was the closest he could ever come to a sacred space in this body’s lifetime.

Sitting down before a gigantic gold ring walkway, he pulled out the book that he had fished out of the dumpster: Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. He opened the book at a random page and read the first lines he saw:

O, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
That has such people in’t!¹

He closed the book, set it down, and buried his face in his hands.

God, he thought, *you have a sick sense of humor*.

¹ Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Act V, scene 1, lines 181-184.

The three bells above the ring sounded the top of the hour, shaking off his thoughts. Returning the book into his coat, he stood up and walked slowly down the center pathway, the liquid sounds of falling, flowing, and splashing water on the left and right of the pathway. He paused before the bone-white, ammonite-spiraling building ahead of him.

Why did I come here? His usual routine was to head towards the central library building, ramble through its many stories, and get lost in the stacks until closing time. Then he would wander until dusk, avoiding police, other poor wanderers like him, and criminals – mostly young men – who would assault a homeless person for sport. At dusk, he would scrounge for more food and drink, retreat to the sleeping spaces under the bridge that served as his “home,” and fitfully fall asleep like the restless dead.

Instead, he found himself drawn towards the spiraling chapel of Thanks-Giving Square. For now he could no longer ignore the signs his body had been giving for the past weeks and months.

It could be today, he thought, which brought neither fear nor joy – just a numb thud, like a limb falling asleep. For the first time since taking possession of this crazy, homeless man’s body, he crossed the high bridge that connected the water garden to the high chapel doorway, towards the sancta sanctorum of this little man-made oasis.

He saw a dark, tall room with ten small chairs. One stone table, a white marble cube, was raised on a red marble circle. Spiraling stained glass rose high, high above him. He sat in one of the small chairs; he felt his heart stop.

Now, he thought, waiting for his five-year sojourn in this body to end.

But he was mistaken, for the heart continued to beat, albeit wildly, with no rhythm. The body’s organs and systems were shutting down, the body thrashing before the stone altar, but the body didn’t die.

For the crazy homeless soul, encapsulated and buried deeply within this dying body, did not leave.

He sighed with exasperation. This sometimes happened. It violated his sense of decorum, to leave while the human soul was still in the dying body, but he’d done it before, in Charleston and Jerusalem. So he stretched his spiritual form upwards, to slip off the body the way an actor slips off his costume.

But he was blocked. He tried again, but he could not escape.

Trapped in a dying body with a comatose soul, he thrashed like a bound living human, buried alive in a coffin. In a panic he thought, *The mind is its own place, and in itself make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of*

Heav'n.² He gave up his thrashing and pulled inward, his spirit forming a fetal ball in despair. God's Judgment, it seemed, had come for him at last. Then the waves of pain from the other spirit, that human soul, began to unfurl outward, like a dark flower opening its jagged petals, its sickly-sweet scent emanating to form this new Hell.

#

Gasping, Zoey Fitzpatrick sat up from her deep sleep, her eyes wide and wild and awake.

“Jamie!”

She shivered as she got her bearings, her eyes sweeping her surroundings, forcing the last wisps of her nightmare to evaporate in the warm light of morning. She shook her head.

“Damn. I need coffee.”

² Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Book I, lines 254-255.