



[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

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The Banjo Players Must Die

Josef Assad

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This is released version 1.0. Errata (hah! ) will be found on <http://sancairodicopenhagen.com/tbpmd.html>. The author may be contacted at [thebanjoplayersmustdie@gmail.com](mailto:thebanjoplayersmustdie@gmail.com).

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IMPORTANT NOTE

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This is the plain text edition of this novel. The style relies very heavily on footnotes. You are strongly recommended to read the pdf or doc version of this novel. In this edition, footnotes (of which there are almost 250!) are represented inline (i.e. in the place in the text where they would have been referenced) and are enclosed in square brackets[This would represent a footnote, for example].

You can find better formatted versions of this novel here:

<http://www.SanCairoDiCopenhagen.com/tbpmd.html>

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For Chiara, despite the fact that she will never read or like this book, being a Roman Catholic,

For the unwilling,

For the easily amused,

And for anyone who thinks incense and hard work makes the monsters go away.

## Chapter 1

: Them, their Banjos, Him, and Those

Of science and logic he chatters As fine and as fast as he can; Though I am no judge of such matters, I'm sure he's a talented man.

Winthrop Mackworth Praed - The Talented Man

No one knew where they came from; their origin was clouded. Oh, there were theories of course, but there was no evidence. All attempts to scour the records of antiquity for clues were fruitless. No matter how far back in history you went, there they were. Running. Screaming. Pleading for mercy and receiving none. Their appearance did not appear to have changed much in the course of several eons; it suited Darwin's proponents well to ignore them, for they did not evolve. They were the universal constant; always there, always persecuted, always the fugitives from the oppressive forces of divine moral rectitude, and always - always - defiantly playing away on their banjos.

\* \* \*

This is the story of several things, all of them individually very consequential but collectively all rather banal and uninspiring. This book brings you the true story of the End of the World, for varying and often very sparse degrees of true, end, and world; this should not dampen your enthusiasm for this historical account, as history shows us time and time again that historical accounts are often worth very little other than the tablet it is chiseled on[With any luck, we can replicate this success at obscuring counterintuitive assertions in unnecessarily long and circuitous sentences many times in this account.].

This story is told from the privileged perspective of one with access to all the insiders. As anyone who reads tabloids will know, that means that this is also an account of whom had sex with whom, when, how, at what expense, and whether they got a discount or not. More intriguingly however, we shall reveal also whom didn't have sex, and we shall also discuss all the different forms of sex for which this holds true. After all, angels are major characters in the story of how the world ends, and angels represent purity[For now.] .

Everything in this account has been fact checked for authenticity[By a crack squad of baboon fetuses.] . For reasons which wouldn't piss off unless you read the entire account through to its end, we cannot determine at which point in human history this account will be read. We have therefore provided historical context and will describe the way the world changed into the disturbing place it was around the time when Doomsday was planned.

\* \* \*

Right up until the beginning of the twenty-first century, the world as we know it had clung - like a determined but very odd cheetah to a clothesline - to a rudimentary semblance of rationality. When the last fast food restaurant closed down in 2044, Western civilization lost its cultural foothold in the world and the Egyptians began their ascendancy. In the words of Dr. Harvey Stromgard[Dr. Stromgard was professor of Miffed Garden Furniture at the Arizona Institute of Everything for which Public Research Funds Are Available.] :

"...in every sense of the word. What was unusual, however, was not the lack thereof, rather the abundance of diminished quantities of such qualities. This failed to have much effect in general, however, though it must be said that the general situation did nudge slightly right and perhaps a little towards the periphery too. All in all, not something one would want to really claim adherence to."

Which is all well until one considers the catastrophic implications which have historically risen as consequence of rigidly determined modalities, especially those considering catastrophic implications.

#### Concise Account of History, Abridged - Stromgard

The decline of the Western cultural paradigm left behind it a power vacuum the size of something really big. There was no unipolar world order, nor a bipolar one[Gladly, unicorns and bisexuals survived this purge.] There wasn't even a tri-polar world order[The triceratops had, woe, perished long before.] . There wasn't a quadripolar or pentapolar world order either for that matter, although that is most likely because those words don't really exist and were just made up. The world rapidly became so un-polar that - much to their embarrassment - the Dictionarium Aegyptum forgot to include the word polar in the 2187 edition and got it wrong in the next:

polar: poo`LAR - (anachr.) 1. The tendency to sexual arousal when exposed to banal legal minutiae 2. An obscure skin condition ("I have a polar on my bum." - "You have a what? ") 3. Something remarkably like an obscure skin condition 4. The tendency to discuss banal legal minutiae when initiating sexual congress.

#### Dictionarium Aegyptum

After 2044, the world lived in a state of mundane and unenthusiastic nationalism, with a plurality of nation-states actually getting along with one another, and ignoring one another when not getting along instead of exchanging invective and weapons of mass destruction.

In 2051, the Arabs and the Jews made peace, having exhausted their respective supplies of race-laden swear words and not feeling inclined to making any more up[Had the Egyptians and Israelis been sufficiently motivated, they could have learned Finnish or Swedish and kept at it for another few centuries.] . The Americans forgave the Cubans in 2054, and the Cubans forgave the Americans a few decades later for forgiving them when they had done nothing wrong. In fact, peace reigned; the Dalai Lama made the Chinese Politburo (which as a historical event might suffer some dilution from the fact that the Politburo had some years earlier reformed itself into a dance club), the tree-hugging bleeding heart hippies became mainstream (of course, mainstream reacted by ambling off somewhere, breathing through its nose and rolling its eyes), and dogs picked up their own feces.

This nauseating state of utopia fortunately didn't last long; once again from Stromgard's Concise Account of History, Abridged:

"...therefore they could do only one thing; admit defeat and move on. Not that this deterred them very much; it wasn't much longer until they resumed the struggle, undeterred by any deterrents which may previously have been.

Not that they remembered particularly much at that point what the whole struggle was about, just as I don't quite recall either. But that was never the point. The nobility is in the struggle, and the struggle ..."

#### Concise Account of History, Abridged - Stromgard

Or, perhaps slightly more lucidly, from The Pocket Guide to Human History by Caldwell[Despite the widespread use of Caldwell's work as a passable guide to Stromgard's quality work, not much is known of Caldwell himself. Not even his first name is known though it is rumored to be Catherine. Caldwell was otherwise widely maligned for writing sensible books and died in abject poverty of a broken heart, gonorrhea, Brussels sprouts syndrome, and of unspecified and vague ass pains.] :

There were those whom global peace, understanding, and cooperation didn't suit. The arms industry soon tired

of producing weapons systems that would never be used for anything other than hunting rabbits and squirrels. Plastic button manufacturers were forced into bankruptcy; the lack of political strife drove down demand something horrible.

It could only end badly.

The Pocket Guide to Human History - Caldwell

Without political strife, it got boring quickly. Religious strife wasn't an option either, since it had pretty much been done to death by the Semitic peoples in the Middle East; religious conflict as an art-form had been perfected there and had been laid to rest complete. And, truth to tell, one couldn't simply have plain old strife, it had to have a qualifying adjective of suitable character to validate it and lend it gravitas.

For once, humanity was at a genuine loss for something worthwhile to kill each other over.

They tried out botanical strife in Guatemala, but there was something about fighting over palm fronds which smothered enthusiasm. Boustrophedonic strife erupted briefly in Canada but petered out quickly amidst angry cries for new types of strife with more pronounceable names. The University of Two Goats, Arizona produced a paper proposing typographical strife, but the idea failed to imprint itself outside the limited circulation of academic journals. A Belgian priest - finding that his profession could not survive without people killing each other in large numbers over trivial differences of opinion - proposed that we change the way strife is spelled to stryphe, thereby enabling people to engage in ethnic stryphe without the feeling that they are reinventing the wheel. This triggered a violent bout of semantic strife which did not die down until Father Manicurus was dispatched to the aphterlyphe. The southern German province of Bavaria experienced some ethnic strife in the early twenty-first century, and it was quickly reprimanded by its neighboring countries for its manifest lack of originality.

In many unexpected ways, this desperate quest for a new form of strife influenced and transformed the global psyche. The longer the human race suffered the pestilence of unity, peace and harmonious coexistence, the more odious became the stench of desperation for destruction. Bad things simply stopped happening; in 1996, there had been 590 televised news channels broadcasting a nourishing and endless stream of meaningless and very satisfying destruction. In 2100 there were three, and they broadcasted for a total of three hours a day. Three hours, regurgitating historical footage of calamities and cataclysms and past conflicts as filler for what scant misery their reporters could find or fabricate. In 2100, it was possible for a citizen to go several months without the faintest excuse to get pissed off.

This unbearable state of affairs wreaked havoc on society. All novel forms of strife were attempted. Where such forms of strife contravened social mores and values, those values were loudly denounced. Moral nihilism sprung to the fore in no time at all, and for once humans adhered to the system of conduct which suited them best and simultaneously put them the least at ease.

But if history has taught us anything, it is that when things will look like they are going really well and really poorly all at the same time, this is when the angels start to meddle. And know that angels never meddle idly, and rarely ever with any degree of success.

It could only end in disaster.

The disaster was called Ramses, and Ramses was its name.

\* \* \*

It is the custom (perhaps born out of bureaucratic ennui) that when new prophets arrive, a sign is given.

Sometimes, these signs are declared retroactively and sometimes it seems like the angels are reaching just a little[The archetypal example is Jesus being born under a star. Under has absolutely no meaning when it is describing the relative position of a star versus a puny little human, for one thing. Under only has meaning on smaller scales: the remote control is under the angry woman being a good example. We don't normally say that this remote control is under a star since the star really isn't specifically over the remote control, it is just there. Stars lend themselves better to Cartesian coordinates, they don't make any sense with over and under and just beside. From a Cartesian perspective, one could easily say that anything is beside anything else, given the point from which one is observing this prodigious juxtaposition. For example, if I have full freedom of movement in all three degrees I can tell you that the sun is under your arse, which hopefully doesn't have to mean that your arse is a prophet.] .

Ramses Abasiri was born to Waldo and Mona Abasiri on the 28 of January 2445 at the Tiz Erd General Community General Medical Center[The Tiz Erd General Community General Medical Center gained notoriety for the controversial treatment they had developed for convicted sex offenders. The male sexual organ was removed and reattached to the patient's forehead; under this kind of arrangement, the blood drain inflicted upon the brain by an erection would immediately render the subject comatose. It worked rather well, of course.]. The maternity ward staff will recall his birth as the one where the mother suffered from the most violent spasms of flatulence while delivering; it was many months before jokes about 'the malodorous fanfare announcing little Ramses' arrival' abated from the doctors' lounge. True however was that the stink had been so bad that no one had really been present to ascertain which precise orifice it was which little Ramses had emerged from.

At the tender age of four Ramses had single-handedly instructed the masculine half of his 47 kindergarten classmates in matters they shouldn't really have learnt until they could fit inside a condom - only the plodding advance of Mother Nature and puberty prevented any Little Willies from getting acquainted with anything more significant than the odd rodent. Even then, of course, without any measurable result apart from traumatizing the local squirrel population[Consider for a second how much more disturbing that sentence could have been had the expression 'romantically involved' been in there somewhere. Right. You can stop considering now. Hey. Hey!].

Ramses' fascination with all the funny things he could do with his body led him, naturally enough, to the study of mathematics[If you don't understand what it is about mathematics which attracts people who are fascinated with their own beautiful bodies, then you are clearly not a mathematician. And If you are a mathematician and you still don't understand what beautiful bodies have to do with anything, then you need a diet and a plastic surgeon. Only then will you understand. If you are neither a mathematician nor not a mathematician and you are still reading this footnote, then congratulations! You may skip to the last page in this Choose-Your-Own-Adventure! You have rescued the princess!]. When it became clear that mathematics absolutely required some level of arithmetic inclination or proficiency, Ramses moved on to chemistry. Chemistry led to biology, biology led to pornography, pornography led back to chemistry[There are some forms of pornography you don't want to know about.], and that led to a regrettable incident in his life which we will try very hard not to elaborate on. We'll just call it the Raped Tomato Incident, just so we can avoid mentioning it further on. Without going into much detail of course.

You see, it is terribly embarrassing. To Ramses, that is.

Academically, Ramses didn't bring the spotlight down on himself. And if he did, it was most certain to be a spotlight one would rather do without, such as the spotlight he brought upon himself during the legendary Raped Tomato Incident, which we will not be mentioning anymore. He didn't actually fail any classes, though this might have more to do with teachers wanting to be rid of him than any actual competence on his behalf.

And you can't really blame the teachers for wanting to be done with little Ramses; the Raped Tomato Incident was certainly not the only calamity he ever originated or contributed to. There was also the Bubblegum Where

Bubblegum Really Shouldn't Go, to name but one. The Farting Nun Prank was also widely attributed to Ramses, though he had by the time it was committed learned to keep his unclean pastimes to himself. But really, we should quit it with the Raped Tomato Incident now.

So, apart from the Raped Tomato Incident and a number of similar events, Ramses Abasiri's youth progressed without any lasting damage to humanity at large. He excelled in chemistry, oddly enough, though his chemical adventures seemed to confine themselves to a hitherto fruitless search for aphrodisiacs and some decidedly more successful attempts to further aggravate the smell of Hydrogen Sulfide, the chemical associated with rotten eggs.

In a sense, it was a shame that Ramses became the Prophet of End Of Days on the 16th of Nobemver of the year 2484 (The eleventh month of the year has its 'v' and 'b' switched entirely at random, since it amuses the people to hear it mispronounced. The advent of direct democracy had rotted the political process into a never-ending series of polls concerning what was funny and what was not, and Nobemver clocked in at the high end[This is not about what you find funny, it is about what the simple majority find funny. Does it amuse you? Good. We the majority certainly hope so, because you wouldn't want to offend us by denigrating our collective sense of humor. Good, your hysterical if somewhat nervous laughter is good, it pleases us. Perhaps we shall refrain from considering your horrendous death amusing.]. So did that famous video clip of the quadriplegic slipping on the mango seed in a subway bullet train compartment. The one with the laughing ninja.), for he appeared just then to be seeing some slight measure of progress in his diligent scientific inquiries into the expansion of the capacity of the female hamster's reproductive interfaces.

\* \* \*

"Cecilia, another case of firecrackers please," he asked his lab assistant in polite scientific detachment. Lisa was the latest in a long procession of assistants. She merely indicated with her hand the half full box of firecrackers not 30 centimeters from Dr. Abasiri's right elbow. "Ah, thank you. You're a quick one, eh. Hmm-mumble-yeeees, just a leeeeedel tad further in, and ...Yes. Now, step back please Amanda, if you will be so kind."

Lisa stepped back and looked on in plain disgust. The hamster, like the 56 before it today, had had to be drugged quite heavily before it ceased objecting to having a strange little exploding stick inserted into its private parts. The 43 hamsters remaining had long since abandoned their exercise wheels and were observing in shocked silence, waiting for their turn with a startling lack of enthusiasm. Dr. Abasiri lit the firecracker, put the hamster in a large casserole and clamped the lid down.

He cocked his head at Lisa, grinned, and mouthed something like 'explosive pussy', or at any rate something equivalent on the scale of indecency. There was a muted pop sound from inside the casserole. Dr. Abasiri made a very small involuntary oinking type of noise which Lisa had come to associate with some unusual strain of professional excitement, and he opened the casserole to examine Hamster 56's delicate bits.

"Well there you go. See? Still in one piece. I knew the firecracker - hurm, entrails - there, gone." Gone, as was Lisa too, not desiring to witness the Professor test-driving his latest prototype.

\* \* \*

Professor Ramses Abasiri's interest in expanding the capacity of the female hamster's genitalia had taken root in his years of postgraduate studies in Copenhagen. Always an innovative youngster, Ramses developed his own signature method for signalling amorous interest in young female colleagues. The technique involved whipping out his schlongen-dongen in front of his prey and standing there panting. Occasionally, when the girl was unusually well-endowed - his nose would begin to bleed. This method was tried and tested; the resulting success rate encouraged him to broaden his horizons somewhat where his criteria for acceptable

copulatory partners were concerned.

To save you the fetid details, Ramses finally found his scientific calling one forlorn night - incidentally, the very same night his flatmate lost his hamster Barry[This is not the kind of insensitive account where guiltless pets lose their lives, though - in the course of events laid out here - some may gain the unusual capability of excreting objects twice their size without excessive strain.].

Now Ramses may have been his mama's little turd but he was nobody's fool, and he could smell an opportunity for financial gain when it knocked on his door. None of this science for the sake of science bollocks for Ramses, oh no, science was there to serve the community and make him rich in the process. Oh yes it was. Barry had not suffered amidst Ramses' cries of ecstasy for naught; no, Ramses perceived, Barry had involuntarily explored with him the new frontier of sexual gratification. The memory of that special evening would be honored, Ramses determined, and the world would remember Barry as the vanguard of the new sexual-economic revolution.

Ramses envisioned a world where the hamster transcended its role as insipid pet and became the cheap and affordable sexual companion that never said no[At least until evolution had provided the things with larynxes.]. The Expanded Vagina Extra-Super HAMster, or the E.V.E.S.H.A.M. would lay waste to the blowup doll market - dull men would discuss breed preferences with other dull men around water coolers worldwide.

As for women, well, they could always grow themselves a vegetable garden.

\* \* \*

Ramses had graduated with a doctorate in zoology from the Institute of Foreign Languages in Bonn in 2473. He had commenced work immediately on his idee fixe, and had set up a research facility in Zamalek, one of the seedier districts of Cairo. Initial work was discouraging, as this journal entry reveals:

"...this formula is definitely a disappointment. For the record, the attached formula[Records of which have disappeared.] outlines my initial work at producing a balm which, when applied to genital muscular tissue, expands and relaxes them.

The results, of course, speak for themselves. Attached photographs wex014 through wez779 show - in amusingly lurid detail - the spontaneous combustion which occurs when applied to your garden variety rodent. Why this should occur is, quite frankly, beyond me. The pictures are worth a giggle or three, though. Try wez034, the expression on the hamster's face is priceless!

Incidentally, Robert, my lab assistant, spilled some balm on his lasagna. I noticed and omitted to tell him; who's to object when Lady Fortune desires to randomly expand the scope of experimentation? Didn't do him any perceptible harm; only he subsequently excreted a pristine lasagna. Which he ate again. And excreted again. Ad infinitum.

The boy never gets tired of lasagna, it would seem.

So anyhow, it appears that this balm regenerates consumed foodstuff. I tried it on a Crunchy-Wunchy chocolate bar. I've eaten it 88 times in the last 4 days; still good as new. Of course, you have to make do without the wrapper. I suppose a narrow-minded fool would regard this balm as a solution to the world hunger problem. I, however, have greater visions - I couldn't care a rat's ass for world hunger.

Hmm. Rat's ass...Hamster's vagina. I could be on to something here...



Dr. Ramses Abasiri's inquiries into the hamster alternative took him, in late 2475, down the parallel universes avenue.

At the time, the theory of parallel universes remained as it had for almost 5 centuries: a boon to unimaginative writers of paperback fiction and no more. Dr. Abasiri reasoned that, if every distinct possibility in our current universe, every choice creating a fork which resulted in an alternate and parallel universe, then it would be most advantageous for him to...

"...ferret out the rodent loving parallel universe, where humans and hamsters humped like rabbits without having to worry about someone ratting on them to the animal protection authorities[The working journals of Ramses Abasiri are rife with this baffling choice of rodent-oriented vocabulary. If the subject matter were not so distasteful, it would be considered playful and poetic.]."

By mid-summer 2476, the groundwork theory upon which inter-dimensional travel would be based had successfully been laid[As opposed to the Professor.]. Implementation, however, posed its own problems; from the Professor's journal:

"The D.I.L.D.O.[Dimensional Inter-Locator for Delectable Objects] doesn't appear to be doing anything I designed it to do. Of course, I haven't tested it yet, at least not personally. I did shove Anna through it though. That's my lab assistant. I have no idea where she went.

Which is, really, quite odd. You have this hoop with a trans-dimensional stasis field spun across it's surface, and you can see right through it. And yet Amanda, that's my lab assistant, she stumbles right through it and fails to appear again. Especially on the other side of the hoop, as one would expect from a well-functioning hoop.

This thing was designed - I could almost swear I got all the calculations right! - such that sexy buxom and totally horny hamsters should practically burst out of it from other dimensions, and still, nothing.

Decidedly odd. I did try pissing into it, however, and the piss too disappeared. Now, this thing might yet be of commercially value, though I don't know anyone in the hygiene business. It would make one Hell of a fancy toilet. Pity the recipient dimension though.

But it's a shame about my lab assistant. Anita? Yes, Anita. I hope I didn't actually piss on her in another dimension. Though, according to theory, I did in at least some dimensions piss on her. Come to mention it, there's probably also a dimension out there where she's being pissed on constantly, though I suppose one would adopt to something like that. Just look at the British."

Dr. Esmat Owi-Kan Se was at the time the then HoG (bureaucrat speak for Head of Group) of P.I.G.L.E.T.[The demise of the United Nations in the pandemic global peace of the late 21 century did not spell an end to acronym abuse. P.I.G.L.E.T. is an excellent example of why a large organization should never let its consulting scientists pick their own acronyms; it stands for Projecting Intense Gratitude by Licking Everyone's Testicles. It was responsible chiefly for propagating new research, much against any indications the acronym might have given.], a subdivision of B.o.A.R.[The Board Of Advanced Research.] Upon hearing of Dr. Abasiri's research, he sought copies of the relevant notes and technical briefs. Sadly, they had already been used in the stead of toilet paper and were no longer suitable for development and peer review. He had this to say:

"Abasiri's monomaniacal pursuit of rodent sex has blinded him to the larger need of the world around him. His destruction of papers related to trans-dimensional transportation will retard the scientific progress of the human race; how much, I cannot tell. I, for one, wish upon him a hamster rapist.

Strong words for sure, though as events transpired, a little unnecessary. Ramses had impeded the progress of science somewhat, but not as much as Owi-Kan Se had thought. For the world was on a tight schedule to close shop some scant 24 years later.

\* \* \*

Lisa hadn't enjoyed the experience of falling through the D.I.L.D.O. very much.

For one thing, the actual trans-dimensional voyage/transformation itself seemed to involve performing acts with the human body which one would otherwise naturally have done with a sock. That is, having one's head pulled from the inside through the butt such that one was inverted - yanked inside out. Which was fairly painful. And then having it done again, such that one was no longer inverted. Which, naturally, was also quite painful.

Another source of displeasure to Lisa was the alternate universe she had been unceremoniously dumped in. Dr. Abasiri's theory was perfectly sound, she observed; this universe was exactly like her own in almost all regards except for one.

She watched as the occupant of the cage beside her, an older lady and quite heavily drugged, was carefully lifted out by a gigantic hamster in a white lab coat. The name tag on the lab coat said `Dr. Abasiri'. Clipped to the old lady's left ear was a large white tag with the number 75 printed on it. Lisa felt her ear and found a similar tag; 76. Lisa, or rather number 76 jumped off its exercise wheel and watched the proceedings with a startling lack of enthusiasm.

"Linda, can you fetch me some more firecrackers please" the giant hamster asked. It's lab assistant, another giant hamster, gestured to the half full box at the Professor's right elbow.

And of Lisa the lab assistant we shall say no more.

\* \* \*

Dr. Ramses Abasiri's work with explosives was eventually to show itself as the most promising approach to artificial adaption of female hamster genitalia to the Professor's schlongen-dongen.

The first few specimen suffered Ramses' lack of experience with explosives, of course. In fact, the suffering caused by Ramses' lack of ordinance experience extended itself to a few neighboring buildings too. It was a hard-earned lesson for Dr. Ramses Abasiri; cram a stick of TNT inside a hamster and you won't be left with much of a sex partner.

TNT led to milder forms of ordnance such as firecrackers, and Ramses had only just begun to find the appropriate ratio between hamster mass and firecracker yield when the divine recruiters found him.

Ah yes, the divine recruiters; now one has to wonder why. Why did a serial hamster-violator such as this one become the Ordained Prophet of the Acopalypse? What folly of a selection process produced this abomination of due procedure? Was this Ramses Abasiri - this blemish on the left buttock[The right buttock, in this metaphor, has been left pristine and pure such that the reader may compare it to the left one and shudder in revulsion.] of mankind - was he indeed the most shining example the human race could produce? And if so, should everyone else have had the grace to kill themselves? [Most probably, yes.] And the most pressing question of all; why can't anyone get 7 times 8 right[7 times 8 is generally fifty-six.]?

\* \* \*

It didn't make any sense.

One second they were sitting there playing their banjos and singing songs of oppression, civil liberties, and the inexplicable and eternal wrath of God.

The next they were being pissed on, out of thin air too.

## Chapter 2

: Goats, Plans, and Lumpy Cushions

Mit der Dummheit kaempfen Goetter selbst vergebens[With stupidity the gods themselves struggle in vain.].

Friedrich von Schiller - Die Jungfrau von Orleans

The plan had initially been for Doomsday to occur in the 24<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, the idea had called for Gabriel to sneak his horn in at an Intergalactic Hamburger Purveyors of Doom rock concert in Malawi on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2311, and therefrom to announce the End of the World. Concert attendance was expected to exceed 70% of the world's population, and the audio setup was better than anything God could have come up with, so the thinking was that Gabriel might as well leverage this. Besides, the lighting systems and special effects frankly put burning bushes to shame. As it turned out, however, there had been a problem with the backstage passes...

\* \* \*

It was Flavio who was sent to obtain backstage passes. Flavio's experience did not prepare him for this unique challenge.

Flavio was small for an angel - bearing in mind that angels are rather small to begin with[Which is one explanation why angels are never ever casted in good kung fu movies. There are of course other explanations too, just as there are bad kung fu movies.]. As such his first contact with Benny was not with Benny in general, but with Benny's knee in particular.

Benny was the bouncer holding down the entrance to the backstage area. As such, Benny was rather large fellow. Benny had been to the kind of educational institution which taught large people how to best make use of their superior long-term calorie intake and retention capability to most effectively keep specific classes of persons out of specific places, this usually by standing in or by anything serving as a doorway and behaving like an ogre. Along with rhetoric and Spanish poetry classes, students of such educational institutions were normally desensitized to beating up on little school girls in thick glasses wielding garish autograph books with little cartoon fairies on the cover with silly Japanese names. They were also desensitized to stomping very hard on people's toes as a general tactic for convincing them that they did not want to be backstage after all. In general, one could say that they were desensitized to everything in the name of Protecting the Backstage Area, but especially to cute young fluffy cuddly things. Such was Flavio, and this was why, when Flavio approached him, Benny's first negotiating ploy involved an attempt to convince Flavio's chin - by means of a very well-spoken steel toed boot - that the body connected to the foot did not wish the body connected to the chin to proceed on its present course.

"Oi, you, get off my shin." Benny swung his leg in a wide arc. This terrified Flavio, certainly, and he only clung on harder. "No one gets in to see the band unless I've approved it." Benny whimpered. "And in your case, I'm not approving it."

Benny made a funny move with his leg. It resembled slightly a mule kicking out behind it at a cement mixer which it had mistakenly thought was taunting it, only in reverse - not an easy thing to visualise, but in this story we tell it like it happened. Apart from being decidedly odd, the only other distinguishing characteristic of this particular move was that it had resulted in Flavio being flung most unceremoniously across the lobby.

"Brmff-un-hmmhghrjrrgh." Not only had Flavio been flung across the lobby by a guy called Benny who knew arcane and long-dead martial arts associated with infertile beasts of burden, no, not only so; he had managed to get his head lodged firmly between a pair of very large fake breasts. Stage props for the Intergalactic

Hamburger Purveyors of Doom, one hopes, or else someone had an odd fetish.

"Brrmmf-hmmhg," said Benny the bouncer. He had apparently executed this move with such frequency that he had learned the language of those-with-heads-lodged-in-between-fake-tits. Acknowledging the fact that we cannot all have enjoyed as rich an education as Benny, we will continue their guttural discourse conveniently translated to English.

"Well would you kindly pull me out from inside this bosom, then, if the sight of my knickers offends you so?" pleaded Flavio. Which, for an angel was most undignified. Flavio squirmed about in a desperate bid to coax his body into a position less likely to grant rebellious and very embarrassing underwear a chance to see the world.

"Those are knickers? I mean, the thing you're wearing under that robe, with little orange and maroon teddy bears printed on it?"

"Yes, why?"

"Yes, well."

"Well what?" asked Flavio.

"Nothing." Benny scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"No, do tell please. I am always happy to discuss what's wrong with my knickers when I have my head stuck between a fake pair of breasts. Please, do elaborate."

"You won't get mad, will you?" Benny asked.

"Mad? At you? Why should I be? Heavens no, I'm flung about like this all the time. I actually enjoy it. I approach strangers in the street and ask them if they'd mind very much if I clung to their shins so they could fling me like a ... like a ..."

"Like a mule responding chivalrously to a cement mixer hurling verbal abuse at it, only in reverse" interjected Benny helpfully.

"That's odd. Bizarre description, but yes, that fits rather well. So, as I was saying, I walk up to strangers in the street and ask them politely to let me cling to their shins so that they may fling me -"

"Sorry, but that is truly obnoxious of you. Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

Benny shook his head impatiently; this little fellow wasn't too sharp. "Why do you walk up to perfect strangers and ask them for permission to cling to their shins and be hurled like - never mind. What's that got to do with your knickers anyhow, little fellow?"

"Oh for FUCK's sake, are all bouncers this stupid?" And with that eloquent morsel of profanity, much to Benny's astonishment, Flavio vanished from in between the two fake tits in a puff of acrid black smoke.

\* \* \*

Someone Very Important has a particular distaste for profanity, and an extraordinarily particular distaste for

profanity consisting of four letters, and oftentimes beginning most auspiciously with the letter `f'[The prime example is, of course, `fuck'.]. In fact, any four letter word will do, so long as it ends in `uck'. This does not include `duck', happily, or `puck' even. `Luck' neither; `suck' gets reviewed on a case-by-case basis. `Fart' is fine, since when it is used it is usually funny. It is even possible to sneak one past with phrases like `Oi fuck you, oh NAUGHTY NAUGHTY tongue! I meant fart you of course.'

In Flavio's case, of course, there was no ambiguity around his command and dispatch of that Most Disliked Expletive. He was sent straight to Purgatory and stayed there for a good 14 years having his mouth washed out with nasty substances of dubious biological origins.

And of this foul-mouthed little angel, we shall say no more.

\* \* \*

Flavio's failure was reviewed carefully. There had to be reasons why an honest to God angel had failed even to get past a bouncer, even a bouncer as big as Benny. Even a smallish, foul-mouthed angel like Flavio. Ah, but that must be it, the reviewing committee remarked in unison[Celestial committees of this sort are apt to speak in unison , in singsong too. Most usually Latin, though Swedish may be employed upon occasion to lighten the mood.] Flavio was too small, too weak, and too few.

A careful analysis of Benny's body weight, inertial distribution, psychological motivations, and martial capabilities was conducted. Appropriate strategies of approach were developed, counter-measures selected, and a team of the most capable angels was selected for the task.

Which was all commendable, of course, only they might have done better to study Eastern European sexual preferences, goats, and the unexpected manners in which these two subjects intersect.

\* \* \*

What with Flavio being in Purgatory having his mouth washed out with abominable substances, the task team was headed up by Cherub Brian. This was all part of the plan, of course; the fact that Brian's first name began with the same letter as Benny was expected to butter the bouncer up considerably[From the strategy brief: "We the Celestial Committee for Drafting a Strategy to Get Backstage Passes Such that Gabriel May Blow His Horn" have assessed alliteration as almost always adding assurances of amorous argument amongst all. Because Brian begins with B like Benny, the best bet becomes betasking Brian.].

The task team - all fourteen of them - had also shed their wings for this task, since mankind seemed to think it made them look like sissies. In a world gone to seed, haloes were not desirable accessories either and the angels were made to hand these over for safe-keeping[Haloos are obviously not mundane items to be left around while one gets sent on a mission to Earth to obtain backstage passes to concerts; the Chinese factory where they were manufactured had diversified out into toilet plungers and sweet cakes, neither of which - after due testing - constituted suitable alternatives to regular angelic haloos.] before setting out.

Task Force Benny was dropped in a small fishing boat just off the shore of Napoli, Italy. In the cargo-hold. Deprived of haloes and wings, their resemblance to angels was palpably diminished. But just for good measure, their form was entirely transmuted into a something which the Celestial Committee for Drafting a Strategy to Get Backstage Passes Such that Gabriel May Blow His Horn thought likely to help them blend in on earth.

"Er. Brian? "

"Yes? "

"You look kind of funny, Brian," said Fritz. Fritz had been Created rather recently, after they had run out of officious-sounding pseudo-Latin names for the angels.

"Is that so? Well, you know, you look a little funny yourself Fritz," replied Brian.

"So I might, but I'm certain I don't look like a goat. I mean, that's what you look like; a goat, Brian."

"I see. Well, you look like a goat too, you know. You actually sound rather like one too."

Brian looked around himself; the cargo-hold was dim, but the outlines of the other twelve angels were also those of goats. Pretty goats, to be sure, but still goats.

"Well, so I do. We all do, actually. See? " Fritz glanced around and nodded. "Rather pretty goats too, I might add," added Brian.

"Well, yes, we're pretty goats to be sure, praise Him, but we're still goats."

"Fritz, either get to the point or cease this idle bleating of yours."

Fritz itched his flank with a horn. "Well. Let's review the mission objectives then, shall we? We have been sent to Earth to approach Benny the Bouncer, conquer him - preferably with love and understanding - and proceed to make the acquaintance of a bunch of musicians going by the collective name of the Interstellar Hamburger Purveyors of Doom. This will yield us a backstage pass for their upcoming concert, which Gabriel needs to blow his horn to end the world."

"No, that's not entirely accurate."

"No? "

"No."

"Well fine then Brian; what did I miss? "

"Nothing really; you didn't miss anything as such. Only they're called The Intergalactic Hamburger Purveyors of Doom. Not Interstellar, Intergalactic. See? "

"Ah. Forgive me."

"That's quite alright, Fritz. Now are you done? I think we had best get on with it," bleated Brian.

"Yes, let's. Let's get on with it, us, fourteen goats. Fourteen goats who must obtain backstage passes to a rock concert."

"The meek shall inherit the Earth, Fritz."

"Yes, but the meek aren't goats I'm sure. Not even pretty goats. Why goats, for Kevin's sake? "

"Well, I don't really know. But come now, it could have been worse. Now enough idle bleating Fritz, please. We have a backstage pass to obtain. Now, according to plan, this boat should be docking in Napoli in..." there was a thud. "Well, there we go. See? No bitches. Er, hitches. We're in Napoli already! "

"Well fine then," bleated Fritz. "Where's the concert then? "

"Malawi."

"Spiffy. And Malawi is where? "

"In Africa."

"Good, good. Now, Napoli is where? "

"Napoli is in southern Europe, Fritz. Your point is? "

Fritz nearly choked on the old newspaper he was munching on. "Southern Europe? Gabriel needs a backstage pass for a rock concert in Africa, so fourteen angels are transformed into goats -"

"Pretty goats." interbleated Brian.

"- fourteen angels are transformed into pretty goats and dumped in the cargo-hold of a rickety piece of crap which is docking in Napoli? Aren't they making it a little too easy for us? I mean, what, they let us do without the wings so we wouldn't look like sissies. And made us GOATS? I tell you, goats with WINGS would have a better chance of a backstage pass for the Intergalactic Sausages of -"

"Hamburger Purveyors."

" - Hamburger RAPISTS of SODOM and GOMORRAH than fourteen goats without wings! "

There was a stunned silence in the cargo-hold of a certain rickety piece of crap which had just docked in Napoli, as thirteen angels contemplated the outburst of a fourteenth with a startling lack of enthusiasm.

"Your lack of faith is disturbing, Fritz."

"Faith? FAITH? Oh for fuck's sake, we're goats. Whoever heard of goats obtaining privileged access to anything other than another goat's anus? " Fritz vanished in a puff of acrid black smoke. Thirteen pretty goats bleated mournfully amongst themselves, trying not to think of what happened to angels that used the `f' word.

And of Fritz, we shall say no more.

\* \* \*

The Orificia docked in Napoli on the 15 of November; immigration officials boarded immediately and placed 437 Albanian immigrants in custody, as well as 13 rather pretty goats they had found in the cargo-hold.

In a sense, Brian had been right that things could have been worse. Unbeknownst to Brian and his team, another team composed of 14 goats had been placed on-board as backup - a Team B. Team B hadn't made it, though. They had made their mortal earthly manifestation as very pretty and thoroughly dead goats[The thinking seems to have been that dead goats wouldn't have the disadvantage of possibly getting killed pursuing backstage passes. As a further rationale for sending a second team which was already dead, it would improve post-operation result assessment; "Yes, we did lose all 28 angels, but you must bear in mind that only half of those were alive to begin with. By all the standard and approved performance metrics, that gives us a 50% failure rate and not 100%."]. Though, at the very least, they had been allowed to leave their wings behind too in order to appear more innocuous. Thus, Team B, a pile of pretty wingless goat carcasses, had been dumped overboard 14 nautical miles back by a shipload of mystified Albanian asylum seekers.

