Fall from Grace

A novel by Nathan Hohipuha

New Beginnings

The heavens opened.

It was as if a dam somewhere high overhead had burst. Exploding from the sky, a snarling beast suddenly freed from its cage, the mighty wave of blue surged forward, foaming at the jaws, howling in exuberance and clawing at imagined restraints in its eagerness to reach its destination… but then something changed.

An unnatural, calming silence settled over the cowering planet below, its invisible tendrils snaking upwards to include the frenzied wave in its gentle, yet relentless, grip. Gradually, inexorably, time slowed down until even the great blue beast, snarling its defiance, ground to a halt mid-way between the dark, dirty-looking clouds above and their gleaming steel and metal counterparts below. It was in this eerie, timeless calm that Abimael found himself gazing upon the uncomprehending faces of the people clustered around the buildings that towered over them, eyes turned skyward in silent contemplation of the impending onslaught.

He saw the father, concern for his family etched into the lines of his face; the mother, lips working soundlessly as she uttered a silent prayer to the heavens; the child trembling in his mother’s arms, too young to understand what was happening but no longer young enough to find refuge in the blissful ignorance of infancy. He saw the poor, homeless, street dwellers, dirty faces peeking out from behind stained blankets and torn cardboard boxes, their eyes reflecting an uneasy mixture of fear and relief at the thought that salvation had finally come to end the torment of their everyday existence. He saw the men and women of power, dressed in suits and surrounded by the myriad electronic tools of their trade, standing at their windows, hands on hips, defiantly surveying the silence of the planet before the downpour was to arrive in all its punishing glory.

These and a hundred other faces and pairs of eyes Abimael looked upon and into in those precious, final few seconds while the downpour hung suspended in the sky, ominously looming over the Earth like a spectre about to deliver an other-worldly justice. The entire planet lay wrapped in an unnerving silence, not a whisper or squeak, not even a rustling of leaves could be heard. This deafening hush descended over everyone and everything as if they had all arrived together and their whole lives had been leading to this one moment, for this one purpose. And so it was that perhaps for the first time in the planet’s history, all living things, large and small, were reduced to a single instance of a single thought in a single moment. Together… finally… but too late…

Without warning, those invisible fingers that had just united the planet, relaxed their grip, setting their spellbound captors free. The torrent, now even more enraged at the artificial delay that had been imposed on it, drove itself forward with renewed fervour, desperate to make up the lost time. As the deluge tasted the soaring heights of the tallest skyscrapers these arrogant creatures had erected in their own name, the ominous rumbling grew to fever pitch.

Abimael looked on helplessly from his privileged perspective, both completely immersed in the events unfolding around him but at the same time somehow strangely removed, an uninvited presence eavesdropping on a world he knew he shouldn’t be a part of. He watched and waited for the inevitable.

With a satisfying crash, the opening lip of the storm barrelled into the stricken planet below with such force that streets were destroyed and buildings torn apart in their meeting, lightening-laced fingers ripped into the concrete flesh and metal bones of the unfeeling and unmoving giants of the planet. In the dying seconds before the first razor-edged wave sawed into the earth all who were unfortunate enough to behold it knew that they would not see the end of this storm…

Sitting bolt upright in bed, sweat drenching his whole body as if he had been caught in the downpour of his dreams, Abimael looked around with a terrified look in his eyes. His young features were starkly exposed on his pale face. His brown eyes, normally soft and forgiving were filled with despair and fear, and his normally unlined forehead was creased as if he had aged ten years since going to bed. His clean-shaven face matched the brown hair he kept closely trimmed and gave him a professional and reliable look. His wife had often told him that with a face like his he should have been a car salesman.

Thinking of his wife, he looked over to his left. She was sleeping peacefully, unaware of the torment that had just gripped her husband. He could see Eshtemoa’s delicate features outlined in the pale moonlight shining through their bedroom window. He watched the covers as they rose and fell, letting the steady, rhythmic sound of her breathing calm him.

Her beauty was reflected in their first-born son. His eyes flicked to the cot in the corner of their room. In between the bars he could see the soft lump underneath the blankets that testified to the presence of young Benhail. In his mind’s eye, he unwillingly saw the eyes of the father in his dream and for a moment, looking through those eyes, he felt the anguish that he was certain would befall millions of families just like his.

He remembered the dialogue that had accompanied the terrifying images of his internal vision. It was burned into his mind and even if he had wanted to ignore it, he knew he couldn’t. The deep, commanding voice had boomed like thunder in his head.

*“Abimael, my son, in whom I am well pleased. You have been chosen. All that you see will come to pass before your son sees his second birthday. A cleansing purge is needed and all will perish except the worthy. You need not fear for yourself or your family. First, you will build a great ship…”*

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Abimael surveyed the ocean before him from a window near the bow of his ship. The past two years had flown by in a haze as if it had all been a dream and he the protagonist of this surreal dreamscape. As a trained carpenter and stone mason, building his ship had been possible, albeit difficult, but it would have remained nothing more than a hunk of timber and a bright idea if it hadn’t been for the tremendous support he had miraculously received just when he needed it. Everything had come together so seamlessly. Anticipated problems failed to surface and chance had favoured everything he tried to do. It was as if Lady Luck herself had a vested interest in the outcome and wasn’t averse to stacking the deck at key moments in the game.

And then the rains came…

It had rained continuously for more than a month and been completely unremitting in its intensity the whole of that time. Night and day had passed virtually unnoticed except for a slight lessening of the dark during what their clocks and calendars told them were the daylight hours. It was the only feeble indication they had that the entire universe hadn’t been submerged in water and they clung to it like the driftwood they saw float past their ship every day. Only this was not the normal kind of driftwood a sailor might expect to see. Floating testaments to the proud, some would say arrogant, civilisation that had been flourishing less than a year ago frequently bobbed past the ship; building beams, roofs, parts that could be identifiable as once having belonged to cars or machinery… all ruins of an era now relegated to history.

