

10 Man in Our Own Image

In the throat-choking sea of dissolved salt, time had no meaning for the burning, naked body of Zachary James Fitzpatrick.

The wild Indian Ocean brought him to this strange sea, a vast, unending expanse of crystal blue water as still as a pool and yet exponentially saltier than a thousand Dead Seas. His body, buoyed by the salt, remained just six inches below the surface, but it was six inches of unbearable burning.

His body, as if the storm had shredded and flayed his skin, was red and raw, which the saltwater made agonizing, flowing into every wound, every scrape – stinging and burning without relief, without abeyance.

His screams only brought the choking saltwater into his throat, and he struggled to keep his face above the water, to keep his mouth and nose and eyes from the blinding pain of the torturous water.

To keep himself from becoming crazed from the pain, he forced himself to move forward, to swim in a painful, pathetic dog paddle, to concentrate on the movement to still his racing thoughts.

I am dead, he thought, and there was no doubt in his assessment. *I am dead, but I'm alive. If this is an afterlife, then why am I here – and what is this place?*

Zack cursed his ignorance, for it was Amy who kept to the old church traditions, not him. While his devout Irish-American mother made sure her son attended his catechism and participated in all of the stultifying childhood sacramental rites of passage, whether he wanted to or not, he left the Church by his late teens, only consenting to the Matrimonial Rite because Amy, following her Filipino Catholicism, thought it was so damn important.

A sudden splash from his arm sent the stinging water into his eyes, and he yelped in pain. But he didn't stop paddling forward.

Something that he could not name but felt from inside out compelled him to keep moving, even though he saw no land in sight. All he saw was the endless expanse of the punishing sea, yet he believed that land was out there – beyond knowledge, beyond sight.

In the absence of knowledge, all he had was faith that – despite all facts to the contrary – his torturous condition had to have an ending.

Not for the first time, he wondered if he was entirely alone in this strange, salt sea, but then he noticed the movement and sound of the waters changing. He opened his eyes – for he had closed

them while deep in his thought – and saw a little island, solitary in the entire expanse of the water, its white sand beach foaming as the salt water lapped against its surface.

He paddled towards it and, in doing so, felt a strong current carry him away from that land – a current that came out of nowhere and, in his old sailor mind, alarmed him in its strength. He fought against it and, in a final push of resistance, flopped onto the beach. His skin, already raw and exposed, scraped against the rough sand. He gasped in pain and passed out.

When he came to, he couldn't see anything, as his eyes were covered in a light bandage. Then he realized that his entire body was wrapped in linen-like bandages that had been anointed in something cool and soothing.

Someone large – much larger than he – was carrying him as if he were a child who had fallen asleep sitting up and was now being moved to bed. The sensation was both unsettling and comforting, as no one had carried him like that since he was four or five years old, over eighty years ago. His carrier gently set him down on some sort of chaise lounge, and then Zack immediately heard someone pull up next to him, open his mouth, and feed him something cool, sticky, and sweet – like some sort of watery oatmeal or thin pudding, although it had a flowery flavor to it.

At first he tried to resist, as he couldn't see what the food was and the thought of being fed like a baby disturbed him. But he was still weak from his exertions, and his feeder – although gentle – was firm in inserting the feeding spoon between his still-raw and chapped lips.

The effect of the flower-fruit meal was immediate, as his desperate thirst and hunger abated and a slow but pleasurable drowsiness took hold of him.

“Who --” Zack tried to croak out the question, but his feeder stopped his words with more food.

A strong wind suddenly picked up, a wind that sent the smell of the salt sea and even a bit of the sea itself, in atomized spray, across the island and towards where he and his mysterious hosts were. His silent feeder abruptly stood up, and he heard sounds of windows and shutters closing.

Soon, he heard the winds' strength increase, and the sound of something being pelted against those windows – salt? sand? a freak instance of hail? – shook the room, as the wind began to whine and howl.