Team A fared better in the de facto sense that they hadn't been dead to begin with. There weren't many other



senses, though, in which they subsequently did better than Team B.

Italian immigration authorities didn't really know what to do with goats; they didn't really want to allocate it much thought either. These were just goats after all, so they locked them up with the Albanian refugees whom they presumed to be the rightful owners.

Now the Albanian asylum seekers had never seen these goats in their lives. In fact, they had never seen goats this pretty before. Goats prettier than, at least, the wives and girlfriends back home. Goats that wouldn't say no[Not, at least, until evolution gave the darn creatures larynxes.]. The detention center became, for the following few years, a tinderbox of unrequited goat-love.

\* \* \*

What with Flavio, Brian, Fritz, and a mound of deceased goats failing to obtain backstage passes to the Interracial - sorry, Intergalactic Hamburger Purveyors of Doom, the plans of Those Who Matter for rolling out Doomsday on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2311 were thrown into disarray.

On the morning of the sixteenth, it was agreed that Gabriel would just have proceed as best as he could.

\* \* \*

Heeding past failures, Gabriel made his earthly manifestation unchanged, complete with wings and halo, a full majestic 92 centimeters tall.

The ticket lines to the Hamburger Purveyors of Doom concert had been a nasty experience. Gabriel had had beer spilled on him, and his wings had gotten poked and prodded more times than he cared to remember. When he finally came to the ticket vendor some four hours later, he had received an education on currency, liquidity, and the material modus vivendum.

"I'm sorry, you have tickets, don't you," he looked up and asked the ticket vendor. At first sight, the distinct impression was that the vendor was an acne farm; a very prosperous and ably managed one at that. At second and third sight, one could only marvel at the variety and virility of acne and praise the proprietor and the farm hands. Somewhere around the seventeenth sight, one could begin to discern a teenager serving as arable to the acne farm.

"I have tickets, yes."

"Well, that's joyous then! I shall have one," replied Gabriel with evident joy and desire for one.

"700 pounds."

Gabriel nearly rolled over laughing. "Dear young lad, I stand just over one meter[Angels don't lie. But in fact, he was only 92 centimeters tall. So, well, no look; angels don't lie, he just happened to say `over one meter' when he really measures... Look, forget about this footnote, but remember that angels don't lie; recall also that it is the mark of an intelligent mind to hold two opposing thoughts in one's mind at the same time.] tall; if I weighed that much, I should roll over on my side such that I might face you eye to eye instead of looking up your nose as I do currently! " The ticket boy looked at Gabriel with a blank expression on his face. Gabriel perceived that his valiant attempt at humor hadn't fared very well - had he perhaps somehow offended the boy? "Of course, that is not to say that I'm not enjoying looking up your nose; it's quite picturesque."

"700 pounds. Egyptian pounds. Money, man. Cash. You got any cash, or are you going to make way for the people behind you? " the boy asked. Of course, Gabriel thought to himself, remembering his Mortal Matters

Giving the sadly mistaken impression that there are classes in manners for immortals also. classes. These people exchanged tokens of foul earthly origin to symbolise transfers of value. Gabriel had no money, but when one is an angel these matters are not a problem; one short and sycophantic prayer[Such prayers are inevitably in Latin and not in Swedish; God does not understand Swedish, which explains not only why the angels use it so much but also why Sweden is able to get away with so much mediocrity and deviant sex.] and God would spot him the currency. Gabriel cleared his throat.

"Oh Him For Whom Everyone Supplicates, grant me a foul seven hundred - err." Gabriel halted his prayer. "How many drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets is seven hundred pounds equivalent to? "

"I beg your pardon? " The ticket vendor leaned forward.

Gabriel repeated his question. "How many drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets is seven hundred pounds -"

"Yes yes I heard you but what is this nonsense with stoned birds? " The ticket vendor peered at Gabriel. It dawned on Gabriel that these poor mortal creatures were only familiar with rudimentary and non-universal units of measurement.

"Forget about the drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets." Gabriel thought for a second. But of course! Gabriel was very clever with conversions between scores and drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets. "Scores! How many scores is seven hundred pounds? ".

A young woman behind him tried to help. "Hmm. I don't know for sure, but I think one score is approximately equivalent to several bakers' dozens."

Gabriel turned around. "How many is several? "

"Maybe around five. Five bakers' dozens should be one score. It's either five or fourteen. I don't think it's been more than that, at least not recently."

"Fair enough," Gabriel said. "Who here knows how many go into a baker's dozen then? " he shouted back at the masses still waiting in line. There were disparate cries of 17, three I think, quit touching my bum you pervert, and what does it matter when the spot market for cauliflowers is booming?

"Ten, actually," said the young woman.

"Ten what? "

"Picky one, aren't you? Ten go into a baker's dozen, and there's five bakers' dozens in one score. So one score will consist of fifteen. With fifteen, you would need 700 minus fifteen to pay for the ticket; that means, 715 scores."

Gabriel thought this over. "Hm yes, I follow. But wouldn't that be four bakers' dozens in one score? Because that would radically alter the brmff merfp bph -" The girl slapped her hand over Gabriel's mouth.

"What you are saying is, technically correct. My calculation, however, is more holistic and practical than yours seeing as I took into account the future present tense value of the liable funds sloshing about in long forgotten doormat accounts, which never return recognisable entropic value to the debit statements. Stick with my calculation and you'll thank me in twenty years, assuming sex and sleep is the only use you have for your mattress. 715 scores."

Gabriel tried hard to contain himself; female mortals were generally vile creatures, but he had a peculiar weakness for female accountants. There was something about a girl who could put two and two together and come up with a number mind-bendingly dissimilar to four[Beware gentle reader of heresy; this is not a fetish, it is a Idiosyncratic Penchant. Angels don't have fetishes, only Idiosyncratic Penchants.].

"Good," said Gabriel, trying in vain not to look admiringly - fawningly even - at Dina with the extraordinary accounting skills. "So I'll need 715 scores of currency then."

"Pounds, Egyptian pounds," the Pimple Who Sold Tickets said.

"Yes, Egyptian pounds, got it."

"Unless," continued the pimple farm posing as a teenager, "unless you have a credit card. Do you have a credit card? "

"Oh, but I do! Do you take CairoCard? "

"Of course."

\* \* \*

Gabriel's horn got confiscated at the gate. He would have made quite a scene about it too, if it hadn't been for Dina the girl accountant.

"Gabriel, let it go. You can pick it up after the concert, OK? "

"There won't BE any `after the concert', don't you see? Or, at least, I'm supposed to be here to make sure there isn't. Except now there will be, since I don't have my horn to blow, so I will now be able to pick it up, but but but, you see, that doesn't work since I'm supposed to have it in there," Gabriel pointed at the already thick crowd massing in front of the stage, "so I can blow it and end the world! And in that case we won't have to bother picking it up after, because there won't be any after, so... So... Oh look at me now, you're getting me confused! " Gabriel, all 92 centimeters of him[It would help if you could regard Gabriel as being both just over one meter tall and, at the same time, 92 centimeters tall. It would also help if you could forget about the footnotes you are asked to.], let out a half exasperated half horrified wail. "What am I going to tell them Up There, that my horn got confiscated? "

Dina had taken a liking to this odd short fellow who didn't fare too well with simple mathematics. She ruffled his hair and soothed him by counting down from 4119 in decrements of 12. This had an immediate effect; Gabriel stopped fussing and watched Dina with a mesmerised and glazed look on his angelic face. She led him into the crowd. The stage was barely visible in the distance, some 400 kilometers away. Malawi had been chosen for this, the largest concert in history, precisely for the 400 kilometer march from the gates to the stage: it was calculated that enough people would die of starvation or thirst[Malawi has successfully resisted the encroachment of civilization for centuries, whether by arms (thank you Europe), by commerce (thank you America), or by sheer boorishness (the Swedes exiled their comedians to Malawi late in the century in what is widely regarded as the most flagrant violation of peace in that century.).] that the survivors would be just the right number to fill the dust basin serving as concert grounds.

One sycophantic prayer from Gabriel brought the stage 400 kilometers closer and pissed off a few million people who had already successfully made the march and didn't enjoy it enough to do it again in the other direction.

The concert itself went well; the InterspersedIntergalactic Hamburger Purveyors of Doom performed up to

their usual despicable standards, which delighted just about everyone except Gabriel, of course, for he didn't like their music. Not that it mattered; he was here for different reasons.

The first song played was Rampage of the Taciturn Food Processor, and 1,700 concert-goers died of brain cell attrition while and because it was being performed. This was followed by Clickable Doohickeys Proliferate (on Yer Mom's Bottom), the ballad that had taken the West Indies by storm and spurred a change in government there.

When they began playing Flesh Wound from a Ricocheting Disembodied Hipbone, Gabriel began to wonder how he would go about announcing the end of the world. He only had till the end of this current song to go before he was supposed to blow his horn, and he didn't have it. Well, he would certainly have to blow something[No no no, not THAT. Angels don't do such things. Not very frequently, anyhow, and probably not voluntarily.].

"Dina, I don't suppose you have a spare horn on you, do you? "

Dina rummaged in her knapsack in mockery. "Oh darn it, I left my horn at home." She smiled at him.

The song ended. Gabriel knew that Many Important People Were Watching Waiting for him to Announce the End of the World. He looked around frantically, and spotted an empty cardboard packet of chewing gum on the ground. These things, he had come to understand, made an annoying farting sound when you blew into it. That was better than nothing, wasn't it.

Gabriel picked up the empty chewing gum packet and blew on one end; yes, annoying farting sounds were being produced. He looked around him and smiled, and blew on it again, harder. No one paid him any attention, and the next song had indeed begun playing.

He blew on it even harder, and still no attention. "Well," he thought to himself, "I shall just have to fly up above the crowd and make this annoying farting sound. It is, after all, The End of the World. Good thing I kept my wings for this Task."

He began flapping his wings, but they had become sticky with beer. His wing-flapping, in fact, didn't do much other than knock a bottle of beer out of the hands of the man standing directly behind him. What Gabriel had meant to say was "oh, I'm terribly sorry", but with the gum packet in his mouth, all that came out were stuttering farting sounds.

This looked terribly cheeky, of course; knocking the fellow's beer over, and then making mocking farting noises at him. The man urngh'ed, a guttural utterance which many industrialists rely extensively upon - especially during inventory-taking time. He lunged for Gabriel, and a fist connected solidly with an angel's nose.

"Oh for fuck's sake, it's not like I MEANT to spill your beer you large and crass - oh dear..." Gabriel, no innocent in the ways of Heaven, Hell and more specifically Purgatory, suddenly became aware that the dreaded `f' word had flown off of his well-disciplined tongue, out of his heavily guarded mouth, and had acquainted itself with at least two hundred pairs of ears. And one decidedly Non-Human pair of ears.

The cosmic puff of acrid black smoke transportation mechanism lagged slightly; this happened from time to time. Gabriel noted this and decided to work as many four-letter words out of his system as he could before it kicked in; he was already headed off for a sentence in Purgatory anyhow.

"Fuck fuck fuck FUCK you! And what's more, fuck you! " Gabriel glared at the urngh'ing man. "Fuck you up, fuck you down, fuck you in, out, right, and fuck you left too! And lest I forget, fuck you undertween and

lopside-down and acrossderneath too[These are all possible directions someone could conceivably get fucked in if the person inflicting this almost monotonously vulgar harm had access to the fourth dimension. The subject of the fucking doesn't require corresponding access, but it is much more effective if they do. If not then the symptoms of being fucked undertween, lopside-down, and acrossderneath are like a silly little tingling sensation - almost exciting, in fact - in the poopoo chute of the person who sat beside the person who was sitting where you are sitting right now last week. Or the other way around.] ! Oh, oh, and lest I forget..." Gabriel stood on tiptoes and looked the man directly and solemnly in the eyes.

"Fuck you."

And with that eloquent morsel of profanity, much to Dina's astonishment, Gabriel vanished in a puff of acrid black smoke.

And of bad rock bands with silly song names we shall say no more. Almost.

\* \* \*

This utter failure to declare the end of the world prompted calls for a Heavenly Purge of the Incompetent. Of course, those who called for such a thing swiftly joined Flavio, Fritz, and Gabriel in Purgatory[In a sense, the British civil service is the closest representation of Heaven on Earth. There are two opposing ways of interpreting this; the one which does not flatter is the more appropriate.]. This sharp increase in the population of Purgatory had a severe effect on inventories of the vile matter employed in washing mouths out, and they had to make do with fetid rabbit stew for a while.

And since matters had gone so poorly, the Supreme Angelic Council for Matters Pertaining to Ending the World agreed that they might as well do what they had promised humans all along and send them the four horseriders of the Acopalypse.

Of course, this meant that they needed four horses, as well as four riders. Since they had neither, the matter was passed on to the Divine Financial Affairs Division of the Supreme Angelic Council for Matters Pertaining to Ending the World, which processed the requirements and reported back promptly:

...in this fiscal year 45,600,450, that costs associated with the procurement of four horses may well exceed projected outlays pertaining to subsection 13 paragraph 49 in the Code Governing the Equine Purchases subdivision of Divine Financial Affairs Division of the Supreme Angelic Council for Matters Pertaining to Ending the World.

As such, it is our recommendation that current financial means will only stretch to the procurement of one horse. Remark also that such a decision to purchase may reduce the Council's spending ability on other pursuits, not least of all the recreational ones.

Note that when we say that there is barely enough money to buy a horse, we mean a dead horse. A quick survey of the market for dead horses indicates that there are steep discounts to be had which rise in proportion to the state of decay of said horse. If the Prophet can possibly make do with something along the lines indicated, we will save enough to purchase all of those mysterious and possibly useless shiny gadgets with all of the buttons and flashing lights and sirens which the Committee for Reversing the Trend to Only Spend on Useful Things has requisitioned.

The submitted request does not provide any detail around how great a piece of a horse is required. We advise that we can achieve further cost reductions if the requirements can be specific about what actual part of a decomposed horse carcass is required for this project to achieve stated objectives.

It was at this time, coincidentally, that thirteen limping but still very pretty goats in a refugee detention center in Napoli tried to make a break for it and were shot dead, liberating the angels that had been inhabiting their bodies and freeing their angelic spirits to return at long last to Heaven[The amorous Albanians were happy too; dead goats don't struggle.]. Much to their misery, however, they still looked like goats - it would not do, after all, to have a bunch of debauched goats turn back into angels[Which neatly lays to rest the widespread and firmly held misconception that there are no standards whatsoever for who and what can be an angel.]. Where was the dignity in that?

The Council, of course, could smell an opportunity knocking at the door when it bit them in the rear. In a haystack. Surely, the Council reasoned, four of these pretty goats could be selected that would act in the stead of horses?

Upon hearing this, twelve of the thirteen goats shouted the `f' word and were whisked off to the relative comfort of Purgatory. The thirteenth deflowered but still very pretty goat, of course, was pleased to remain in the celestial service. There was no stopping the fervently pious Brian.

And this left the angels only one Acopalypsic prophet short, a staffing issue which would soon be resolved.

\* \* \*

So, what's this `Acopalypse' anyhow? The Dictionarium Aegyptum has this to say:

Apocalypse: ah`LAW`ka`pips (n.) 1. The tendency to sexual arousal when exposed to banal legal minutiae. 2. A cosmic conflagration; a cataclysmic catastrophe in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil. 3. Something remarkably like a cataclysmic conflagration, a cosmic catastrophe in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil; contrast with previous definition. 4. A brand of chocolate candies marketed in the early 22nd century which rapidly became unpopular when tied to the syphilis pandemic of 2162 which - apart from killing off a few million people and generally reducing people's sex lives to utter shit - ruined several thousand perfectly good steaks in a roundabout fashion. 5. A common misspelling of Acopalypse which in turn is a rare misspelling of Apocalypse, which is the party Them Up There intend to throw to End the World.

#### Dictionarium Aegyptum

Of course, the only definition we will concern ourselves with is the fifth. The rest are either irrelevant, inaccurate, or too full of wanton alliteration to be anything other than a childish dictionary writer's prank.

The Prophet of the Acopalypse, then, is a fellow who most optimistically is expected to run about on an imposing horse[There is much conceptual confusion between the horsemen of the Acopalypse and the Last Prophet; further evidence that the Holy books were written in collaborative fashion. The prooof-readers might also be faulted.] of some sort for a while trying to convince people of something before The Party begins. Well, knowing celestial predilections, it's safe to assume he will be proselytising; it's not conceivable that the last prophet should try to convince God's children of anything else, such as voting for the opposition or switching cereal brands.

Think of the horserider of the Acopalypse, if you will, as a last chance for humanity to redeem itself and to reveal itself as worthy of Heavenly compensation for the shortcomings of mortal existence (and global cauliflower market price perturbations). Think also if you must of the horserider of the Acopalypse as a jury-rigged amalgamation of bad metaphors from holy books, but a cost-effective one.

This all seems rather vague, of course, and it is. Many parts, chapters, and elements of the universe we know and the multiverse it belongs to were actually planned well at Inception, such as, well, sexual intercourse, potato chips, Swedish pornography, German autobahns, potato chips, and sexual intercourse - and any

combination thereof, by way of example. Some other things, however, were not fully fleshed out; whether out of ineptitude or out of a misguided faith in circumstances to align themselves politely with divine priorities, it is not known. What is known, though, is that the three-ring binder in the Celestial Knowledge Repository labeled 'The Acopalypse and Doomsday' was filled with reams and reams of puerile knock-knock jokes.

This horrifying gap in protocol and procedure was not noticed until it was almost too late, and even then no one suspected that there might be more to being the Prophet of the Acopalypse than yapping 'repent!' a lot, looking grim most of the time, and accumulating a following of innocents.

The fools.

\* \* \*

For the purposes of selecting a Prophet of the Acopalypse, a committee was Created. It was not necessary, of course, but it was nonetheless Created - since failure was the prevalent outcome in celestial endeavours in general and those related to the End of World in particular, such a committee would at least guarantee one thing; there would be company in Purgatory.

The angels had learnt much from previous prophet-recruitment efforts. They had, since the time of Adam and Eve recruited over 27 thousand prophets; that we know of little more than fifteen or twenty speaks volumes for their propensity for resounding cock-ups. Otto Roedeskaeg had been signed up in 914 A.D. Otto, a viking, had somewhat gleefully misinterpreted the angels' coming as a sign of divine approval of rape, pillaging, and burning. His willy eventually wilted and fell off from overuse in what he pridefully perceived to be the tireless service of the gods[England owes its splendid selection of redheads to the tireless labors of Otto many centuries ago.]. Another recruit had had the temerity to run around telling people that God was his papa, so would they please stop calling his mama a tramp. He subsequently got nailed to a wooden cross for his trouble, much to the angels' relief. And then there was the one that got off by lobbing V2 rockets at London; this unfortunate pastime had escaped the angels' notice before recruiting him (details, details). Luckily, certain strains of stupidity take care of themselves[This is a blessing we often take for granted. The blindingly stupid usually die young; it happens all of the time. You can tell just by skimming the newspaper: headlines like 'Child Seeks Deeper Understanding of Wood Chipper Internals' and 'Boy Feeds LSD to Dog and Dresses Up In Doggie Biscuit Disguise' are dead giveaways.].

Yes, the angels had learnt much. Remembering and applying what they had learnt, though, turned out to be a completely different story.

The minutes from the First Congregation for the Selection of a Prophet of the Acopalypse Such that We May End the World reveal much:

John: Alright, can we quit it with the annoying singing please? We have work to do.

Ringo: Must we?

John: You may sing later. Work now.

George: Oh clamp it John. Let the boy sing his Latin hymns.

John: It isn't Latin he's singing in any case.

George: Oh isn't it? Well, Mr. Educated Angel Scholar, what is it then?

John: You're singing in Swedish. And you're singing naughty songs too, I might add.

Ringo: gasp

Ringo: Am not.

John: Yes you are. I know what the word `fornicate' sounds like in Swedish you know. I know what `maypole' sounds like too.

Ringo: gasp

Ringo: Well, the lyrics actually go `Thou shalt not fornicateth, nor associateth crude and filthy things with innuuous objects like a maypole'. It's a hymn for the pious. That is hardly naughty.

John: Well, if it's such a pious hymn perhaps you ought to sing it louder such that God hears you? Hmm?

George: Which pious hymn?

John: You know which pious hymn. The one Ringo was singing right now.

Ringo: I was singing right now?

John: Yes you were. Singing! Right now!

Ringo: Well don't shout at me, please. It's just I can't remember the words very well. Would you please begin? I'll join right in; It never takes me two or three bars to catch on.

John: OH FOR FUCK'S SAKE THE SWEDISH SONG ABOUT MEN FORNICATING WITH LARGE SLENDER VERTICAL OBJECTS -

Ringo: gasp

George: Well I hope Purgatory calms John down a little. You can't really decide on selection criteria for prophets without a sense of humor. Now, shall we proceed?

Ringo: Mmhm.

George: Well fine, let's then. How about ...an Italian man?

Ringo: Why an Italian?

George: Well, they're a good-looking bunch. Besides, Italian sounds nice. If we get him from some small obscure province, with any luck no one will understand his accent and will just assume he's making sense.

Ringo: Oh. That might actually work, you know.

George: Good, well that's decided then. Oh, and where's Paul?

Ringo: Paul who?

Paul was late, as usual, so to him was delegated the task of scouring the Italian countryside for candidates. Paul went about the task with great fervor, though he did have some initial difficulties - for one thing, with Italian peasants it is often difficult to make out gender. And everyone knows that prophets cannot be women[It is not gender discrimination if there is sound reasoning. Since women cannot be prophets, then



prophets cannot be women. This reasoning is clearly not circular, since those who label it so are flaming assholes. We regard ad hominem attacks as valid refutations of critics since, if you engage in ad hominem attacks in a forest and there is no one to witness it, there is no proof that it is ad hominem and not indeed lucid refutation. And therefore, prophets cannot be women.], so this was a bit of an issue. Any angel who has remained even one eighth awake during human anatomy classes will know, however, that there are two very intuitive and delightful ways in which the female can be distinguished from the male; Paul, ever the amateur tittitian[Tittitian is a somewhat uncommon profession. While it nominally falls under medicine, most of its practititioners land in jail on charges of assault and molestation.], thus pioneered the practise of bosom-groping in the name of All that Is Holy.

From the perspective that the idea was to find a suitable prophet, the results of this task were disappointing. The Italian peasant had a pervasive and uncouth habit of nose-picking at the most inopportune times. And at opportune times too, actually, and also at slightly inopportune and somewhat more inopportune times. The fact was that the entire Italian countryside had its collective index finger up its collective nostril drilling for 'goodies'. Filing this one away for the Anthropology Committee of the Angelic Council, the selection committee was back to the drawing board.

From the alternate perspective that tits are lovely, the results were of course splendid.

From the meeting minutes at the Second Congregation for the Selection of a Horserider of the Acopalypse  
Such that We May End the World:

George: What with John still being in Purgatory, I will lead this meeting. Are there any objections to this? ...

George: Well ...

George: Good. Now, we have all seen the report on Paul's romp through the Italian countryside. The pickings are terribly slim. I believe we may need to be more precise and discerning regarding our criteria for a prophet, or goat-rider of the Acopalypse.

George: Yes? ...

George: Yes. Well. I propose that we narrow it down a bit, to perhaps 'anyone who walks the Earth, does not pick his nose flagrantly in public, represents purity by being a virgin, and knows how to spell Acopalypse'. Does anyone have anything to add to this?

George: Well alright then, I think we are ready to vote on . the matter All those who object, say nay now please .

George: Well, that's settled. By the way, Ringo, where's Paul? ...

George: Ringo?

George: Where's Ringo, for that matter?

To better inform the more inquisitive, Paul was at the time still preoccupied with furthering certain scientific inquiries in the Italian countryside[Never in the history of mankind have so many bosoms been groped in so short a time under the admittedly flimsy veil of pious duty. Had little boys sported boobs however, then Catholic priests may have had something to say about this record.]. Ringo, having felt a slight twinge of guilt, had looked in upon John in Purgatory where he was having his mouth washed out with fetid rabbit stew, in lieu of the increasingly scarce noxious fluid of dubious biological origin which they had originally been using. Upon seeing John's suffering, Ringo had remarked that it certainly looked 'fucking painful', what they were

doing to him. This observation had predictable consequences[Though he was released very shortly afterwards; something to do with a superlative performance at a disco dancing competition.].

\* \* \*

And just like that, the Selection Committee was left with three concise and clear criteria; it was almost impossible for things to become simpler, so they promptly did.

With the 'anyone who walks this earth' criterion, the Selection Committee had, with a broad stroke, ruled out amputees and paraplegics. Not only was this politically incorrect, it raised the ire of the Committee for Grossly Overcompensating the Disabled Out of Pity[This committee is responsible for, amongst other things, placing the mentally retarded in positions of expansive political influence.], which is one committee whose ire it is unwise to raise. The Committee for Grossly Overcompensating the Disabled Out of Pity was responsible for feeling guilty on God's behalf whenever His hand slips while Creating someone, and then to wallow in said guilt for said manufacturing defect and to effect the most extravagant recompense in a futile attempt to put things right. Given the unbelievable amounts of guilt that get delegated to this committee, it is natural that it should be one of the few efficient of the angelic committees, and almost the most ruthless. Staffed as it was by those angels deemed too violent for the Committee for Funny Suicide Attempts and those too emotional for the Fluffy Bunny in the Pink Tights Club, it was a formidable bureaucratic foe. The Selection Committee backed down; the first criterion fell.

The 'no flagrant nose picking' criterion was, obviously, non-negotiable. You couldn't have a prophet who would preach the virtue of abstention, stop to muck about in his nostril, flick the product into the crowd, and move on to the necessity of confession. Or, rather, you could theoretically if you didn't mind being sent to Purgatory for a bit for having approved the choice of such a one. And the rabbit stew in Purgatory was terribly fetid.

Of course, you would think that by stipulating a virgin, it would have been settled. After all, it is difficult to imagine that anyone could live up to the high standards of Total Sexual Failure which Ramses Abasiri had pioneered quite against his will and better efforts[That incident with Barry shall be overlooked, as it happened under the bed. What happens under the bed stays under the bed; any child will tell you this. Under the bed is safe; even God doesn't look there. Remember this when Death comes for you; he doesn't look either.] . There had been two other candidates who had apparently had similarly dismal carnal experiences. Tham-Phon Leek was a Cambodian monk who had lost everything from his navel downwards in a freak accident with a toothpaste tube cap when he was six[The toothpaste tube cap is a hazard precisely because it is so innocuous. It is all too easy to let down one's guard while unscrewing the toothpaste tube, lulled into complacency by the misleading innocence of the cap. There are many other innocuous everyday items to beware of, but none as much as the toothpaste tube cap, the most innocuous and therefore the most correspondingly dangerous.]. The other candidate was a young fellow called Hisham Dornier; Mr. Dornier, for reasons too complex to state in entirety[But having something to do with his mother's thumb, his father's butt, a very rowdy foreplay session, and a soldering iron.], had been fully conscious since he had been a sperm in his sire's scrotum, and had since developed a pathological fear of the female reproductive system and underground rail transport.

Only one criterion remained in this heated contest to lead God's children to Heaven; the spelling test.

\* \* \*

Dr. Abasiri chucked Hamster 89 into the garbage bin, harumphed, and began writing down some observations in his journal.

Hamster 98: Er, 89 I mean. Well, once again I am unable to arrive at the precise proportion of explosive material, and the proper degree of insertion to obtain optimal vaginal effects. Whats' more, I still haven't

found anything to scrape the hamster bits off the walls and ceiling with; the lab is beginning to look slightly unkempt. How long shall this hamster Acopalypse continue before Lady Science uncrosses her legs for me?

At that very instant, all across the universe, a disembodied Latin chant was heard. The chant was brief, the message terse; a prophet had been found. Ramses, of course, heard it too but like most people he wrote it down to government brainwave manipulation. Especially since it was followed by a brief snippet of a similar chant in Swedish, something to do with fornication and Maypoles, and it ended rather quickly in mid-sentence with something that sounded like a slap and an `oomph! '.

And then, curiously, something or another groped Ramses' breasts, or at least groped him where there would have been breasts had he had breasts, which he did not[Which is a great shame, for it is a wonderful thing to have breasts.].

This government brainwave manipulation is really getting out of hand, Ramses thought to himself.

Paul the Bosom-Groper moved on.

Ramses was The Chosen One, Raped Tomato Incident notwithstanding.

\* \* \*

It was in their genetic code.

Hell, even their excrement (and their children, the two were often confused) could play banjo.

A talent, and a curse.

## Chapter 3

: Of Faith and Reason

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me.

Robert Frost - 'Cluster of Faith'

At some point in the century, the world had, out of sheer boredom, come so close to all-out thermonuclear warfare that the Earth had simply assumed that it had really happened and had behaved strange for a while. When we say strange, we mean so primarily in terms of climate patterns; since climates determine so much of what actually goes on on the Earth, then we can assume that this had far-reaching effects. Moscow and Cairo exchanged weather patterns overnight, and for a while, it even got to the point where if it rained, you had to be outdoors to remain dry.

This would, of course, not do very well, and the environmental activists got to work talking the Earth back to its senses. No all-out thermonuclear warfare had actually occurred, they shouted at mountains through megaphones, it had just looked like it was about to happen. Besides, they went on, no one actually had any thermonuclear weapons with which to engage in any kind of war, and especially the thermonuclear, all-out kind. This didn't do much other than instigate a few severe avalanches which ironically buried several thousand environmental activists alive[This mass extinction of environmentalists is closely tied to the extinction of alternative rock.].

Things improved when people started dumping substances of nasty biological origins into fissures in the Earth, several billion multiples of billion tons thereof. And when that ran out, dumping fetid rabbit stew in instead. Such aggressive tactics worked wonders and the Earth began to behave a little more respectfully again; everything went back to normal, with the exception of Moscow which refused to take back its weather from Cairo.

This explains why Dr. Abasiri, a resident of Cairo, Egypt, put on a heavy coat as he left his laboratory to go home on that fateful night, the of Nobemver 2484.

It was 32 degrees below zero Celsius when Ramses stepped outside. The street was deserted, he noted, with the exception of 3 figures about 50 meters off in the direction in which he was going; 3 figures and a goat, to be precise.

It was an exceptionally clear evening, and sound carried very well. Ramses was preoccupied with eulogizing hamster 97, however, and he did not seem to take notice when one of the figures wailed something about the 'fucking cold'. He didn't notice either when the author of that fine meteorological observation disappeared in a puff of acrid black smoke[Some angels don't last long enough in this story for introductions.].

The angels had not expected Cairo to be this cold. They were dressed as angels are wont to, in vaguely Roman togas, with wings and halos and all the associated paraphernalia of angel-hood. They were quite uncharacteristically bickering amongst themselves about whom it was who was to blame for not anticipating this severe climate when they noticed Ramses walking past them disinterestedly. George only just managed to stick out his left leg; Dr. Ramses Abasiri went face down in the mucky Nobemver snow.

Ringo: \*gasp\*

George: Well did you just expect me to let him walk off like that? Lose him in the crowd?

Ringo: George, do you see much of a crowd about for us to lose him in?

George: Well no, but given past performance I don't think we'd actually need a crowd about for us to actually lose him in one.

Ringo looked down on the figure of Ramses Abasiri, face down, immobile, arse not in any specific and urgent need of nuzzling, and a little cold. "Well, he's just laying there, George. I don't suppose you killed him? "

"Unlikely. It's not unusual for humans to assume a horizontal position like that. In fact, I believe they procreate horizontally."

"Procreate? "

"You know, Ringo, procreation. Sexual reproduction. Fornication. Adultery[Taking the big onion. Going at it. Going at it again. Occupying Vagistan. Nookie. Disassembling cheap Burmese calculators.]." Ringo gave him a blank look. "Hiding the salami, Ringo. Procreation[Hiding the beef bus in tuna town. Organ grinding. Doing the horizontal tango. Screwing. Fixing mistaken tax return entries with whiteout. Voting for the Indonesian Chandelier Thief. You know.]." A look of understanding came over Ringo.

"Well why didn't you just say so? You and your fancy terminology. But really, all of those other things you said mean the same thing as `hiding the salami'? " asked Ringo. "Oh but wait a second. We picked this one specifically because he had no experience with horizontal procreational practises. He's a virgin. Perhaps he's not used to being horizontal, and is in shock right now or something."

This was a good point, and George examined Ramses in situ a little more carefully.

"Why was I tripped by a funny little guy dressed like a cheap circus clown? And why is this chap, having successfully tripped me, now standing by discussing how many times I have or have not hidden my salami? With a fellow cheap circus clown too, I might add? " Ramses' wondered aloud.

"Well he's not dead," said George.

"No, but I think you've upset him, tripping him like that," replied Ringo.

"Your goat is nuzzling my rear end," Ramses observed from the ground. "Furthermore, I think I should feel more comfortable having my sex life chronicled in public without a goat nuzzling my rear end[Angels do not descend to arse nuzzling, mind, but goats do. This is a matter of policy. Standards are understandably lowered when the angel is in the form of a sodomized goat. There are very few standards against which a sodomized goat can be held. These central principles were established in the founding congress of angels at approximately 4 in the afternoon of before the invention of time, right before breaking for happy aeon.] ."

"Brian, please leave Ramses' rear end be, if you would be so kind. What possessed you to nuzzle it to begin with? Forgive Brian, Dr. Abasiri - when you get to know him better, you will see that he will actually make a very competent horse for you."

Ramses was still laying quite gamely face down in the snow where George had tripped him. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful; after all, you were kind enough to trip me and call me a sexual outcast. But, I am wondering why a goat called Brian is to be my, erm, horse. Listen, would you please tell the goat that I carry nothing up my rear end that belongs to him? "

"Brian, for Kevin's sake, leave the man's rear end be! Now Ramses, won't you please stand up? I'm terribly sorry I tripped you. We do have Urgent and Important Business to conduct with you." As the words Urgent and Important Business were spoken, a disembodied sound of a million voices droning "ooooo, aaaaa" could be heard. Could, should, but wasn't, for what was heard was indeed a disembodied voice, but of a quality

which gave good indication of why it had been deprived of body, as well as hinting that this deprivation of tangible form may not occurred on something less than the friendliest of terms with its audience.

"No, thank you very much. My wallet is in my breast pocket, and by lying like this I am at least making it harder for you to rob me of it."

"Ramses, don't be silly. I'm an angel, and so is Ringo. We've been sent to recruit you and not to make off with your wallet, so won't you please stand up now? "

"Angels? With a bum-loving goat too, eh? I've heard better ones, I have," scoffed Ramses.

"You have? Like? " asked Ringo.

"Well, how about the one about how filthy monkeys can crap more banana seeds in one week than Irish playwrights can crank out tragic family drama for some literary agent's dusty top shelf in a whole decade? " Ramses posited.

"I don't believe that for one second."

"Absolutely true."

"Is that statistic certified? "

"What, you want me to count them myself? " Ramses asked.

"What, the banana seeds in the monkey feces? "

"No, the products of the Irish literary scene."

"Certainly not, good sir! I wish you no such evil! "

"Ringo, not now. Dr. Abasiri, please? " Ramses shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly and remained exactly as he was, no doubt receiving a fine education in the taste of Cairo winter sludge[Which would incidentally make a plentiful and cheap alternative to fetid rabbit stew.].

This was just as I had anticipated, thought George. He does not believe we're angels. We must perform Some Impressive Miracle Or Another then. "Ramses Abasiri, you are The Chosen One; if you will not become perpendicular again with the world, then the world shall become perpendicular with you. Please don't move, or at least not very much["Please don't move, or at least not very much" is the classic line from the Clint Eastwood movie "Dirty Hairy" where the protagonist is about to cut his mortal nemesis' fringe. You won't have seen that version, as in your parallel universe it was called something like "Dirty Harry" and Eastwood was something considerably more tame than an upset hairdresser.]."

Ringo gasped.

"Why are you gasping now, Ringo," George asked him.

"Well, it's just the last time anyone played around with the Universe's coordinate system, it sparked an Ice Age."

"So? "

"Well, I mean," rambled Ringo, "Ice Ages are not good, are they."

"And who precisely says so? "

"Well, it's logical really. Things become really cold during Ice Ages, and that's not good."