Abimael looked up through the rain at the dark clouds roiling above in the sky. Somewhere high above the clouds and the water, a sun was still burning, not noticing or not caring that its rays only barely managed to pierce the dark wall that separated them from it. He wondered if they would ever be reunited again. He hadn’t realised just how precious the sun’s light was until he had been deprived of it for months on end.

Even though he had been warned of the calamity, he still felt uneasy and depressed. He had had no more prophetic dreams since that night almost two years ago and it was beginning to look as if they had been cast adrift in an uncaring and very wet world. Each of the two hundred or so people who had joined him and his family looked to him to do or say something, but he had no idea what those things should be. He was supposed to be their leader, that much was clear, but in truth he had no idea where he was leading them.

He held his hand out of the window, palm up, and watched as the tiny drops splashed harmlessly against it. *Both our salvation and our destruction*, he thought. “Can this really be Your plan?” he whispered to no one in particular. “What am I doing out here?”

“Safeguarding the future of humanity, my husband,” the gentle voice of Eshtemoa answered as she sat down next to him. “Do not be so quick to doubt yourself.”

Abimael’s eyes never lost that faraway, haunted look as he spoke without turning around. “I see their eyes, my wife. All of them. Whenever I close mine. They look to me for answers, for guidance… but what can I say? I had a dream two years ago?” He shook his head. “I can’t be responsible for all of them. It’s too much. I don’t know anything more than anyone else on this ship. They want me to be a leader but the truth is I’m the biggest follower of all… and the worst thing is… I’m just following a dream.”

Eshtemoa stroked her husband’s hair and turned his head so he was looking directly into her eyes. “All leaders follow their dreams, their *vision*. That’s what makes them leaders.”

“I’m not a leader. Look around us. I’ve just condemned us to a slower, drawn-out death. Maybe it would have been better to have drowned with the rest of the planet.”

Eshtemoa shook her head. “The Lord spoke to you,” she insisted.

“Did He? Or did I just have a dream – a dream about what I wanted to believe – that I had been chosen, that I was destined for something… something special? Classic delusions of grandeur,” he grinned wryly.

“Have faith, my husband. If you can’t believe in yourself yet, at least believe in the Lord’s choice.”

“Everything just happened so… easily,” Abimael continued as if he hadn’t heard his wife. “I got swept up by the tasks and… well, there was no time to really think about it… until now.” He looked back at Eshtemoa. “I don’t even *want* to be a leader,” he confessed. “What kind of a leader says that?”

His wife smiled in that knowing way that only wives could pull off. “That is why He chose you. It’s why Benhail and I follow you – well, it’s why *I* follow you; Benhail’s just going along with the crowd…” Eshtemoa’s joke earned her a slight relaxing of the muscles around her husband’s eyes and mouth, “...but it’s also why everyone else chose to follow you. You never wanted to be a leader, you never desired power; and that makes you the best person to have it.”

Abimael remained silent, perhaps contemplating what his wife had said before she continued, “Leadership is no light burden, but we believe in you. You must believe in yourself.” Eshtemoa stood, kissed her husband on the forehead, and left him to work through his thoughts.

He looked back out over the blue expanse surrounding his ship. He let the rocking motion of the boat lull him into a depressed reverie as the gentle rising and falling of the ever-present waves held his eyes in a hypnotic embrace. He thought he could hear someone whispering his name. It sounded like someone shouting at him but from such a distance that by the time the sound reached his ears it had been reduced to nothing more than a whisper, almost drowned out by the steady pattering of the rain all around. He couldn’t be sure… but… it seemed like that pattering was now slowly fading into the background. In fact, not just the sound of the rain but his vision also seemed to be teetering on the brink of disappearing altogether. It was as if he was looking into a pool and the image reflected back at him was being disturbed by ripples which threatened to overwhelm and collapse it entirely.

Then suddenly, as if he had just breached a wall in his perception, he could no longer hear the rain or see the ship. Intense clarity greeted all of his senses. He saw a light shining so brightly that he had to shield his eyes and heard singing so beautiful it immediately brought tears to his eyes. His body tingled all over with feeling. It was then that he felt the presence behind the Light, or maybe it was the Light itself...

“YOU HAVE DONE WELL,” the voice intoned in his mind. The words appeared to the startled man like thoughts; thoughts he wasn’t the source of. Stunned and awed, Abimael dropped to his knees and prostrated himself before the Light, eyes tightly closed.

“Do not fear, My child. We are never far away and you are never alone. You are being watched and protected.”

The voice paused as if waiting for something and Abimael gathered as much courage as he could before raising his head off the floor just a little, just enough that his mouth was off the ground. “My Lord,” he mumbled as deferentially as he possibly could, sweat breaking out on his forehead, a tiny reminder of the downpour that was presently lashing his ship somewhere far, far away.

“My child,” the voice replied. “I hear doubt in your voice and feel uncertainty in your heart. You do not know Me.” It was a statement, not a question.

Abimael struggled for words, unsure what he was expected to say. He opened his mouth to beg forgiveness for his ignorance but was cut short.

“Have you been lost so long that you no longer know your Creator? I am the first breath a new born infant takes and the last gasp of a dying man. I was before the first moment and I will be long after the last moment. I am the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. I am more than you could possibly imagine. Know Me and fear Me, for I am the Lord, your God.” That last word hung in Abimael’s mind like the triumphant final note of a symphony. It spoke of the unlimited power to create wonders undreamed of by man… but it also spoke of a terrible wrath capable of unparalleled destruction.