As if to drown out the strange dread brought upon by the high wind, his silent feeder began to sing:

“You sunburned sicklemen, of August weary,

Come hither from the furrow and be merry.

Make holiday: your rye-straw hats put on,

And these fresh nymphs encounter every one
In country footing.”¹

The voice was a woman’s, but unlike any woman he had ever heard. She sang in a soft, soothing mezzo-soprano. The hushed tone of her voice, along with the gentle rhythm of her words, lulled him further into the drowsy stupor that the delicate food had begun in him.

“Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices
That, if I then walked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.”²

Feeling no pain or discomfort, Zack drifted towards sleep’s waiting arms. Before succumbing to heavy slumber, he thought, *Amy would’ve liked this.*

And then he was suddenly awake as he realized, *No, no she wouldn’t.*

The sound of shattering glass and rushing water slammed Zack out of his paralysis, as he struggled to remove the bandages around his eyes.

“No!” an unearthly screech greeted him as the darkness fell away from his eyes.

He recoiled in instinctive horror at the crazed creature before him – a woman who was not a woman, with bloodshot violet eyes, nails like talons, dead-white skin oozing black, and oil-slick hair and wings which seemed to melt and bubble in the caustic sea water.

Whatever room or house or hut he was in was gone, as the punishing sea had crashed into and over it and was now swirling around him and the creature, trying to suck both of them underneath its violent surface. With a cry both enraged and fearful the creature took flight, but not without taking Zack with her.

He writhed and twisted under her strong arms, forcing her to choose either to drop him or follow him into the swirling vortex of water and salt. The old man and ageless creature wrestled just above

¹ Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Act IV, scene 1, lines 134-138.

² Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Act III, scene 2, lines 132-140.

the surface, Zack kicking and splashing as violently as possible such that she was soon enough covered in ugly rising blisters. In excruciating pain, she finally let go.

Zack sought the relative safety of the punishing sea, diving well below the surface with quick, adrenaline-fueled kicks, leaving a quickly dissipating trail of inky blackness behind him. For the bandages were not made of cloth at all but was of the same oozing substance that he saw exude from the creature, a darkness made visible.

Zack shuddered, and the buoyant sea pushed him to the surface, where he retched inky darkness – the delicious food that the creature had fed him. His skin burning and his head dizzy, he could feel that strong compulsion again, like a deep ache in his heart that directed him forward, to start swimming onward.

He heard a screech from above – a raptor that had caught sight of its prey – and he cried out in fear and pain as he saw her dive headfirst, her strong arms outstretched in expectation.

But then a blur of light so bright that Zack was briefly blinded shot out and caught her just inches above his head. He stared as the figure of light dragged her high into the sunlit, deep blue sky, and his mind finally gave him the words for what he just saw.

Angel and demon.

He shook his head in one violent shudder and then continued his journey, not daring to witness the battle above him.

#

Over the bottomless Purgatorial Sea, two angels wrestled in the sky.

For Ariel, he felt an odd sense of relief. Finally, he was in motion instead of waiting and watching on Mount Purgatory, following his orders. Having full access to Central’s intel, a bird’s eye view of the entire Purgatorial Sea, and his own comm firmly in place, he had crouched on a stony outcropping as he saw Miranda construct an island from the sub-atomic particles of Zack Fitzpatrick’s discarded material body, from dust to dust.

From his perch, he felt both awe and disgust at Miranda’s sub-creation, recycling Zack’s matter to manufacture matter in the spiritual realm. Knowing Miranda, he knew that she was likely feeling smug and clever, finding a loophole or backdoor anchor to Heaven by catching a ride on Zack’s dying soul, judging that he wouldn’t be going to Hell but – given his earthly record – would have to undergo Purgatory before allowed into Heaven proper. He shook his head at her audacity.

But also knowing how it was to be fallen and homeless, he also understood her despair, of being Heaven’s exile and yet not belonging in Hell. He understood her aching loss, not just the loss of

Heaven but also the loss of Earth. She would need Zack close to anchor her existence in this lobby of Sacred Space. What she should’ve known but seemed to have either forgotten or denied was that Zack was more powerful than she was. She was fallen, while Zack, in making it to the Purgatorial Sea, was Heaven-bound.