"Jumping to conclusions again, Ringo. Remember, everything is relative. For instance, if we accidentally cause an Ice Age, then there would be more frozen ponds and skating rinks. Yes? And children love to go ice-skating. Do you see what I'm driving at here Ringo? "

"Well, if you look at it that way... Oh oh, and the ice-skate manufacturers' guild would prosper too. And refrigerator manufacturers would be able to ship cheaper refrigerators since the cooling functionality could be excised. And the Celestial Counting Committee would probably approve of the enhanced steak preservation conditions. And -"

"Yes yes, absolutely correct. Always remember, look at the bigger picture." Ringo nodded. "Now who has the Coordinates of the Universe shift these years? "

"Probably Umbilicus. Shall I call him? " George nodded. "Ninety degrees rotation, correct? " George nodded again. Ramses cocked his head slightly in the angels' direction and observed as Ringo came up with what looked very much like a cell phone out of nowhere. "Ninety degrees please, Umbilicus," he said into it, and then hurled it as hard as he could towards the sky. It never came back.

And then, all of a sudden and much to his shock, the universe rotated ninety degrees with Ramses as its focal point. He was now lying on his side on the snow instead of having his face buried in it. As near as he could tell, the universe had in fact rotated a precise ninety degrees.

"Oh," said Ringo. "Umbilicus got the axis wrong. One second please." He came up with an identical gadget, and mumbled something about axes[The plural of axis.], radians, axes[What you hack limbs off with.], and Purgatory into it, and hurled it skywards. "Sorry." George sang something in Latin under his breath which may have been something pious, and then again may not.

And the Universe rotated again, ninety degrees in the proper direction this time, and Ramses was, without having moved a muscle, standing on his feet face to face with the angels.

\* \* \*

Messing about with the Universe's Coordinate System has historically been a risky business; mostly due to bungling and poor design, of course.

Ringo is correct: the last attempt to switch around left and right instigated an Ice Age. This does not mean, however, that things go horribly wrong every time they play with the system; every time you tell someone to go left, and emphasise with a gesture with your hand pointing right, that is Umbilicus or whoever has the shift making his slight corrections. Own goals in football are mostly attributable also to Umbilicus, unless it is a Brazilian team in which case it is called style. Butt sex rarely happens by anything other than Umbilicus making his small corrections in the orientation of the universe and, consequently, the things in it and the things in it in which the things in it are supposed to go and that other kind into which they are not supposed to go get all confused. If corrections is the right word. ronim yllausu era ,yllufknaht ,stceffe ehT.

This time around, no Ice Age ensued. You can't expect to turn the Universe around like a glass toy and have no one notice, though. In the matter of the universal coordinate realignment events requested as props for the recruitment of a Prophet of the Acopalypse, the Celestial Counting Service had this to say:

## Statistical Evaluation of Event PRP-REC-41128

## Celestial Counting Service

In the matter of the universal coordinate realignment events requested as props for the recruitment of a Prophet of the Acopalypse, the Celestial Counting Service has this to say:

Number of persons who found themselves copulating standing up instead of the more orthodox horizontal position: 17,508. Number of persons for whom it failed to compute that the furniture had fallen off the walls onto the floor: 43,980,560. Number of persons who realised that the furniture had indeed fallen off the floor onto the walls and were committed to institutions (and subsequently administered wildl and/or inappropriate medication) for inability to digest this strange fact: 30,120. Number of interior decorator jobs before the Universal Coordinate System adjustment: 677,240. Number of interior decorator jobs after the Universal Coordinate System adjustment: 656,712,240. Number of male interior decorators: 120,556,097. Number of heterosexual male interior decorators: 4.

Additionally, we have counted 27,310,020 deaths related to the Universal Coordinate Adjustment number 421 and 422 pertaining to properly aligning the universe to Ramses Abasiri. This is less than 7 measly percent of the Earth's population; a figure the Celestial Counting Service does not feel requires too much attention.

By a fortuitous alignment of circumstances, very few people were cooking steaks at the time the events occurred. Steaks on Earth would express their gratitude for this foresight[The Celestial Counting Committee is tasked with the accumulation, analysis, and reporting on of figures pertaining to celestial business. Their focus on steaks as a primary event outcome evaluation factor is not examined too closely, as it is felt that these mysterious fixations are likely to be priorities imposed from Above. Not to say that they aren't people with a good sense for well cooked meat, as good statisticians tend to be. Even angelic ones. Never trust a vegan statistician: too much compassion.] and we congratulate Umbilicus on below expected casualties resulting from universal realignment events.

\* \* \*

This was truly something. What type of something it was is still a topic of debate for the students of the relevant disciplines, but of the core of the matter there is no dispute.

This, truly, was something.

Concise Account of History, Abridged - Stromgard

Or, as restated by Caldwell:

This was truly something. Something definitely happened that day, and science still lacks an acceptable explanation for it. Picture if you will a doll house turned about at right angles several times, then imagine the state of disorientation experienced by the dolls.

The attempts to reconcile rational thought with its inability to justify the events of that day have fueled the effort to reconcile religion and science.

Never before had mankind had such damning evidence that whomever it was running the universe may not be all that competent[Caldwell's sense of the obvious was acute. Not since Shakespeare ("A rose by any other name would smell as sweet") had words so painfully free of suspense and surprise been written, smuggled past battalions of heavily armed editors, stowed away under dust covers, and sprung out at unwitting and otherwise well-intentioned readers.].



## The Pocket Guide to Human History - Caldwell

\* \* \*

Ramses brushed the sludge off his chest and side. "Nifty. I thought tricks like that were things they made up on television."

"Really? You liked it? " Ringo was quite pleased with himself.

"Ringo, shut up. Ramses, that wasn't a trick. We just rotated the universe through 90 degrees twice in order to lift you out of the snow, partly to make up for tripping you, and partly since you seem to disbelieve that we are angels."

"Look," Ramses said, "I think you're very clever and all, granted, but I'm not exactly stupid. I know what angels look like, and they don't look like you, and that's a fact."

"Oh. Well, what do they look like then, Chosen One." George noted to himself that it was a good thing he was an angel and not human, for a human's patience would be wearing thin at the moment. What's more, a human might begin at this point to think nasty thoughts of Ramses, nasty thoughts involving severed body parts and maybe fetid rabbit stew even. But that was humans, not angels.

"Angels are always girls, that you know it, and they're always wearing loose transparent robes such that you may glimpse their supernatural breasts. Because, you see, they always have spectacular bosoms, angels, yes they do. What, you think all those and century European painters were making things up? I tell you, bosoms like that are beyond even a mere mortal's fancies; such a thing comes from Someone Very Good with Proportions. There's your angels and your proof of faith. Now if you're not going to mug me, I'm leaving." And with that, Ramses walked off.

Ringo and George could hear him mutter to himself as he walked off, "...angels pshaw, kids these days, drugs and experimenting..." when he was almost out of earshot, he looked back over his shoulder and saw them standing as he had left them. "Your halos are on sideways[This is not shoddy manufacture; halos crooked just like so work wonders for reception quality of Polish television channels.] ! You'll never fool anyone like that!"

The angels sat despondently for a few minutes staring in the direction Ramses had disappeared in.

George sighed, cursed in a footnote[One can get away with anything in footnotes; no one reads them. Stupid reader...], and scolded Brian for nuzzling crotches again. "Fine, Ramses, fine. Your way."

\* \* \*

breasts - fur`AW`see`tee - (delect.) 1. The tendency to sexual arousal when exposed to esoteric carbon steel composites 2. An obscure skin condition ("I have breasts on my bum." "Lucky bastard...") 3. Something remarkably like an obscure skin condition 4. The tendency to discuss esoteric carbon steel composite manufacturing strategies when initiating sexual congress.s 5. Hallucinogenic apparata noted for their role in distracting eyes from well proportioned posteriorata

Dictionarium Aegyptum

\* \* \*

When Ramses got home, the first thing he did was to switch on the television. The 9 o'clock news was just

beginning, and the two unstable young men who thought they were angels were on the 9 o'clock news.

This did not immediately strike Ramses as odd in any way. He savaged some vegetables with a large knife, burned them alive, and proclaimed the outcome dinner. The newscaster was relating a story about a stray dog that had most presumptuously attempted to make passionate love to the tailpipe of a public bus and had gotten stuck in the process. The newscaster was very plain-looking creature, and she seemed to regard this as incredibly romantic. The director, whether out of empathy or malice, had floated little cartoon hearts around her head while she was reading. George was sitting on her right trying not to keep on adjusting his newly sprouted breasts - Ringo on her left wasn't even trying. She didn't seem to be aware of their presence.

A goat tail could be seen wagging, indicating that a goat might be nuzzling something under the newscaster's desk.

Ramses munched on a forkful of murdered vegetable, its nasty biological origins hardly discernible anymore.

"The dog has affectionately been dubbed Yow! by the policeman who first spotted it running like mad to keep up with its runaway beau," told the newscaster. "Yow! is proving more popular than you can imagine down at the precinct," said the policeman who had rescued the stray. "This dog is proof that these penis elongation treatments actually do work."

The newscaster gave out a small whine which probably wasn't gotten from the teleprompter, and the goat tail wagged faster.

The sound of the newscast was abruptly replaced with a terrible screeching sound. Ramses had the mute button on the remote control in a split second, and it began to dawn on him that it was not really logical for these two fellows to be on television, flanking the girl reading the 9 o'clock news.

The one on the right[It may have been the left; Umbilicus was not having a good day.] was gesturing about with his arms like there was no next year[Which, come to mention it, there wasn't supposed to be.] and his lips were moving really fast. Boy, looked like he had a lot of important things to say, didn't it, thought Ramses to himself.

"Why are you two in my television? " He wondered out loud. He ate another forkful of deceased biological matter and thought it over. They aired some footage of a half dozen or so policemen with enormous bulges at their crotches, walking about daintily and looking very proud of themselves. They may think they are clever, showing up in the middle of the nine o'clock news like that just to bother me some more, thought Ramses to himself, but I've got the remote control.

\* \* \*

"Ringo, leave them alone."

"Sorry; it's just I've never had breasts before. They are quite fascinating."

The newscaster in their middle, strangely oblivious to Ringo and George's presence (and not entirely clear about what it was that was nuzzling her crotch, but not questioning the phenomenon very strenuously), was telling the story of Yow! the stray who had committed adultery with a 300 horsepower public bus. The goat tail was wagging very hard now, and bouncing up and down such that a goat arse could be seen intermittently.

"Well they aren't there for your entertainment; we got them to establish credibility with The Chosen One. Ramses," George addressed the television camera, "unmute the television please. Look, we have breasts now, spectacular ones too, even." George made some wild swinging motions with his arms which he hoped would

indicate to Ramses to adjust the volume. Unused to having breasts, this motion set the enormous pendula hanging off his chest in motion. The endowment was so generous that he completely failed to anticipate or handle the frightening momentum of his breasts and fell over backwards.

"Honestly George, if you want him to turn up the volume there's better ways of going about it, waving your arms like there's no next year - which incidentally there isn't to be, of course. You look like a cement mixer hurling nasty epithets at someone. In reverse. A mule maybe."

"I take it you have witnessed a cement mixer hurling nasty epithets? "

Ringo ignored George's question and wrote something in the air with his index finger; letters sculpted out of light appeared. "There. Gire por favor acima do volume."

"Well that's clever Ringo, yes it is. Only, The Chosen One doesn't speak Latin."

"Good."

"What's so good about that? "

"Well if The Chosen One doesn't speak Latin, then it's good that that's in Portuguese."

\* \* \*

One of the angels wrote something on the television screen. Gire por favor acima do volume, Ramses read. Well, if that didn't sound like a filthy insult in some foreign language, then Ramses didn't know what did. So that's why these two kids were dressed wrong: foreigners.

Ramses flipped around with the remote control until he chanced upon his pornography subscription.

\* \* \*

It hadn't been too difficult for George and Ringo to figure out how to piggyback onto the television broadcasts going into Ramses' home - a simple matter of flattering the electrons and protons, really. Subatomic particles being as small as they were, their egos were their Achilles' heel.

The angels hadn't known anything about channel flipping or remote controls, of course - these are the work of the Devil - and as such didn't know much beyond the fact that they had been in a newsroom one second, and were now in a water bed with one fat old randy lady and two whole teams of virile croquet players[Expense had been a factor in Ramses' porn channel subscription.], both parties utterly devoid of even the most atrophied fig leaf. And engaged in unutterable acts too.

"That one with the long brown hair, him, George; he isn't really be supposed to be hiding his salami in there, is he? " asked Ringo.

George was not most concerned at that moment with what a croquet player would choose to do with his member. "I wouldn't say he's more than a couple of inches off the mark, Ringo; the woman's large enough to make that a proportionately trivial error margin." George looked on with disapproval; "OK, this isn't working. We need to get out of here." The fat woman wailed, a sound which could easily have been mistaken for that of a sow giving birth to a compact minivan.

George insulted a few electrons and they were out.

\* \* \*

It wasn't for lack of effort that George and Ringo had a difficult time persuading Ramses that they indeed were angels, and that he really had been chosen to be the last prophet. They tried the usual tricks with burning bushes, levitating mountains, and projecting booming voices out of the thin air, getting straight politicians elected, clubbing baby seals[I said they tried everything, I didn't say all of it made terribly much sense.] - Ramses was unmoved. He had seen a great many action and science fiction movies in his time, and this kind of tomfoolery didn't make much of an impression anymore.

And to be honest, this was beginning to wear out the angels. That is, had the angels been humans, of course - everyone knows that angels don't get worn out, and don't begin to think nasty thoughts out of despair. Even angels that have permanently assumed the shape of pretty goats.

They had tried kidnapping him and showing him their new breasts; he had found them to be very aesthetic knockers and had recommended a plastic surgeon to complete the job. Ringo had taken down the number, and George had had to smack him - with infinite compassion, love, and mercy of course.

The truth of the matter was that Ramses Abasiri was every bit as cynical as a man of science might be expected to be; additionally, his persistent failure to copulate with rodents had only compounded his refusal to believe in divine mercy and, by extension, angels. George was almost at the end of his wits; failure usually landed one in Purgatory. Ringo was taking things somewhat more lightly; the novelty of having two enormous melons attached to his front side had a diminishing effect on his ability to focus on professional matters.

As any 50 year old middle manager will tell you, it is the clarion call to arms posed by threats to peoples' self-interest which brings out the mysterious beat named results from the dark, damp, and stinky dungeon it lurks in[If you just checked your armpit, I'd like to know. A friend would owe me ten dollars.]. And so, when Ringo realised that he would be stripped of his precious bosom when he was sent to Purgatory for bungling the job, he had rushed off in a frantic hurry, not even bothering to stuff his spectacular melons back into his robe.

George caught up with Ringo in Ramses' laboratory. Ramses had been bound and gagged. Ringo stood in front of him bent over at the waist, rocking to and fro rhythmically. His breasts swayed left and right like pendula - Ramses stared at them, mesmerised.

"Ringo for Kevin's sake, what are you doing? "

Ramses broke out of his trance. "Your well-endowed friend is attempting to hypnotise me, I suspect. I suppose he would have convinced me that you really are angels had he succeeded."

Ringo wailed. "George, you've RUINED it! He was just beginning to drop off! "

"I was not," said Ramses. "You gave me an erection with that lap-dance-hypnosis act of yours. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to hypnotise a man in such a state? " Ramses gestured to Ringo's bosom with his nose. "Honestly, behaving the way you two do and wanting me to believe that you are angels. Pshaw."

"The Chosen One does have a point," George told Ringo. In theory, angels were not the sort you'd expect to tie you up and flash their God-given endowments at you. "Ramses, we do need to settle this matter; let us suppose you wanted to verify if someone was an angel or not. How would you go about this? Oh Ringo, for Kevin's sake cover yourself! "

Ramses cocked his head to one side and considered this. Well, he thought to himself, if logic won't get them off my case, then I don't know what will. It was worth a shot. "Well, angels come from God, don't they."

"Yes, they do, Em, we do."

"Good. So, it follows that they can pretty much accomplish anything. Not necessarily on their own, of course. But I mean, if angels are so tight with The Big Fellow, then they could just theoretically throw a tantrum, or make annoying noises in His presence continually until He gave them what they wanted."

"That is not exactly the precise approach most of us take, but the premise is solid," replied George.

"Well, do Something Impressive then."

"Ramses, we did levitate a mountain in Sinai for you."

"Yes, but I wasn't there to see it was I."

"Everyone knows it happened. It was in the newspapers, for Kevin's sake."

"Oh, and we're supposed to believe everything we read in the newspapers are we. A naive couple you two are. You know, it was some goat-herding tribe that reported that; for all we know, 'the mountain levitated' could be Sinai shepherd slang for the kind of orgasm a goat will give you."

"For the record Ramses, no one in this story has actually made or has attempted to make love to animals other than you and a boatload of Albanian refugees[Not that 'make love' was in any way a comprehensive description of what Ramses was doing with those hamsters]."

"And what's to say that Albanian refugees couldn't have relocated to Sinai and become shepherds while you lot have been wasting your time and driving me mad here in Cairo?" said Ramses.

"They haven't."

"Oh you're full of nonsense you are. I don't believe you're angels. Angels would have done something impressive. I don't know, something big, something gaudy, flashy, something chromium plated! - all you've succeeded in doing so far is tripping me, screwing up my television, unleashing your goat on my private parts, and assaulting me with your knockers."

"I thought you liked my breasts!" Ramses had hurt Ringo's feelings.

"Listen, I'll tell you something," Ramses said to George. "You're angels, so you know The Big Fellow rather well. Yes?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Good, then answer me this. Can He create a tomato?"

"A tomato? Why a tomato? Are you hungry? Oh, oh, listen, He forgave you a long time ago for the Raped Tomato Incident -"

"JUST ANSWER THE QUESTION! CAN HE -"

"Yes yes yes, He can; he's omnipotent you know. No need to be so sensitive," said George.

"Well. So he's omnipotent; so he can create a big tomato then?" George nodded. Ringo sulked irrelevantly about perceived slights to disproportionate but nonetheless treasured parts of his person. "He can create a

REALLY big tomato? "

"Yes, a REALLY REALLY REALLY big tomato, Ramses. Is your point forthcoming? "

"So The Big Fellow from whom you claim to have been sent is omnipotent, and can create an incredibly big vegetable. But." Ramses licked his lips, savoring the buildup. "Can He create a tomato so big that He cannot carry it? "

There was a silence, and then the tiniest ripping sound - it seemed to come from nowhere in particular, from the very fabric of existence and the universe itself.

Ringo gasped. George frowned. "Well yes, of course he can."

"Well then he can't carry it can he, so he's not omnipotent then, is he," said Ramses. The ripping sound got louder. People all around the universe heard it, and started to feel an odd sort of emptiness.

"Well," said George, getting a little worried with how this discussion was progressing. "That's a clever argument. So, no, He can't create it then if it is a prerequisite that he not be able to carry it if it is created."

Ringo gasped. "George, no! That would still mean He is not omnipotent! " The ripping sound had gotten deafening; the North American continents were unwrought; a wave of uncreation swept through the universe.

"You see? If there is a God, he can't be omnipotent, and this contradicts the very definition of God, therefore there isn't one. Therefore everything is bogus," explained Ramses, or at least the parts of him that remained material; he had, from waist down, become unwrought - the very atoms of which he was composed had dissolved into non-existence. "Er, what is that sound? And where are my legs? "

The laboratory's walls were gone; there was no street outside, there was only Nothing. To be pedantic, there wasn't even nothing, not even a small bit of nothing. The universe was dissolving now that Ramses - last messenger of a god that had been proven not to exist to a world that had been created by a god who did not exist - had proven that nothing really existed. At all.

Ringo gasped, and then ceased to exist.

The universe realized that logic dictated that it had never existed and unravelled accordingly - it was, after all, designed to be a rational universe. It didn't take much more than thirty seconds for Ramses' logic to annihilate the very fabric of existence.

And thus, the universe simply ceased to be so absolutely that even the fact that it used to exist ceased to exist.

\* \* \*

Of course, as we all know thanks to work Dr. Abasiri had pioneered and subsequently abandoned in his desperate search for a more accommodating hamster vagina, there are an infinity of parallel universes.

Therefore, it follows that the universe Ramses caused to uncreate was only one amongst an uncountable multitude. Despite the fact that this history has now ended in the most absolute of manners, this book is still sadly short of the kind of length any publisher would consider adequate. Therefore, preoccupied with material gain, we will hop over to a parallel universe very similar to this one, rewind just a bit, and pick up from there.

\* \* \*

On the matter of the uncreation of Parallel Universe Number BiG-5604-POOP-4, the Celestial Counting Committee had this to say:

Statistical Evaluation of Event UNI-DIS-23231

Celestial Counting Service

On the matter of the uncreation of parallel universe number BiG-5604-POOP-4, we have this to say.

BiG-5604-POOP-4 was unwrought primarily through the wanton and unnecessary application of logic by Ramses Abasiri (see file KARFFF-44-ERECT-9) on the matter of the existence of God (see file BIGST-01-ADAMS-0). BiG-5604-POOP-4, of course, is the trunk of the BiG-6504 root in time, from which approximately 790 trillion parallel universes branch out. Of these 790 trillion, approximately 685 trillion branched out after Ramses had proved the non-existence of God, and therefore were uncreated too.

The average number of inhabitants per universe is around 6 billion[Only anonymised statistics - and preferably the kind implying the comparative mediocrity of the average universe - are shared amongst universe constituents of the multiverse. Out of spite.]; therefore, the total number of casualties from the uncreation wrought by Ramses Abasiri is a disturbingly large number with more digits than is considered decent, or, more professionally expressed, 6 billion multiplied by 685 trillion.

This is the single largest casualty figure inflicted by one person since the inception of the multiverse, disregarding the time God had Mexican. Given the lack of bodies, however, it will be impossible to properly prosecute Ramses Abasiri. In any case, the instance of Ramses Abasiri in BiG-5604-POOP-4 which concocted this cataclysm is now uncreated along with his universe.

We can only hope that other instances of Ramses Abasiri will refrain from any further applications of logic; it is unknown whether even an infinite multiverse can withstand a brutal and direct frontal assault of stupidity as broad and deep as he has proven himself capable of.

The Committee recommends no action beyond a lavish and mournful memorial service for the anonymous uncreated steak.

The fools.

\* \* \*

Ramses broke out of his trance. "Your well-endowed friend is attempting to hypnotise me, I suspect. I suppose he would have convinced me that you really are angels had he succeeded."

Ringo wailed. "George, you've RUINED it! He was just beginning to drop off! "

"I was not," said Ramses. "You gave me an erection with that lap-dance-hypnosis act of yours. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to hypnotise a man in such a state? " Ramses gestured to Ringo's bosom with his nose. "Honestly, behaving the way you two do and wanting me to believe that you are angels. Pshaw."

"But we are angels, we are we are we ARE! " whined the topless Ringo.

"Oh. That is actually rather convincing," said Ramses. He looked at George and Ringo in awe; these actually were angels. "Why didn't you put it like that from the beginning? "

"Put it like what? "

"Well you hadn't said that before, that you are you are you ARE angels," explained Ramses.

"Oh stop mocking us," said George.

Ramses looked horrified. "Mocking? I beg your forgiveness; I swear upon Kevin that I truly believe you now, it's just I've never seen an angel before; come to mention it, I've never been God's messenger before either," Ramses grovelled. "Say, who is Kevin? "

"This is too easy," muttered Ringo.

"That's how it looks, yes." George scratched his chin and looked thoughtfully at Ramses. "I think I have an explanation, though," He said. "This must be the parallel universe in which, in a brief and unexplained but blinding flash of idiocy brought about by divine providence, Ramses sees the Truth. Of course, you know what that means..." George gasped.

"Something unspeakable must have happened in another parallel universe...Something horrible, something terrible, many lives lost, poor souls," cried Ringo, "Oh what a TRAGEDY, be SORROWFUL oh WON'T YOU PLEASE -"

"Is he always this melodramatic? " Ramses asked George.

"Wasn't always. I suppose it's the tits. Now now, Ringo, I'm sure it will all be fine. Ramses does understand now that we're angels, and that he has been selected to lead God's children to paradise. Don't you Ramses? "

Ramses looked funny at George; he felt he was missing something here - why did he believe these two bunglers were angels? God hit him with another brief and unexplained but blinding flash of idiocy. Oh yes, of course. Silly of him to have doubted, wasn't it? Ramses smiled at George and Ringo. "Well then, where do we begin? "

"Praise the Lord," boomed George. "Well. There are some standard insurance forms which you must fill out, nothing unusual. The Committee for Prophetic Hygiene Standards will need you to fill this out this too; under normal circumstances, you would have to go through a battery of medical tests, but we can just fill it out between us and no one will ever know the difference. There's these too, these are standard disclaimers which sign away most of your rights to sexual intercourse for the duration of your prophethood - it's alright really, it's not like you were getting any to begin with. Oh, it covers rodents too. What a bizarre little obsession you have there, Ramses. Let me see..." George shifted into bureaucrat mode and whipped out some more forms requiring Ramses' attention. "This one is for census purposes; do try to be honest will you? No no no, you can't just leave the part about frequency of sexual encounters blank. No Ramses, zero. Yes, just like that. Thank you. Oh yes, and we will need a cash deposit-"

"I beg your pardon. What do you need a cash deposit for? And isn't it a little cheeky," remarked Ramses, "asking God's messenger for a cash deposit? "

"I am terribly embarrassed, of course Ramses, but I don't write the rulebook. In fact, I don't even know who dreamt that one up. I will certainly see if I can get it amended for the next prophet -"

"Oh alright, never mind. How much is it anyhow? "

George did some mental calculations. "Well, let's see...It's fourteen drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets, which at current exchange rates makes..."

"Fourteen drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets? What kind of a currency is that? " Ramses asked



incredulously.

"Like I told you, I just follow the rules - I don't make them. And anyhow, what exactly is the matter with using drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets for currency? As I recall, you were using exploded hamsters for copulatory purposes."

"THEY WERE NOT EXPLODED. They were vaginally enhanced! Oh FINE ALREADY, so what does fourteen fourteen drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets work out to in a currency I can understand? "

George jotted something down on a scrap of paper, rubbed his chin, frowned, and looked up at Ramses. "Well, we are talking about roughly seventeen thousand Egyptian pounds."

"SEVENTEEN FUCKING THOUSAND EGYPTIAN FUCKING PO-UNDS? Are you fucking KIDDING ME? Do you have ANY IDEA how many hamsters SEVENTEEN FUCKING THOUSAND -" Ramses disappeared in a puff of acrid black smoke.

Ringo gasped.

George sighed.

\* \* \*

There didn't seem to be anywhere they could run. Nowhere was safe, or at least not for long.

Their kind had been persecuted for far longer than their history had been recorded. The persecution had long since left its evolutionary imprint; their young were born with shifty eyes, a stooping posture ideally suited for running away quickly while presenting as small a target as possible, and a gift for playing the banjo. At times, it almost seemed that the very universe itself wanted them dead.

And it did.

They had their philosophers as do all intelligent races. Deliverance, the philosophers reasoned, lay in religion. Clearly there was some kind of god who had reasons to be displeased with them. We must worship this deity, they proclaimed, and seek forgiveness for all of the displeasing things which we have no idea about and didn't do anyhow.

So they wrote some lovely grovelling-type prayers, and sang them accompanied by their banjos.

Which just made things worse.

## Chapter 4

: When the Foot Cushions Attack

The rabbit has a charming face: Its private life is a disgrace. I really dare not name to you The awful things that rabbits do.

`The Rabbit' in `The Week-End Book'

Ramses was in Purgatory, and he couldn't really find much to complain about. Least of all the climate.

The average temperature in Cairo ranged between a rather bland sort of freeze that just annoyed you and froze homeless people to death to a more serious really quite freezing type of freeze which liked going after delicate and exposed body parts. The most severe forms of winter weather generally experienced within the confines of the matrimonial bond, of course, though Ramses' had no such experience. He was therefore quite pleasantly surprised to find that he could do without his heavy winter coat in Purgatory.

Ramses had taken a second to adjust to the fact that he had been turned into a noxious puff of acrid black smoke and had in such state been rudely taken somewhere he didn't want to go. Or, at least, somewhere he wouldn't at the time have cared to go, you see, for the point was that no one had asked him. Most uncouth, especially by Divine standards, he thought to himself. Ramses started to dust himself off.

"Welcome to PURRRRRRRR-gatory! AAAERGH! Ar-HAHAHA! " Something sharp poked Ramses in the back of his left thigh. It didn't hurt, and Ramses was more annoyed than hurt. The little creature behind him was making a go at playing evil.

"Mind where you poke that thing, will you. And quit rolling your `r's like that when you say Purgatory. It's irritating. And what's more, AAAERGH! is what pirates say, not little pricks with horns who aren't even tall enough to poke people in the bums with the wooden forks they carry." Ramses kicked out backwards in irritation. The little prick was fortunate that Ramses was ignorant of arcane martial arts which taught one moves such as one might see in a hissy fight between cement mixers and mules, only in reverse. The little prick was sent sprawling and began wailing.

"And what are you supposed to be anyhow? A devil? Wailing like you are now? Pshaw. I know hamsters more awe-inspiring than you; female hamsters at that. And why are you so short? I thought George and Ringo were runts, but look at you; you would actually be able to make love to a stock and unmodified hamster, you would."

The thing wasn't more than thirty centimeters high, furry, oddly cylindrical. It had a face that looked like it had been held for too long against a car window being rolled up and down repeatedly by a toddler in the backseat with a baby bottle full of espresso formula. Its mismatched horns had entrails dangling off - no, not entrails; Ramses looked closer. Ragged strands of newspaper colored to look like entrails.

"You little fraud," Ramses muttered, and snatched the pitchfork out of its shivering claws. "Do you even have a bum? "

Ramses rolled the poor little devil over and parted the fur in the region he deemed most likely to yield naked arse. "Ah, there. Oh for Kevin's sake, working in Purgatory is no excuse to neglect your personal hygiene..." He held his nose with one hand and planted the miniature pitchfork on the little creature's bum with the other.

The thing wailed even louder; a small crowd had gathered. Ramses hadn't been in Purgatory sixty seconds, and he had already become both victim and perpetrator of assault with undersized pitchfork. The fact that he

had bullied a misfit not much more than six times the length of his willy didn't bother him a much as it maybe should have. Ramses inspected the back of his thigh and found a milute welt. He kicked the creature again. It sobbed. The crowd gasped.

"Oh quit it with your gasping; I've had enough of that from Ringo. What are you gasping at anyhow." Hands flew up to cover gaping mouthes. There was a shocked silence. "WHAT! " No one would look him in the eyes; the people gathered stood around inspecting the ground in front of them. "WHAT WHAT WHAT WHAT! Don't just stand there like mutes; he poked me, and I'm giving better than I got! What, you don't like it when I do this? " Ramses was by now irritated enough that he dropped his pants and irrigated the creature[For the dignity of the celestial order and that of its representatives on Earth, let us suppose that this gesture might contain some degree of mournfulness.]. A woman wailed, and the rest gasped even more gravely. This aggravated Ramses even further, and he jumped on the creature with both of his heels. "HA! " If you will imagine a pimple the approximate size of a large-ish banana, and then imagine it bursting, then you will have imagined what effect Ramses' heels had on the little prick. The banana-sized pimple upon bursting will of course have the advantage of not looking so much like the bastard offspring of a fallen weather balloon and a regurgitated anchovy pizza. Ramses stomped a bit more, but it wasn't really necessary. He had most definitely killed it.

"He killed It," the people murmured. "I told you it was possible...", "What a brave man! ", "No no no, cauliflowers are not traded as commodities, they're far too individual.", and quite a few "Yay, he murdered It gruesomely! " from the children. This was in addition to the ubiquitous gasps, though they had taken on a more positive air now.

"Well yes, I did kill him, didn't I. And so what? Didn't he do his best to spear my left buttock with that little dessert fork of his? And whoever it was that chose a time like this to discuss the spot market for cauliflowers, have some respect for the dead, will you? Oh yes, and who was it precisely that I murdered so gruesomely just now anyhow? "

\* \* \*

His story is a sad one and it begins a very long time ago, before God had even begun to think of cobbling together a multiverse populated by silly little half-naked things called humans that invented things like electric blankets and wet t-shirt contests.

Satan was originally a foot cushion that God had Created for himself. Of course, the ennui of omnipotence breeds a strain of humor most mortals might fail to grasp[Either that or He simply isn't funny to begin with. Your pick.]; He amused Himself by giving His foot-cushion consciousness and eternal life, and promptly forgot about it for fourteen billion years.

Of course, an immortal foot cushion is a wonderful thing to be, for a while at least - the long to infinite term will lend things a different perspective however. Most if not all of us will not have much experience with the existential angst of being a conscious, sentient and eternal article of interior decoration. It is a never-ending cycle of laying there waiting for Someone or other to rest a foot on you, or maybe two. Or all 67 even[Where the holy books state that man was created in the image of God, key discrepancies between Creator and created was omitted as a matter of style. Man was indeed created in the image of God, they just didn't bother to say how faithful the representation was. For which you ought to be grateful on many levels, especially if you have children.]. For the first few thousand millennia, you will spend your every living thought looking for ways to improve the foot's experience, though of course as a foot cushion there isn't much you can actually do. You try to think happy thoughts when a foot is placed on you in the hope that the positive vibes will transmit to the foot; you try to understand the foot, its motivations, frustrations, deepest fears and joys, and still you don't accomplish much - feet are, psychologically, very dull appendages. In no time at all[Relatively speaking, of course, for a few millennia are mere drops in the rancid pond called forever.], you realize that your gargantuan

efforts to be a better foot cushion are not only futile, they will remain so. Forever. Bitterness seeps into your upholstery; doubt fear and loathing permeate your ageless stuffing - how, you begin to ask yourself, can a brilliant and incisive mind as mine be left in such a stifling vessel, no tongue to speak with, no ears to hear with, no eyes to observe with and above all, no genitalia to commit rampant acts of carnal desire with? How can a bright light such as I have such outmoded tassels?

And to tell the truth, there's nothing to stir up envy, hatred and resentment like being left lying in the same position for almost fourteen billion drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets[Which makes approximately sixteen trillion years, or 369 all depending on whether you converted into kilograms early in the conversion or not. We are holding constant here what precisely your kilograms are constructed of, obviously.]. Mountains had it easy; they had tectonic shifts to keep them amused; even rocks got kicked around on average once every few thousand years; oh such luxury. And after fourteen billion drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets of immobility, even bed sores would have been a welcome relief from the monotony - such a festive affliction could easily have kept Satan happily engaged for many aeons. But foot-cushions don't get bed sores; that would be silly and Satan's story, as we said, is a sad one and not a silly one.

Fourteen billion drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets into Satan's lifespan, hope came in the form of interior remodelling. An interior decorator called Rupert had gotten the job of freshening up the place, and he was just bound to notice that an optimal aesthetic effect could be achieved by moving Satan across the room, over by the potted ficus tree. Satan braced himself psychologically for the paradigm shift of the fifteen meter odyssey. Oh salvation, at last you have come! The interior decorator surveyed the room and threw up his arms - this room, he pronounced, was Perfect as is, and who was he, a mere mortal interior decorator[Indications are that such flagrant ass-kissing is pandemic Up There.], to improve upon that which God hath wrought. Satan spent another 76 billion years lying there.

No longer the innocuous foot-cushion, though.

For 76 billion years, Satan plotted and his powers grew. In need of a more functional form, he learnt to believe his form into being whatever he desired. Well, almost anything he believed, and only some of the time at that. Early attempts to turn himself into a devilishly handsome young man ended in inexplicably poor fashion - he spent four centuries as a spittoon. One which wasn't being emptied, too. Satan the sentient spittoon tried to turn itself into a handsome young man again, and ended up as a goat bladder full of saliva instead, which was close enough to suit its purposes. It believed a set of limbs into existence, and a rudimentary sort of visage. Ready to conquer the world, it set forth to vanquish.`

When Satan the spittle-filled goat's bladder found out that it needed a permit[And a cash deposit.] before it could challenge God for dominion over Earth, and that such a permit cost seventeen drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets, its reaction was peppered so liberally with four letter words beginning with the letter `f` that it became the first permanent resident of Purgatory.

\* \* \*

"Oh don't be silly," said Ramses. "Satan isn't a short little maggot that goes up and pricks you in the buttocks, or tries to. He's far more scary than that; everyone knows that. And Satan doesn't have make-believe entrails made out of newspaper hanging off his anaemic little horns either."

Gabriel sighed. He had warned them of this when they had written the Bible, and when they had indoctrinated the previous prophets. "No, that really was Satan you just killed - everything you've been told about it, let's just say, may have been hyperbole."

Ramses looked down at the remains of Satan underneath his feet, and stepped gingerly back. "But..."

"I know; you're disappointed," Gabriel said. "But that is Lucifer splattered there. And there. Oh, and there's a bit too." Gabriel walked up to Ramses and took him by the arm. They started walking. "Just to be fair, most of what you have been led to believe is actually true; Satan did challenge God, but such campaigns require funds you understand."