Abimael kept his head down and tried to control the shaking that gripped him. He had never been so afraid in all of his life. “You are wise to be fearful of Me, My son. Your ancestors used to call themselves ‘God-fearing’ and they wore that badge with pride. Much has changed since those days but I see goodness in your heart and for that reason I have spared you. Resist temptation and sin and I will be the unmoving shelter beneath which the worst of storms will pass you by as no more than gentle breezes on a warm summer’s day. This purge which I have visited upon you and your fellow travellers will cease in five days and five nights. You will remain at sea for another year until you see my sign – it is then that you will know you may return to land. Now, arise my child and carry this message to your companions that they may know the might of their Lord and also the relief that I have promised you.”

As those last words faded in Abimael’s mind he felt the shimmering take place around him once more as one world was about to be replaced by another. With a curious feeling, something like being sucked backwards through the same veil he had only just moments ago penetrated, Abimael found himself gazing out over the ocean from his window and listening to the constant drumming of the rain falling above his head. With a renewed spirit, he stood up and offered a quick prayer of thanks to his Lord before heading up the stairs to the massive dining area where he would address all of his ship’s inhabitants. As he walked with brisk, purposeful steps, he reflected on the fact that he still didn’t feel the way he imagined a leader ought to feel. He still felt unworthy of the responsibility. *There* must *be others more suitable to lead*. But now this doubt was tempered by another one; the Lord had chosen him... and that was enough, for now at least. He had a job to finish!

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It had been a year since Abimael’s vision. Life had been much more pleasant since the rain had stopped. The clouds still hadn’t broken but light had returned to the planet and once more there was difference between day and night. The reluctant seafarers kept a close watch for any sign of land, anything to give them an indication that the water level was dropping, but for all they could tell, they could be over the middle of a continent or the deepest parts of what used to be oceans. They didn’t even know what the land beneath looked like anymore. The flood had been more terrible than anyone could have imagined and the rain had lashed the planet relentlessly. Some onboard claimed to have heard a deep rumbling coming not from the sky but from the earth in the days and weeks after the initial onslaught. It was widely believed that this had been the sound of earthquakes re-sculpting a land they had lost the right to call home. Even without Abimael’s vision, there could be no doubt that this was punishment for the sins of the human race and a chance for them to restart with a fresh slate.

Abimael had gotten over his surprise and much of his disbelief at having been chosen by God to be His human representative on Earth and by now had embraced the task with vigour and passion. He felt humbled and awed to have actually been in the Divine presence of his Lord’s Light and to have borne witness to the singing of the Angels. After he relayed his experience to the others who had been led to him before the flood, the looks of joy and gratitude on their faces had made the terrifyingly ecstatic experience of being in the presence of God in Heaven all worth it.

He stood at the bow of his ship looking far into the horizon and offered a small prayer to his Lord before getting ready to head down for the morning meal. As he lifted his head and opened his eyes, he raised his hands to shield them from the sun and… *wait a minute*… *the sun*? Lowering his hands, he looked up and felt the warm rays of the sun upon his face for the first time in more than a year.

At first he couldn’t register what was happening. His mind refused to process the information. It was like meeting an old friend after years of separation and enduring the uncomfortable and confused silence as both parties try to think of something to say. Speechless, he just stared up into the clouds where a sliver of sunlight had slipped through like a hot knife slicing through the black rock which covered the heavens. The ray of sunlight fell directly onto Abimael, creating a glowing aura which surrounded him like a spotlight falling on the hero at the climax of a play. A tear slid down his sun-warmed cheek and into his beard. He raised his staff and cried aloud, “Thank you, my Lord!”

It took only seconds for the first of his followers to emerge from below and when they did they were greeted with a sight that none of them would ever forget for the rest of their days. Their Divinely-chosen leader, standing proudly erect at the head of the ship they had built under his guidance, surrounded by a glowing nimbus of golden light. Some would even later say that they had seen a halo shining over his head.

Among the first to surface above deck was Abimael’s wife, holding the hand of their son. After they took in the situation, they bowed down at the foot of their husband and father, setting an example the others followed as they too emerged. Before long, the entire group, two hundred strong, had thronged to the deck and were lying prostrate before their revered leader. Some of the massed were crying, tears of joy streaming down their faces. Others had their heads bowed in reverential silence. All were praying and all felt blessed, for this truly was a day for blessings.

Abimael raised his hand with his finger outstretched, pointing somewhere over the vast ocean which stretched in front of his ship like a lazily undulating behemoth smothering the planet. His followers lifted their heads, straining to see what was out there. At first no one saw anything, then one by one, they began to spy movement against the ever-present blue background. It was white and there was a consistency to it that differentiated it from the random, rolling motion of the massive body of water. It looked like… flapping.

Some cheered when they realised what it was but as the white dove drew closer their cries were gradually replaced by a hushed silence. The crew eagerly awaited their leader’s pronouncement. When the dove alighted on Abimael’s finger, he whispered reverentially to himself, “The sign.”

He turned slowly to face the people gathered before him, the people he had led to salvation, the people who trusted his judgement and believed in him… *his* people. “As it was told to me by our Father, our Lord, almighty God, so it has come to pass. This day marks the end of our long voyage and there…” he raised his other hand out over the ship’s bow, “…lies our destination.”

Once more everyone turned to look where Abimael pointed and at the far end of the horizon they could just make out a trace of green shimmering like a mirage in the expansive blue of the ocean desert they had wandered for such a long time.