Ariel shook his head, pitying her.

It was only human for Zack to seek some kind of relief from the waters, to invite any kind of respite. The purgatorial process was excruciating, as the remaining dross of a soul’s earthly existence was literally eaten away, as an acid eats through rust. Vulnerable as Zack was, Ariel witnessed Miranda binding Zack from head to toe in her fallen substance, covering even his eyes, for in Sacred Space Miranda would not be able to transform her appearance and thus could not deceive the human’s eyes.

But the subtle and then strong-armed actions of a fallen angel were mere parlor tricks compared to the protests and prayers of a human soul in Purgatory. The man’s sending, *Amy*, reverberated across all of Sacred Space, a call in which the response was the very Purgatorial Sea rising up to reduce the alien island into pure energy, the particles dancing in the air like dust motes.

Ariel witnessed all of Miranda’s actions, not questioning Central’s decision to allow her to play out her plan until the acceptable time of intervention. When Zack cried out as he faced Miranda’s rage, that cry was Ariel’s cue: NOW.

He leaped up from his perch on Mount Purgatory. Aided by the thermal currents of the vault of Heaven, he shot down Miranda’s attack like a heat-seeking missile and then pulled up just as quickly, with Miranda in tow.

More like animal than angel, Miranda screeched and clawed and bit and writhed. Ariel was able to see up close what eons of Hell’s residency – outside and inside of Miranda – had done to shatter Miranda’s angelic beauty and sanity.

Angel and demon, he heard Zack’s sending. It was only then that he had to agree, as he tried not to doubt his own ability to complete his mission.

Go, Zack, go go go, he sent, as he endured Miranda’s painful struggling but refused to let go.

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Swimming and swimming and swimming, despite his nausea, despite his skin burning and stinging, despite his eyes momentarily going blind with the pain of salt. He could not see where he was going, but the deep ache in him pointed true, like a compass’s needle. Whether he was swimming for hours or days or weeks, he couldn’t tell in this timeless sea.

Then he saw it – a solitary, unimaginably tall and narrow mountain jutting out of the sea like a dead volcano, its perimeter a narrow ring of rock and sand. His heart’s ache pointed him there, and he did not question it. From the deep ocean, to the shallows, to the rocky beach, he dragged himself out of the water and lay face down, panting on the surface, the waves gently lapping against the raw and naked body of a thirty-year old Zachary James Fitzpatrick.

He heard soft footsteps approach, and he looked up. “Amy,” he whispered.

Still looking as he best remembered her – a happy wife, a young mother – Amy sat down, the hem of her white shift floating in the waters, and pulled him up enough so that he could see her dark eyes, face to face. “FINALLY you called,” she said, slightly exasperated, but smiling. “You *really* know how to keep a woman waiting, do you, sailor boy.”

Zack stared, marveling that nothing – absolutely nothing – hurt. Then he burst out laughing, a laughter that was only stopped when Amy pulled him closer and gave a long, welcoming kiss.

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Hearing Zack’s laughter ring out across the Purgatorial Sea, Ariel let go of Miranda.

Hearing Zack’s laughter echoing across the Purgatorial Sea, Miranda’s face grew grief-stricken, and she shot out towards Mount Purgatory.

“Miranda!” Ariel called after her, but she wasn’t listening. He followed, but he was not chasing, for there was no reason to chase. Zack was safe – as Zoey had predicted – in the care of Amy, his earthly wife and one of the Communion of Saints. He was home now. So Ariel soared high above the crystal blue waters – caustic in its saltiness to any creature bearing the burden of fallenness, but refreshing in its sweetness to any creature unfallen or restored to unfallenness, like himself. He flew through the sky of Sacred Space, as clear and bright as a cool, sunlit day on Earth. Only on approach to Mount Purgatory did he see clouds, opaque white that obscured the very top of the mountain that touched Heaven, like Mount Olympus of Earth legend. The clouds cast enough moisture in the air that a permanent rainbow spanned the island, which glittered with the light of Heaven.