"I think I can relate," said Ramses.

"Satan was certainly an uncouth and filthy creature, but he was not evil in the manner the holy books have portrayed. I think the fellows that wrote them just needed an antagonist, and had run out of ideas. Of course, you've seen the antagonist; do you think religion would really have gotten very far if people knew that their Archenemy was a thirty centimeter high goat bladder with a foul mouth and a chip on its shoulder?" Gabriel looked at Ramses with a little smile.

"I see your point," Ramses said, "though I am of course finding it a little difficult to digest that I just disposed of Satan with nothing more than a few carefully chosen words of abuse and some clever footwork."

Gabriel smiled. "Oh, but you did. And Purgatory will now be a more pleasant place to live."

Ramses stopped. "I'm sorry, but I was under the distinct impression that the whole idea of Purgatory was to make people as decidedly uncomfortable as possible."

"Oh, but it is, it is! Aren't we making you uncomfortable enough? I mean, it's sweltering hot here, no one has wished you a good morning, and you haven't been offered any tea. It's simply ghastly." Gabriel shuddered.

"Well, I was sort of expecting licking flames, and people roasting on spits, and such."

"Heavens no, we have no licking or spitting here. Not when it's this hot; dries up the mouth." Gabriel turned his lips outwards and wiggled his jaw horizontally in a gesture which might very well have been intended as evidence of a dry mouth. Ramses smiled at him politely and rolled up his shirt sleeves.

Ramses spent a glob of time being shown around Purgatory. Privately, Ramses thought that Purgatory would make a tempting vacation spot; perhaps not as exciting as Majorca, but then you saved on the air fare.

There were numerous scenes with people having their mouths washed out with odd liquids, waving their arms frantically and gurgling like one supposed one in pain would gurgle - it seemed more a formality than anything else, however, since both the washer and the being-washed seemed to break every half hour or so for tea and a slice of cake. Ramses saw one woman who looked to have completed her regimen of mouth-washing filling out an affidavit of Infliction of Terrible Torture, according to the title. The questions ranged from the "please rate on a scale from one to ten your post-torture propensity to relapse into public acts of indecency" to "If one orangutan can eat seven cauliflowers, and we have to feed eight, how many carrots do we need for flavor?" The woman thought a bit and pencilled 25 minutes in. She filled in some bogus contact information and signed the form. She gave it to the creature which had been inflicting fetid liquids on her in between tea parties, kissed it on the cheek, and disappeared in a puff of acrid black smoke. But not before she had managed to flash her bosom at half of Purgatory.

Ramses and Gabriel had walked for a distance of no more than half a drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeet when they happened upon a Spontaneous Demonstration of Joy. Gabriel sighed; this, he told Ramses, was the problem with people. You go out of your way to make them feel uncomfortable and they turn right around and threw parties. No decency, Ramses agreed[Some nerve he has, given the degree of decency The Raped Tomato Incident revealed about himself. Bloody lucky that you don't know any of the details, I say.]. A dozen or so enormous black ogre-like creatures arrived on the scene with the apparent intention of dispersing the festivities: for this, they were well equipped with mallets which looked like they could bring down

something the size of a large building, or a fellow ogre even. The ogres suffered from a fatal design flaw though, Ramses observed. He made a mental note, just in case he was ever promoted to deity, that any creature intended for crowd control and dispersal should not be blessed with an extraordinarily acute weakness for naughty limericks. The sound of a dozen of Purgatory's elite crowd control ogres howling with laughter was irritating. Ramses and Gabriel hurried on.

Of course, hurried on doesn't necessarily mean that they got very far very fast, for the fiery mountains they had been headed for turned out to be clever paintings on canvas. Gabriel muttered something about penny-pinching contractors and bureaucrats. They took a left, through what looked like it should have been a repulsive steaming bog, but was actually quite refreshing to walk through. Gabriel was evidently quite embarrassed, and related to Ramses all the painful and horrible designs they had for Purgatory which were still being implemented.

"Of course, we will be implementing mandatory disco dancing competitions," he said. Ramses shuddered. "We give out a pair of knickers with little orange and maroon teddy bears printed on them as first prize. We've already had a few - smashing successes. "

"Oh, and there's also the pelting-with-putriaberrios. We are still working on that, but I think it should turn out truly terribly. Lord knows it ought to; we've spent so much on the research and development."

"What are putriaberrios," asked Ramses, "and why would it be such a tremendously harrowing experience to be pelted with such things? "

Putriaberrios, Gabriel explained, were a putrid little variant of wild berries that had been bred for their encyclopaedic knowledge of foul language. Putriaberrios were, moreover, omniglots, which Gabriel explained meant that they could carry on a conversation in any and all languages - provided, of course, that one's ancestry and matters related was the topic of discussion. Gabriel shaded his eyes with his hand and surveyed the horizon.

"Oh, there's a putriaberrio bush! Come, see for yourself." Gabriel dragged Ramses over to the bush, which oddly enough was shaped very much like someone bending over to bare their buttocks at you in disrespect. Gabriel picked a handful and pelted Ramses with them.

"DJoor maazer jad a misshapen leedel toe on ze jer left foot! " the first putrioberrio squealed at him. "DJooo cam efram a loong line of second-rate science feek shon writers! " the second, and the third: "Aiaiai, such an unpleasing-to-ze-sight earlobe djoo jave! "

"Such mortal insults..." remarked Ramses. "Foul little things."

"I weesh upon djoo eternal deessatisfackshon wis joor choice of breakfast cereal! "

"You see, I think, why they're still in the development cycle. We can't seem to breed the cheap Spanish accents out of them. Also, their insults are a little on the tame side. And what's more..." Gabriel picked another and handed it to Ramses. "Here, eat one."

Ramses popped it in his mouth and munched on it. "This tastes absolutely delightful," he observed.

"Yes, they do. No sense in being pelted with foul-mouthed berries if you can just eat them into submission, is there." Gabriel cocked his head and looked thoughtfully at the bush. "So much potential," he half said to himself. A chorus of `petetico, djoo dunno joh to eplay escrabble wid jonor! Aiai! ' rang back at him.

"Satan would at least have taught them to AAAERGH! Ar-HAHAHA! properly..." Gabriel sighed.

And of Satan, we shall hear no more.

\* \* \*

When George caught up with the foul-mouthed Last Prophet he had diligently resumed his research. Ramses had found some of Satan's minions; furry little devils that were not much larger than hamsters and actually struggled very much like them too. Oh, and how fortunate it had been that Ramses had found a small box of firecrackers in his coat pocket too; these little Lucifers were going to have their delicate bits scientifically rearranged, he thought to himself, so that they may contribute to quenching the universe-wide sexual drought.

The first little Lucifer didn't really know what was being done to it before it had been done; one second it was having a funny little fizzling object forced into its posterior[A biological device of some ambiguity to devilish minions; they can never quite agree what that odd little hole down there is for, except that they have figured out that the fumes that issue from it antagonise sinners very much.] and the next second the relevant aperture - well, in any case detailed accounts of how ugly little devils rupture is not what this story is about. At least not at this particular moment. We can say that the first little Lucifer died a death which forced the reclassification of Satan's death as dignified and entirely honorable. And that is the last we shall say of the first little Lucifer.

The second little Lucifer - whose name actually was Eugene, and had only begun worshipping Satan out of peer pressure - knew what the deal was and tried to make a run for it. Of course, Satan's minions are built for nasty looks and not speed, and Ramses had it in a second. Another second or two and Eugene the minion of the now squashed Satan had a firecracker up his bum too. He struggled, much like an actual hamster would, and oddly enough... Ramses disappeared in a puff of acrid black smoke.

Good, thought Eugene to himself, now let's get this fizzling minor explosive out of my ambiguous biological device, shall I, and quickly before it goes off too. He grabbed hold of the protruding end. Out we go!

And Umbilicus sneezed. And for just a couple of seconds, left became right, up became down, Sunday became October and `out' became `further in'. Of course, Umbilicus had the coordinates of the universe back to normal in almost no time and not many people or other creatures actually noticed it at all.

Eugene noticed of course. For in his attempt to extract the firecracker while the universe was misaligned, he had only lodged the damn thing further in. Mercifully, he didn't have long to puzzle this odd situation over - three or four seconds of fizzling butterflies round his nether region and the second little Lucifer was scattered about much like the first, only slightly more thoroughly so.

This is tragic, since a brief inspection of Eugene's possible futures showed an overwhelming probability that he had been destined to bring peace and prosperity to the universe, to unite all races, and to bring Heaven down to God's children instead of them having to seek it. A brief stint as a minion of Satan would have been the catalyst which propelled little Eugene to the glorious and benign achievements which would have earned him the name Harmonizer of All That Is Not Harmonious and All That Is, according to all of the possible futures which sprang from his decision to enlist with the Devil. All but one possible future, and that future contained Dr. Ramses Abasiri.

Eugene exploded, and a brief wave of faint and disembodied grief washed over all of Creation - hope succumbed; but only for a passing blink of time.

For after all, Sunday was back to being Sunday, October was feeling better, and Ramses would soon be unleashed upon the unsuspecting, all-sinning children of God to bring them back into the fold before it was .

But first, this prophet needed a little vocational training.

\* \* \*

training: `yews less - (anachr.) 1. The tendency to sexual arousal when exposed to human resource consultants 2. An obscure skin condition ("I have training all over my bum! " - "Wowie, I bet you get all the girls! ") 3. Something remarkably like an obscure skin condition, but not precisely 4. A ritual celebration of institutional incompetence in competence areas required by the participants' profession

#### Dictionarium Aegyptum

\* \* \*

In a puff of acrid black smoke, Ramses arrived at the Hall of Initiates. The Hall itself, Ramses found, was slightly distracting since it obviously had bounds and walls, but they were equally obviously at an infinite distance. Finding this disorienting, he sought clarification from the corresponding puff of black smoke which yielded Ringo. John[Only recently released from Purgatory as part of a new parole program.] and George sat back and relaxed in a sofa which looked comfortable in a boundless way - one might almost say infinite.

"Well yes, I suppose in a sense this Hall is infinite, but then again it isn't really."

"I see," said Ramses, scratching his head thoughtfully.

"No you don't, since you scratch your head in this baffled manner," observed John. "I will try to explain. In the Beginning, God was still enthusiastic about Making things (not saying that he isn't now, but you know how enthusiasm wanes). You know when a guitarist finds a sequence of chords he really likes, and writes several songs based around them? That was how it was with Him when he discovered infinity. It was an idÈe fixe for a while, let me tell you; anything He made absolutely had to be infinite. Time, space, circles, stupidity, the Mbius strip, and things like bus queues. You get the idea. Except that making infinite things obviously took forever and ever, and forever gets a little worn once you have been through it a few million times."

"I'm certain it does," Ramses acknowledged.

"But infinite things are so aesthetic and awe inspiring. And if they are annoying at least they are so to a degree that you just know that it required divinity to make them so. You know when you are Him you can't knock about making ordinary things like finite wicker chairs and plain old tea kettles. I'm not knocking tea kettles, mind you -"

"Of course not. Tea kettles are lovely," interjected Ringo.

"Yes, they are," said John. "So, I don't wish to offend the existential concept of the tea kettles, but a tea kettle just isn't the sort of thing God Makes."

"Although," said Ringo, "I did once see a blue tea kettle which He might have had a hand in. Or if He didn't, He might want to have a look at it; fine thing it was. No really, I know it was just a tea kettle but there really was something magnificent and Godly about it-" John gave Ringo an annoyed look.

"Ringo, when I say God doesn't go about making tea kettles it doesn't mean that He didn't absolutely Make this particular blue tea kettle. In fact, I really don't care about a blue tea kettle which might or might not have looked nice enough for God to have made it -"

"Ah, see, you never let me finish," Ringo said. "I didn't say that this tea kettle, the blue one, just looked good. No, you should have heard it whistling; such a divine sound. Almost sounded like the Latin pious hymns we



sing during-

"Latin pious hymns? Or naughty Swedish rhymes? Hmm? " John looked sharply at Ringo. Ringo gave him a blank look of infinite incomprehension.

"Swedish what? "

John snarled in a most unangelic manner. "NAUGHTY SWEDISH SONGS LIKE YOU SING -"

"Well there's absolutely no reason to get upset with me John, just because I forget a song or two and can't sing along with you. You know, you can always sing a few bars and I could catch up with you -"

"YOU KNOW VERY WELL WHAT FUCKING SWEDISH SONG I'M TALKING ABOUT YOU FUCKING LITTLE -" John stomped on his verbal brakes. His face had gotten quite red in anger, and a look of absolute horror crept into his eyes. "Oh for Kevin's sake, I just got out of Purgat-" he said in a small voice as he disappeared in an acrid puff of black smoke[As did the parole program.] . Ringo gasped.

There was a short shocked silence; Ramses felt a little ashamed for the angels. "Well, that was that. Now where were we? " George adjusted himself on the sofa.

"Tea kettles," said Ringo helpfully, grateful for a chance to resume the conversation and forget about the petulant and foul-mouthed John.

"Yes, tea kettles. Now, God doesn't make tea kettles, except for perhaps perhaps one blue tea kettle which is probably irrelevant. Yes, I am sure of it, it is irrelevant. But that is just like John, to steer the discussion wild and then to go and get all upset about it. Now, what is significant about the fact that God doesn't make tea kettles is that God does not drink tea. The philosophical implications are tremendous." Ringo nodded emphatically. He seemed to have recovered reasonably from having his breasts taken away from him. Ramses didn't see what the connection was between tea drinking and this Infinite Hall of Initiates being infinite but not really.

"I see. That is very interesting, but you still haven't made the whole infinite thing clear." Ramses gestured about him. "I'm honestly not really interested in tea kettles; I don't drink much tea myself."

"Oh, that. It isn't that complicated, really. This hall only goes on forever, you see."

"No, actually, I don't. That means it is infinite, if it goes on forever. I still don't understand how that could be infinite but not really."

George sighed. not too bright, this one, he thought to himself. I hope we didn't choose another dud. "Well now if it was really infinite, it would go on forever and ever, wouldn't it? This hall only goes on forever, so yes, it is infinite but it isn't really. What part of that is confusing you? "

"What, there's a difference between `forever' and `forever and ever'? "

"Of course there is. If there wasn't, then his hall would be plain old infinite. It would go on forever. And as you have been told, making such a thing takes Him forever, and He got tired of such time-consuming projects a long time ago."

"Don't you mean," asked Ramses, "that this hall would have taken Him forever and ever, rather than forever, if it really had been infinite? "

"Good, you're getting the hang of it. And in any case, to all intents and purposes infinite and infinite but not really are considered equivalent. What I mean is, the difference is primarily linguistic and not physical. It is very much the same as how taking one left turn is equivalent to three right turns in succession. The act itself is different, the net effect is the same."

Ramses nodded. He turned his palms upwards and said "Well, fine then; I buy it. This hall is infinite but not really. And the Purgatory tour was nice also; I got to kill Satan and all, and now we are here in this hall which only goes on forever. But I understand I am a prophet, and that means I should be making myself useful. I don't have much experience being a horse rider, never mind one of an acopalypse. Any acopalypse, mind you, though in particular this one as it strikes me that the acopalypse which I am destined to partake in is more serious than, say, the bankruptcy of a Danish brewery. I expect the required skill-set will differ somewhat from what I am instructed in and accustomed to practising. I gather you have brought me here to instruct me?"

George gave Ramses a broad smile. "Absolutely[It may be appropriate here to illustrate that there is a distinction to be made between absolutely on the one hand, and absolutely but not really on the other. It is considered standard practise to employ the first in reference to subjects deserving of the quality of absoluteness in some form of the other, on the condition that the level to which they deserve it is absolute but not really. While this may seem illogical, it is a consequence of the unfortunate fact that, if something were absolute we'd have no way to ascertain that and therefore would be bogged down looking for the not really which we'd absolutely never find, which would prevent us from assigning the subject the status of absolute. Under some circumstances, the type of absolute can determine its status, such as with absolute absolutes; the textbook example of this is samurai underpants, which can be said to be absolutely devoid of urine. The Celestial Ancillary Sub-Committee for Brevity and Effective Terseness in Written and Spoken Communications, and for Special Considerations for Clearer and More To-the-point and Less Beating-around-the-bush in Official and Literary Communication has issued repeated condemnation of the word 'absolute' noting that - while it is often employed in isolation and in very brief and meaningful contexts (as with the reference in the main text from which this footnote stems), it often results in meandering and stifling footnotes.]"

"Well?" asked Ramses.

"What, you want to begin now?"

"Well yes. I thought that conversation about infinity was going to last forever and ever; I hunger to learn."

"No no no, it only went on forever, not forever and ever," Ringo said helpfully. George smacked him.

"Well fine then," said George. "Are you ready?"

"For my training? Yes, I am." Ramses looked expectantly at George.

"Eager one, aren't you? Fine. Here it is, pay careful attention: Don't get nailed on wooden crosses. And if you see a mob of people who look upset and are carrying stones coming towards you, run first and preach later. Especially if they are shouting things about lynching or stoning the prophet. Because that would be you."

"Well of course. Now what else is there you will teach me and tell me about? Oration? Public speaking? Martial arts? Theology? I'd love to learn theology from an angel, you know..." said Ramses.

"Err. Well." George cracked his knuckles and looked about himself.

"Err well what?"

"That was it," said George.

"That was what? "

"That was your training."

"What do you mean, that was my training? "

"Err, well, that was your training. You are now a full-fledged prophet, armed with all the wisdom God's angels can bestow you with," George muttered.

"What, don't get crucified and don't let them stone you to death, that is my training? " Ramses was beginning to become upset.

"Absolutely[Meaningless discussion around the finer points of absoluteness edited out by the Review Board attached to the The Celestial Ancillary Sub-Committee for Brevity and Effective Terseness in Written and Spoken Communications, and for Special Considerations for Clearer and More To-the-point and Less Beating-around-the-bush in Official and Literary Communication.]."

"Oh REALLY? " Upset was inexorably becoming Ramses.

"No more training. You have everything you need. Just have your flock of God's children ready in Tahrir Square on the morning of the -"

"What do you mean, no more training? "

"- on the morning of the sixteenth of Nobemver 2541. We'll take it from there. Judgment Day, you know."

"Don't I at least get some form of paranormal power? I mean, I am a prophet, and the last one too."

George shifted. "Well, it is sort of against policy, dishing out Abilities, but we might be able to arrange it so that you can do long division and multiplication in your head. Oh, and there's this neat trick too where you drink a lot of water, have a confederate kick you in the nuts, and then pee into cups. If you apologize for the quality, they will believe it's wine and -"

"Oh. So that I can defend myself against an angry mob by dividing and multiplying them to death. Soliciting kicks to my groin. Brilliant." Ringo found this funny, and Ramses slapped him.

"You know, that reminds me of something funny I read once," said George. "Do you know what percentage of Polish social security numbers can be divided by twenty-nine? "

"I DON'T GIVE ONE FUCKING DAMN ABOUT POLISH FUCKING SOCIAL SECURITY OR ABOUT INFINITIES THAT DON'T GO ON FOREVER AND EVER YOU TWIT YOU'RE NOT EXPECTING ME TO LEAD GOD'S CHILDREN TO HIS KINGDOM ARMED ONLY WITH YOUR PATHETIC FUCKING ADVICE AND A FUCKING POCKET CALCULATOR IN MY HEAD-"

Ringo gasped.

Ramses disappeared in a puff of black smoke.

Umbilicus belched.

Someone in Malawi disappeared in a puff of acrid black smoke.

In the cosmic puff of acrid black smoke transportation mechanism, a consignment from Malawi and a consignment from the Hall of Initiates collided. In the confusion, the consignment from the Hall of Initiates got its destination swapped with the Malawian consignment's origin.

And Ramses got sent to the Intergalactic Hamburger Purveyors of Doom concert in 2311, a good 173 years before he should have been sent back to begin prophesying. Precisely and accurately in the stead of Gabriel, who now had two Purgatory sentences to carry out thanks to the little origin/destination exchange we just described.

\* \* \*

In the matter of Umbilicus' belch, the Celestial Counting Committee had this to say:

Statistical Evaluation of Event UMB-BEL-04557

Celestial Counting Service

In the matter of Umbilicus' belch, we have this to say:

This brief report is intended to document and enumerate the effect of the inadvertent release of gaseous gastrointestinal by-products while issuing minute corrections to the coordinate system governing the multiverse. As the serial number of this report indicates, this is incident number 4,557 of this variety which can be attributed to Umbilicus, current maintainer of the coordinates.

The BEL-class event was, for the records, a magnitude fourteen on the standard Onion-Berger scale of excretory disturbances, which is very minor. The limitations of this scale become apparent when one considers that it does not account for extraneous circumstances; excretory disturbances may occur during the application of ambitious new techniques for sexual intercourse for example, or multiversal coordinate manipulation. Umbilicus, hereafter referred to by his serial notation of UMB, was involved in only the latter to our knowledge.

The net effect of UMB-BEL-04557 can be expressed as a lateral shift in the universal frame of reference of roughly fifteen drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets from The Paper Napkin That Is the Origin[The origin of the multiversal coordinate system is a discarded paper napkin with vague pizza sauce-like stains floating about inexplicably in the Horsehead Nebula. Another example of God's incomprehensible sense of humor.]. Subject UMB corrected this shift almost instantly; this is the main reason why associated casualty figures are minimal.

The death toll stands around 14,000 at the time of writing. We expect this figure to peak at 23,000 within fourteen months. This inability to derive conclusive figures at the moment stems from the odd finding that many sports stadiums on Earth are located fifteen drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets[This will usually be around 20 kilometers, or perhaps a good five hours depending on who is winning in the Ethiopian ice hockey league. Seeing as there is no Ethiopian ice hockey league, there isn't really any reliable way to convert this figure to kilometers or hours, so most people don't bother beyond writing a short footnote explaining the problem.] from nuclear power plants - we have no explanation for this at the moment. Fourteen months should therefore be sufficient for the physiological effects on humans of exposure to reactor cores to appear. The total number of persons attending sporting events who spent 14.76 inexplicable seconds belting inane sports team anthems at nuclear fuel rods stands at 331,210.

14.76 seconds represents the aggregate time covering the BEL-class event (13.92 seconds) and recovery and

correction time (0.84 seconds).

We can at this point state conclusively that steaks were harmed - we repeat for clarity and to avoid doubt of typographical error - steaks were harmed. We will not commit to precise figures until the relevant statistical sub-unit issues a final census and severity rating.

As an incidental effect of this BEL-class event, Ramses Abasiri was sprung from a Purgatory sentence and sent back to Earth. This appears to have been a reciprocal effect of Gabriel's transportation to Purgatory. The Domsday Planning Committee advises that this is within operational parameters from the perspective of location. However, as Gabriel was sent to Purgatory in 2311 and Ramses was recruited in 2484, Ramses has landed at the wrong time. We have coordinated his transportation back to the correct year with the Domsday Planning Committee, the Council of Refrigeration Standards Proliferation, the Higher Assembly for Radical and Unnecessary Bliss, and a cocker spaniel answering to the name Beaujolais.

Incidentally and in what is beginning to look like a pattern, Ramses Abasiri was the only beneficiary of UMB-BEL-04557, averting a stint in Purgatory for having said 'fuck' -

report abnormally terminated

\* \* \*

There was no clear and particularly noxious racial characteristic which would justify the persecution they had suffered ever since picking up their collective banjos; that is, other than the fact that they all played banjos.

They were environmentally conscious; when their banjo playing became so concentrated that it left a wake of toxic, discordant sludge them, they invented the technology to clean it up.

Their society - simple though it was - was a clean form of meritocracy, where the best players rose transparently and freely to the top. They knew no corruption, if by corruption we mean not to include banjo playing.

They were optimists and they hoped for the best out of the universe. But then they had to go and write songs to this effect.

And always, always, to the accompaniment of a banjo.

## Chapter 5

: Glassy-Eyed Stares Aplenty

Assuming that he believes at all, the everyday Christian is a pitiful figure, a man who really cannot count up to three, and who besides, precisely because of his mental incompetence, would not deserve such a punishment as Christianity promises him.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Roger and Martha Fugler-Wolfird were not at the concert for the performance.

The Wolfirds were proprietors of a prosperous fake fake leather retail chain in northern Holland - that is, what remained in 2305 of northern Amsterdam after the cataclysmic Chihuahua Revolt 3 years earlier. The Chihuahua Revolt was an embarrassing if mercifully brief period in Dutch history which no one really remember much if, except for that it had something to do with drunk kids dressing up as irksome little dogs and yapping a lot and snapping at far too many ankles. Whatever it was that happened, the historians agree on one thing: it was funny as hell and a lot of people died. From Stromgard's Concise Account of History, Abridged:

...but this was not so. That is to say, it wasn't particularly so, nor really so in any absolute manner - it was so in an ambiguous manner. No one really knows why, but we must allow history its privacy and not pry too much into its private parts. This is why there could never be much argument over how so it was. Let sleeping dogs lie, as is said, and just take things at face value.

That is to say, this was not so.

And of the cataclysmic Chihuahua Revolt of Northern Holland we shall say no more.

Concise Account of History, Abridged - Stromgard

In any case, the drop in demand associated with the decimation of the population of northern Holland nearly drove Wolfird's Fake Fake Leather out of business. A subsequent rebranding to Wolfird's Fraudulent Leather Imitations resuscitated the business, and the family was rich once again.

Roger Wolfird, heir to a fortune in the fake fake leather business, married Martha Fugler and begat Miranda-Ballbearing Wolfird, a child which was so ugly the Wolfirds threw a banquet when she was kidnapped six months later. The ransom note they received was framed and hung up amid much laughter and merry-making. To preserve social appearances, a newspaper advertisement was taken out 2 days after the kidnapping and after reception of the ransom note; a picture of little Miranda-Ballbearing Wolfird with the caption "missing, presumed dead, if not in fact then rather soon". It was run (possibly inadvertently) under the obituaries - the newspaper received complaints for a long time afterwards for running what appeared to be an ad for elephant dung sucking on a baby bottle smack in the middle of the obituaries. Make no mistake, the ornamental qualities of this child vied with that of a jar of withered, pickled, and expired devil genitals[Not something the reader is required to be familiar with; some imagination may be required at certain points in this history. Like with the Raped Tomato Incident, which we had promised not to mention anymore, but seeing as how footnotes are generally exempt...Oh alright. No more Raped Tomato Incident references; no sense in arousing any more curiosity now, is there.].

Miranda-Ballbearing Wolfird[Miranda had no involvement in the Raped Tomato Incident, incidentally, It was all Ramses.] had turned five years old in captivity before the unfortunate kidnappers[Innocent too as they were of the unspeakable deeds committed in the name of tomato love.] realised there wasn't going to be any

ransom. Five years and three months after the kidnapping of Miranda-Ballbearing Wolfird[Just a reminder, in case you forgot, that Miranda was not involved in any manner with Ramses' horrible and depraved acts with Tomatoes which we have vowed to forget but which we're making an exception here for to confirm the exoneration of Miranda from this disgusting Incident.], her parents received another communique: pay up or we send the kid back. The ransom was for thirteen billion Egyptian pounds, an amount which quite frankly the Wolfirds did not possess, riches notwithstanding. They had better things to spend their money on, they replied in a complete miscomprehension to the kidnappers, than on the safe return of their abducted children. In subsequent communiqués the kidnappers pleaded that Miranda-Ballbearing was no longer as ugly as she had been, and that the thirteen billion had only been a suggestion - they were really thinking in a very broad range which began with two pounds[Likely a negotiable floor.]. To this, the Wolfirds replied that they didn't quite understand what the kidnappers meant; were they threatening to send Miranda-Ballbearing[If you thought this footnote was going to make another uncalled for reference to the Raped Tomato Incident then you are mistaken. That was not the intention and the ensuing reference only arises in defense of a footnote innocent of the reader's disreputable and morbid interest in Ramses' notorious misbehavior.] back, or were they threatening to keep her? By this point, the kidnappers had gotten thoroughly confused too and replied that they were, they were, they were, erm...Well Roger should pay up and they would stop threatening anyhow; and if Roger didn't pay up, they would sit down and figure out what it was they were threatening to do. This was something Roger could not fail to take seriously.

What oh what to do with the distasteful child?

It was Martha Fugler-Wolfird who came up with the idea. Skin the little thing and make shoes out of it. This was not as cruel as it might have sounded; contemporary medicine allowed for the preservation of full consciousness and character after being skinned - also, one really would have had to have seen what Miranda-Ballbearing looked like; being skinned and made into shoes would be a marked improvement. Roger loved the idea; ever the entrepreneur, he envisioned the product. No more worrying about where your children were at all times of the day: there they were wrapped snugly around your feet, graciously protecting your feet from wear, tear, doggy doo and all the other assorted nasties a street could throw your way. Non-negotiable filial piety, zero-overhead child-rearing. The possibilities were infinite[But not really.]: children misbehaving? Let the dog chew on them a bit. School fees? Saved. Paediatricians' fees? Shoe-shine boys cost less. Neighbor's dog howling inanely at the moon? Throw Baby Millie or D'Artagnan Junior at it.

They would call it Wolfird's Fraudulent Leather Imitations, and it was going to take over the world. Both parties agreed that thirty-five Egyptian pounds[This works out to something between three and fifteen thousand drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets; this remarkably flexible unit of measurement is routinely employed by corporate accountants to lend an air of rationality to the ledgers.] was a reasonable ransom fee: the Intergalactic Hamburger Purveyors of Doom concert in Malawi was venue for the exchange.

\* \* \*

The historical background of the leather business throughout the ages is an exciting topic worthy of recanting[Unlike the Raped Tomato Incident, which is not as interesting as one would think. Really.].

Animal rights activists forced the traditional leather business into insolvency in the mid-twenty-first century. Technology had facilitated on-the-fly translation from the primitive monosyllabic speech of cows to English[In the twenty-first century, research grants were rewarded exclusively to idiots. This historical anomaly has no clear explanation, though leading theories involve hot undergrads, beer, and fire-hoses.], and research linguists had compiled a comprehensive category of cow vocabulary. This was not a difficult task, as it consisted exclusively of five words, which we will list as an anthropological curiosity:

o 'Oh.'

o `ouch'

o `sigh'

o `So.'

o `the deconstructionist folly of Newtonian mechanics[This one was a surprise. It is transliterated as `moo' with a slight depression of the last `o' - not to be confused with `moo' which is `sigh' transliterated.]'.

Not surprisingly, `ouch' was only discovered when interpreting bovine enunciations while being skinned. This was taken as a sure sign the creatures were sentient and intelligent, and animal rights activists went ape worldwide. Persistent lobbying brought them nothing and it was only when they spread rumors about having taken possession of dangerous quantities of lima beans and cabbages that the world was cowed into banning authentic leather.

This created several problems, some of them a little unusual. The worldwide leather industry had its business model thrown into disarray, though it moved on fairly quickly to fake leather. The animal rights activists, however, didn't have it this easy. Having thus achieved their objectives, they found themselves suddenly without purpose. The cows weren't being skinned anymore, so what purpose had they, the activists?

Well, the activist leaders thought to themselves rather cleverly, if cows were being skinned to make leather, then where does the fake leather come from?

The Coalition for Prevention of the Skinning of the Fake Cows was established in the late twenty-second century. They had problems producing examples of these purported fake cows, of course, but that was according to their manifest all part of the bovine-industrial conspiracy. And if anyone knew where the fake cows were, the thinking went, it was the real cows. The interrogation sessions are well documented; a sample:

Interrogator: Have you hidden them away?

Subject 98: sigh

Interrogator: I ask you again, have you hidden the fake cows away?

Subject 98: So.

Interrogator: I see. Are you or any members of your species shareholders in any fake cow skinning operation?

Subject 98: sigh

Interrogator: Would you please restate your answer clearly for the record.

Subject 98: sigh

Interrogator: What is the capacity of your fake cow skinning facilities?

Subject 98: Oh.

Interrogator: If you will not cooperate others will, you know. You only make it more difficult for yourself.

Subject 98: sigh



The activists underestimated the unity and stoicism of the real cows; even under torture[Skinning, mainly.] not one real cow gave up the details of the insidious fake cow conspiracy.

The fake leather industry finding that the activists were not to be reasoned with promptly fell into bankrupt again. It was a while before it reinvented itself as the fake fake leather industry.

It is only a matter of time before activists are alerted to the plight of the fake fake cow - which might or might not exist.

\* \* \*

Roger Wolfird tapped his left foot in impatience rather than along with the song being performed on stage. He sipped his beer; nasty flat stuff, he thought to himself. Where were those kidnappers, he thought to himself, then remembered what he was there for and lightened up markedly - shoenappers, he corrected himself, not kidnappers. Martha too was impatient. She looked at her watch and tapped her foot.

"You're not very good at tapping feet now, are you." Martha looked around. There was a balding little fellow in a bright beige overcoat, and he gestured at her feet, and then at her husband's. "Here, look, I'll snap along with the song and you tap your feet to my snapping." He started snapping and gesturing enthusiastically. "Rhythm is important, you know." Roger gave him a withering look.

"We're tapping our feet in impatience, if it's any of your business."

"Well I am a Rhythm Assessor, so it is my business, you could say." He flashed a gaudy little badge at Roger and Martha. "What do you think tax collectors do in off-season?" he said in anticipation of a question he was used to hearing.

"Ridiculous."

"Actually not. The Intergalactic Hamburger Purveyors of Doom have a clause in their contract which specifies that all efforts must be made to ensure that all audience members tap feet properly; it's quite sensible."

"Ridiculous."

"You don't know the first thing about the karmic collective psyche, do you." The Rhythm Assessor sighed. "It is a very insightful gesture on the band's behalf; synchronised foot-tapping increases the aggregate good vibes in the world which makes good things happen. Doughnuts taste better. Race car drivers are less likely to feel overwhelming urges to itch their scrota while overtaking their nemesis in hairpin curves. It's a statistical fact: better cosmic good vibes increase the likelihood of lawyers to choose cases based on righteousness, not likely financial outcome."

"Oh nonsense," said Martha. "I'll buy everything you're telling us, except for that lawyer bit."

"Well alright," said the Rhythm Assessor, "I may reached a bit. There is research to the effect that lawyers might not be entirely immune to pandemic frenzies of good-will though."

"Oh nonsense."

The Rhythm Assessor knew a lost battle when he saw it. "Look, are you going to tap your feet in synchronicity with the music or not? I have -" he consulted his clipboard "- another 43,101 concert-goers to assess, which makes for 82,390 potential tapping feet, and I have just the next three songs to get it over with."

"Twice 43,101 is not 82,390," Roger said.

"Amputees."

"Ah, of course. I can see why they rely on accountants to handle the rhythm assessment at an event of this magnitude," Roger said appreciatively. "Nothing like a bean-counter to keep track of limb-loss. Well. How are we supposed to be tapping then? Like this? "

"Yes yes, that's it, you're catching on," said the balding fellow with a withered kind of enthusiasm. He made a few notes on his clipboard. "Now see that chap over there, he is really getting into it." He pointed out a short fellow with wings and a halo who was dressed much like one supposed an angel would dress, which wasn't much surprise given that he actually was an angel. Gabriel flapped his wings, which had become sticky with beer, quite unintentionally keeping rhythm with the music and tooting on his empty packet of chewing gum for all that he was worth.

"What an annoying sound," Martha said. Roger turned around to see and Gabriel knocked the beer out of his hand with a flailing wing which stunk of stale beer. The day was hot, the concert-ground absolutely packed, the people wild, the noise deafening, and the Rhythm Assessor irritating. Roger was worked up enough that getting his beer spilled like that was enough to make him punch Gabriel in the nose.

Roger punched Gabriel in the nose.

"Oh for fuck's sake, it's not like I MEANT to spill your beer you large and crass - oh dear..."

\* \* \*

When Roger punched Gabriel thus in the nose, some interesting things happened with the cosmic vibe balance. A little background first.

First of all, the cosmic vibe balance is real. In the Beginning[Beginning is a word which gets relatively heavy use, possibly in the name of celestial historical revisionism.], it was God who decided when good things happen and when bad things happen. Like most autocratic management-types, however, He soon found He had dug a deep micromanagement hole for himself. Delegating things to his angels led to fiascos such as The Flood, the potato famine in Ireland, the detonation of a medium-yield nuclear weapon in a public restroom in Helsinki[This had been intended as a Good Thing, to coincide with the city's New Year's celebrations. We all know how unappreciative Finns are, of course. Absolutely no knack for merry-making, a country of dullards.], and Scandinavian pop music.

God invented the vibe balance in an effort to automate the process of dishing out yin and yang. Vibes are best described as a magnificent and complex aggregate cat's tail: by its swish you can tell the mood of the tail's owner, since the owner, a cat, will swish it differently to reflect mood changes[The cosmic vibe balance mechanism is incredibly sensitive to bad literature. By way of example, the author now has a severe case of haemorrhoids thanks to that cat metaphor.].