“The time of our Lord has come once again and this time let us not forget what that means. Let us not repeat the mistakes of our forefathers. This time we will remember!” Abimael promised to the gathered masses at his feet. As he delivered his speech, he remembered how they had approached him those long months ago, all from different backgrounds, all from different places, but all responding to dreams that had told them to look for him, Abimael, and follow wherever he saw fit to lead them. Like a beacon, Abimael’s light had shone out over the land drawing to him all those who had been chosen, and like hesitant moths to an uncertain flame they had come. While the rest of the world had carried on oblivious to the warning signs – the wars, the natural disasters, the feeling of unease… no, *dis-*ease on the planet – he and those few selected had begun the work of a lifetime, work which had brought them all to this point; right here, right now.

“We will not make the same mistakes again, my Lord,” Abimael vowed to his God. And he almost convinced himself it was true.

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The ship eventually drifted onto the grassy beach like a lumbering whale. Abimael’s people disembarked quickly, as if afraid that if they didn’t take this chance to free themselves from their wooden prison and flee their watery captor, they might lose it on the next outgoing wave that rushed past the boat’s bow.

It was indeed a scene to behold and if anything like this had happened only eighteen months ago they would all have been committed. Everyone, adult and child alike, was laughing hysterically and running around on the still wet grass, grabbing tufts of it in their hands, feeling it beneath and between their toes, some even tasted it to make absolutely certain it was real. *It has been such a long time for them, for all of us*, Abimael thought. *How long,* he wondered sombrely, *how long before we began taking it all for granted once more?*

The man chosen by God raised his eyes to look over the island they had landed on. A large hill rose up inland not far from the shore and as he looked in that direction, he noticed a glowing, white cloud gracefully descending from the sky. Flashes of lightning could be seen around its outskirts and in total it must have been over one hundred metres long and fifty high. As Abimael looked on, it majestically settled on top of the hill and, covering the entire summit, merely sat as if knowing that he would inevitably be drawn to it, as all of his people were once drawn to him.

Without a word, he disembarked from the ship and made his way across the makeshift beach, his eyes never leaving the cloud that held him spellbound and single-minded in his purpose. As he threaded through the throng on the land, those in his vicinity noticed their leader’s direction and dutifully fell into line behind him, chanting a hymn Abimael himself had composed immediately after his revelation on the ship:

*Oh, Hallowed One*

*We stand before You in obeisance.*

*Your glory and Your power*

*Reflect onto us.*

*Light us in Your magnificence.*

*The one Creator, our only Lord*

*Forever and always.*

The hymn was sung with a sonorous, tonal quality that conveyed a humble respect of, and simple praise for, the Creator. Eyes turned down, each followed the person in front and by the time everyone had joined the procession they had ordered themselves according to their gender and their age. Men came first, oldest to youngest; women followed, each woman leading her children, oldest woman to youngest, so that the last female was the youngest female adult in the group. With no children to follow her, she marked the rear of the orderly, formal march.

And so it was that this long procession wound its way through the surrounding bushes and over the still damp earth until they reached the bottom of the hill. The cloud had not moved since settling on the summit. It just hung there as if taking pleasure in the procession beneath it, waiting for them to finish the final words of their worship.

“ABIMAEL, MY SON, MY CHOSEN ONE ABOVE ALL OTHERS. YOU ALONE SHALL PROCEED,” a deep voice boomed out over the group. “My other children, chosen you are also, but it is not proper for all to come into the presence of the Lord. This is My decree and I charge you to hold your faces and eyes turned down in reverence for your Lord God, until your leader returns to you.”

As Abimael squeezed his wife’s hand and began the march up the hill he broke his gaze from the cloud for the first time since seeing it and cast one last glance at his followers. They had spread out at the base of the hill forming pockets of faithful all around. Some were fervently praying to themselves, others were supplicating on the ground while others were standing motionless in the dirt as if they had been turned to stone on the spot at hearing the voice of their Lord. His own wife and child were uttering the Lord’s Hymn he had taught them. With their faces turned down and eyes tightly closed, he realised how little he could see of them from that position. He had heard it said that the eyes were the windows to the soul and the face the canvas the soul painted on. He now understood that saying as he looked at his friends and family without the benefit of those windows and saw no more than empty shells in human form. They looked like the people he knew on the outside, but that was all. There was no substance, no essence supporting that form. He thanked the Lord for creating the entry and exit points on the face for the soul’s light to shine through. Life would be unbearably lonely and pointless without those windows.

Steeling himself, he turned and continued on to his meeting with the Creator. This close, the cloud looked no clearer than it had from afar; fuzzy and indistinct around the edges, lightning-like flashes flickering occasionally just beyond the opaque core where he was headed. Fighting the urge to turn around and flee from this great unknown, Abimael tried to thrust all of his doubts from his mind and focus on his gratitude and reverence for his Lord whose mercy and compassion he could trust in to guide him through this experience unscathed. If anyone had looked up from the base of the hill at that moment they would have seen Abimael’s flowing, brown robe fading into the white insubstantial emptiness halfway up the hill as if he was being silently, and wilfully, swallowed up by a gaping white maw.

The instant the cloud engulfed Abimael he was almost completely blind. It was thicker than he could have imagined and the change in visibility was almost instantaneous. It was more like he had walked into a semi-solid substance rather than the typical vapour of a cloud. He also noticed that the temperature hadn’t changed and there was no sense of moisture. As if he hadn’t known it already, this was clearly no ordinary cloud.

He focused on placing one foot in front of the other and even closed his eyes, placing his trust in the Lord to keep him safe. He found it better than trying to vainly look through the fog and it helped reduce his panic which had been close to overflowing when all he could perceive was white all around. The sensory deprivation the unnatural fog induced in him warped his sense of the passage of time and so Abimael found himself climbing for what seemed like hours before that familiar, commanding voice he had heard once before intoned directly in his mind, “That is far enough, My son.”

Abimael threw himself to the ground immediately, squeezing his eyes shut even more tightly. He felt an uncontrollable trembling come over his body as he bowed before his Lord for the second time in his life. “My Lord,” he said. “Blessed be Thy name.”