But it wasn’t the clouds, the rainbow, the light of Heaven, or even the vision of Amy guiding a newly restored Zack up the winding mountain paths that stopped Ariel’s flight in mid-air.

Assailing herself against the light of Heaven’s force shield around the mountain, Miranda flew headfirst again and again, each time slamming against the something invisible, each time inflicting great injury on herself as the shield held, pristine and intact.

Miranda had lost it.

Ariel recalled that old human saying: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” But Miranda, as maddened as she was with grief, was not entirely insane, even as he saw her battered body rebound like a broken bird against a car windshield. In her grief, Miranda sent, and Ed received without a word, witnessing her pathetic actions.

Why why why why did he get saved – he doesn’t deserve it, lousy father, lousy husband, abandoned his family, damn coward. Why him and not Mara, not Halim, powerless, do nothing, need to do something, I can’t stand this!

Miranda threw herself into the shield, feeling the substance of herself crushed and bleeding ichor. She focused on that pain, trying to replace the never-ending pain of betrayal by her Creator, the pain of seeing her family uncreated, annihilated, as if they were never born, and not a damn thing she could do about it. But she could do this self-injury, not even pausing between each beating against the shield for her injuries to heal, cursing her inability to die.

Christ, Miranda, Ariel sent, and he flew to intervene.

“Go away!” Miranda cried out loud, her face a battered, bleeding mess.

“Not this time,” he replied, and he stayed her hand. “Look.”

The clouds over Mount Purgatory parted a little. With Ariel serving as transmitter and amplifier, he revealed to Miranda what she could not believe in her fallen nature and her blind and deaf grief.

She saw Mara, forever a teenage mother. She saw Halim, forever a little baby but – miraculously – transformed as a human soul. They both peered down from above, amongst the Communion of Saints, glowing with the light of Heaven.

“Central can’t uncreate, remember? To do so would destroy who He is. Just because the Reboot happened doesn’t mean the righteous who weren’t in the stasis ark got sent with the unrighteous. Did you see Mara and Halim in Hell?”

“No – I was never allowed to go further than Pandemonium’s outer level,” Miranda replied quietly, her face enraptured, looking radiant in her happiness. “Heaven. My God, they’re in Heaven.” She stared intently, fearing that if she looked away, then the vision had never happened. But just as suddenly as the feeling of happiness had come, Miranda could feel it slipping away, as the old resentment against Central threatened to return, of being made a fool, a pawn, in the human’s purgatory, of being ignorant for all of these eons of Mara’s and Halim’s true end, of living under a deception of her own making that no one had ever bothered to rip apart until now.

Ariel stared as Miranda started grabbing and ripping at her skin, as the dark, sticky ooze of her fallenness began to choke away her tiny glimpse of joy. She cried in panic and fear, unable to control the sign of her damnation. “Ari,” she cried out, using an old name she had for him, once upon a time,

when they were both in Heaven. “Ari – help me – Ari, I don’t want to lose this joy, I don’t want this hate anymore – please --” She flung out handfuls of the black ooze, but it poured out non-stop, an unstoppable hemorrhage of despair and self-loathing.

In reply, he grabbed Miranda and, holding her tight, dive-bombed straight into the Purgatorial Sea. Even under water, all of Sacred Space heard her scream.

Again, he did not let go, as he flew deep into the waters of the Purgatorial Sea. Within his arms he could feel the layers upon layers of Miranda’s fallenness being stripped away, each layer coming off in slimy inkiness, revealing another raw, slimy layer underneath.

Miranda writhed and convulsed, not in any desire to escape but in the involuntary spasms of a creature in excruciating pain, as if being tortured. If there was an easier way to purge Miranda’s fallenness, he would do it – but there wasn’t.