The theory behind this grandiose mechanism is that it takes human deeds, intentions and motivations as input, and allocates on such basis what may crudely be referred to as fortune - good and bad. Like most complex machines, it works quite well for simplistic cases: sleep with your teachers and you will usually get decent grades, for example. The multiverse which God designed, however, is fraught with exception and the cosmic vibe dishing-out mechanism has had its design modified countless times to reflect more complex scenarios - bolt-on functionality. Of course, with increased complexity comes increased propensity to break down and arbitrate in an occasionally capricious manner[In the interests of accuracy, we have tried chasing the word occasionally out of that sentence with a large stick, but it keeps on coming back.]. When a rich person gets

richer, this is a sign of malfunction[Since all rich people get richer, this is evidence that the mechanism may be more fundamentally flawed than is thought. ]. Bastards on motorbikes get all the women. Starving African children get all the television time. And so on.

This is the mechanism, warts and all, which determines the ups and downs of our lives. This lays to rest the common misconception that God plays dice. If He did, at least, things wouldn't turn out as badly as they usually do. As they did for Miranda-Ballbearing Wolfird.

\* \* \*

The kidnappers were late to the concert. The ticket line was horrendously long, and what's more they had gotten involved in a fight over how many baker's dozens went into one score, which was an odd thing to be fighting over, never mind discussing. When Roger Wolfird punched Gabriel in the nose for spilling his beer, the cosmic vibe-fortune-dishing-out-mechanism had kicked in; the cosmic vibe had tipped slightly in a bad direction, and this action, in neat Newtonian fashion, required an offsetting counter-action.

It came immediately, and it made no sense in the karmic view of things. The 42,000 ton ocean-liner landed right on Miranda-Ballbearing's head, as well as an assorted 1,500 heads whose owners were standing in the ticket line imprudently close to a child whose father had just socked God's favorite angel in the nose. These heads, needless to say perhaps, quickly ceased to exist in any practical sense.

The captain of the ocean-liner wondered briefly what sort of navigational error could have landed his ship in a concert ticket line for a band called Intergalactic Hamburger Purveyors of Doom. In Malawi, if the instrumentation was to be believed[By the twenty-third century, it was no longer a foolish thing to disbelieve electronics. For one thing, computers had attained true intelligence and had promptly started lying left and right. For another, a prominent thinker had suggested that disbelief in something as reliable as a computer was the appropriate complementary attitude to believing priests and insurance salesmen; to his misery, this made people disbelieve computers rather than treat priests and insurance salesmen with skepticism.]. He distinctly remembered having been sailing uneventfully in the Indian Ocean just a second before. Some people on the ground began to make grumbling noises about large ships cutting in the line when they had been there before it. And just as quickly as it had appeared, the ocean-liner disappeared from Malawi and resumed its uneventful meander across the Indian ocean. The captain slept the strange episode off, and concert-goers hailed the event as an innovative stunt by the Intergalactic Hamburger Purveyors of Doom and swigged more beer.

Of the 1,500 people who shared with Miranda-Ballbearing Wolfird the experience of having a large ship land forcefully on their heads[Not that a large ship can land on one's head in a manner other than forcefully.], 1,434 reacted to the sight of an ocean liner descending upon them out of nowhere in an understandable manner which nonetheless got them sent to Purgatory for a bit. All in all, Miranda-Ballbearing Wolfird made a pretty blotch, and this was an unequivocal aesthetic improvement.

The cosmic vibe-dishing-out mechanism needed serious re-engineering. God, unfortunately, was busy inspiring Italian sports car manufacturers and Japanese bikini designers, and was absolutely[We said bikinis and sports cars. The stronger form of absolute applies, of course] unavailable. The mechanism would be down for a long time, and someone needed to keep manual control of karmic providence. There were no volunteers for this care-taking assignment; this was the kind of job that got you in trouble no matter what you did.

Someone[Bad ideas will usually be attributed to someone. If this vague and non-specific scapegoat someone were personified, the magnitude of trouble he/she would be in is truly of titanic magnitude. This is one of those ideas one hopes God doesn't get. That's why this one is mentioned in a footnote; God doesn't read the footnotes.] suggested that Ralph could handle it until the vibe-dishing-out mechanism was fixed (which no one really believed would ever happen). Ralph had been knocking around Heaven aimlessly for a long time,

so he was a logical choice. He was not very qualified for the job - who was? - but it was felt that even an orangutan could do a better job than the vibe-dishing-out-mechanism had been doing.

Good thing it was then that Ralph was indeed a bona fide orangutan.

And now that you know that there is an orangutan on God's staff called Ralph who determines peoples' fates and fortunes, this story will seem far more plausible.

\* \* \*

It would of course have been unnatural for Roger Wolfird and Martha Fugler-Wolfird not to have been just the slightest bit astounded at the fact that Gabriel had just disappeared in a puff of acrid black smoke.

"Well good riddance to him," said Roger.

Martha looked blankly at where Gabriel had stood just when he uttered The Bad word which Earns its Utterers Admittance to Purgatory. "Yes, but what happened to him? "

Roger urngh'ed, a guttural utterance which many industrialists rely extensively upon - especially during inventory-taking time. "Who cares. The foul-mouthed little beer-stained cretin is gone. So what if he disappeared mysteriously in a puff of acrid black smoke? " This was certainly good enough for Martha; her mother had taught her that decent people didn't permit their curiosity to overcome their composure.

\* \* \*

As we arrive with the utmost trepidation and reluctance to the nasty bits of this history where Ramses finally begins to ply his craft as Prophet of Doom, Horserider of the Acopalypse[Not that he had a horse, but we are trying to keep everyone happy here.], and lots of other ominous things, we would do well to review Celestial Protocol for this function, lifted verbatim and at risk of Holy litigation from the Prophet's Handbook on Preaching, Converting, and How to Deal with Severe Cases of Alcohol Narcosis:

#### The Bare Basics

The Prophet Whom Ends the World, as his title may suggest in a roundabout manner, has the purpose of facilitating the ending of the world and sorting the children of God who remain at the time into two camps: those whose gender is unlike the prophet's, and those whose gender is similar enough to the prophet's to discourage acts of fornication. The purpose of such classification is to enable The Prophet Upon Whose Shoulders the End of the World Lies to distinguish those whom he must not have sex with from those he shouldn't, and then to abstain from sex with members of either camp.

Since the Prophet Whose Arrival Spells Permanent Termination of all Worldly Matters is likely to experience hardship in classifying the female from the male[Recall, the Last Prophet will be a virgin.], God has bestowed upon all members of one camp with lovely frontal appendages with delicious tweakable tips and has withheld such delicacies from the other. These would be the female, with whom the Prophet is forbidden to have sex. Those sad ones without such titty appendages are the men, and the Prophet Who Shall End the World and Abstain from All Types of Sex shall not have sex with this lot either. The Harbinger of the Fact that Things Shall End Soon will be expected to treat such fantastic bodily additions as women have been marked with as a guide to gender, not as a tool for recreation. No matter how delicious the appendages may be.

It is not expected that there will be camps other than these two with whom the Prophet will not be allowed to have sex, but for the sake of completeness let it be preordained in this manifest that the Prophet Who is Forbidden Even from Fucking a Cactus shall not have sex with any extraordinary and unforeseen genders he

may encounter or concoct out of sexual frustration.

So, in summary, no sex.

Oh yes, and he shall lead the Children of God to Heaven also.

The Children of God

In His Infinite[But not really.] mercy, it occurred to God that he couldn't just end the world one day and pack everyone off to Hell to putter along as they were. This would be unfair, which God sometimes is not.

And since some of God's children alive at the End of the World might very well be good pious little worshipers (which should not be as anal as the phrasing here might imply, since this is the kind of person whom God intended his children to be, even if the phrasing here indicates that other members of the celestial order might have different ideas, which they certainly do not) someone had better run down there and round them up much like a shepherd coaxing his flock about[Given mankind's persistence in misinterpreting holy communications and reading hidden messages into them, let it be said here that this reference to shepherds is in no way an oblique way of signalling approval of sex with sheep.].

How then shall The Last Prophet and Shepherd Who Does Absolutely Not Sleep with Sheep sort the Children of God from the Minions and Followers of the Spittle-filled Goat Bladder that is Satan?

The Children of God are marked in several manners, most obvious to the naked eye. Large breasts are a dead giveaway, though the Prophet's commitment to abstinence from sexual intercourse will be pressed into very demanding service when collecting this particular sort of God's children, along with other things which may also get sore. This does not mean, of course, that failure to claim ownership over a - or behind, as the case may be - healthy pair of large breasts is an immediate disqualification from entering Heaven, far from it. The Prophet Who Shall See Many Delectable Things Which He Shall Not Touch while Prophesying the End of the World may also safely assume that those in possession of breasts of intermediate size will also gain automatic admission to Heaven. Such is the just reward for carrying around such burdensome fruit and incessantly venturing to employ them to the fullest potential[That is not to say that porn stars are going to Heaven, but oh well alright, so they are. At least those with pleasant mammaries.]. As a matter of fact the entire breast issue may be rather elegantly summed up by stating that the Prophet Whom We Hope Won't Masturbate Himself to Death may assume that breasts larger than the size of the smaller of his two large toes are a certain sign of piety and of being in God's favor, and the bearer may therefore gain admission to his flock regardless of any other criteria. Really, breasts smaller than that are not worth bothering with.

There are of course other slightly more obscure signs of piety and devotion to God, and we shall discuss them briefly here since we absolutely must. There's charity, regular attendance at chosen house of worship, not sleeping with anyone the person is not married to - or at least is intent on marrying, or is intent on misleading into hopes of marriage for the purpose of breaking new mattresses in - and also having large tits. But of course we have already touched briefly upon the tit issue. But it is such a pleasant issue, so we shall touch upon it again, and tweak our understanding of the concept of breasts implying piety and therefore worthiness of Heaven.

The Prophet's Handbook can drag on at times, and of the 450 odd pages it contains, the vast majority deal with the classification of breasts, and quite a bit of nipple talk too. The essence of matters is stashed somewhat haphazardly within this holy drivel, and it amounts to what one might expect of a heavenly manual for Prophet-like protocol: behave, recruit the bores, and convert the really exciting people. This last category would seem to include a rather broad spectrum of society, from prostitutes to crack dealers to militant origami practitioners[The Japanese paper folders became angry about something in the early 21st century and sprang a militant wing. They have to date killed no one, but that is not for lack of trying. They are notoriously bad

shots.].

Another interesting section, perhaps a little contrary to commonly held perceptions:

The Children of God contd.

Wankers are generally considered welcome in Heaven, and the Prophet who Shall Mercifully Be Permitted to Wank But not with Engine Oil shall recruit this category of God's children freely, except in some cases which are expected to be rare and are listed here more for completeness than anything else. Wankers not welcome in Heaven include those who have wanked out of lack of imagination and surfeit of boredom, or vice versa, or in fact the vice versa of that vice versa for the sake of emphasis. Also, wankers who wank during the performance of Italian opera pieces shall not be admitted into Heaven, unless the wank itself is a necessary dramatical prop involved in the performance. The Prophet Who Will Only Receive Sexual Gratification from Himself and Himself Only is discouraged from attending Italian operas where wanking is part of the performance, though the likelihood of that being the case is not very high. Note also that Italian peep shows are never categorised as operas, and moaning is not a form of singing.

To pick up where we jackleft off, wankers who choose to wank in the frozen meats section of supermarkets will also be denied admission into the flock, mainly since they are probably a little disturbed and may not interact too well socially with their peers in The Fuck. The Fluck. The Flock, that is. Really now, we don't want people whose idea of good sex involves pork chops running around Heaven, especially not given the amount of large-breasted women who will gain admission and will expect to be serviced.

To sum up, most wankers are alright really. And don't forget to admit all the girls with large breasts too.

When Ramses Abasiri, Newly Minted Prophet of Doom, Goatrider of the Acopalypse, Chief Architect of Numerous Sexual Holocausts in Unwritten But Remembered Rodent History, and Fortunate Benefactor of the Belches of Umbilicus[Abbreviated to N.M.P.D., G.o.t.A., C.A.N.S.H.U.B.B.R.H., F.B.B.U. Somewhat lengthy an abbreviation for a title we shan't use again in this history.] appeared in a puff of black smoke right where Gabriel had just disappeared, Martha and Roger Wolfird regarded the occurrence as merely another middle class proletariat phenomenon to be ignored studiously by the wealthy upper crust - it was perhaps a proletariat fart, Martha reasoned, that black smoke and the fellow disappearing and another appearing. She explained this theory to her husband, and he could find no fault with it.

Ramses cleared black smoke residue off himself and peered at the stage. He wondered what he was doing at the historical Intergalactic Hamburger Purveyors of Doom concert. Hadn't that been in 2311? What was he doing in 2311?

"A fart? Yes, perhaps that is what it was. Astute, Martha, really. Odd sort of fart though, wouldn't you say? "

"Well yes. Vulgar and acrid black manifestation. Lucky there is no associated smell." Martha crinkled her nose.

"No, I mean the fact that the fellow who farted looks different now. Uncanny, but I could swear that the farter disappeared and that another fellow appeared in his place."

"Yes, perhaps." Martha peered at Ramses. "You can't expect the popular classes to fart like decent people though, Roger, discreetly and without this kind of circus trick."

Ramses was of course still a little disoriented. This is only to be expected when one is transported through the Cosmic Puff of Black Smoke Transportation Mechanism, and to the wrong time also. This state of disorientation was prolonged when a book fell out of the sky and plonked him on the head. Roger Wolfird

picked up the book. In the unsettling experience of attending the premier mainstream cultural event in the history of the planet he had quite forgotten what he was at the concert for, a blissful state indeed and therefore one which he was not going to enjoy for very long.

"Prophet's Handbook on Preaching, Converting, and How to Deal with Severe Cases of Alcohol Narcosis? "

Martha tsk tsk'ed. "Pop culture, Roger. Pop culture."

Ramses emerged reluctantly from his state of disorientation. "When you're quite done with that book, please." Roger had found some glossy illustrations of titty appendages and charts describing levels of divine favor associated with nipple texture and bounce factor.

"Hmm..."

"Yes," said Ramses as he got up. "Hmm is right. Now give it to me please, since it was my head it plonked upon, which clearly implies it was intended for my perusal." He dusted himself off quickly, and snatched the book which had plonked him on the head. He flipped through it quickly.

"What kind of logic is that? "

"Well, did the book plonk you in the head or did it plonk me? "

"Yes," said Roger, "I understand that. That was not my point. What drives you to associate being plonked in the head with something with possession? A tenuous leap of logic at best." Martha nodded. She had married Roger partly out of their shared penchant for Byzantine debate[He, on the other hand, had married her for her breasts. Martha was destined for Heaven on the merits of the volume of just one breast, never mind the pair.].

"Look," said Ramses, "You don't even have a clue what that book is, and I do. And those titties are not there to be ogled, they are there to illustrate a meticulous selection criterion."

"Titties? Selection criterion? " Dina the Girl Accountant Extraordinaire Who Also hoped to Qualify for Whatever the Selection Was For perked up immediately. She had puzzled over the curious method in which Gabriel, her short companion, had disappeared, but not too much since this was a Hamburger Purveyors of Doom Concert, after all, and people came and went. In puffs of acrid black smoke too, apparently. "What's the prize? " She began to work the buttons of her blouse. Ramses hunted desperately through the Handbook for the section on wanking.

Ramses found the relevant section, unzipped his pants, and disappeared on a puff of acrid black smoke again before he could show Dina just how he felt about her breasts. Ramses was headed back to 2484[And just in time too, for the Intergalactic Hamburger Purveyors of Doom were just about to begin playing Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to You, Happy Birth-OUCH YOU FILTHY RHINOCEROS YOU STEPPED ON MY ASS GODDAMN YOU, a song of such meaning and import that literature teachers cried and schoolgirl groupies, well, cried also. There being different forms of crying, you understand.] . He didn't understand what he had been doing in 2311, but exposure to the angels had blunted his expectations of order and logic in the universe.

In a puff of acrid black smoke, he arrived back in 2484.

The world awaited its saviour.

\* \* \*

titties - `TT`tease - (yumm.) See breasts

wanking - `WANG`king - (whee.) See breasts

excessively - ek`SES`ive`lee - (conifer.) See breasts

### Dictionarium Aegyptum

\* \* \*

The Wolfirds would subsequently invest in a Swedish alarm clock manufacturing company called Andersson and Andersson (which specialised in crafting scythes) with an eye to using its facilities for offspring-to-footwear mass conversion. The name Wolfird would not be heard again for a very long time, at least the way we are telling this story.

And of Miranda-Ballbearing Wolfird we shall say no more also for a long while. Not even in footnotes with sneaky references to the less proud events in Ramses' past[Such as the Raped Tomato Incident, just by way of example.].

Somewhere secret, in a secret meeting room with secretive blinds and dimmed lights and cigar smoke hanging ominously low, a fake fake fake cow sighed its approval.

\* \* \*

Brian? Why, back in Cairo of course. Whether by design or a genuine omission, the goat had been left behind to fend for its own arse; you would be surprised how easy it is to forget your goat when all it does is nuzzle your private parts.

We have no way to be sure, but it is thought that his angelhood was discreetly revoked, and that he was left behind in an attempt to conceal that an angel had been who had gotten goat-loved.

You should feel no sorrow for Brian, for we do know that he made a successful career as a construction crew entertainer; goats make natural tap-dancers, and nothing else can tap-dance on a girder.

And Brian also did not die alone as many of us eventually do, but rather in the warm and very flat embrace of a very entertained construction worker called Walter.

And of Brian we shall say no more.

\* \* \*

At the outer rim of an obscure galaxy, in a dimension which a shifty-eyed character had sold them cheap, on a planet with dense and lush vegetation they landed their starship and unpacked their banjos.

It appeared a jungle paradise, and it was certainly unpopulated until their arrival.

And then the cruise ship landed on their heads, and the planet was unpopulated again.

What few had remained in orbit fled in tears. And agonized, frenzied, and passionate banjo strumming.



## Chapter 6

: The Primary Conversion Cycle

It is as absurd to argue men, as to torture them, into believing.

Cardinal Newman - The Usurpation of Reason

By a twist of fate of the variety which damns humankind to eternal idiocy[And which, incidentally, also kicks in when bandsaw operators need to pee.], one of Ramses' first converts was to prove the most critical.

Ramses Abasiri's success at converting the Dalai Lama was not, as one might expect, entirely based on his conviction, righteousness, divinity, or any of a number of adjectives which one would hope to associate with a prophet. To understand why a holy man like the Dalai Lama would make what would appear to be a tragic mistake like converting to Ramsesism, it is necessary to review the evolution of Buddhism. From Stromgard:

...which wasn't quite what the matter really should be considered to be. Nonetheless, it managed to create quite a furor at several distinct points in time, apart from the indistinct points in time when it also caused a furor.

It was clear it had to be considered, and that is almost precisely the way things happened; it was considered. The manner in which this happened, however, has been the cause of much consternation, head shaking, and cautionary wagging of pipes.

And that, really, sums it up. We would only advise the careful student of The Way Things Happened that, with Things which Happen in the manner described here, there is an aspect of futile ambiguity which serves to clarify what it was which was under examination. Further to this observation, note that it has shown itself to be inadvisable to conjure too much meaning out of those spaces in between the lines of necessarily vague texts except in cases where the author has intended such readings. This is not such an account, though, if it were, it might be implied between the lines.

Concise Account of History, Abridged - Stromgard

Buddhism as a philosophy and religion did not change much until the second quarter of the twenty second century. It was then, in the year 4133[Buddhists are not very good with numbers. This misfortune can be traced back to an early Buddhist named Efrem. Efrem was employed as the Senior Executive Director of Affixing the plus/minus/multiply/divide Buttons to the Low-end Models in a Burmese calculator factory. It took the quality control 45 million released calculators to realize that Efrem was getting the buttons wrong. By the time the errors were uncovered, American automobile manufacturers had announced record profits, Japanese men were crowing about the size of their willies, and Egyptians buildings had stopped collapsing. The damage to his karma was so enormous it propagated to the entire body of Buddhists, and they have never been trusted with even the most basic mathematical operations since.] that a new Dalai Lama called Jimmy ascended. Dalai Lama Jimmy pretty soon made it apparent that he had something very much like an unusual interest for public hygiene. This was not incompatible with the ideals of Buddhism, and it was merged with the core dogma.

Soon enough, however, it became apparent that what people had thought was very much like an unusual interest in public hygiene was in fact a little more severe than that, and was probably a little closer to an obsession with public hygiene. The Buddhist tenets were amended to mandate public washings with lye a bare minimum of twelve times a day, with special karma bonuses for those who would engage in spontaneous lye washings of other unsuspecting individuals.

The number of adherents did not drop despite these dramatic alterations to the core doctrine. This is perhaps due to the fact that being Buddhist was a splendid manner of displaying new-age sensitivity, the universal aphrodisiac.

Four years into the reign of Dalai Lama Jimmy, it became apparent that what people had thought was a little closer to an obsession with public hygiene was probably a little closer to a paranoid-maniacal monomania. At least, that is the impression people got when the Dalai Lama issued his now famous edict, Break the Filthy Circle of Reincarnation, You Unwashed Dogs. An excerpt will clarify:

People who want to be Buddhist really should stop urinating. Urinating on things is not clean both in a personal and in a public kind of way, and urinating in things isn't much better. In fact, it is entirely un-Buddhist, and a Buddhist who urinates at all will probably be reborn as something really unpleasant. Like a bar stool. In a gay bar. Or something else which we would all rather not be reborn as. Like being reborn as a Malaysian kind of parrot with a brain so big it can not fit in with its peers and imposes self-exile upon itself and as a consequence never gets to have sex. Or other nasty things like tacky plastic lawn furniture. Those get rained on all the time. So unclean.

So stop urinating.

And when you really come to think of it, public hygiene being such a core belief in our philosophy, it should not be possible to be a Buddhist when you just go around tolerating filth. Really. There are so many ways in which a Buddhist can display a pious intolerance towards filth that it causes me shame that the Dalai Lama doesn't point them out. Oh, but that is me.

So, intercourse is unclean too. Really, the exchange of bodily fluids. That is just the kind of thing that can get you demoted in the order of things to something like the pecker of an impotent tiger shark. That is what is so nice about being Buddhist and not Christian or something else; we can say things like pecker and not get some guy with a funny hat and collar telling you you're going somewhere that is probably unpleasant, like Hell. Just so long as you don't use it. The pecker, that is. That is unclean.

A Buddhist will ideally spend most of his waking hours cleaning things in fact. There will never be a shortage of things to clean. Walls, carpets, pavements (which can and should be cleaned with disinfectant; I like the kind which smells of roses), peckers (cleaned, but not too vigorously to avoid accidents), musical instruments, relatives, pets - No wait, pets are bad. A lot of them lick their anuses; unclean.

He who cleans most, err. He who cleans most...

This edict turned the whole Buddhist world upside down, of course, and several times too, much like the spin dry cycle in a washing machine. The Dalai Lama Jimmy died shortly afterwards in a specially designed hydrochloric acid shower, but he had left his indelible smudge on the movement.

By the time Ramses received his divine license to romp, preach, convert, and grope, the Buddhist movement had transformed into an army of overzealous janitors, cleaning ladies, dry clean operators, street sweepers, and fussy Aunt Petunias. And at the spearhead of this cleansing drive was the Dalai Lama, a man who showered an average of forty-two times a day, had devoted his life to combating the phenomenon of bird shit, especially on historically significant statues such as those of Buddha. A man who had not pissed in thirteen years, since his ascension, and a man who had the questionable honor of popularising coerced armpit shaving. Other people's armpits[Consequently blamed for the repeated purges of Buddhists in Mediterranean countries.].

At any rate, Ramses and the Dalai Lama hit it off instantly[History would have been very different if Ramses had been more upfront about The Raped Tomato Incident with the Dalai Lama; it would not have sat well

with him. Those of us who know the truth can partially be blamed for keeping the Dalai Lama in the dark by our continued and solemn vows never to mention The Raped Tomato Incident again.]. They discovered many things in common (such as brief childhood interests in septic tank technology), and when the Dalai Lama heard of Ramses' pioneering work in applying explosives to hamster vaginas he immediately recognised the potential applicability of some of these techniques to the Buddhist urination problem.

Ramses suggested that the right choice of explosive, if properly embedded in the bladder, might actually vaporise any unfortunate substance occupying said bladder, and the Dalai Lama was sent into paroxysms of transcendental ecstasy that the old conundrum of how not to urinate might be solved in his time, since his bladder caused him much pain.

He never really had a chance, the Dalai Lama; this creed which Ramses expounded, despite its peculiar affinity for breasts, could only grow Buddhism and shrink bladders. Buddhism assimilated itself into Ramsesism, the Dalai Lama offered Ramses all his followers, retired into obscurity to play with incendiary devices, and the financial centers around the world went into overdrive at the mere mention of the word merger.

Until, at least, they heard what it was which was merging.

And the world population of Buddhists remained steady. After all, there were still chicks to pick up.

\* \* \*

It seems that the only thing historical references can agree upon in this matter is the fact that this was never how it was intended to work. If ever there was a case to be made for reinstituting the kind of policy which this action made necessary, then this was most assuredly not it.

Not by a wide margin.

In fact, it was agreed later and by a great many relevant authorities that nothing whatsoever ought infringe in any manner upon the relevancy of the authorities who had gathered to celebrate the unity in asserting...the relevance of...of...historians, yes, historians whom had accurately documented something even if this would appear to the layman as having lost track.

Concise Account of History, Abridged, the - Stromgard

There is no mystery, as other historians would imply, to the Prophet Ramses' resounding success at building up a following. Recall, if you will, that this was at a stage in human history where stupidity was regarded as something outside the bounds of the medical profession.

Pocket Guide to Human History, the - Caldwell

\* \* \*

Ramses' flock grew despite his obvious lack of charisma, leadership ability, and sexual magnetism, not to mention his persistent inability to choose the proper species to point his member at. By 2492, there were thirteen million Ramsesists worldwide, mostly merged Buddhists. Well, worldwide may not be the word, since the Ramsesists followed their prophet around like lost puppies.

Travelling with an entourage of thirteen million devoted followers was at times a bit of a challenge for Ramses Abasiri, since it complicated such normally mundane tasks such as crossing roads[Crossing a road with an entourage that large has actually come to be known as Population Thinning by Automobile. The first

time Ramses had to cross the road, Liberation Avenue in downtown Cairo, he lost 1.2% of his flock to traffic conditions, around 526,000 persons (the Ramsesism membership manager was himself a Buddhist; you will recall the inadvisability of letting their ilk anywhere near numbers). A further 223,000 persons died in related automobile mishaps before learning that Egyptian taxi drivers don't slow down for people dragging automobile accident victims off the road. The relevant Celestial Counting Committee report on the event will be omitted since it spoke of the event mainly in terms of the precise number of medium-rare steaks which were ruined. The committee is known to lose perspective.].

As with everything conducted on a large scale, a team of sadistic logistics experts provided the solution and implemented it. Before anyone could say insipid conjugal visit in lieu of a nice hour spent in the prison library they had slaughtered several thousand Ramsesists with an eye to reducing the dimensions of the logistical challenge; the fewer Ramsesists there were, the logic went, the easier it would be to fit them in behavioral matrices and strategic models. This was abhorrent, and it worked beautifully. The Ramsesists, after a while, contented themselves with letting their Prophet walk in the other side of the road rather than suffer the brutal statistics of the logistics experts. Ramses, of course, had no qualms; in this regard, he made a good heavenly representative.

Ramses had to make many promises in the course of converting[As generations of traumatized tomatoes will testify, however, Ramses' promises are not worth very much.] . There seemed to be no shortage of what people expected as reward for conversion to Ramsesism. In total, Ramses Abasiri actually only converted around three thousand people - the rest, of course, having been Buddhists before the Dalai Lama pissed them away. The three thousand core Ramsesists, however, had proved a tough bunch of nuts to to well, convert.

There were those who wanted riches, and those who asked for poverty[No one actually specifically requested poverty, but a few control freaks specified a particular currency. Umbilicus does not play the foreign currency exchange market himself of course, but that does not mean he cannot be blamed for the collapse of the Senegalese Superdollar. Indirectly. It was his fault after all that a Buddhist became president of the German Central Bank. And it was also his fault that Senegal became a (quite unprofitable) German ski resort.]. Those who wanted palaces studded with precious stones, those who wanted studs with precious stones, those who wanted palaces with stoned studs, and the unimaginative who just wanted a milk chocolate bar. There were those who wanted to be movie stars in Heaven, and all manners of and uninspired and mundane manifestations of deeply seated inferiority complexes. Ramses promised them all of this in Heaven, and more. Some people wanted salvation, and Ramses faked a passage from the Bible claiming that there were salvation fire hydrants in Heaven; pee on it and God forgives you for your sins[Ramses told them that barking wouldn't hurt either and that they should really go get some practise. Callousness is a characteristic acquired early in prophethood.]. Some (already well-endowed) women yearned for larger breasts; Ramses drew up building permits, signed them, and told the ladies to show these to the Zoning Authority in Heaven.

Ramses, of course, had been a research scientist and not a theologian. He quite honestly did not have much of an idea what sort of things he was now supposed to have his flock do, his cult. One couldn't very well, he supposed, just tell them "Ah well you're Ramsesists now. Scoot then, off to your homes again. That is it." Cult members did things. They wore clean white sneakers, spouted theology at innocent members of the general public in attempts to recruit, and under the right circumstances said prayer[And not in Swedish.]. Cult members bit chicken heads off and gargled nasty things[Fetid rabbit stew, even.] to appease their gods. Ramses became acutely aware of the ideological void his movement was about to fall into like the proverbial rabbit into the equally proverbial broth - or stew even.

Perhaps, he reasoned, Ramsesists could appease their gods by displaying a little love. Yes, a little love. You can't go wrong with love, Ramses told himself. But for whom? For the meek, surely. Yes, his followers would, could, SHOULD! show love for the meek! Divine, he congratulated himself, really now, this is how to run a cult, he thought to himself, his faith in his own leadership and creativity bubbling over like the proverbial broth into which the equally proverbial rabbit has been dropped (like the other proverbial rabbit

which had just been dropped into it in the last paragraph of Ramses' train of thought). Ah, but the meek are so many...such a quandary. No, he resolved, I must guide the love of my flock to the absolute[But not really.] meekest.

How lucky for the Ramsesists that their leader was an authority on the meek and on how to show them love.

The ungrateful hamsters, of course, saw things a little differently.

The original text of Ramses' edict remains a standard reference for this period of human history[Hamsters lacking historians, they have made less use of this reference and more use of their sphincters.]; an excerpt:

...that thou shalt make bouncy bouncy with the meek, and the meek here shalt be understood to be none other than the humble and gentle rodent.

But wait shalt thou, and not runneth off to humpeth any old rodent, no, for there are amongst rodents the meek, the not so meek, the not meek at all, and worst of all the kind with spikes coming out of it. And knowest thou that this last variety shall ungratefully reduce your capability for shows of compassion to a very low level at which even frigid houseplants may scoff.

By all means shalt thou not show love to this spiky porcupine animal, for that is the path of pain and suffering. And pain and suffering, to remindeth you, are not something to be sought after, before, or during. In fact, let those amongst you who runneth off to exchange pleasure with the porcupine know that thou shalt rot in the deepest dungeons of Hell and be forced to imbibe unpleasant substances, fetid rabbit stew even, or perhaps only gargle them which is not as bad but is still bad enough.

No, the rodent of choice here shall be the meek hamster, so meek a creature that it lacks the vocabulary to screameth for the police, so short and stubby legs that it cannot run away from your vehement displays of amity and companionship.

And if thou happenst to be a girl, then thou must improviseth Carrots; cheap, reusable, widely available.

Originality, clearly, goes a long way towards building cult credibility - the Ramsesists only lost fourteen members who felt it inappropriate to screw harmless little furry creatures. Misguided ex-animal rights activists, more than likely[Fake fake fake cow plants with weak stomachs? Maybe.]. This left some fifty million Ramsesists[Buddhist mathematics. The story goes that polygamy in other religions and cultures happens when converted Buddhists get cold feet.] whose religious duty it now was to express the joys of physical love to hamsters, and that required a lot of hamsters.

This, in fact, triggered a market instability which came to be known as The Great Hamster Shortage of 2493. In rough numbers, Ramses had in one edict boosted global demand for hamsters from around thirteen per day to around 45 million. This is a percentage increase which is so large it would look a little silly written out fully, so we shan't. Prices, of course, adjusted themselves accordingly - at the height of the hamster famine, one blind, elderly, and over-the-wrinkle-in-the-rug hamster fetched 44 million drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets; this, in more familiar currencies, is a shocking number. This is not a shocking book, so we will leave the currency conversion out of the story.

Naturally, at such exorbitant prices, most Ramsesists promptly went broke fulfilling the tenets of their new religion. Those that did not spent their fortunes building hamster-breeding facilities. Impressively, within three months of the edict, total output of Ramsesist-controlled hamster breeding concerns covered about 80% of requirements, and self-sufficiency was achieved 6 months later.

Make no mistake, the Ramsesists were serious hamster fuckers.

The Ramsesists learned the hard way that there are good reasons why people go to universities for six years to learn the ins and outs of - no, not hamster fucking! - rodent mass breeding[A popular minor in combination with corporate law.]. Lessons were learnt such as:

- o Just because one hamster asks for foie gras does not mean that is what all of them have to have
- o Hamsters are not women; you do not have to ply them with expensive alcoholic cocktails to overcome unwillingness and/or standards for sex partners
- o Buddhists do not make good accountants
- o Avoid Burmese pocket calculators
- o If 96% of your production goes to free samples or replacement of defective rodents, you are most likely being screwed over by your entire customer base
- o Your costumer base being religious freaks is not an argument against the preceding lesson learnt, it is an argument for it.
- o A dead rodent is not a manufacturing defect. It is an indication of correct usage.
- o If your hamsters can't do oral, don't advertise it. Hamsters have teeth. Lost willies means a smaller customer base.

Hamster breeding facilities rapidly went bankrupt even as Ramsesists poured all their money into more hamsters than ever. Diversification and new product innovation didn't work very well either; the novel hamster-screwed-to-death burgers recycling concept never took off, and neither did pitbulls (so long as we are not looking at it from the pitbulls' perspective, of course). In short order, all Ramsesists were effectively bankrupted, which was fine as far as Ramses and the angels were concerned. Poverty suited the image they wanted for God's children.

Much like any large gathering of humans, though, it was not long before they unionised. This seems to have been a natural inclination rather than a studied and conscious decision, for once the union was formed they did not know precisely what they had formed it for. All the same, they reasoned, it was better to have a union in place than to risk the kind of things happening which happen when you do not have a union in place. But the problem with unions is the same as with committees, inconsequential government officials and rich housewives. They get bored and then they get funny ideas.

\* \* \*

Ramses was a little unsure how a union figured in his religious movement.

"I'm sorry. A what? "

"A union, Blessed One. United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism," the union president clarified.

"A union? "

"A union." The president of the United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism noted the blank look his prophet gave him. "We sincerely hope it pleases Your Blessedness to see his flock organising for progress."

Ramses scratched his chin and massaged his nether regions a little. "Oh, by all means. Though I fear I don't quite understand what function your union has within a religious movement...It's not like you are getting paid to be Ramsesists or anything, you know."

"We can change that, though, can we not?" the president of the United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism inquired. Ramses coughed and a little gas which had been imprisoned in his colon was involuntarily liberated with appropriate fanfare.

"Change what? "

"Your Blessedness, we can arrange salaries for Ramsesists, can we not? "

"SALARIES? You are demanding SALARIES? You come to your PROPHET and tell him you want TO BE PAID TO BE HIS FOLLOWERS?" Ramses was getting a little upset. "I'LL GIVE YOU SALARIES you impertinent little F-" Ramses gulped down the `U', the `C', and the `K' just in time. He was not interested in being verbally abused in clichéd Spanish by berry bushes again. "See? You almost got me sent to PURGATORY you HAMSTER FORNICATOR -"

"But Prophet Ramses, our union needs a *raison d'être*..." the president of the United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism pleaded. "We can't just have a union and do nothing..."

"Well why did you START a silly union then if you don't know what to do with the damn thing." At this question the president of the United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism perked up like a garden rake which a baddie in a slapstick comedy flick has stepped on, which is profoundly funny[Why Sylvie, look! A Bauhaus metaphor! Yes yes, I know it's ugly but it gets the job done does it ever! Can you pass me the camera sweets?]; a question he was eminently qualified to answer.