Abimael felt an aura of peace and joy wash over him. It wasn’t unlike standing before an open flame, only instead of radiant heat stimulating the nerve endings in his skin, the radiant energy appeared to stimulate his emotions. At some level he was aware that this arousal of his emotions was the result of the essence of his body coming into sympathetic resonance with the energy of the Lord’s projected aura. In a curious blend of opposites, Abimael found himself basking in the Glory of his Lord even as a profound sense of fear and trembling gripped his soul.

“You have done all I have asked, My child. Know and rejoice that I have found favour with you. Your heart is noble and your soul is pure. For this I honour you and your blessings will be many.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Abimael mumbled into the ground.

There was a slight pause and Abimael began to wonder if the Lord was waiting for something. A sudden terror struck him. Perhaps he had done something wrong. Perhaps he hadn’t done something he should have. He opened his mouth to apologise… and then the Lord spoke. “Tell me. Have you not had cause to wonder why I sent forth this deluge and destroyed so many innocent people? Has your heart not once known doubt over My Plan?”

A sudden sweat broke out on Abimael’s forehead. “No, my Lord. Never.” The words fell out of his mouth as if he couldn’t get them out fast enough. “It is not for humans to question Divine Will.”

That pause again.

Abimael felt his heart pounding against his chest as if it was trying to burst through his rib cage. His breathing was coming in ragged gasps and he was having trouble filling his lungs on his inhalations and emptying them on his exhalations. The ground began spinning underneath him and Abimael felt his sense of balance follow it.

“Well said,” the voice resonated in Abimael’s skull. “Indeed, you are correct that it is not for the human to question the Divine, but this answer still reflects a fundamental flaw in your understanding of Me; an error it is important I correct. Imagine that a wicked individual, mired in sin, were to question my decision to flood the planet. He might point to some human ethical theory which forbids murder, point to the flood and then accuse Me of murder, that is, wrongdoing. How might one respond to such an individual?”

Abimael felt himself once more thrown to the lions and forced to fight his way out. “Umm, I would say that he can’t possibly know that the deaths in the flood amount to murder. If… umm, if *You* sent the flood then there must have been a good reason for it, even if to human eyes there doesn’t appear to be one. And if there’s a reason, it can’t then be called murder. Rather, we should call it ‘Justice’.”

Abimael felt a wave of… satisfaction roll over him. “Just so,” the Lord said approvingly. “And yet we can do better than this. Does nothing else strike you as mistaken in this account? Think of this ethical theory My would-be accuser avails himself of to cast judgement on Divinity.”

*Ethical theory?* Abimael fought to keep from panicking. *I’m no philosopher. What do I know of ethics?*

The Lord’s thoughts overruled his as the voice of Divinity filled Abimael’s mind once more. “Fear not, My son. You may think and speak freely. This is not a test. I am merely trying to educate you that through you, those you lead may in turn be brought into the Light. Think not of ethical theory. I am not concerned with sophistry and argumentation. Consider this; is it fitting to bring *Me* under your ethical proscriptions?”

“Impossible, my Lord!” he replied with more vehemence than he intended, spitting on the ground in his outrage at the mere thought. He breathed… and thought. And then something clicked in Abimael’s mind. “I think I understand,” he almost whispered. “Divinity cannot be subsumed under human categories of right and wrong. You stand outside… no, *beyond* our ethical systems. You *transcend* them,” he declared happily.

“Very good. Another important insight. However, you continue to skirt the Truth. Your error lies in continuing to think of Me in human terms. Human acts can be compared to some standard of right and wrong precisely because you are beholden to something greater than yourselves; a moral code. But what can be greater than the Being nothing greater than which can be imagined? Know this Abimael, My chosen; I am beholden to no one and no thing, including standards of right and wrong. I don’t merely *transcend* morality, I *create* it… through My actions.” The Lord paused to give Abimael time to work through the implications of what he had just heard before His voice boomed in His loyal servant’s head like thunder. “Understand this. Right is right not because there is some Absolute morality in the universe, as some of your *philosophers* have thought and arrogantly claimed can be known without reference to Me, but because it is an Act of God.”

Abimael’s voice seemed petty and insignificant as he carried the thought to its conclusion. “The flood is right because You caused it,” he breathed, understanding illuminating his mind.

“Just so,” was all the Lord said. “Take this and the other Truths I and My Angels will impart to you and teach them to your followers that the mistakes of your generation may never be repeated. This is no task to be taken lightly. Of all My children, upon you, falls the greatest burden, for the future of humanity rests in your hands.” The Lord paused as if weighing Abimael for the appointed task. “Know this too, Abimael. I can be your be your salvation, your rock, or I can be your doom. As it was with those who came before you, I have given you the choice, the *freedom* to experience Me in either of those roles, Saviour or Destroyer.” The intensity of the Lord’s radiance increased as a sudden surge of anger poured over him. “My Precepts are simple, My demands easily met, but I will not tolerate failure to keep them.” Frightened, Abimael nodded in dim understanding and meek obedience as his Lord continued His monologue.

“Step forward, loyal Abimael and receive My Nine Precepts. Hear Me well…”

At the base of the hill, a younger man, wondering what could be taking so long and perhaps feeling a little affronted at the fact that Abimael was being given such preferential treatment over the rest of them, decided to risk a quick glance up the hill to see if there was any change in the situation. All was as it had been an hour ago, when they had first heard the voice of their Lord commanding them to remain where they were and bidding Abimael onwards. *That’s not so bad; I haven’t been struck down where I stand,* the youth thought, relaxing a little. For some inexplicable reason the thought of a calf statue made of solid gold suddenly popped into his head. He flinched in surprise at the unexpected image.