He kept his speed steady but faster than light, to allow the waters’ scouring to outpace the inky ooze’s regeneration. In the Sacred Space of this timeless sea, they had all the time in the world to undergo purgatory. However, he had no idea how many revolutions in the Purgatorial Sea the process would need, as no fallen angel had ever experienced this process, tailor-made for humans.

Eventually, Miranda’s screams ceased. Eventually, the sickening slipperiness of Miranda’s sloughing layers lessened, then ceased. Finally, Ariel opened his eyes – tightly shut the whole time – and saw the pure essence of Miranda, who was barely conscious, laid bare. He was not so much holding her as keeping in stasis the shimmering quantum particles that kept the core information of Miranda intact. It was this Miranda that he brought out of the water, finally breaking free of the Purgatorial Sea into the warm, sun-lit sky, and touching down gently at the foot of Mount Purgatory.

He spread his hands, and the shimmer that was Miranda flowed and spilled onto the rocky shore, coalescing into a form vaguely humanoid. He looked up and saw Mara, with a sleeping baby Halim strapped to her chest, approaching, her body shining like a beacon.

The mortal dust of Zack Fitzpatrick flew and danced toward Mara, as if called. She kneeled before the shimmering form and kissed where Miranda’s forehead would be, as if in a blessing. At the spot the dust flew in, not only covering Miranda’s form but filling in, like clay slip in a mold.

It was the miracle of transubstantiation that Ariel was witnessing. After the dust had settled, what lay unconscious and naked before them was not Miranda the fallen angel but Malech the man, newly born.

In his sleep, he cried out, a soft baritone, and Ariel gave a small gasp, hoping that it was allowed, his small but sharp mourning for the passing of Miranda and their shared past.

“It’s allowed,” Mara said, picking up the angel’s thoughts.

“I – thank you.” He breathed deeply, letting the ache of grief wash over him and then evaporate away. “I’m ready.”

Mara now was witness as Ariel crouched and reached out, his right hand just centimeters above Malech’s chest, rising and dropping with every peaceful breath. At first, his hand was flat, palm facing down. But then he quickly made a tight fist and pulled away, and Malech’s newly born heart stopped beating, his breath falling away.

The dust, as quickly as it came together in Malech, fell away, phasing from matter to energy flowing into the rock and sand. What remained was a human soul, still in the position of deep sleep upon the rocky shore. Mara removed her outer tunic and draped it over Malech – just a young man under a blanket, sleeping on the beach, with a young woman sitting nearby, gently adjusting his blanket and sweeping a stray lock of dark hair from his sleeping eyes.

The angel adjusted his position, sitting next to both of them. He breathed out, a weird mixture of sadness, joy, and love roiling and tumbling within him. “It worked.”

“Yes,” Mara replied quietly. “Finally. But only when he chose to stop fighting, chose to ask for help. He very well could have chosen the other way.” She swept Malech’s hair away from his sleeping eyes. “Free will always makes everything complicated, does it,” she declared.

“Always.” He rubbed his eyes, suddenly tired. “What happens next?”

“I stay with Malech as he sleeps, for as long as he was Malech on Earth before the Reboot. When he awakens, I’ll serve as his guide up Mount Purgatory and, from there, it’s up to Central to decide Malech’s role, as his experiences are very unique.”

Ariel chuckled. “Yes, even more unique than mine. A fallen angel is granted redemption and then human mortality. Who knew that could happen?”

“Well – God?”

He gave her an odd look until he realized that she was joking, and he smiled. “That’s about right.” He glanced upwards. “I guess I should be going.” He began reluctantly to stand up.

“You can stay and keep us company for awhile, if you’d like.”

He tilted his head to the side, listening. “Well, I’m allowed,” he declared.

“Good, then. We can swap stories – your happy memories of Miranda, my happy memories of Malech. How does that sound?”

Zoey would’ve loved this, he thought. Smiling, he settled back down, grateful for the space afforded to say goodbye to Miranda and welcome to Malech. “That sounds wonderful.”