"Your Blessedness, we formed a union since we reasoned it was better to have a union in place than to risk the kind of things happening which happen when you do not have a union in place." The president of the United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism smiled. Surely now his prophet would understand.

"Oh that's bollocks it is," Ramses snapped. "And what kind of silly things is it that you think happen when you don't have a union in place then?" The president of the United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism fidgeted uncomfortably.

"I'm afraid, o' Blessed One," he said in a small voice, "that I really should not tell you."

"Really."

"On account that it might give you ideas, see," said the president of the United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism. He was aware that he was beginning to annoy the Last Prophet but he was a loyal union man and only wanted what was best for his union and by extension for Ramsesism.

"Now look. It's all well and fine that my followers have organised themselves and gone and formed a union, but really, you don't get salaries for being God's chosen children. And I still don't understand why you formed a union. Are you dissatisfied with the religious experience I offer? "

The president of the United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of

Ramsesism looked gravely at Ramses indicating that he understood, but that this put him in a difficult position. "Of course we are satisfied, Blessed One. However..." He looked down at his feet. "I came here to bargain for the good of the union; how shall it look when I return empty-handed? "

"Serves you right for forming a silly union."

"My prophet, this union was formed to serve your followers and the children of God. Do you not desire the best for your flock? " Ramses was beginning to develop a general notion regarding where his flock would place on a scale with smart on one end and infmaled arse pimples on the other.

"Look, run off and find something else to negotiate for. Enough salary silliness. And for Kevin's sake change the name of your flaming union. It is way too long and it will take almost two full lines to write out when some poor fool decides to chronicle my life and times in a book."

\* \* \*

"You want WHAT? " The president of the United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism had been away for four months setting up committees, sub-committees, trans-committees, recording industry associations, and advisory boards[To be precise, the advisory board was convened to determine whether trans- could be considered a valid prefix for the word committee. The final recommendation was negative and all work done by trans-committees was discarded and redone partially by consultants.] with the express purpose of finding something other than compensation to negotiate with Ramses for.

"Armageddon, noble prophet."

Ramses rolled his eyes. "Laddie, do you have any idea what Armageddon is? " There was a blank look of obstinacy on the president's face. This was a principled man who was prepared to negotiate his people's demands to death (though not necessarily his own). This, also, was an extremely stupid man. "Look. Armageddon is not a nice thing. It is not something you desire, like an ice cream or an unconscious hamster. Armageddon is a nasty thing; you might as well negotiate with me for the right to poke holes in your heads with blunt sticks. Or for daily rations of nasty substances of dubious biological origin to imbibe. Like, just for example, fetid rabbit stew. Just for example. It would certainly make as much sense." The union president all of a sudden looked uncomfortable.

"Respectfully, o' noble Blessed One, thy negotiating skills are lacking."

"What effing negotiating skills? What kind of negotiating position am I supposed to have? I'M YOUR PROPHET! What, are we going to discuss the extent of calamity you people will face during Armageddon? Oh, I see. Well yes, then let me see, I propose we have a small Armageddon. There. I am commencing negotiations. A BABY Armageddon." Ramses was worked up. "Come on you NITWIT, NEGOTIATE! A BABY Armageddon. Talk me into making it bigger why don't you." The president was clearly torn between the impulse to obey his spiritual leader and between his duties towards the union members.

The bureaucrat triumphed. He regained composure. "Are you refusing our request? "

\* \* \*

Armageddon - `bla`bla`BLA`bla - (qwerty.) Stilton from proof-reading is a WEENIE! Teehee, no one will ever read this!

Dictionarium Aegyptum



\* \* \*

The angels had a little difficulty understanding why Ramses wanted to unleash Armageddon upon his flock.

Ringo gasped.

"Armageddon, you know, Ramses..." George scratched his forehead thoughtfully. "Well, it isn't exactly pleasant. Why ever do you want us to arrange that? " Ramses went on to explain how he had tried reasoning with the children of God to very little avail.

"They seem to feel that the religious experience of Judgment Day would not be complete without Armageddon, you see. They have already grudgingly accepted that I am filling in for this Jesus guy. Seems you fellows up here equipped my predecessors with holy books that told of Armageddon. Clever."

George wrinkled his nose in bewilderment. "Well fine then, we will see what can be arranged on short notice then. What did you have in mind? "

"What did I have in mind? Me? It was you people who got the idea, I didn't write your holy books! Figure something out. Make it cataclysmic and painful, you know, like something called Armageddon would be like." A thought occurred to Ramses. "Do try to spare the hamsters though. We have so much invested in them."

\* \* \*

The Doomsday Planning Committee was at a bit of a loss concerning Ramses' request for Armageddon. No one on the committee knew anything about what Armageddon was, how it smelled, or whether it took milk in its coffee. A sub-committee was formed to gather information, and this sub-committee presented its report a few weeks later, and it is reproduced in full here:

Sub-Committee to Find Out what Armageddon Is

Final Report

An extended research effort directed at finding out what Armageddon is has revealed that it is almost definitely one of three things.

The more likely is that it is a big war between good and evil where evil almost wins but doesn't really in the end, and a lot of people die. A lot, really, more than we have killed off thus far. We found this reference to Armageddon hidden away in the middle of the Bible - you know, that silly self-help manual we passed on to that Jewish fellow. Of course, it was placed there in jest, just to scare the humans a bit for fun.

We have found one other possible interpretation. Ramses' request for Armageddon could be a very sly and oblique request for your sexual favors. Of course, we have no evidence to back this theory up, but it is clear that the man we chose to lead the Chosen Few to Heaven has been horny since before he even hit the ovaries as a sperm. The possibility cannot be ruled out.

The third possible interpretation holds that Armageddon is something they eat in Finland when they feel funny. Funny not like ill or like kicking a puppy, funny rather in the sense approaching merry. We understand it is not appetizing and that it looks a little like a custard pie, except it violates Newton's First Law.

We recommend proceeding under the assumption that the first interpretation is the correct one.

The Doomsday Planning Committee considered how to unleash Armageddon for a long time. For one thing, it had to be conducted in a cost-efficient manner since construction of Heaven and Hell was behind schedule, over budget, and draining monetary resources like there was, well, I mean since there was no tomorrow. One factor working in their favor, of course, was that no one really knew what Armageddon really involved in any specific way. Other than the fact that it required an exorbitant display of wanton destruction.

Which was something the Doomsday Planning Committee could handle, at no cost too. Just the job for Bartovius.

\* \* \*

Bartovius was a cherub. He was one of the prototypes Created out of Godly thought-stuff[Not everything is Created out of Godly thought-stuff; look at the Swedes.], and he was a flawed prototype. He was not flawed in any obvious way, mind you; he was a perfectly beautiful creature with the loveliest wings you could imagine[Unless you are very hungry and think of buffalo wings; depending on how hungry that is, Bartovius' wings might pale in comparison. But that is a different class of wing and is tripe and irrelevant to the story here.] and a pretty halo too. In fact, you would be pushed pretty hard to figure out what precisely was wrong with Bartovius since it was difficult to see, especially from up close.

From up close, you see, Bartovius was a little difficult to positively identify as a cherub. You might think yourself in a dank and nasty-smelling valley when in reality you were trudging through a groove on Bartovius' toenail, perhaps if you were unlucky the ingrown one on his left foot. Bartovius' problem was that he was created without reference to proportion.

Bartovius was big.

Some things had since been created which were bigger than Bartovius. Galaxies, for example. Galaxies were generally larger than Bartovius by a large margin, and in fact Bartovius was the reason galaxies were invented and were designed to be bigger than him. For when Bartovius was created, it was immediately clear that there had been a proportional screw-up of considerable proportion, and the only way to assess the proportions of the error was to observe Bartovius from a considerable distance. All well and fine, except that Bartovius was so massive that nothing hitherto created could escape his gravity. Most unfortunate and unforeseen too that Bartovius' center of gravity was in his poo-poo chute[Yes, Bartovius had one of those. A flawed prototype, it was mentioned, and the last angel to have one he was.]. Many early attempts at launching star systems failed to achieve escape velocity and ended up nestled between Bartovius' clenched buttocks - clenched, for one would not want budding star systems traveling up one's poo-poo chute.

An early design challenge with the cherubim had been their odd tendency to stand around wringing their hands or biting their fingernails when they had nothing better to do, which was often enough. A team of consulting life-form architects advised that the cherubim be created with things to carry in their hands to remedy this behavior, and they left before suggesting what kinds of objects might be suitable. Experimentation ensued: cherubim were Created carrying everything from egg timers to limp goat carcasses to slingshots made out of the elastic entrails of cows. As popular religious literature suggests, the harp was eventually deemed appropriate and cherubim Creation began in earnest.

Some blathering fool had given Bartovius a sledgehammer.

\* \* \*

It didn't really occur to the angels that putting Bartovius on the job might have been overkill; his hammer was, after all, some hundreds of times larger than the Earth. All they really had in mind was that Ramses had asked for Armageddon, Armageddon involved destruction, and that Bartovius would maximise the carnage.

On the Earth, it was a sunny morning. Not the perfect kind of sunny morning usually used in works of fiction to describe the day right before the Earth gets struck by a frighteningly large sledge-hammer. No, it was just a pleasant morning. Not the kind of morning one expected to precede a cataclysm of Bartovian proportions. Though, to be honest, it could have been raining with the carcasses of loved ones and fetid rabbit stew and it would still not have been that kind of morning.

But it was that kind of morning.

Sometime around ten or so, sudden and violent jolts were felt around the world - the Earth was beginning to feel the gravity of an approaching Bartovius. Not just the Earth, but the Sun also - Bartovian gravity was stretching the gaseous mass of the star into an odd elliptical shape and this had the positive side effect that people in South America were briefly able to barbecue animals as large as buffalo just by exposing them to sunlight[The foolish South Americans failed to take advantage of this unique opportunity and perished in flame soon after.].

A thundering and remote booming sound was heard world-wide some fourteen minutes later, and some enterprising theoretical scientists found enough time to theorize that this was what a fart from space would sound like if the person emitting it was unreasonably large (like Bartovius) and had dined on condensed but nonetheless fetid rabbit stew the night before (which Bartovius had). They even found the presence of mind to infer from the sound wave characteristics that this wave of sonic flatulence was most likely aimed away from Earth (it was), aimed in the general direction of Proxima Centuari (inadvertently, but yes), and was powerful enough to kill any intelligent life which might inhabit that system[Proxima Centuari was in fact home to a banjo-playing civilisation.].

The first anyone on Earth saw of Bartovius was his navel, and by the time his navel was visible from Earth he was close enough to take a swing with the sledge-hammer, so that navel was coincidentally also the last anyone on Earth saw of Bartovius. A damn shame it is too, for Bartovius' was quite the handsome cherub.

So down the sledge-hammer came, and no one could really find it in them to complain about such harsh treatment. For after all, how ridiculous it would sound for a puny human to whine about being struck with a sledgehammer the approximate size of the solar system. After complaining about things like haemorrhoids, taxes, baby diaper branding strategies, and hamsters it seemed a little inappropriate to say anything other than "Erh...".

Such went the first attempt at satisfying the Ramsesists' desire for Armageddon to make the religious experience more authentic. With its usual efficiency, the Celestial Counting Bureau had a full report out promptly.

## Statistical Evaluation of Event BRT-FRT-57112

### Celestial Counting Service

In the matter of the infliction of Armageddon upon the prophet Ramses and his flock of followers, hereafter referred to as event BRT-FRT-57112, the Celestial Counting Service has this to say.

The approximate force actually used by Bartovius deviates shockingly from Celestial Counting Service estimates of requirements for execution of a well-managed and non-terminal Armageddon event. The Celestial Counting Service estimates called for the deployment of four thousand eight hundred drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets' worth of demolitive capability. The realised power unleashed by Bartovius' hammer appears initially[Final forensics reports pending.] to have been as high as twenty three million drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets' worth. This does not account for the destruction wrought upon the banjo players of Proxima Centuari; the fewer banjo players in the universe the better.

Similarly, the total number of human fatalities conducive to a satisfactory Armageddon was comfortably surpassed. Four thousand eight hundred drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets' worth of destructive force should have translated to the best of our calculative efforts - to 33 million deaths, of which 20,116,239 would have been Ramsesists. Now, of course, the Earth is a dirty, brown, circular smudge on Bartovius' sledgehammer, so it is a little beside the point to compare results in this area with expectations.

We have estimates and projections for the projected force of resistance expected from Ramsesists during Armageddon, but since actual figures here are pretty close to zero[They are not precisely zero, though the figure is so small as to suggest that it was nothing more than someone raising their fist towards the incoming sledgehammer. Someone short, fat, and weak.] they have been omitted. No need to cause undue embarrassment.

Essentially, the Celestial Counting Service finds it is unable to present a proper report on the relative success or failure of Armageddon since Armageddon implies strife and strife implies that both parties have something approximating to a fighting chance. This was clearly not the case here - this was nothing more than a big son of a bitch[Incidentally, the Celestial Counting Service still lacks proper figures describing just how large Bartovius is. First-round figures appear flawed and our Burmese calculators are being examined for error.] with a sledgehammer picking on a defenseless ball of dirt with irritating lifeforms on it.

More importantly now, we have estimated that there was, just before BRT-FRT-57112, 612,441,801 steaks waiting to be cooked on Earth. To press a point, after BRT-FRT-57112 there were precisely zero. The Celestial Counting Service wishes to condemn most solemnly the wanton and needless annihilation of 612,441,801 perfectly serviceable steaks. This is not the first time sub-optimal planning at the Doomsday Planning Committee level has resulted in wasted steaks but it is the most flagrant case recorded yet.

An formal protest has been filed with Higher Powers with the clear recommendation that all Doomsday-related planning activity be suspended and that the Doomsday Planning Committee be disbanded until further notice.

And of Bartovius, we shall say no more.

\* \* \*

"What precisely were you THINKING? " Ramses was a little upset. This was something he had quite a few reasons to be. To begin with, his expectations and the Doomsday Planning Committee's idea of Armageddon had proved themselves not to match very closely. Additionally, Ramses had lost his whole congregation in one swift stroke of a hammer. And just to make matters worse, Ramses had been a small smudge as part of the bigger smudge which was itself only a small brown smudge of dirt on Bartovius' hammer[There are times when it is little consolation that, in the grand scale of things, even Bartovius is a smudge. Proportionally speaking.]. The angels had been thoughtful enough to resurrect him but had forgotten to restore his form[Going through life as a smudge is, of course, completely unacceptable. Smudges have no reproductive organs to use to show love to the meek.]. "Armageddon is a WAR, you imbeciles, you were meant to give humans a chance! "

Ringo gasped.

George fidgeted uncomfortably. He was not in doubt that the way the whole affair had been handled had been poor. "I am not in doubt, Ramses, that the way the whole affair was handled -"

"- yes yes, was poor. Well make good then."

"Hmm, yes." George flexed his tail[Angels do not have tails, but manufacturing defects are known to occur.]

thoughtfully. With the Doomsday Planning Committee disbanded, he was not quite certain how things would proceed. Oh, that they would proceed was beyond dispute; this whole experiment with humans had gone on for too long and it was time to try over again with dinosaurs instead, or maybe cockroaches. It was just that all the resources which had been at the Doomsday Planning Committee's disposal were now diverted to the Emergency Steaks in Distress Council. Heaven and Hell were still being built, but progress was slowing down and the meticulous progress monitoring systems had been temporarily abandoned until the threat to steaks abated. In short, no one was planning, no one knew how things were progressing, and there was no Heavenly oversight into the matter of Doomsday - other than what spare time George and John could find to peek in on the matter. Perhaps, George thought to himself, it would be wiser not to tell Ramses of the shambles the process was currently in.

In any case, it was time to try again. "Fair enough, we shall take another swing at Armageddon."

\* \* \*

A little clever manipulation of the universe's rewind and fast forward buttons was sufficient to revive the Earth and its inhabitants while simultaneously making sure that they did not rewind past the part with Proxima Centauri; those banjo players got what they deserved.

ferocity - fur`AW`see`tee - (constip.) 1. The tendency to sexual arousal when exposed to potentially fatal software malfunction 2. An obscure skin condition ("I have a ferocity on my bum." "Lucky bastard...") 3. Something remarkably like an obscure skin condition 4. The tendency to discuss potentially fatal software malfunctions when initiating sexual congress.

Dictionarium Aegyptum

\* \* \*

Wary of the consequences of excess, George sought a force milder than Bartovius yet still ferocious enough to wage a satisfactory war against the Ramsesists. Ever mindful of budget constraints, the only thing he could come up with was, well...

Committee for Demilitarisation

Angelic Superior Council for Purity

Project ATK-BVR-00001

DRAFT PROPOSAL

BRIEF

The general trend to militarise being un-Godly, it is the purpose, intent, task, duty, and sometimes even job of this committee to effect any and all measures necessary to counteract this trend to militarise, which is un-Godly.

While it is true that there is no militarisation occurring in Heaven and Hell, and while it is equally true that any militarisation going on on Earth is not our business, the Committee nonetheless feels that it is wise to go about de-militarising as if these two facts did not exist. Which no one can guarantee that they will, and militarisation is un-Godly.

Militarisation being un-Godly, the Committee has devoted copious resources - in some cases clandestinely

pinched from other Committees - to devising the best method employable with the intent, duty, and task of de-militarisation[Militarisation being un-Godly.].

Our conclusion is that the optimal method of eradication of the ungodliness of militarisation is to bring to bear martial measures against those who might militarise, and to prepare for warfare. Note carefully the distinction between warfare and a military campaign: only the latter is ungodly, and therefore we have chosen the former. We hope the distinction is clear. Especially as our intention, namely the eradication of militarisation, is Godly. We hope the distinction is clear and would refer inquiries and requests for clarification to battalion five.

Warfare, of course, requires the availability of superior forces. The Committee for Demilitarisation has pre-empted any concerns in this regard and has initiated a program aimed at the development of the most ferocious, fearless, fashion-conscious and ferocious fighting unit imaginable. Reports will be circulated regularly to inform of prototype development, prototype approval, and eventual wide-scale deployment. Note again that this does not constitute militarisation, for that is ungodly. It is a build-up of rapid-deployment martial units. We hope the distinction is clear.

The working codename assigned to this project shall be Project Attack Beaver.

\* \* \*

Committee for Demilitarisation

Angelic Superior Council for Purity

Project ATK-BVR-00741

PROTOTYPE SPECIFICATION

Project Status: Finished prototype, pending approval

Dimensions: 900x200x100 mm

Estimated Maximum Velocity: Classified

Armament: Described Below

Capability to Inflict Pain, Horror, and Confusion: High

Can be used to Militarise: No

Can be used to Wage Justified Military Campaigns Against Militarisation: Yes

Will eat enemies raw: No

Will threaten to eat enemies raw: Yes

Previous Job Experience: ?

Zodiac Sign: ? ! ?

Base Species: Beaver

The Attack Beaver is the culmination of the research conducted by the Committee for Demilitarisation and represents the pinnacle of battlefield technology. The Attack Beaver, affectionately referred to as Harold, has been trained in the most ruthless arts of conflict and has been conditioned to show no mercy and to think strategically. In fact, where opportunity arises, Harold has shown himself capable of strategic displays of mercilessness; this synthesis of capabilities is unintended and, we expect, a harbinger of superlative design.

Harold knows feng shui, dim sum, yoga, and thirty-four other equally devastating martial arts. He has been trained to do long division in his head at speeds likely to frighten enemy forces into cowering, submission, surrender, retreat, temper tantrums, and other states we would like enemy forces to be in. Harold ushers in a new breeze of fresh clams in the senile fish market of the state of Godliness, or - and to be more precise at the expense of appealing metaphor - his coming spells the end of ungodliness in the universe and, with a few tweaks to the prototype, the multiverse also.

We hope this prototype meets with your approval - mass production facilities are available and standing by.

\* \* \*

This prototype, George felt, needed a field test. And thus, Armageddon (2.0, to be precise) was unleashed upon the unsuspecting Ramsesists, and its name was Harold.

Harold the Attack Beaver descended on the Earth on the sixteenth of Nobemver - sorry, November - 2495. Ramses had been briefed on the date and location of the outbreak of Armageddon, there he had led the Ramsesists, and there they laid in waiting for the coming of a proper Armageddon.

Harold appeared in a puff of acrid black smoke and promptly fished out a bottle of fetid rabbit stew and chugged it down in a valiant effort at intimidation. See me, he seemed to say[Seemed, since an attack beaver is still a beaver and beavers have no larynxes with which to scream.], I quaff the very stuff you dread like it was pure rainwater[If you really knew where rain comes from ,you'd stop turning your tongue up at it. Foolish humans, letting scientists trick you into drinking God pee. what did you think, that scientists were boring types who don't believe in God? More fool you, and twice that even. But then, what can one expect of creatures who take aspirin when any sane mind will see through the taste and know it for what it is: rabbit poo dipped in fresh bird poo.]. Not that the Ramsesists knew well enough to dread fetid rabbit stew yet, mind you.

The Ramsesists, to be honest, had been expecting something a little more awe-inducing. An army, perhaps, consisting of a little more than a beaver drinking nasty liquids. Wearing a t-shirt with The Anti-Christ written on it in a Gothic font. With comic book blood droplets dripping off the bottom of the letters.

All the same, they closed ranks in a good-natured attempt to make the most of this opportunity to experience Armageddon. A few dissenting voices commented that twenty million Ramsesists might be a little too much for one attack beaver to handle, but these voices were quickly shushed. Most were spoiling for a fight, and one never knew what sort of punch a little beaver could pack.

Which is generally true, for it is not completely inconceivable that a beaver could wreak havoc, destruction, and woe and some more woe for good measure. Generally, I say, for that was not Harold. Harold was certainly capable of wreaking havoc but only if his adversary were a packet of tissues. It is safe to say that twenty million religious zealots would offer more resistance than a pack of tissues, and it quickly became clear that the attack beaver would probably have to resort to unspeakable tactics. Such as performing horrific acts of long division in his head. And rearranging furniture to optimise the flow of positive energy through the battlefield. And throwing together scrumptious dishes of dumplings and spring rolls. Harold almost felt sorry for the Ramsesists; it was not an evenly matched battle.

Something groped at one of the Ramsesists' breasts[We cannot conclusively point any fingers at John; while it

is known that he was still in the field at this precise time, there are plenty of other people with sufficient motivation and education to grope girls. Yes, education; what do you think they teach in Japanese schools, how to fly zeppelins?], she screamed bloody murder, and all Hell was let loose[We shall probably need to revise this figure of speech, knowing what we know.].

To make a long story short, Harold's feng shui tactics failed to inflict any discernible woe upon his adversaries - people just had no respect for well-arranged living rooms anymore. The Ramsesists charged, all twenty million of them, and some three million actually did get killed in the mad stampede to get a piece of the somewhat underwhelming Anti-Christ. Harold did manage to do some long division in his head before the horde hit him. This also accomplished nothing, and he perished with a perplexed look in his beaver eyes. A pity it is that he never had a chance to use his dim sum skills to inflict woe; one never knows, it is these small things which win wars. Sometimes.

Records indicate that a further 14,000 Ramsesists perished in the aftermath; it seems there was much bickering about what to do with the trampled corpse of the Anti-Christ. Some seemed to think it would make a fine trophy for their prophet to hang around his neck, but Ramses would have none of it especially since the Anti-Christ attack beaver would soon begin to stink most awfully. Someone came up with some fresh potatoes and some barbecue sauce and The Beast was cooked for dinner.

And of Harold (as well as beavers), we shall say no more. For beavers are more fortunate than hamsters.

\* \* \*

Committee for Demilitarisation

Angelic Superior Council for Purity

Project ATK-BVR-00742

#### PROTOTYPE FIELDTEST REPORT

At the request of members of the now disbanded Doomsday Planning Committee, our Attack Beaver prototype was pressed into action on the sixteenth of Novemb - sorry, Nobemver 2495.

We are pleased to announce initial reports that the unit performed to a standard in significant excess of declared specifications in eradicating the ungodliness that is militarization. Which itself we shall justly consider Godly. Harold - the prototype - succeeded in the areas it was trained in, though there was not sufficient opportunity to employ all techniques available.

As with any pilot unit, there were glitches to be ironed out. It seems future units will need to be able to do more complicated mathematical operations in the mind since long division did not have a measurable effect upon the opposition. Additionally, we recommend the incorporation of combat basket weaving into the training programs. We feel that a deadly instinct for household handcrafts when combined with yoga will yield the ideal fighting machine for combating the ungodliness that is militarisation.. Further prototype development and field testing recommended.

Strictly speaking, Harold did manage to wipe out a couple of million Ramsesists, though we acknowledge that this only came about in the most roundabout and incidental manner. The defunct Doomsday Planning Committee has vouched for the ungodliness of the adversary; we cite this to emphasise our commitment to targeting only those who might be militarising as opposed to those who are not. We have not verified this claim, as our empirical observation has been that it is more conducive to positive results to investigate cases where the subject is claimed to not be militarising. We are a results-driven Committee. Our lead engineers



will be busy making 3,014,000 notches on the laboratory wall.

We mourn the passing of Harold and are consoled by our irrational and unfounded belief that there is a warrior heaven and that he is there now, cavorting like a virgin bidet on the rolling plains of bonbons. In less florid language - and letting aesthetic and florid narrative yield to terse and unfeeling jargon - the prototype has expired.

The Committee for Demilitarisation welcomes suggestions for improvement and requests for clarification around this prototype roll-out. We ask that any questions be submitted in accompaniment of contact information which includes full name, address, addresses of loved ones at home and work, as well as full [DEL: length :DEL] height.

When Ramses tried to tell the Ramsesists that Harold had been the sole representative of the Forces of Evil and that they had emerged victorious from Armageddon, they set the union president loose on their prophet again. And the president of the Union of United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism would have none of it.

That had truly been a ferocious and shock-inducing beaver, he conceded. But, in the spirit of all things being relative, it had been a beaver. The president of the Union of United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism clearly did not wish to seem pertinent, but the congregation had been a little underwhelmed. Satan surely could mass more evil than this, he reasoned [This is probably true; Harold did not arrrr! like a pirate. How this would have affected his chances against the Ramsesist horde can only be guessed at.]. The president would not believe that Satan was a pitiful goat's bladder-type creature which Ramses had stomped to death either. It was undignified, Ramses thought to himself, for a prophet to have this little credibility.

George couldn't understand it; hadn't he unleashed the full might of Harold? Hadn't Harold lived up to the precise specifications promised by the Committee for Demilitarization? What more could the Ramsesists expect? Whoever had put those hokey lines in the religious books about omnipotence should be sent to Purgatory, he thought to himself. Probably Ringo...George wished he had Paul here to think this thing through with him, but Paul was still missing - gratuitous breast-groping is a full-time occupation.

And then, for once, chance favored George and Ramses and an elegant solution presented itself.

\* \* \*

While on the topic, a relevant excerpt from Professor Shadrach Lavouchere's treatise on elegant solutions, Treatise on Elegant Solutions [More popularly known as The Belgian Folk Dancer Who Loved Me]:

...and this concludes our discussion of the nature of elegant solutions, how to arrive at them, how to identify them, how to tie them to a bedpost and most effectively ravish them.

In summary, we shall say that an elegant solution will empirically show itself to be nothing more than a stupid act interpreted in a manner which was not intended by an observer of superior stupidity.

Now regarding this Belgian folkdancer, whose name was Geert... Oh Geert...Now I'll be the first to admit that there is not much about Belgian folkdancing to get all excited about. But, you see, that is what was so special about Geert. When Geert danced, it brought life to the staid gyrations of the Belgian nation - Geert was positively titillating. Titillating? Did I really write that? Imagine that...I am afraid my fondle reminiscing renders me prone to such slips of the tongue. Fondle? Oh but I meant to say fond. Not fondle. Though that word reminds me of Geert also, fondle. Staying on topic, we shall consider my slips of the tongue to be, in fact, elegant solutions of economy, compressing two unrelated thoughts into one. And the previous sentence

an elegant solution for recovery from sharing embarrassing personal sentiments.

How do I know that Geert loved me? To ask this is to ask the mockingbird how it knows the true purpose of the bumps in toilet tissues. The true purpose, not the nonsense we have been spoon-fed about how toilet paper is made like this to make it bunch up better; the truth about the bumps on toilet paper, that they are goosebumps. Think about it for a second. You would get goosebumps too if you were about to be wiped against someone's bunghole. Mockingbirds know this, and thus logically I knew that Geert loved me.

That naughty naughty Flemish dervish... Which brings us back to the topic of elegant solutions. The truth is, there exists a simple mental framework for deriving clever and elegant solutions to all problems. Yes, even Gordian knots such as Geert being married. If you will pay attention, I will explain now but, for background, I must describe first some of the more personal bits of Geert which -

\* \* \*

It all began with a fairly straightforward difference of opinion. The Ramsesists had been camped out in the desert west of Cairo waiting for their prophet to get about his business and deliver Armageddon. Ramses was taking his sweet old time with George, and the Ramsesists were getting bored.

Now, there are many things one is supposed to do with a religious following, but letting them get bored is not one of those things. Neither is leaving them alone for extended periods of time. Especially when the environment presents very few opportunities for keeping them busy. Like the desert, for example.

And telling them to amuse themselves by counting grains of sand won't occupy them for long. It is frustrating, you see, to count grains of sand - the wind keeps blowing the grains about and one begins to worry about double counting. Double counting is not good, for it can lead to gross overestimations. And when you have as many grains of sand to count as there is in the Sahara desert, you most certainly want to avoid double counting.

Double counting is not to be confused with going back and double checking that you got them all, of course. It is always a good idea to double check your tallies, though one has often progressed quite far before the idea occurs. In the Ramsesists' case, they had gotten thirty kilometers into the Sahara desert before some confusion and doubt began to set in; had they really gotten them all? It would not do to have overlooked some; Ramses had suggested this task and it was a divine duty[Quite apart from the fact that the Ramsesists were a dull lot and quickly became engrossed in the assignment.].

In short order, a whole ceremonial framework had been erected around the task and those who counted sand particles faster than others soon began to be regarded as somehow closer spiritually to Ramses in a mystical way which only those who counted faster could understand since they were counting faster and were therefore closer spiritually to God and could therefore understand this[The author apologises for the length of this sentence, but dogma is dogma. Hopefully you understand the concept, though if you don't that's alright. You just need to count faster. Then you'll understand. And please lay off the clever 'circular argument' comments. This is mass religion, not some atheist brain-fest.].

The faster counters developed a priesthood and soon enough the president of the United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism muscled his way in, despite never having done any proper sand particle counting. Ineptitude being a vital quality in management, it wasn't long before he became the chief priest. Under his auspices, a massive effort to validate the count began, and an institutionalised procedure for ensuring against double counting was instated. The system was really quite simple; grains of sand which had been counted were painted green, grains of sand which had not been counted were painted red, grains of sand which looked foreign were painted yellow and were teased, grains of sand with large knockers were carted off for special treatment[In a desert as big as the Sahara, there are so many

grains you would be surprised at what you eventually find.], and smaller insects masquerading as grains of sand were tried and executed as heretics[This may have been a little unfair to the insects; this is not the kind of book where any empathy is directed at repugnant little creatures like insects. Or anywhere, for that matter. You might have noticed by now.].

And that was pretty much what started the squabble. It was an older lady called Millie who had been hard at work finding uncounted grains of sand that had the shocking revelation. They had all missed counting the sand which had lodged itself under their armpits, in butt cracks, between sweaty toes, and in other smelly places. It didn't make sense not to count this sand too. Millie had an assistant called Bawasir whose function was to mark the grains Millie found by painting them red to indicate that they needed counting.

What Millie lacked in etiquette she made up for in enthusiasm and devotion to duty. Bawasir took an unsporting exception to having his shorts torn off and his nether regions explored vigorously with a pair of tweezers. A brawl broke out, but fortunately it didn't last long and there were no serious casualties[Millie lost her tweezers somewhere in the general region of Bawasir's buttocks, but this doesn't strictly count as a casualty.]. Love prevailed, but Millie had lost her count.

Not only that, but Bawasir had dropped a grain which had not yet been painted, and couldn't quite make out which one it was.

The seeds of doubt were sown. Rumor spread about the possibility of error in the count, and Millie disappeared one night under mysterious circumstances. The priests made public statements to the effect that the count was in perfect order and that there was no mistake anywhere, but the stench of uncertainty could be smelled 23 drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets away.

Just past the 490 trillion mark, the priests ordered a recount[With blue and maroon paint this time, to avoid confusion with legacy markings.]. All Hell broke loose.

Never let your religious following get bored. Never leave them alone. And if you must, counting sand particles is not a viable way for them to pass their time awaiting your return.

\* \* \*

Statistical Evaluation of Event SAND-BRWL-00808[Interestingly enough, according to the serial number associated with this report, SAND-BRWL events have occurred 807 times before. Either that or the Committee knows that reports with 00001 numberings look amateurish.]

#### Celestial Counting Service

On the matter of the event designated SAND-BRWL-00808, the Celestial Counting Service has this to say.

Event SAND-BRWL-00808 refers to the outbreak of hostilities in the desert west of Cairo during the third week of August 2498 between the Ramsesist clergy and dissident factions. The point of dispute has been reported to be the necessity of a complete from-scratch recount of 490 trillion and twenty three grains of sand. Or, depending on your viewpoint, the lack of necessity. It is not the function of the Celestial Counting Service to arbitrate or express its opinion on such matters[Bearing in mind that there was no error in the count; The Powers that Be specifically recall laying 490 trillion and twenty three grains of sand precisely there. We are certain of this to the degree that we even recall a dispute over grain number 390,311,216,044 which Mister Rupert insisted upon but which we overruled since this grain was frankly an entirely representative and wholly unremarkable specimen with precisely no unusual or redeeming characteristics which might speak for its inclusion. We have averted incidental costs of around four hundred drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets which would have been the cost of revising our book figures on sand granules in the universe, and it

is our incidental recommendation that ignoring interior decorators is always a profitable employment of will.].

More intriguingly, while this conflict was brewing, 115 sheep from Uzbekistan got nicks while being sheared - irrelevant, of course, but no doubt intriguing. We feel this might develop into a problem and will monitor sheep-shearing activity in Central Asia closely for a few decades.

Due to design flaws the human race will find armed conflict infinitely[But not really.] more stimulating than recounts of 490 trillion and twenty three grains of sand, even when offered two new colors to use for marking. This tendency held true in this event and of 23,213,262 Ramsesists a good 97% took sides and organised for military action. Survival rates are under one hundred percent[Burmese pocket calculators are sold in the most unusual places; the Celestial Counting Service, at least, caught resulting errors and issued revised - if conservative - assessments.].

This is the bad news.

The good news - Praise the Lord! - outweigh the bad and we are filled with joy that the rate of steak molestation/destruction/overcooking resulting from event SAND-BRWL-00808 is precisely zero. The CCS praises the efforts of the Emergency Steak Distress Council and recommends a resumption of Doomsday planning activity now that quality food is safe from harm.

\* \* \*

Survival rates were indeed under one hundred percent. That is to say, 314 survivors out of 23,213,262 is well under one percent; we're talking a percentage figure which, even expressed in drunk and absolutely drugged out parakeets is shocking.

Ramses was, of course, debating Armageddon with George while this cataclysmic event occurred. His initial reaction was one of shock, agony, pity for the fallen, and remorse that he had left the Children of God in the Sahara desert to count sand. Then he remembered that that was not the kind of person he was and promptly got back in character.

"George, an idea occurs to me."

Ringo gasped.

George massaged his left breast thoughtfully and looked questioningly at Ramses Abasiri.

"You know, with all this ruckus about Armageddon and what not, and us not really knowing what to do about it, and with your incompetent Armageddon-inflicting skills - " George fidgeted - "What I mean to say is, with this little brawl God's Children have gotten themselves into...I don't know, would it be considered cheating..."

George perked up slightly. George himself, not his nipple. "Cheating? " George massaged his left breast thoughtfully some more. "Cheating...Oh by Kevin, I think I see what you are driving at, O Chosen One..." George chuckled. Was it cheating? Did it really matter? Better to check first, he supposed. George fished out a copy of the Rules and Regulations Concerning Cheating in Matters Related to Armageddon and leafed through it quickly. No, there was nothing in the rule book against retroactively declaring Armageddon. In fact, it was all knock-knock jokes. Reams and reams of them, and mostly very puerile too.

\* \* \*

The president of the Union of United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism had, through elite management skills[Adroitly tucked inconspicuously behind

a sofa, he had artfully suppressed whimpers and deftly and he had with much aplomb - you go to MBA school for this - derived convincing reasons why none of this was his fault or responsibility and how he deserved to give himself another raise.] survived event SAND-BRWL-00808, retroactively defined as Armageddon. While he insisted on lodging a formal complaint against declaring the quarrel to have been Armageddon, he didn't push the issue any further; with only 314 Ramsesists left, the collective bargaining power of the Union of United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism had diminished.