Then, just as suddenly, his field of vision spontaneously narrowed and in the mist, he saw two terrible, great eyes boring into his, stripping away the layers that covered his soul until he felt himself reduced to a tiny, insignificant speck of nothingness in the vast cosmos. The eyes grew larger until they filled his field of vision and even when he turned his head he couldn’t escape their piercing, accusing gaze. His own dark brown eyes widened at the realisation of what was about to happen and he opened his mouth to scream when suddenly, in a flash of lightening and a proclamation that came from the very air around the gathered people, “THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS TO THOSE WHO BETRAY ME!”, a searing tongue of flame engulfed the youth in a blast so hot that it instantly vaporised him and left scorch marks on the garments of those standing nearby. Those few who had been nearest to him bowed lower to the ground and uttered their prayers louder and faster as if through prayer they could appease the source of the violence that had just been aimed into their midst.

Silence settled once more over the newly terrified group, even the children dared not cry, and with parents’ hands clasped tightly over their eyes, they continued to mumble their prayers of supplication as best they could.

One more hour passed for Abimael’s flock before they were rewarded with the presence of their leader once more. He appeared just as he had disappeared earlier, this time in reverse, as if his body just materialised out of the cloud. The transition was so abrupt that the effect seemed almost instant; one second there was nothing and after the blink of an eye, a fully formed Abimael stood on the grass, beneath the cloud.

He paused, and as if it had been waiting for an earlier agreed on cue, the cloud lifted and disappeared into the sky above leaving no trace of its passing except the stone tablet Abimael clutched to his chest like a second child… and a fine sprinkling of ash where a young man had been standing.

“Behold, my friends,” Abimael began, his voice sounding weary and drained as if the ordeal had taken its toll on him. “Look up and rejoice,” he commanded. “For here are our Lord God’s decrees, chiselled in stone, that we may never forget how to honour Him in all His glory.”

Abimael held the tablet up in front of his face and read the Nine Precepts aloud. He dug deep and forced himself to find the strength to issue them in a strong, unwavering voice:

*Precept 1 - I am the One and Only Sovereign Lord*

*Precept 2 - Do not worship false Gods*

*Precept 3 - Love your Lord God above all others*

*Precept 4 - Keep the Holy Rituals*

*Precept 5 - Observe the Holy Law*

*Precept 6 - Do not take anything not your own*

*Precept 7 - Treat others as you would have them treat you*

*Precept 8 - Do not offer falsehoods or attempt to deceive*

*Precept 9 - Remember the accord made this day between you, My people, and Me, your Lord*

“With these commandments,” Abimael continued, his voice growing louder and stronger with each passing moment, as if he was drawing strength from the tablet in his hand, “our Lord has bonded us to Him. Out of His bountiful love and generosity He has granted us a covenant whereby He promises to watch over us and nurture us, His children, in return for our obedience to these few principles for living which ensure that our lives will be joyful and sacred. With this sacred bond to our Lord we need never live in fear again, we need never look over our shoulders or wonder where our next meal will come from. With this bond may we forever walk in the Light of our Lord and never fear the shadows of evil again.” Abimael paused as if individually judging each person below him, assessing their worth for what he had to say. “My family, my friends, my people, let us not repeat the mistakes of our forefathers, and let us not forget the consequences of their blasphemy lest we come adrift and wander down that same path. Let us not forget where that path leads.”

Silence greeted the chosen man as he concluded his speech, the truth of his words stinging like salt poured onto fresh wounds, the soggy ground underfoot and the mammoth ship lying nearby with the sound of the waves breaking over the hull, a powerful reminder driving Abimael’s message home with more impact than a hundred words and a thousand speakers could ever have hoped to achieve.

Abimael turned to ten of the strongest and most able men, “Find stone and wood, as much as you need, and let us construct a temple atop this mountain in honour of our Lord. From this day forth this mountain will be called Mount Areli, the place where the light of our Lord first descended to Earth. Our wandering across the oceans is at an end, my children. We have come home.”

The rest of the day passed by in a blur, Abimael found work for everyone. The women, he had unload the ship and bring ashore all of their collective possessions before preparing fires in anticipation of the evening meal. The men who weren’t working on the temple were beginning simple, preparatory construction for the wooden houses that would be their new homes at the base of the hill. Most of the wood for this was to be taken from the ship which, having served its primary purpose could now be taken apart. It seemed fitting to honour the ship, which had been their home for the better part of two years, by reworking the materials so that it would continue to offer shelter for the next hundred. They would still need the berths and sleeping quarters of the ship for now as the ground was still too wet to begin actual construction of any houses or even to sleep on, but wood could be removed from other areas in preparation for those tasks.

Abimael found employment for every man, woman, and child that afternoon and he himself never stopped moving. At times he almost seemed to be in two or even three places at once; overseeing the construction of the temple which he insisted on being made to very specific dimensions, making sure the boys were going to catch enough fish to bolster the supply for the evening meal, checking the houses were being designed in the correct fashion; he was a key part of everything. He realised that he could have delegated some of these projects to others and he often did so, but still he felt that if this time was to be different he needed to be involved in everything as much as possible… no, he *wanted* to be involved in everything as much as possible. This was no longer about survival, it was about the Lord, everything they did now was a reflection of the Lord and as such it had to be perfect. It was simple in his mind; serve the Lord first and you in turn serve the people. The Divine circle was complete. If one kept one’s eyes turned up towards Heaven then earthly concerns would take care of themselves.

The sun began to set in the West and for the first time in Abimael didn’t know how long, it offered its glorious evening spectacle to him and his people. Work had finally stopped for the day. Everything that could have been completed had been done; enough fish had been caught, preliminary work on the shelters had begun in the area Abimael had designated as the commune… and the waters were steadily receding.