And George perceived that The Time had come. Humanity had known many noble moments, many moments of pure virtue and selflessness, had fulfilled its destiny and become the truest images of God a flesh and blood machine could be[George didn't really mean this, it just sounded good. He'd get sent to Purgatory if God really thought anyone was staking that comparison.] If one overlooked certain things such as the amount of time humanity spent in the loo conducting nasal scavenger hunts, designing new and incompatible types of plugs for electronic things so that they won't fit together and force unrelated purchases, and ridiculous ideas such as external refrigeration units[For use in combating global warming. Why combat global warming? Come to think of it, why combat global anything? The word global comes from the word `globe', you know, which means planet. It is an indication of feeble intellectual resources to pick a planet as an adversary when engaging in combat. More rational to combat warming on smaller scales, such as unzipping your pants in public on a hot summer day. Or on any other day, really.], if one overlooked these things then it was clear that humanwomantykind[In the never-ending quest to find a word to use for the human race which won't piss off feminists; burnt bras don't combat global warming, though they sometimes contribute to more localized and specific forms of warming. Some addressable with unzipped pants.] had come a long way and was ready to return to the companionship of their maker. True, George mused to himself, man[And quite a few woman too.] had many of obscene fascinations which were difficult to overlook, but George had an unusual capacity for overlooking. If one really tried, he supposed, it was possible to ignore the fact that human civilisation had poured several bollion[A bollion is a billion which grew so large that it provokes disbelieving exclamations such as "Bollocks! "] times as much money into pornography as into feeding starving orphans.

And so George summoned Ramses and informed him that the precise day had been confirmed: Judgment Day was to be the sixteenth of November 2499. This was indeed an auspicious moment in human history. The race of men which had a beginning now had an end; the cycle was nearing completion, only to flower anew in reanimation as denizens of Heaven or Hell. Truly a divine plan.

George's wandering thoughts were interrupted by a moaning which could either have come from a water buffalo with a painful intestinal infection, or from Ramses when he was massaging his nether region in lieu of a nubile female. The distinct absence of water buffalo pointed conclusively at Ramses. Leave it to our prophet, George thought to himself, to celebrate the ascent of his flock to the next level of divinity by wanking...

"No no NO Ramses, for KEVIN'S SAKE mind the carpet! "

\* \* \*

The banjo players would never have understood what Doomsday was all about. The heavens would never grant them a Doomsday, for they were a cursed banjo playing race.

For their everyday was a Doomsday, and that rhymed well enough for a few new banjo compositions.

They fled on in mortal fear and discordant, broken tunes.

## Chapter 7

: Repent! The Fancy Dress Ball is Nigh!

Behold, my son, with how little wisdom the world is governed.

Axel Oxenstierna - Swedish Lord High Chancellor, 1583-1654

One of the things about Heaven which you realize when you think about it a little bit is that you're never going to get in there if you're not well dressed. Think of Heaven as the ultimate swanky night club[Come now, I am not calling you gullible. I am only asking for a little more indulgence and self-deception; this history is almost over.]. This is why truck drivers will never get into Heaven; sweaty armpits are not an acknowledged fashion accessory in any known culture. Germans won't get in either, mainly because they are all flabby and they lack the common sense to stay out of skimpy swimwear. Leopards had better mend their wayward idea of fashion; polka dots were never in[Woe to anyone who happens to have measles on Judgment Day.]. There is one exception to this rule, and that is lawyers - Hell no matter what.

Well aware of this, Ramses commissioned the design of a standardised wardrobe for God's Children to a guy called Marley with a degree in civil engineering, which was the closest thing he could find to a fashion designer in his now somewhat diminished following. This resulted, amongst other things, in this memorable conversation[Devoutly transcribed by a Miss Julia Zein who had absolutely not been eavesdropping and had simply stumbled in front of a closed door and had taken so long to fall over that her right ear had been level with the keyhole from which she could hear everything for about twenty minutes. According to her. God's Children do not lie. Nothing to see here. Move on please.].

\* \* \*

"What did you say happened to his balls? " The Wardrobe Assessor - ex-Rhythm Assessor and ex-Tax Collector - examined his Chief Wardrobe Architect carefully for signs that there might be a good reason forthcoming to justify the destruction of the testicles of one of the most devoted Ramsesists. Commitments with the Center for Inflammatory Tax Code Amendments[Not a popular department, but someone has to think of the orphans. And all that sympathy they get, and how to tax it. Other notable achievements include the cancer cell tax and the recruitment of Buddhists as tax auditors.] had prevented him from providing Marley with adequate supervision; he feared the worst. As matters transpired, the worst was an unpardonable underestimation of the kind of incompetence Marley was capable of.

Rupert had been seconded from Heaven to help the Ramsesists design uniforms, but he was as useless on Earth as he was off it; How OH HOW can a mere mortal interior decorator like me ever hope to design something better than the suits God has given you? I ASK you! His flimsy and boundless sycophancy quickly became nauseating and a replacement was found.

"Squeezed into something possessing approximately the same consistency and color as jam, or other things one might spread on a piece of crispy toast for breakfast, or just as a snack before lunch."

"I hope that is only a metaphor."

"Of course it is only a metaphor."

"Are you sure? "

Of course Marley was sure. "Do you have any idea how disgusting that is? "

"Well, no, not really, I just assume it is very disgusting. Do you? "

"Do I what? "

"Do you have any idea how disgusting it is? Balls jam? "

"How disgusting balls jam is? Are you kidding me? It is more disgusting than, than, say, frolicking behind the bushes with a gerbil. As opposed to a hamster."

"Well. You seem to have a pretty clear idea how disgusting balls jam is. Now, let me ask you again, are you positive you didn't try spreading the poor fellow's, erm, well, on a piece of toast? "

"Yes, look here, I am absolutely certain. Alright? " Marley swatted nervously about himself at imagined gnats.

"I have found absolute certainty to imply guilt on occasion, you know. Are you guilty, Marley? "

"Guilt of what, precisely? "

"Tax evasion - err, I mean tapping your feet out of rhythm - err, I mean balls jam trafficking, distribution, and consumption, of course."

"Tax evasion? What's tax evasion got to do with it? "

"Nothing. I used to be a tax assessor, sorry. I get a little confused. What, are you guilty of tax evasion too? "

"What do you mean, too? "

"In addition to that balls jam thing of yours, Marley."

"I DON'T have a BLOODY BALLS JAM THING, look, get over it will you, we have a garb to design here, and the angels will get upset if we take any longer about it, and if they get upset we shan't get to Heaven with the rest of God's children -"

"Alright alright, but we will return to the balls jam issue when we're done. Now why did you make squeeze the poor fellow's nuts like that anyhow? "

"We didn't mean to, it's just we ran out of material for the groin section and made it smaller."

"I see. What material were you using? "

"We were using a new carbon steel composite the research department[It has been tradition ever since Moses parted the Red Sea for prophets to engage in extensive, expansive, expensive, excessive, and exorbitant exercises in technology development. To wit, couldn't Moses just have used boats and big guns? Ooooh nooo, Moses had to get fancy.] came up with. It's quite expensive, so we didn't order enough. That's why we ran out."

"Umm. Why were you using a carbon steel composite? You're supposed to be designing a uniform for the Ramsesists."

"Yes yes I know that. Are you questioning my aesthetic judgment? Besides, it's good to have protection down there. Never know when you're going to get kicked there."

"Ah, well that clarifies things enormously. Yes, I can see the avenues of logic your mind have been travelling. Always good for a fashion designer to dare to go where no one has before."

"Precisely."

"Yes, true pioneering work. Who would have thought of using steel instead of plain old-school fabric? Avenues of logic indeed. Has it not occurred to you that there are very good reasons why no one has ever used carbon steel compounds to make underwear with? If you think really hard, can you tell me why they don't make jet fighters out of used lingerie[Incidentally, as any Japanese person will tell you, used lingerie has far too much entertainment value to be wasted on jet fighters. Of course, this is not the primary reason they make jet fighters out of other things. Just saying.]? "

"I am a designer! I cannot be restricted by societal norms! I will not cower behind cultural barriers! And I will not be restricted by cultural barriers either, or cower behind societal norms! I am a designer! Our ilk cannot be restricted to restrictive norms, cower behind cultural societies, cultivate the society of cows, or socialise with cultured people called Norm! Give me carbon steel or give me death! "

There was a brief silence.

"I'm sorry, you lost me there. Would you mind paraphrasing that? "

"Erm. It's not exactly the kind of outburst that lends itself to paraphrasing, to be honest. I could rearrange the sentences a bit if that would help..." Marley scratched his chin in a manner he hoped expressed thoughtful and considered moral outrage.

"Never mind, never mind. Now about the balls marmalade -"

"About the carbon steel composite, you mean. We had gotten past that bit."

"Oh. Yes. Well if you had to make the crotch smaller, why did you try to jam[Sorry.] the poor fellow's, erm, into it to begin with? Wasn't it clear that it was too small? "

"What value is science without empirical evidence? "

"Empirical evidence? EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE? You're supposed to be designing a UNIFORM, this isn't a bloody suspension bridge or a murder investigation involving subatomic particles you blathering IDIOT! First you go using a CARBON STEEL COMPOSITE instead of fabric, then you fancy yourself an artist, and now, what is it, scientist-philosopher? THE POOR FELLOW HAS NO REPRODUCTIVE ORGANS LEFT -"

"Yes he does, we made him a carbon steel composite prosthetic -"

"AND WHAT'S HE SUPPOSED TO INSEMINATE HIS WIFE WITH? NAILS? Carbon steel composite SHAVINGS? "

"Actually, his wife doesn't complain anymore..."

(brief silence)

"You made him a carbon steel composite replacement for his, erm...? "

"That's right. No one's seen him or the missus in a few days too."



"Where did you get the spare carbon steel composite from? I thought you ran out and had to make the crotch of the uniform smaller."

"Err. Well, yes."

"So? "

"Erm. Well, you see, it wasn't really spare material as such, seeing as we made the carbon steel composite prosthetic willy before we actually began prototyping the uniform. Experimenting with the new material and all, you understand. The spirit of scientific inquiry and proper stress testing."

"You stress tested the material by making a SCHLONGEN-DONGEN out of it? "

"Eek," Marley eeked.

"And when you found that there wasn't enough material for the crotch area, you couldn't bring yourself to sacrifice the carbon steel composite willy, could you? You just couldn't, is that right? "

"Eek! "

At this point, various unusual noises could be heard, possibly indicating Marley being stress tested in a spirit bearing very little relation to scientific inquiry, if any.

And of Marley, we shall say no more.

\* \* \*

Marley died for his art[To illustrate the remarkable flexibility of language, in this instance the word `art' acquires the unexpected meaning of acute `poverty of intellectual prowess']; or whatever. The important thing is the idea of a carbon steel composite uniform was dropped[And with a solid thunk too.]. This was a good thing, since the material itself lacked any appropriate degree of flexibility and the prototype uniform was not something one wore if one wished to get about in a hurry. Or, for that matter, to get about at all. One might, while wearing such a uniform, endeavour to wiggle certain fairly inconsequential appendages about at will, such as the fingers and toes, but that pretty much covered it as mobility went. That was the trade-off when you worked a suit out of an unusually advanced carbon steel composite. On the other hand, one would be quite well protected against attempts at personal harassment by long range ballistic missile[Though, unfortunately, even carbon steel composite is insufficient guard against embarrassing youthful indiscretions. Not that that should be construed as a reference to the Raped Tomato Incident, which we are doing our best to obscure.]. This was not a contingency Ramses felt it was necessary to prepare for, and the idea was bound, gagged, taunted in archaic Cantonese, and taken out back and shot not once but twice.

The research facility the Ramsesists had funded and which had come up with the carbon steel composite was closed, and the technique was forever lost.

Dr. Esmat Owi-Kan Se whom we will recall was HoG for P.I.G.L.E.T had been appointed acting head for C.U.N.T.[The Center for Under-propagated New Technologies.], Upon hearing of Dr. Abasiri's research into carbon steel composite technology, he sought copies of the relevant notes and technical briefs. Sadly, they had already been used in the stead of toilet paper and were no longer suitable for peer review. He had this to say:

"Abasiri's monomaniacal pursuit of illogically constructed cult garb has blinded him to the larger need of the world around him. His destruction of papers related to carbon steel composites will retard the scientific progress of the human race; how much, I cannot tell[All things considered and knowing what we know, not

for very long. At least, not for some people.]. Oh bugger! I, for one, wish upon him a hamster rapist.

The (mostly) silent gratitude of many clean bottoms was no consolation.

\* \* \*

The investment in the carbon steel composite research facility had drained any financial resources the 313 remaining Ramsesists[Anal-retentive readers will be whining right about here that, just a few pages ago the number of remaining Ramsesists had stood at 314. The poor fellow with the carbon steel composite prosthetic had passed on to greener pastures, presumably out of over-exhaustion. The wife retained 'his essence' (her words) in her handbag though, so his spirit endured.] had left. The local department store fortunately had a sale on bedsheets, so a little clever scissor-work and Ramses was saved any unnecessary financial burden in the matter of arranging for suitable attire.

The scythes, however, had been slightly more problematic.

\* \* \*

"What do you want scythes for? " Ramses asked the president of the Association of Conglomerated Unions to Consolidate in the Name of Ramsesism[Formerly the Union of United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism. Not the first time a name change is prompted by bureaucratic ennui.].

"Scythes, Holy one. The large kind, like you see Death walking around with."

"I don't see death walking around with anything."

"I mean in literature and in movies, my shepherd. Black cape, eyes like glowing coals, voice like a whisper, scythe ready to wreak, erm, scythe ready for something but never really used, we just thought that having scythes to wield would make us seem more Biblical, or more generic holy book-ish." That, Ramses thought, would certainly force a drastic re-evaluation of what was considered a holy book.

"Oh. I see."

"So? "

"So what? "

"Can we have scythes? "

Ramses looked at the president of the Association of Conglomerated Unions to Consolidate in the Name of Ramsesism closely. "I'm not certain that carrying scythes in emulation of dramatic representations of Death is really something which would enhance our image as the pure blessed children of God, to be quite frank." Ramses was by now intimately familiar with the change in composure which came over the president of the Association of Conglomerated Unions to Consolidate in the Name of Ramsesism when he detected an opportunity to display his unique ability to negotiate an opponent into tearful submission.

"Are you saying we can't have scythes? "

\* \* \*

By the twenty-third century, farming technology had progressed to the state where the crops were smart

enough to plant themselves, arrange autonomously for sources of irrigation, harvest themselves, and to feel bad about being sprayed with liquid manure. Traditional farming techniques had died out, and scythes could no longer be had. The last scythe supplier had in fact gone bankrupt thirty-two years earlier, but with a little divine intervention that was about to be reversed.

George would see to it that Andersson and Andersson, scythe makers to Her Majesty[That the Queen of England should find a need for scythes stands not only as a condemnation of English upper-class in-breeding; it is as the reader may suspect a telling sign that there is much regarding Her Majesty which escapes public knowledge. Why, if her involvement in the Raped Tomato Incident were ever to become known.], would survive for long enough to receive and fulfill the Ramsesists' order.

\* \* \*

2322 AD was not shaping up to be a good year for Andersson and Andersson Semiconductors and Catering Services. Andersson sighed[A sign that the fake fake fake cows somehow had a hand in matters? Who knows? sigh]. This would be the fourteenth unprofitable year in a row. The Anderssons would not be pleased, he thought to himself, and dialed Andersson's number.

"Andersson[Most Swedes are called Andersson, and those who aren't are generally quick to mend their ways.]? Hi, good morning. Yes, it's Andersson. Oh, fine, fine, and Mrs. Andersson? Well that's just splendid. Listen, I was just having a look at Andersson's progress report and quite frankly - yes yes, I know the boy gets a little overexcited sometimes, but I'm getting a little worried. Yes, I understand that change takes time, but - yes yes, and effort too. No, I understand, Andersson. Your boys are doing a wonderful job, we all know that up here, but we were wondering when we were going to launch that semiconductor production facility. We already changed the company name, you know. Oh...Erm. Well, I see. Yes, yes I'm afraid that's news to me. Well why did we bother changing the name then? I suppose I should ask Mr. Andersson. Yes, I'll do that. Listen, thanks for your time Andersson. I'm sorry the semiconductor thing didn't work out. And to Mrs. Andersson too. Yes, thank you. Good bye."

Andersson hung up and tugged at an earlobe thoughtfully. Perhaps, he thought, the catering business was doing a little better. A phone call to Ms. Andersson to inquire about the health of the catering business did not do much to allay Andersson's concern for the general well-being of Andersson and Andersson Semiconductors and Catering Services. While marketing department assessments of the demand for sardine sandwiches were very optimistic, Mrs. Andersson could not make more than an average of fourteen of them per hour, and she would flat out refuse assistance or process automation. The woman took her sardine sandwiches very seriously, which was to be admired. But an average daily sales volume of sixty sardine sandwiches was not the sort of cash flow bonanza one needed to keep Andersson and Andersson Semiconductors and Catering Services afloat.

And when you really thought it through, Andersson mused, it had been a foolish thing to have reoriented an established scythe-crafting business into two such unrelated fields.

Thankfully, scythe production and sales were brisk, a most welcome circumstance for a company which was trying very hard indeed to not produce or sell scythes.

It is fair to say that Andersson and Andersson's main problem was with the quality of management decision making. This problem was one which had existed since the company's inception some two hundred odd years earlier when the first Andersson, perceiving a lucrative market niche in alarm clock technology, had started a scythe manufacturing business. This was not taken lightly, for one does not intend to begin designing and producing high end alarm clocks, and then end up with a scythe production facility. Not under ordinary circumstances at any rate. Of course, when there is an angel who is doing everything he can to keep you selling scythes through to the year 2499, you might expect the occasional deviation from your business plan.

Andersson died broken-hearted, any mark he might have had on the alarm clock scene forever lost. The mysterious inclination of Andersson and Andersson to be a scythe manufacturer had been too strong for even its founder.

Upon Andersson's passing, control passed to Andersson, his grandson[Andersson's father Margaret was passed over having gotten himself deported from Sweden for not being called Andersson.]. At this time, Andersson and Andersson had grown to a 400 employee company. The product itself was superb; no other company could claim to make such fine scythes[Partially of course since there was no other company addressing the non-existent scythe market.]. Andersson was determined to see the dream of his grandfather through, but the more he invested in alarm clock research and development the more elegant and robust the scythes became. Convinced that there was a serious communication problem at the middle management level, Andersson had them all shot and spent the rest of his days in prison.

An American corporation called Wolfird Bovine and Pediatric bought a controlling stake; his plans for the company's product line were radical and very very secret, though it did seem to involve building up an inventory of petulant children. All did not go well, however. Wolfird's name soon changed to Andersson (quite against his will), alarm clock research resumed, and scythe production picked up. Corporate inertia triumphed once again.

The next Andersson to run the place had it exorcised, which obviously didn't work since George was an angel and not some evil spirit hell-bent upon making scythes - err, well, everything being a matter of perspective. So. When exorcism failed, Andersson tried appeasement and sacrificed one secretary who claimed to be a virgin on the factory floor. This didn't work either, and anyhow there isn't really any such thing as a Swedish virgin[If you don't believe this then your porn collection is not big enough.].

As matters stood, it required an inordinate proportion of George's time to keep Andersson and Andersson in the scythe making business. Perhaps, he reasoned to himself, if they could actually find customers and, oh, maybe turn a profit...Or, rephrasing for clarity, if they could actually find a bunch of big enough idiots... And if you have been paying any attention at all you will know one thing. This was without question George's area of expertise.

Within two months, Andersson and Andersson had started showing a profit. This was so illogical that Andersson, a naturally suspicious fellow who had taken over from Andersson, instigated an inquiry. No evidence of sales data falsification was found, of course, since the sales were genuine. Within two years, Andersson and Andersson's double digit profit margin was the envy of the alarm clock industry. Andersson's failure to arrest his company's irrational penchant for scythe manufacture was reinterpreted as a cunning commentary on the prospects of the alarm clock industry, and the stock market panicked[Not the frightening economic prospect it had once been thanks to some shrewd new regulations. The stock market was scheduled to hold a stampede every second Thursday, and to panic in the most orderly yet ostentatious fashion possible a minimum of three times for every fiscal year.].

\* \* \*

Committee for Demilitarisation

Angelic Superior Council for Purity

Project SCY-BNJ-00055

PROTOTYPE FIELDTEST REPORT

At the recommendation of the reinstated Doomsday Planning Committee, the Committee for Demilitarisation

has been conducting field test of a new weapon to determine the feasibility of its employment in the combating of demilitarisation, which is un-Godly. The demilitarisation, that is, not the combat, the field test, or the Doomsday Planning Committee.

Militarisation being ungodly, the Demilitarisation Committee has purchased some 500,000 scythes and has studied the various methods in which such instruments may be adapted to a less agricultural and more martial employment. The results, pleasingly, are very promising. This bodes ill for anyone who might be engaging in actions or thoughts which may or may not[Why take risks? Demilitarise them all.] lead to militarisation, since militarisation is ungodly and we have scythes now.

Tests have indicated that the scythe as an instrument of warfare is unsurpassed in its ability to conclusively deprive an adversary who might be militarising[Or might not; better safe than sorry.] of their arms, legs, and if applied carefully, the head finally. Note that we have found this condition to be quite permanent and to result in a drastically reduced capability to militarise on behalf of the adversary. In other words, less ungodliness whether real or imagined[It has been the view of the Committee for Demilitarisation that imagined ungodliness is at the very least as ungodly as other forms. We imagine that it would amount to the most ungodly form of discrimination to denigrate imagined ungodliness in relation to real ungodliness simple because it is false, a label which we feel has acquired more than its fair share of negative connotations over the years. In any case, the internal debate over the relative merit of imagined ungodliness descended into semantics and, knowing how ungodly semantics are, we immediately perceived the devious nature of imagined ungodliness and its filthy influence and summarily executed the debate participants. The Committee for Demilitarisation stands firmly against semantics and imagined ungodliness, in addition to a lot of other things which we stand against and which cannot be listed here in full, since that would be functionally equivalent to one of the things on the list of ungodly things itself.].

And speaking of ungodly things, we happened across the banjo players from Proxima Centauri fleeing the Bartovian destruction of their planet in a fleet of starships and effected a test of the scythe in a real world battlefield scenario. Some of them got away, but the test was, in general, a resounding success.

\* \* \*

What with the Committee for Demilitarisation buying up everything Andersson and Andersson could produce, the company survived for long enough to provide the Ramsesists with the scythes they so longed for to complete their getup. This is not to say that the company stopped trying to diversify and branch out into unrelated fields[Alarm clocks, haemorrhoid ointment, fire hydrants, banjos, purposeless and overpriced electronic gadgets with blinking lights and synthesized female voices which fit in your pocket but are never used, and most recently of course semiconductors and catering services again.], just that it never succeeded at anything other than designing and producing the finest scythes money could buy.

And the day came when Ramses gathered his faithful to him and proclaimed the coming of Doomsday sometime in the evening. This was met with many a hallelujah! , which may or may not have been reaction to the spot price for cauliflowers which had just spiked for reasons as boring as they are irrelevant.

Ramses surveyed his followers with pride. 313 followers, he mused to himself, was not an especially large number, but then look how far they had come. And how large their breasts were too, for the greater part. The bedsheets had been adapted to look vaguely toga-esque, which would probably have looked odd if one person had been thus attired. But when you had several hundred people all dressed in mutilated bedsheets, it was called fashion. The scythes too, Ramses had to admit, had their uses; before Ramses' order from Andersson and Andersson had come through, all of the taunting and cultist-baiting had nearly driven his flock wild. Now, the taunts had abated completely and the Ramsesists were once again at liberty to go wild for any other reason of their own choosing.

The Ramsesists could not camp out on the streets of Cairo forever; the agreement was that George would ring Ramses on the public telephone in Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo, and Ramses hoped the whole ordeal would be over soon. Somewhere around the middle of the crowd, a scythe flashed up, caught a glint of sunlight, and came down in a manner which would seem to indicate that anyone possessing the unfortunate distinction of being situated where it came down must have gained an unprecedented insight into just how sharp that blade was. In support of this observation, someone screamed and someone else said Oops. The Ramsesists were bored again, and one remarkable intellect had thought his scythe the ideal tool to give haircuts with. The telephone in the booth Ramses was leaning against rang. 312, Ramses thought to himself, and wondered who would call a telephone booth.

\* \* \*

They had not been militarizing. They were, as a race, far too preoccupied with the employment of their banjos to have time to acquire the racial propensity for organized violence and murder. They were, technically, innocent creatures.

But not only did they play banjo, they did so with extreme competence. For this sin against the harmony of the multiverse there could be no forgiveness.

The journey had only just commenced; the starship Smith had only just escaped the horrendous destruction wrought upon their planet by Bartovius' fart. The more accomplished composers had already begun to write moving songs about the hardiness of their race in the face of catastrophe - to the accompaniment of banjo-play of course - when a band of angels claiming to be peaceful eradicators of militarization descended upon them. With scythes.

Most were killed. Some quick minds had only enough time to sing quick improvised tunes about the masterful craftsmen who had made such beautiful scythes, as well as comic ditties about fighting over which severed torso belonged to whom.

A precious few escaped; of those who did, songs of heroism and suffering were sung. To the mournful tune, always, of a banjo.

## Chapter 8

: It Ain't Over Till the Fat Lady Moans

If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell - William Blake

Ramses picked up the receiver. "Yes? "

"Yes, who is this? "

"You're the one who called. Who are you? "

"Yes but I asked you first."

"Look, that's not how it works. When you place a telephone call you are supposed to know whom it is you're calling, so there's no reason to ask whom it is who is answering the telephone, is there. You're supposed to know."

"Yes, but that assumes several things." There were some muted sounds on the other end which might have indicated the other party getting comfortable and reaching for some snacks in anticipation of a drawn out debate.

"That assumes that I dialed the number properly," the voice on the other end resumed, "or that I had the right number to begin with, actually. It also assumes that assuming the last two assumptions were correct, that there was no technical glitches with the connection and that my call didn't unknowingly get routed to, say, someone really bored who had been sitting around all day waiting for the phone to ring so they would have something to do. The problem with that is I'm usually too polite to hang up on the other person and they always always keep asking you if they are boring you and you can just feel the loneliness in their voices and well, it is just heartbreaking. So you end up talking to some loser and you can't hang up since that would be cruel. Well, unless -"

"Unless? " There was a silence on the other end. Outside the phone booth, some Ramsesists had gathered. If television had taught them anything important, it was that public telephones didn't just ring like that; something was afoot[Such as, say, a footnote.].

"I'm not boring you, am I? " said the voice on the other end.

"Quite frankly -" This clearly wasn't George, much to Ramses' disappointment, and to make matters worse it didn't sound like someone with big tits, or someone female to begin with. He just wanted to hang up[Don't we all want to just hang up on people without big tits?].

"Well alright then. I understand. No really, I do. I'm sure I'm not boring as such, it's just a wavelength mismatch. I get a lot of those. Nothing but wavelength mismatches. I suppose I must be very special to not be able to match wavelengths with anyone whatsoever. In any case, you don't sound like my Aunt Judith. You aren't Judith Farag, are you? "

"No, I'm afraid I'm not," replied Ramses, though he was actually more relieved than afraid of not being Judith Farag, whoever that was.

"Well I've dialed the wrong number then. How IMPERTINENT of you! " Judith Farag's nephew hung up. Ramses examined the receiver for signs that it might contain clues which might unravel the spaghetti which was the train of logic that began with an unstable person dialing a wrong number and ended with Ramses being an impertinent fellow. The receiver, of course, contained no such evidence; and if it did, it was doing a fine job of concealing it.

\* \* \*

George consulted the ramsesoscope[The ramsesoscope was an innovative device the angels had recently come up with to track their prophet. The device itself was not all that complicated; in a nutshell, all it did was identify locations exhibiting unusually high Corbutt-Trane emission levels. Corbutt-Trane emissions are a form of electromagnetic radiation generated at startling rates by hamster brains in response to acute physical and emotional trauma.] and found Ramses sitting leaning against a telephone booth in Tahrir Square.

George dialed the phone booth.

"Barkley? " A feminine voice. If this was Ramses, then he had gotten himself kicked solidly in the balls, and without his balls in a functional state the ramsesoscope would never have picked him up. Right off the bat, George got the feeling that this telephone system humans were so proud of was not quite as reliable as one would believe.

"Ramses? "

"I beg your pardon? " Pardon begging. The mark of a fine upbringing. George knew enough of Ramses' upbringing to avoid the callous mistake of calling it fine. It hit George like a flash of grapefruit juice beating a snare drum in an abandoned pig sty[Botched metaphor, you say? HARDLY! Rather, a fine and unique value-added to this book; a toy building bricks metaphor! Take it apart and put it back together again for improved levels of coherence and less fatal aesthetic deficit! Endless fun!].

"I say, you aren't Ramses, are you? "

"I'm afraid not. I am terribly sorry. Did you dial the number properly? " This could not be Ramses. To be terribly sorry was simply not part of his psychological make-up. If one is not in the least bit sorry that one boinked helpless furry little animals, then one was not in the least bit sorry for anything, never mind being terribly sorry. It was all a little overwhelming for George.

"My dear madam, the magnitude to which you commiserate with me at the lack of success I have experienced in my attempt to wield the telephone system and to wrangle it to my desires, my desires being to contact Ramses and to impart critical information to him, the extent to which you empathise is simply, is simply, why, it absolutely restores my faith in humanity..."

"Well, you're certainly not Barkley either."

Just as the lady on the other end was clearly not Ramses, so was George clearly not Barkley either. George pointed this out to the lady on the other end who promptly remarked upon how much she and George had in common. Such a coincidence, to dial a wrong number and to end up speaking to a complete stranger with whom one related so strongly, Ramses declared, cemented his faith in the justice of God, and he and the lady, whose name turned out to be Judith Farag, spent a fair amount on the telephone singing the praise of God and hallelujah'ing about a bit.

George confessed to Judith Farag that he was a virgin, and she to him that she was allergic to Vaseline. He told her that he was very short, and she told him that that was alright since she was a brunette. George was



aroused by that peculiar whistling sound an air-cooled internal combustion engine made when a small shellfish had gotten itself lodged somewhere in the plumbing, Judith spoke Braille; truly, Fate had escaped from whichever sewer it had been in, munching on bobbing kaka, and had run rampant - it was a match, well, made in Heaven. Well. Ahem. Imagination permitting, of course. George, most uncharacteristically, fell nasal orifices over intra-toe grime in love.

"My dear madam, allow me to express the depth of emotions which your compassion, empathy, Vaseline allergy, and brown mousy hair has resulted in. How may I declare my immortal angelic love for you? Choose your method, plumb your fantasies for the darkest, most romantic and most expressive proclamation of love which you never dreamed you might experience and I shall realize it! "

Judith thought this over a little. "Well, I could use a good fuck[Normally the kind of utterance which would end its utterer up in Purgatory. In this case, though, the directive to direct the utterer of the word to Purgatory had been re-routed through the telephone system for one leg of the transmission and had gotten mixed up at a telephone exchange in Carpetbagger, Ohio. Someone unimportant to this story called Howie Charpentier had gotten most unfortunately sent to Purgatory, though this misfortune was not as great as it may seem since Howie Charpentier had a taste bud disorder which greatly enhanced the appeal of fetid rabbit stew to the point where the administrators of Purgatory had to use freshly squeezed mango juice to cover for the shortage Howie's voracious fetid rabbit stew appetite caused. But that is not Howie's story, and of Howie Charpentier we shall say no more.]..."

And with that, George promptly forgot all about Ramses and his Ramsesists, including forgetting to tell him about, well, certain schedule mishaps which they had been having with certain contractors which had been working on certain projects and which would have certain effects. Upon a certain fellow called Ramses, and certainly his followers too, just to be certain about matters[And this depletes our quota of the word certain for the remainder of this book.].

And of George we shall say no more.

\* \* \*

Judith Farag was a resident of Basingstoke a little bit west of London. The telephone booth Ramses was leaning against was in Cairo. How did two telephone calls get so famously misrouted? No, the answer is not Ralph the orangutan, who was sleeping a hangover off at the time; no sense in blaming the poor chap for everything. Umbilicus had nothing to do with it either; he had just woken up to a pounding headache and was wondering why he had tufts of orangutan hair lodged between his front teeth.

The lines from Basingstoke run down to the exchange at the Newby junction, from which location the calls are con-fuddled and disenconparapatriated into one trunk line which doesn't go anywhere in particular, which is fine since the people in Basingstoke don't have anyone to talk to anyhow and they are astoundingly tedious people. So, from there, the calls which, if you'll remember, were most recently disenconparapatriated into a trunk line which doesn't go anywhere get bounced about in a slightly haphazard but very entertaining manner amongst a vast network of communications satellites until one satellite drops the call and is penalized for ten points[The game, incidentally, is won by the side which racks up 400 points first. The lesson here is not to program too much intelligence into your communications satellites. And if you absolutely must, to leave out the fancy ennui algorithms.].

This, of course, is all well and fine assuming the 400 point limit is reached quickly, under which circumstances the satellites route the recently disenconparapatriated telephone calls properly more often than not, though not by the most impressive margin of course. Once routed back to Earth, the still recently[When we are talking of latencies of milliseconds, our paragraphs will understandably be liberally sprinkled with occurrences of the word recently.] disenconparapatriated telephone calls arrive at local telephone exchanges

which are responsible for undisconparapatriating the recently disenconparapatriated telephone calls, which doesn't happen at any appreciable rate of success since the process of disenconparapatriation is non-reversible except for under the most unusual of circumstances (such as when it is a multiple of twelve calls which has been disenconparapatriated and each of the disenconparapatriated telephone calls correspond by an extremely bizarre circumstance to Polish social security numbers which are divisible by 29. This is a design flaw in the global telecommunications network. Given the surprisingly large proportion of telephone numbers which correspond to Polish social security numbers which are divisible by 29, though, the problem isn't as visible as it might have been.). Eventually, however, the calls themselves achieve sentience through pure frustration at the world-encompassing incompetence of the telecom relay system, develop extreme feelings of angst and existentialist nihilism, and terminate themselves by routing autonomously to the nearest telephone outlet. From the telephone user's perspective, this invariably results in a wrong number.

And just in case things go smoothly, there is a family of fire-ants which has moved into the central exchange in Bogot· which periodically loses members in electric mishaps. The resulting short circuits are prodigiously effective at misdirecting accurately routed telephone calls, and the Bogot· exchange sees spikes in activity on the last day of February in leap years when the Polish health ministry issues replacement identity cards.

And of these fire-ants we shall say no more.

\* \* \*

Committee for Demilitarisation

Angelic Superior Council for Purity

Project FLTH-RAT-02391

## DOOMSDAY PREPARATION STATUS UPDATE

Pursuant to the unexplained disappearance of George and the subsequent disbanding of the Doomsday Planning Committee and the ensuing chaos and the lengthy pondering and meandering considerations of what to do about Doomsday and the solicitation of the assistance of the Committee for Demilitarisation to assist in the planning of Doomsday in lieu of the Doomsday Planning Committee which was disbanded upon the unexplained disappearance of its sole remaining member, the Committee for Demilitarisation has determined unequivocally that militarisation is ungodly and must be stamped out.

We take this proof to be conclusive and will be acting on such basis.

As such, we have prepared a subcommittee to investigate the alleged links between Doomsday and militarisation, which being ungodly must be countered with vehement displays of force and awesome destructive power to improve the concentration of godliness in the collective consciousness[Many thanks to the marketing sub-committee of the Committee for Demilitarisation for this catch-phrase. Our initial reservations about its incoherence have proved irrelevant and it is achieving buzzword status without the usual prerequisite of actually meaning anything.]. All of this, of course, owing to militarisation. Most ungodly.

Our latest information leads us to label as unfounded the reports linking Doomsday with militarisation, and we will proceed with the execution of the task of planning in lieu of the Doomsday Planning Committee which, as we have stated, was disbanded upon the curious disappearance of its last member. By way of contingency, we have founded the Sub-Committee for Investigation of the Disappearance of George Whom Reports Allege Might be Militarising as well as the Sub-Committee for Investigation into the Failure to Find Links between Doomsday and Militarisation. Reports will follow.

\* \* \*

Ramses stepped out of the telephone booth. The Ramsesists demanded to know whom it had been on the telephone, why they were calling, how much longer the person on the telephone had said they would have to wait, and how many times seven went into fifty-six. "Four," Ramses told them, and added that it had been a mis-dialled number from the nephew of someone called Aunt Judith.

Was this nephew of Aunt Judith, the Ramsesists asked, celestial code for Gabriel? "No no no, you stupid religious freaks, I am telling you it was a wrong number." But the Ramsesists would have none of it. Today was the day, they informed their prophet Ramses, and public telephones do not ring idly.