The smell of freshly caught fish floated on the breeze and even though it was Abimael’s four hundred and fiftieth odd meal of fish, it still smelled delicious. *A minor miracle, perhaps*, he thought as he glanced upwards, gratitude filling his heart. The smell reminded him how hungry he was and he suddenly realised that he hadn’t eaten since that morning. Hunger started gnawing at his stomach as if it realised it was finally getting some attention and was now seizing the opportunity to make itself both heard and felt.

*Patience, all good things come to he who waits*.And while he was waiting he couldn’t have asked for a more magnificent vista to behold. The deep blue sky was streaked with reds, oranges, yellows, and a myriad of vibrant shades in between. It was as if the sun was trying to make up for its recent absence and wanted to reassure the weary travellers that it was still as resplendent as ever. Wisps of cloud, fighting against being burned off the steadily darkening sky, sizzled in a mix of deeper shades of red. The rich blue of the sky seemed overwhelmed in the face of the sun’s jubilant and extravagant display.

Ancient civilisations had worshipped the sun and Abimael could see how they had made the mistake but it was not a false belief he was about to fall into. He could see behind the sun’s display and knew who had caused it to be so. When viewed in the light of the Truth, a light which would make even the dazzling sunset seem nothing more than a glowing ember in an almost extinguished fire, it gave the day’s end a new and much more profound meaning. No, this was not the sun showing off, it was the Lord spelling out his satisfaction and approval by doing no less than emblazoning it across the sky in fiery letters that could be read by young and old, literate and illiterate; *I am here, you are not alone, I am your Lord.*

The group watched the sunset as one, each rejoicing silently in their own private way and in their own private thoughts, but all revolving around one central theme; their Lord God. Once the sun had fully set beneath the horizon, the light from several fires around the edge of the commune each took up the torch by marking their warm boundary against the intruding darkness. It was as if a delicate struggle were ensuing between miniature suns constantly pushing outwards while the dark night eagerly pushed inwards trying to exterminate the last of its anathema.

The smell of dinner once more assailed Abimael’s nose and he sat down with his family around the centremost fire with around twenty other members of the group. Each of the small fires suckled ten to twenty of Abimael’s extended family like mothers feeding milk to their young. The fires had been lit in a broad semicircle around the edge of the plot where the houses would be built; penning them in against the hill which rose behind them and delineating the border of what would be their village.

It was a happy meal and the mood of the group as a whole was positive and hopeful. The rains had stopped, the waters were receding, they had made their way to land and they had the blessing of their Lord. There was now a promising future in front of them; life could begin once more.

After the meal some people headed back to the ship and their beds but most of the group, especially the younger ones, hovered around the fires, relishing the feel of being outdoors again. There were no insects or birds around to chirp any night-time melodies but there was still a distinct terrestrial quality to the ‘sound’ of the land which cleansed their spirits. Abimael realised it was the sound of openness, a stark contrast to the sound of water sloshing which had previously dominated their lives, and one he had never noticed before. The breeze, gently blowing across the plain, caressing his skin like a parent blowing on the wounds of a child, carried scents that seemed almost foreign but which engendered one thought in the mind; *freedom*. The smell of damp grass and water-marinated trees wafted amongst the smell of their finished meal and it was like a tonic that eased everyone’s ailments with each breath they took.

Long after the sun had dropped beneath the horizon, Abimael could finally no longer resist the lure of sleep. He made his way back to his bed in the ship. At first, he was reluctant to leave the refreshing, cleansing air but in time as weariness set in and the day’s work caught up with and overtook him, he was forced to succumb to that most human of needs, the need for sleep. Walking back to the ship, hearing the laughter of those still seated around the fires he suddenly experienced an instinctive, fatherly concern for their safety. It was late at night and they were outside and alone in an unfamiliar land… but in the next breath the reality of the situation dawned on him as an even greater weight settled on his shoulders threatening to crush him under its import… *there is no one, and nothing, else here*.

It was a bittersweet realisation, comforting in its truth but terrifying in its implications. There could be no danger; they were the only survivors of a planet that had been torn apart at the seams and was now lying like an injured animal licking its wounds and beginning the healing process. As Abimael and his family began climbing the gangway, he still wasn’t sure which feeling dominated his thoughts, joy at the rebirth and cleansing or sorrow at the loss and loneliness.

The Eliam

Somewhere high above where the crew of Abimael’s ship were taking a well-deserved rest, beyond the clouds racing around the planet, beyond even the stars and galaxies shining like long forgotten landmarks charting a route through the heavens, a lone figure hovered in blackness and folded a pair of wings tightly around its body bracing for what was to come.

The figure was male with a strong, lean form around nine feet in height. He wore a flowing, white robe with two holes in the back which allowed his massive wings to extend comfortably. The white wings, when fully opened, had a total span of around six feet and were composed of a flexible substance more like skin than feathers. Thick muscles firmly corded the area where they met with the being’s back before opening out into a more loosely gathered collection of feather-like appendages which in turn extended out into several long vanes tapering to a point just above his feet. Wrapped around his body they resembled a massive coat… or a cocoon.

A closely cropped black beard covered the chin and cheeks of the man’s face and intense blue eyes, which seemed to glow on their own, lit by a fire burning deep within his soul, shone out from beneath an overhanging cliff of a brow like beacons lighting the way home for lost travellers. He had high cheekbones and a prominent nose that made his eyes seem even more deeply sunken.

Closing those eyes, he brought his arms in front of his body and cupped his palms one on top of the other facing upwards. Lowering his head in concentration, he began the mantra that would slow his body’s vibratory rate down to a speed which would allow him to enter the unique four dimensional realm of time and space.