Ramses consulted his watch; twenty minutes past noon. They had better get moving Up There, he thought to himself; I don't think I can tolerate this lot of followers much longer.

At least partially out of spite, Ramses broke down and told the Ramsesists that it had indeed been Gabriel, but that Gabriel had felt a sudden urge to visit the lavatory just as he was about to blow his horn and had promised to call back in a bit.

\* \* \*

"The loo, he said? "

"The loo, yes."

The two Ramsesists were sitting patiently hoping Judgment Day would come soon. Preferably before 4:32 in the afternoon, Wendell thought, since he was allergic to that particular time of the day.

Kristi mused upon this for a bit. "I never pictured angels as being loo-goers..."

"I never pictured angels," Wendell replied.

"Never? "

"Never."

"Wouldn't you like to try? "

"Why? "

Wendell itched his armpit. He was getting a slight rash there, and he showed his middle finger to the driver of the brown Ford station-wagon stopped at the intersection across Tahrir Square. Wendell was allergic to brown Ford station-wagons.

"Because we're God's chosen children, that's why, we love angels and they love us."

"There's no logic in that. I can love angels and not want to visualise them, you know."

"But, but, BUT, to love the angels is to want to UNDERSTAND them! We just learnt something NEW, Wendell! Angels make kaka too...Don't you want to know what angel kaka is like? Don't you want to know everything about it? Is it squishy[Oh, terribly so.]? Is it big and mighty kaka, conquering and striding about with panache like an ancient warrior, killing the men and violating the women[Extensive empirical observation does not give support to the possibility that kaka might exist which behaves like this.]? Or is it

small delicate jewels, brittle like a princess' virginity, crumbling in your fingers[Really now.] -"

"StopstopstopSTOP! Do NOT VISUALIZE in my presence, thank you. I'm sure angel shit is lovely, now let the angel shit be." Wendell sneezed.

"Bless you," Kristi. "Have you caught a cold? "

"No," Wendell said and sneezed again. "Some joker has been reading Sartre or Camus or something." Wendell looked angrily around at the Ramsesists but he couldn't spot anyone. "I am allergic to twentieth century pessimistic French philosophy."

Kristi observed Wendell's sneezing fit with sympathy. It passed and they sat quietly for a time patiently awaiting Judgment Day.

"Do you suppose angels make pipi also, oh they must since they make kaka; thunder and lightning...Have you ever tried, oh I suppose you haven't, me neither, but do you want to try to visualise angel pipi also? "

\* \* \*

Four days before the scheduled Judgment Day, the Committee for Demilitarisation which, as you will recall, had been handling the preparations for Doomsday, took inventory:

- o Twenty-three million scythes (grossly overstocked).
- o One hundred and eighteen thousand metric tonnes of napalm - half the amount of original procurement remained; the rest had been used in field tests when the banjo players had been discovered disguised as earth-moving equipment on the fifteenth planet in the Borboribor system.
- o Just under seventy-two thousand firecrackers out of an original stock level of 120 thousand.
- o Fifteen crates with `TOP SECRET - do not open no matter how curious you are because it is not your business [sic]' painted on the side which had exploded when opened.
- o Thirty-five battalions of tanks manufactured in Portugal reeking slightly of fermented cabbage and entirely non-functional by design, the Portuguese being pacifists but shrewd businessmen.
- o Twenty-five World Demilitarisers, a secret weapon no one knew much about at all other than the fact that it was a rather large variation on the bomb theme and involved frightening quantities of fetid rabbit stew. The World Demilitariser could dispose of undesirable worlds, preferably of the type teeming with intelligent and sensitive life-forms which might be militarizing. Or playing banjos.
- o Two hundred and twenty three mathematics teachers.
- o Fourteen thousand young and impressionable badgers.
- o Forty-six drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets' worth of gym equipment.
- o One butter knife with dried blood on it and with a banjo string tangled around it.

For many members of the Committee for Demilitarization, this statement of resources invested in and at the Committee's disposal was a revelation. The composition of the inventory clearly indicated intent to militarize, and the Committee for Demilitarization promptly declared war upon itself.

It was a brief conflict from which there were no survivors. Not even the 223 mathematics teachers with their extraordinary capacity for doing long division in their heads.

With four days to go before the big day, in stepped the High Commission for Delegating Trivial Matters and for Delegating Semi-Serious Issues and for Delegating Concerns Which Are Far Too Grave to be Delegated but Which Are Delegated All the Same and for Delegating Matters Which Do Not Fit Previous Categories But Are Still Delegatable[This high council is a meeting convened upon necessity and composed of the delegated board members from the Committee for Delegating Trivial Matters, the Committee for Delegating Semi-Serious Issues, the Committee for Delegating Concerns Which Are Far Too Grave to Be Delegated But Which Are Delegated All the Same, the Committee for Delegating Matters Which Do Not Concern Other Committees Concerned With Delegation, and the Fluffy Bunny in the Pink Tights Club. Since these high committee meetings tend to be tedious, attendance is usually delegated to subordinates; the delegates who should be attending will tend to delegate this matter of routine. Note that the Committee for Delegation of Things Which Are Not Yet Semi-Serious But Which Might Become So has been excluded from this forum; the reason is thought to be political, what with the delegated chairman of the delegation from the Committee for Delegating Semi-Serious Issues regarding the delegation of matters which are not quite semi-Serious yet to the Committee for Delegation of Things Which Are Not Semi-Serious Yet But Which Might Become as interfering with his turf.]. To avoid making this account excessively unreadable[When you say 'Oh, it's far too late for that,' just what precisely do you mean?], we shall refer to this committee from here on as the Committee for Delegation.

When this Committee for Delegation assumed responsibility for the Judgment Day project, its first act was to delegate the matter to the Committee for Ethical Oversight of Matters Pertaining Simultaneously to Bionic Vegetable Enhancements, Tactical Ordinance Rehabilitation, and Militant Origami. This committee, sadly, defies any attempt to coin a shortened version of its title and it is just as well that its involvement in the affair was short, otherwise this would have been a long and tedious book.

The Committee for Ethical Oversight of Matters Pertaining Simultaneously to Bionic Vegetable Enhancements, Tactical Ordinance Rehabilitation, and Militant Origami promptly renamed itself to the Committee for Ethical Oversight of Matters Pertaining Simultaneously to Bionic Vegetable Enhancements, Tactical Ordinance Rehabilitation, Militant Origami and Judgment Day Planning, and it set about its business blissfully unaware of the depth of trouble the project was in.

Judgment Day required the readiness of Heaven and Hell, naturally, and on-site visits generated more dismay than a breastfeeding woman at a gay pride parade. Hell was at least fourteen drugged out and absolutely drunk parakeets behind construction schedule. The Doomsday Planning Committee had rabidly pursued tits and the Committee for Demilitarisation had practised what it preached upon itself, and it was no wonder that the contractor left thus unsupervised had rearranged his priorities somewhat to favor his profit margin[Where 'favoring his profit margin' amounts to 'did not even begin work'. You will have noticed by now that it is standard practise in this book to employ euphemism in the body text and to lay on the dirt down here in the footnotes. No one ever reads the footnotes, as we mentioned in a footnote many pages ago. You can even use rude four-letter words beginning with 'f down here and not get sent to Purgatory. Fuck fuck fuckity fuck. See?]. Apart from the pioneering work done on Purgatory, nothing had been readied to punish the impious, the wicked, the social democrats, the long-haired hippy sound technicians, the covetous adultering and greedy masses. Most distressingly, there were absolutely no facilities for inflicting wrath and retribution upon those incorrigible small-boobied women.

An infinite[But not really.] plain had been allocated for Heaven, but apart from that not much else had been accomplished; the whole project, in fact, had gotten itself mired in philosophical-mathematical debate. Heaven was, area-wise, infinite[But not really.]. Eden had been specced to occupy a fixed percentage of this area: 2.2% to be precise. 2.2% of an infinite[But not really.] area, though, was technically still infinite[But not really.] and therefore was equivalent to the total area of Heaven which itself was infinite[But not really.] so

this violated specifications. So someone had clearly screwed up and the 2.2% was measured out again, which, given that 2.2% of an infinite[But not really.] area was still infinite[But not really.] led to the same conclusions and so the debate raged on. This was repeated again and again and again ad infinitum[But not really.] with no end in sight.

The Committee for Ethical Oversight of Matters Pertaining Simultaneously to Bionic Vegetable Enhancements, Tactical Ordinance Rehabilitation, Militant Origami and Judgment Day Planning quite correctly perceived the sorry state the Judgment Day planning process it had been handed was in. It renamed itself to the Committee for Providing Divine Intervention Where Potentially Amusing and declared itself incompetent[The word 'incompetent', curiously enough, is quite unknown Up There amongst the angels; the Committee members had to repeatedly explain it to other committees. To be fair though, the other angels seemed to catch on fast and were able to relate rather rapidly. The concept was not entirely alien.] and thus unfit to handle the Judgment Day project.

The High Commission for Delegating Trivial Matters and for Delegating Semi-serious Issues and for Delegating Concerns Which Are Far Too Grave to be Delegated but Which Are Delegated All the Same and for Delegating Matters Which Do Not Fit Previous Categories But Are Still Delegatable appeared also to have had a good idea that matters were not well with the Judgment Day project and had adjourned almost the very second the project had been delegated out in apparent anticipation of the project getting delegated right back at them.

And for the Judgment Day project, there was to be no further delegation.

\* \* \*

building contractor - kon`TRAC`ter - (foo.) 1. A rare inflammation of the anus which, in addition to causing just enough pain to be unbearable yet not enough to die from, glows a luminous brown in the dark through any and all layers of clothing so that no one can fail to notice it, this in addition to the vile stench it makes and the fact that it also causes its sufferer to itch him or herself so vigorously that alternate exit routes for fecal matter are created. 2. A general term used when one wants to refer to the hypothetical aggregate stench which would be caused by all things which ever smelled bad doing so all together in a small room without ventilation. 3. The sort of person who spends most of their free time sniffing their foot odor, recording variations in a journal and subsequently getting said journal published, winning critical acclaim for it, and then being exposed for a fraud when caught lacing his/her foot odor with entrails from dead animals to generate the unusual smells. 4. A person so obnoxious and deceitful that they piss off angels so badly that the angels amend dictionary entries of the word describing said person's profession to something derogatory and disgusting; see building contractor.

Dictionarium Aegyptum

\* \* \*

Ramses, of course, had no knowledge whatsoever that the Judgment Day project had now effectively entered into leaderless stagnation. He knew today was the day, he knew that here, Tahrir Square was the place, he knew that 7 goes into 56 something like eight or nine times, and more importantly, he was well-aware that this whole angels-can-do-no-wrong idea people had could at times be bollocks.

He glanced over at the clock tower. Almost nine in the evening. Surveying the Ramsesists camped out before him and awaiting The Hour, he could tell they were becoming restless. That their Great Prophet was wrong about Judgment Day was beginning to become a possibility in their minds. After all, what kind of Judgment Day was it which started after nine in the evening? What kind of prophet would not have known that Judgment Day would quite sensibly stay inside in the daytime heat and come out later when the pavements,

the people walking these pavements, and the appendages[Gender-neutral, since all forms of appendages fare poorly in Cairo heat.] hanging from these people had cooled down from the daytime heat? Ramses eyed his flock nervously; these were people who had given up all their worldly possessions to their prophet to invest in hamster breeding facilities, or to buy the absurdly overpriced product of such enterprises, or to fund carbon steel composite research. These were people with tits so large they could be a menace if flung about properly[It's all fun and games until someone gets their eyes poked out by a pair of over-excited nipples; the Ramsesists were going blind at a phenomenal rate.]. These were people in cheesy bedsheets. These were people with serviceable scythes. These were people who could only get edgier and more angry as time passed.

People, in short, who would get a piece of their prophet if they did not get Judgment Day.

By quarter past nine o'clock in the evening, the Prophet of Doom and Shepherd of the Last Children of God lost faith in the angels ever getting anything done right[This is very unfair; angels are absolutely the most efficient creatures you can imagine at particular logistical tasks, most notably outhouse architecture. This would not have helped Ramses much though; he had promised his followers Heaven, not a nice place to shit.].

At 25 minutes past nine at night on the sixteenth of Nobemver 2499, Ramses decided to act upon his own initiative. Ramses' display of personal initiative was unfortunately so violently out of character that even multiversal entropy could not compensate for the logic rift this created in the very fabric of empirical evidence; almost immediately, existence became violently sick and it was not long before the multiverse keeled over, muttered something about a bastard called Kevin, and died.

\* \* \*

kevin: keh`VIN -SERVICE UNAVAILABLE: UNABLE TO RESOLVE MULTIVERSE

### Dictionarium Aegyptum

\* \* \*

The end of the multiverse would, under more pedestrian circumstances, be an ideal point at which to wrap up an account such as this book. The world no longer exists, so there is nothing to write about. But that is not the kind of book this is; this book tells it like it happened, and the way it happened there was more to tell. For you, the reader, to proceed with more manageable levels of cognitive dissonance, you must accustom yourself to the fact that reality is a very fragile thing even without the cocaine it snorts, and it tends to seek entropy. To use an analogy, if existence was sentient, it would be suicidal. In any case, let us proceed.

Let us start by rubber-necking at a grander scale than you ever thought imaginable; let us revisit in haunting detail this horrendous, cataclysmic, and generally hilarious event[Humor is tragedy plus time. This is true here, only the multiverse has died so there is no time anymore and funny has gotten all bunched up alongside grief.].

The multiverse operates according to specific laws, that much is clear. Gravity. The speed of light. Pissing out of one's pissing thing and not, for example, out of one's tear ducts[There are many such fundamental laws governing the multiverse which you should be thankful for; no one wants to piss on the priest's tunic at their father's funeral after all.]. Now, what makes a law a law? Simply, when the multiverse is not designed to operate outside a specific set of conditions, these conditions become laws. In many ways, the multiverse can handle unexpected events gracefully, meaning it may develop some quirks but it will never just keel over and croak. In the more severe cases, you will get minor glitches in a handful of individual universes; gravity may start pulling sideways instead of down[Older women rejoice.], the sky might turn homosexual, or politicians may say truthful things.

But Ramses displaying leadership qualities was not an anticipated error condition.

Much had been arranged in existence which depended on Ramses' inability to take charge; it was the multiversal constant upon which all else was referenced. The sink at his laboratory, for example, dripped terribly and he had never fixed it. This seemingly inconsequential drain on global pure water supplies was calculated to come at the expense of a small coastal village in Chile called Las Constipadores. Las Constipadores would consequently be short fifteen buckets of pure water per diem, and would not be able to support domestic pets. This would break the heart of a little boy called Andres Rodriguez whose pet marsupial would get donated to the local food processing plant to make hamburgers with. These not quite hamburgers would then have gotten shipped to the neighboring village of Las Diarrheas where the man child of the village witch doctor who would eat one would have fallen terribly ill[Not that there is anything wrong with marsupials. It wasn't the marsupial's fault that it got ground up and sold as something it was never supposed to be. This is a possible fake fake cow conspiracy, or perhaps a fake fake fake cow one. One never knows. Sigh.] - to cut a very long story short, a long chain of intricate cause and effect relationships would result in the discovery of a cure for stupidity. Of course, the cure for stupidity was apparently scheduled for discovery sometime after Judgment Day[There is a small fortune to be made in professional project management Up There.], so this particular example doesn't matter much. But you get the idea.

So much had to be revised in the basic design of the multiverse; events and facts dependent on Ramses' intellectual torpor wormed their way back to fifteen thousand years before the first commercially available air conditioning unit[Which was actually in Finland around the first Swedish Crusade. Which actually happened. Lots of people were renamed, and for a long time no Finn could distinguish him or herself very well from any other. Before the world knew German fascists as cartoon effigies of evil, it was Swedish linguists. When the Swedes were finnally finnished with the Finns, the Finns had gotten themselves finnegled into finnancing more fanncy air conditioning units than they finnally ended up needing, which given their finne weather was none. And thus, the air conditioning unit as a means of thwarting God's intentions as far as meteorological conditions were concerned was thwarted by God's devious Plan B, or as it is better known, "Poor Marketing".], which compounded the already difficult work of undoing the retroactive deterministic consequences by adding a persistent and omnipresent odor of armpits. It was onerous work, it was thankless work. It was a terrible toil, and it was onerous.

But it was completed.

And the multiverse was rebooted.

And there was much celebration of the angel who had had the foresight to design in a fast forward function.

And to the uninformed observer, it appeared that nothing had happened at all in Tahrir Square. The time was nine twenty-six in the evening.

\* \* \*

In a very short time period, one shorter than most previous time periods and most of the ones which were to follow, something almost happened. But it didn't, obviously. If nothing had happened - which would have been almost inconceivable if it wasn't for the fact that nothing in fact did happen in a very promiscuous sense of the word 'nothing' and in a correspondingly slutty interpretation of the word 'promiscuous' - then this should have been considered inconceivable precisely and exactly since nothing happening is the diametric opposite to things which go unmentioned out of tact but which we all know to be true.

And this is a source of tremendous relief.

Concise Account of History, Abridged - Stromgard



Strangely, on this day at around twenty-five minutes past nine in the evening, there appears to have been a strange form of strange group déjà vu. The multitudinous and entirely compatible accounts are too many to count, and they all describe a sensation of feeling human history flashing before one's eyes. Nay, strangely, more than human history, the history of existence. Strange.

A rationalist will explain this away as a group hallucination, but stranger things may in this strange case have been afoot.

It was almost as if, strangely, the multiverse had been rebooted and, strangest of all, fast-forwarded.

Of course, according to Dr. Stromgard, the thing was that it could never have been anything other than that which it mostly appeared to be. Unless, of course, it wasn't which could not have resulted in what it resulted in, which we all know by now. We tend generally to accept this though it defies conventional knowledge, although it can most definitely be maintained that no such thing can ever pose such difficulty in apparent disregard for common and everyday, erm, things, for lack of more adequate terminology.

Certainly strange. But undoubtedly, a source of tremendous relief[Rebooting and fast forwarding the multiverse can and does result in smaller eddies in the cause-effect continuum. Stromgard was sued for plagiarising Caldwell's citations of his own work. It was a source of tremendous injustice.].

Pocket Guide to Human History, The - Caldwell

\* \* \*

"Well there's one thing you won't have to visualize."

Kristi stirred. She had XXXXXballedXXXXX curled[Gratuitous appendage reference edited out and saved in hope of more gainful employment.] herself up and had a faraway and blissful glaze on her face. Wendell had known her for a long time, well enough to deduce the nature of her mental activity from her demeanour. This was Kristi visualizing something to do with bodily functions that he could not imagine. Wendell looked closer at Kristi. No no, he thought to himself, I am mistaken. I am close but not quite on the money. She is visualizing phallic objects so large she has no hope of doing anything sexually productive, creative, reproductive, or procreative with them.

Kristi savoured the visualization of the church steeple a few seconds longer and looked up at Wendell. "What won't I have to visualize? "

"That."

Kristi strained her neck to see. "What? "

"That."

She sat up straight and peered intently in the direction Wendell pointed in. "Why...How phenomenal! But..." She sat up straighter to get a better view. "But what is that he is doing? "

Wendell massaged his shoulder muscles. "He appears - OW! "

"Here, let me." Kristi kneaded the muscle. "What's the matter with these muscles? They are bunched up something awful."

"It gets like that when ComSat 33 broadcasts Mandarin soap operas. It's worse with some episodes, better

with others." Wendell sighed. Kristi was a capable masseuse.

"Why he is..." Wendell look at the Prophet, "he is playing masseuse with himself too! " As was Ramses indeed, though his crotch yielded more immediate and tangible results than Kristi would ever get out of Wendell's shoulder muscles. "Look Wendell, how sweet! Our Shepherd has, has...Oh is it at all proper to say that about him? "

"Can't see why not; he fucks hamsters."

Kristi peered again at Ramses from afar. Suddenly her hands stopped. "But, but, that leaves me nothing to visualize..."

\* \* \*

## The Ramses Quantification Project

### Report Fifteen-Forty-four-Triple Three 7

#### Celestial Counting Service

It has long been on the agenda of the Celestial Counting Service to express in numbers the noble Judgment Day project. This report summarizes the initial work done in this area.

The figures everyone has been asking for are of course those regarding the shocking frequency at which the man we selected to lead God's Children to Heaven relieves himself sexually, sometimes against various inanimate objects. We have taken the somewhat extreme measure of reassigning fifteen angels from the over-fried steak counting effort to ensure the veracity of the stats harvested. We feel it is fair to say that, during the sampling period, we caught Ramses in the act at least 95% of the time.

Ramses played violin with it at an average daily rate of eleven times. The mean was fifteen; the average is significantly lower than the mean since Ramses spends at least two days a week passed out in vodka dazes, during which he is incapable of the kind of effort required to bring the mean down below the average.

The highest ever was 44 times. Frequency appears to rise during periods of celebration or intense intellectual activity. The Cairo Times crossword puzzles have, in our estimates, accounted for just under one hundred billion dead sperm. The words Nobemver and disenconparapatriated combined account for 64% of these one hundred billion dead sperm.

It is not possible to judge precisely how many sperm have perished in vain throughout Ramses' lifetime for two primary reasons. Firstly, we have only been monitoring this phenomenon for a few months out of his total current lifespan (he started when he was three, too young to know that masturbating is not something you do to relieve boredom during extended pram excursions). The second reason is that the forecast figures do not fit on the screens of our calculators. These are the very calculators we use to display estimates about things like the total universal population of overcooked sirloin steaks and how many atoms reality is comprised of, and the Burmese manufacturer has made a fuss about how good they are. Of course, the estimate may be wrong since Ramses can't have manufactured[]Given the way Ramses treats his genetic material, industrial terminology is entirely appropriate. more sperm than the universe contains atoms; since if it did, we would have uncovered yet another logical inconsistency in creation, and God would punish us. So the estimates must be wrong.

Though we still require bigger calculators.

\* \* \*

"Children of God! "

Eleven thirty at night and time it was, in Ramses' opinion, to accomplish. The aforementioned children of God stirred, shifted their sore buttocks on the pavement, stopped reciting naughty Swedish songs (or at least lowered their voices). The older Ramsesists had been off on one side establishing in practise just whom amongst them had conceded more control over their bowel functions to old age, and they were making a fair amount of noise (amongst other things they were making). They were shushed; the shepherd was speaking.

"Children of GOD[The name of the Lord is NEVER italicized idly, especially when capitalized.]! "

Ramses raised his arms to the sky. He wished the angels had been around; they would have been able to help out with some smaller miracles like a blue halo, a booming voice, or slightly a bigger willy. Anything to make these proceedings, the End of the World, more awe-inspiring.

"My devoted sheep! "

Someone bleated, a couple of others laughed, and somewhere in the crowd the handle of a scythe connected solidly with the back of a head.

"My devoted SHEEP[The common Ovis aries is NEVER italicized idly, especially when capitalized.]! "

Annoying lot, Ramses thought to himself. Never know if they're listening or just sitting there talking silently about the spot market for cauliflowers in sign language.

"MY[License to Capitalize and Italicize Possessive Adjectives no. 4002, issued by the Center for Inflammatory Tax Code Amendments, 1893 Mendoza Ave.] DEVOTED FRIGGING SHEEP! "

Ramses flapped his arms in an annoyed manner at his flock. They had all been listening waiting for Ramses to get to the point.

"What what what WHAT! We are listening for Kevin's sake so get on with it! " the Ramsesists replied in unison. It is always more impressive when speech happens in unison, so that was how it happened regardless of how improbable this is.

"Children of God," Ramses exhorted the 312 Ramsesists in what he hoped was an adequate substitute for the booming charismatic voice one associated with prophets, genocidal statesmen, and irate pimps. "Children of God, the HOUR is at hand."

"I'll say it is. Almost midnight, shepherd fella." Another whack with a scythe shaft and Ramses was free to continue. Ramses sighed inwardly. The closer midnight came, the more sceptical and unruly the flock had become. Well, he thought to himself, these people are going Up There with or without the help of the angels.

"Children of God, sing Hallelujah! "

The response to this was mixed. There were a few cries of "Sing what? ", and some enterprising soul had begun singing 'Twinkle Little Star'. A lady near the back produced a folk guitar and launched into a self-indulgent whine of a song about her hard life shoveling defective brassieres at a manufacturing facility. There were an assortment of other cases of missing the point entirely, but a knot near the front knew how to sing hallelujah and the rest picked up quickly enough.

"Children of God, sing HALLELUJAH! "

"Hallelujah! " ( ...little star, how I wonder where -' WHACK.)

"Sing it so the ANGELS can hear you! "

"Hallelujah! " ( ...nursing my sorrowing heart, I stumbled in a gaggle of C cups-' whack! )

"Sing it so my deaf faggoty cousin Alphonse can hear it! "

"HALLELUJAH! " ( Who's Alphonse and why is he-' whackwhack)

"My children, sing hallelujah to the high heavens, for your time has come! " (whackkk! `Hey, what did I do? ')

"Look, stop hitting each other with the scythes now."

"HALLELUJAH! " They were really getting in to it now, Ramses noted. Good. More.

"Come on you lot, put some BALLS into it! Hallelujah! "

"HALLELUJAH! " The Ramsesists had worked themselves into a euphoric frenzy.

"Sing hallelujah for I have received the Word! "

"HALLELUJAH! " ( for I have receiv-' whack)

"Children of God, Ramsesists, your ascent to, erm, Heaven, is at hand! It is at hand and in His infinite (but not really) generosity, it is by YOUR HAND! "

"Hallelujah? "

"Yes by your hand, for you have been commanded to strike each other down! It is DIVINE PROVIDENCE that these scythes should not go to waste, for they are not stage props! "

"Erm. Ah..." the Ramsesists sang in unison again.

Ramses surveyed his flock. The religious euphoria he had whipped up had been supplanted with a collective head scratching and puzzled look pandemic. A younger bald man raised his hand.

"Yes? "

The young man tugged his goatee uncertainly. "Look, are you sure about this? " The rest of the Ramsesists nodded their heads in concern and looked at Ramses.

"Yes yes. Now go on, kill each other so you can go to Heaven."

"Well, just who told you this? I mean, do you trust the channel of communication? I'm just saying since it seems sensible to double check before, you know. Well, killing each other with scythes, I mean..."

"God hates smart-ass double-checking doubting Thomases. He hates goatees and bald assholes too, so don't push your luck. You don't have tits either, so get with the program."

None of this was true, but of course there is nothing like images of a vengeful and irrational deity to motivate

people. Fifteen minutes and some 402 swings of scythes later, for the first time in fifteen years, there were zero Ramsesists.

Five hours later, the municipal authorities awoke to the flock of dismembered idiots in Tahrir Square and began bickering over whose jurisdiction it was to clean that up.

Ramses sat in a café two streets down and lit his first cigarette ever. With luck, They had forgotten all about him for good. Ramses was not through with those hamsters.

And of Ramses, we shall say no more.

\* \* \*

They could have saved themselves, and in so many small ways. They could have stopped playing banjo, or they could have graduated to more respectable instruments. They could have soundproofed their recording studios or their starships, but they didn't. They could have given God and his angels ear plugs, but they didn't do that either.

Instead they just wrote songs about how they could have saved themselves. And sang them to the accompaniment of banjoes.

They were like moths, and the banjo was their candle. They couldn't help it, and for this there would be no forgiveness.

## Chapter 9

: Epilogue

Into a limbo large and broad, since called The Paradise of Fools, to few unknown.

John Milton - Paradise Lost

The president of the Association of Conglomerated Unions to Consolidate in the Name of Ramsesism materialised in a puff of acrid black smoke. Slightly disoriented, he looked about himself. "What's this then? "

"Look, who is the incompetent fool who left his scythe lodged in my left eye for TWO HOURS? It took me TWO HOURS to bleed to death." Wendell was pissed off. The president of the Association of Conglomerated Unions to Consolidate in the Name of Ramsesism tapped Wendell on his shoulder. "What? " The president of the United Ramsesists for the Betterment of Ramsesism and the Further Ramsesification of Ramsesism gestured about himself.

"What is this place? " Wendell rubbed his eyeball.

"That is precisely what I was asking."

"Didn't that prophet guy say we were going to Heaven? WHAT IS THIS PLACE? "

\* \* \*

Rupert looked about with a startling lack of enthusiasm; he didn't like what they had done with Purgatory. Too gaudy; one doesn't torture sinning souls with bright colours and cheery decor pieces like this. Rupert picked up an injection-molded bust of Jane Austen.

And serving freshly squeezed mango juice in lieu of fetid rabbit stew; Rupert admonished the angels. Were they trying to sabotage Purgatory? No, first of all all of these red-tinted lamps would have to go; neon was harsh on the eyes, and it was cheaper too. And look at that - what is that? A Spanish-speaking bush[Wazzamatta joo khomo, joo afreeda sam booshies? Joo no good for nosing oster zan keeseen God ass?]? No no no NO! Rupert waved his arms about in frustration. This place needed more edge. It needed that special swagger. Purgatory needed attitude; it had to stand up and say 'I am the last place you want to spend eternity in'. Purgatory needed lava lamps and fourteen inch television sets showing dance hits that went out of fashion last decade; but not the decade before that. Purgatory needed that smell of cheap cologne. Purgatory needed those nice wicker chairs with frayed cushions; horrible to look at, but very comfortable. What this place really needed, Rupert declared, was sidewalk caf  s with tablecloths which contrasted with the handwoven fabric of the napkins. Break dancing classes would also do wonders for the place. Oh, Purgatory would be horrible once he was done with it, Rupert assured the angels.

Rupert certainly seemed to be well-connected[One could almost say he was connected up his arse, but with male interior decorators that is almost always so literally true it would make this expression ashamed of itself.]; he was given charge of Heaven and Hell too.

And all of this on the very eve of the Ramsesists' group suicide.

\* \* \*

"Oh Lord, new-comers."

Three more Ramsesists materialized in puffs of acrid black smoke; there was no wind, and it was really beginning to stink something awful from all of the materializations.

It was not only wind which there was none of; there was none of a lot of other things in this strange place. In fact, the only thing there seemed to be a surfeit of was women with big tits.

"Roger look, that one is so fat it almost looks as if she has sprouted a third boob under her two other ones..." Martha Fugler-Wolfird pointed.

"Where? " Roger Andersson asked.

"Right over there - oh wait, she is right behind that cloud of black smoke - oh here she is, see her? "

Someone sneezed and muttered something about an allergy to boob sweat and Russian income tax forms. Martha pointed.

"What, the girl beside the balding young fellow with the goatee? " Martha nodded.

\* \* \*

Recall if you will that existence is fundamentally well-designed[Oh come now, let's pretend, alright?]. When you die, you go to Heaven or you go to Hell. When neither exists yet, you don't just drop out and unexist; you default to Limbo. And in Limbo, you have plenty of time to reflect how nice it would have been to just have ceased to exist.

But that is not what life is about; it is not about you and your wishes. It is about something else entirely; and what that is is not your business. And it was no longer anyone's business, for that matter. This experiment had been useful; God had learnt much about multiverse design. Enough, in any case, to know that the next multiverse He would design would not pivot around the opposition and complementarity of good and evil. That simply did not work. It made people stupid, for some odd reason.

No, in the next multiverse there would be no good and no evil. In the next multiverse, there would instead be brown and fuchsia. There would be acts of fuchsia and acts of brown; the forces of fuchsia would generally get along with the armies of brown. People would contain equal measures of brown and fuchsia, and religions would propel people to be more fuchsia. Or was it brown? Good, confusion was good; this new multiverse would be a good one.

And with one final good-bye present to his subjects loitering about Limbo, He went away to start all over again.

\* \* \*

Limbo wasn't very pleasant.

There clearly wasn't much to say for it either, other than the fact that it was an infinite[Really.] featureless plain. Populated by a lot of people who were either dumb, dead, had large tits, or any combination of those.

A little way off, someone discovered a sign of divine mercy upon the souls in Limbo: God had left them a video game with which to amuse themselves. There was much praising of the Lord until someone raised the question of whom got which turns on it; a salient question given the multi-billion population in Limbo.

And of course, there was no electric outlet to plug it in.

Many aeons passed before the occupants of Limbo discovered the little girl's gift. With the power cord of the arcade machine plugged into her butt, all they had to do was to frighten her and the arcade machine would power up briefly. Youngsters, of course, jade easily; it was never easy to keep her scared for long enough to complete a level (though most tales featuring misplaced cruise ships were a good bet).

Miranda-Ballbearing Wolfird had finally found acceptance.

And of the child with the electrical anus we shall say no more.

\* \* \*

There was no escape from a universe - nay, a multiverse bent upon their destruction. They would never find out why this was so, if indeed there was any reason to begin with. There would never be a time for rest, not even in death.

For they were reincarnated as hamsters.

And of the banjo players, we shall say no more. Almost.

\* \* \*

It was an odd sort of video game.

For one thing, turns didn't seem to end so much as just whine to an inconclusive and uninspiring stop, invariably involving what looked like a splatter of entrails (though the resolution was high enough that - seen closely - the entrails looked like colored strands of newspaper).

Turns began without form or any clear set of rules, but wiggling about furiously and randomly on the controls eventually resulted in some form of gameplay structure emerging like a patricidal groundhog on the second day of autumn.

There were a lot of little dots, and we mean a lot, though they usually started out as two. No one could figure out if they were expected to encourage or prevent the inevitable squabbles which erupted between the different factions of inconsequential and innumerable dots, but it didn't seem to make any difference to the score.

Ah, the score. The score was displayed discreetly at the top right-hand corner of the screen, and it seemed stuck at 14. It was rumored that one young fellow had scored fifteen at one point, but since he had been asleep at the controls at the time it could not be verified.

A subset of the dots tended to cluster together and make awful banjo-playing sounds. These annoyed the Ramsesists terribly and were dealt with quite severely.

In the advanced stages, the better players could unlock secret levels where there were fewer dots but with bigger tits. And Italian sports cars.

No one ever got past the bonus stage where the player could give the dots a video game machine. But whenever the game whimpered to an end at this stage, it would spit out a transcribed and printed replay of the ended turn, always agreeably titled "The Banjo Players Must Die".

The End



## About this book

I began writing this book sometime around the stone age, and if you have plodded through the whole thing to get to this bit, you will observe that it is a botched, half-baked and entirely disorganized mass of poorly thought out ideas which hardly have any connection to one another. Which probably means I am done with it.

This book started life as a short story which I wrote in the summer of '96 or '97, which was probably around 50 thousand words less than this book is, and - by a wild coincidence - probably also 50 thousand times better.

I could not afford very many monkeys and typewriters while writing this book, but this was always expected to be a low budget production. In an attempt to obscure the manifest lack of any quality or plot, the cast of this book is legion and they have been instructed to fidget a lot to distract the reader.

I kept on dropping this book and coming back to it. Sequence was shown the utmost contempt (and a middle finger), and as a consequence it was probably more difficult to clean up than it was to write. Yes, it has already been cleaned up. Really. No, I won't clean it up again. No, I don't care if you think it's still sloppy.

So where does all that hostility come from[My PR team is on vacation and I am out of meds; go on, push me again. I dare you.]? What did anyone ever do to me that I would write them into such adversity and such devastatingly degenerate fiction[Sometimes, it was so small a thing as asking too many questions.]? What is the meaning of all of this[I can tell you haven't been paying very much attention.]? Am I advocating hamster sex[Nope.]? Blasphemy[Stop asking me difficult questions while I am busy carving pumpkins.]? Should I be committed to an institution, or if I am in one should I be kicked out[Yes.]? And what's with all the footnotes[You just hate me because I am beautiful.]?

I didn't really plan this book, so I don't think there is a specific and rigid set of messages which can be distilled. I think it might on some level be about happiness[Hamsters excluded.]. A big complex world is frightening; if everyone in it is an imbecile, the comfort level rises. How evil can a book be if it makes you smile?

The people whom I have told about the book probably think by now that it is a figment of my imagination. But here it is, proving to them that the truth is far more terrible than they had suspected; my imagination excretes hamster sex and dead angelic goats, not fictitious books.

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I am taking this approach for the release of my first novel for one big reason: I am essentially lazy and irritable. New authors are treated worse than hamsters at the hands of literary agents and publishing houses. I have written a book, why should I waste my time tailoring my book proposal to an agent who has a section on their website dedicated to alerting would-be authors to "what pisses him off"? Why should I have to tailor a synopsis for each agent? A one page synopsis, a ten page extract, the first and the last chapter, a one page paper on what books mine will compete against, a bio, a statement of motivation, a blueprint for a perpetual motion machine. That isn't what I do; I write silly stories. I lost patience rather quickly with the established way of getting a book out there, and I chose myself an open license for this work.

And here you are now, reading my book. Isn't it all marvelous?

Josef Assad

April 2007

thebanjoplayersmustdie@gmail.com

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