He grimaced as his body’s vibratory rate stepped down through the first level. It was never a comfortable process, taxing even the hardiest Angel’s bodies. Maintaining the mantra through the discomfort, he breached the second tier and his body began to fade as his connection with this higher domain weakened. As he passed the third level, what could be seen of his body began shaking uncontrollably and flickering violently. He grunted as if someone had punched him in the stomach, winding him, and muttered under his breath through clenched teeth into his mantra as if he might garner some form of strength from the effort, before abruptly vanishing from sight.

He immediately discontinued the mantra, not from choice, but simply because in this transitional phase vocal utterances of any kind were impossible. He felt like his body was trying to melt into the void as he hurtled down what looked like a tunnel with luminescent, shimmering, blue and white walls. There was something about altering the body’s vibratory rate that brought on the decidedly unpleasant feeling of being liquefied alive. The walls of the conduit were almost transparent and through them he could see the inky blackness of space racing by at some unimaginable speed. At least, he could have if his head wasn’t buried in his chest, arms flexed and fists clenched at his temples. No one had ever bothered to clock the exact speed with which Angels made their fall through this light conduit but Yerachmiel was fairly certain that velocity didn’t have much relevance in this place anyway. There was no mantra to chant here but concentration was still needed. He had to adapt his body to Earthly conditions and focus on his destination. The universe was a large place and hitting the exact spot he had been assigned to on Earth was like trying to hit a speck of dust on Pluto with a fifty cent piece thrown from Mars. Certainly not a task for the faint of heart.

After what could have been a single heartbeat or an eternity, Yerachmiel found himself planted rather unceremoniously on top of a hill somewhere near the equator of the Earth, in one of only a few dry places that had recently emerged from the turbulent seas. Getting to his feet a little unsteadily, he raised himself to his full seven-foot Earth height and went to flex his wings out of habit before remembering that they never survived the harrowing journey down.

Feeling more than a little naked and somewhat uncomfortable at having lost more than a foot from his frame, he rolled his shoulders back and forth and stretched his neck as he tried to adjust. When on Earth, Angels were required to adopt bodies that allowed them to more closely fit in with humans, hence the (slightly) shorter stature and the absence of wings. In the early days they had appeared in their true form but it had proved to be too intimidating for humans and had paradoxically resulted in their teachings being easily forgotten and more quickly relegated to myth. They had learned that the more a human can relate to the teacher, the more he can also relate to the teaching.

The Angel surveyed his surroundings and took a deep breath. It had been a long time since he had been here. He missed the place and was glad for the chance to reconnect with that part of himself that had once thrived here. There was something uniquely thrilling about being alive in a mortal body. It offered a sensory experience unlike any other.

He took stock of his surroundings. Hilltop, receding ocean, great beached ship - dead on, he remarked to himself with a note of satisfaction. Early morning at the place that would become the new cradle of civilisation, well, one of them anyway. The sun had already risen, as punctual as always in its duty, announcing to all who would listen that the time for slumber was past and the time for work had arrived. And there was a lot of work to be done…

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The sun greeted the new day with a gentle hint of illumination that began by merely making the darkness less absolute and culminated in a bold drenching of light that reached into all but the most deeply entrenched shadows, forcing the night’s secrets from them. It soaked the ship that housed the members of Abimael’s extended family, wrapping it in a warm, loving embrace and highlighting the newly discovered land around it.

The water had kept to its steady withdrawal as if honouring a secret promise made to its Creator, satisfied at the completion of its historic mission and now gracefully bowing out to make way for a new era. The waterlogged, battered and bruised trees and bushes drank in the sunlight as if trying to store it up for fear they would lose their fiery, life-giving benefactor once more. Abimael momentarily wondered how any greenery had managed to survive the terrible storm that had raged above them for so long but then he recalled the Source of the downpour and supposed that green plants were pretty much the least miraculous of all the things he had been witness to.

Sudden movement caught his eye, drawing his attention to the top of Mount Areli. It was difficult to tell from this distance but it seemed to be a person moving down the side. Must be either a reveller from the night before who stayed out too late or a devoted worshipper who had risen early to greet his Lord through the sunrise, he thought. Either way, he could meet the individual halfway between the Mount and the ship if he disembarked now. He wanted to check on the settlement site at any rate and now, before anyone else had woken up, was probably as good a time as any.

As the two figures made their way through the bushes and scattered trees towards their inevitable meeting point in the middle, Abimael began to realise that this was not, in fact, someone from his group. He was too tall for one and there was something about his gait; purposeful, confident... unafraid. He didn’t move like anyone Abimael knew. A sudden unsettling thought weighed down on him like lead and squeezed his upper body with a constricting hand.

*Who else could be here?* A hundred other questions clamoured for his attention like school children greeting a popular teacher first thing in the morning. Like the teacher, he knew he couldn’t handle all of them at once.

He forced himself to relax but as he gazed out at the impassive form approaching, he noticed something else odd. At first he thought it was just the sunlight silhouetting his frame giving him an almost ethereal, glowing quality, but from this angle he realised that couldn’t be the explanation. The man was definitely surrounded by a faint but clearly present, glowing white nimbus. Abimael missed a step as he suddenly realised who, or more correctly, what he was looking at.

With wonder etched across his face, the Divinely chosen leader of two hundred men, women and children, in a very real sense their saviour, dropped to his knees and bowed deeply before the advancing figure, whom he had belatedly recognised as one of his Lord’s Angels.

“My Lord,” Abimael stumbled awkwardly over the words in his surprise. “How may I be of service to You?”

The large Angel smiled a warm greeting. “You can begin by standing,” he replied with a clear, rich voice. “Your homage is not necessary. I am called Yerachmiel, a name from ages long since past and forgotten by all but a few very old souls,” he said, grinning to himself as if he had just made a joke that only he understood.

Abimael cautiously looked up and stood tentatively before Yerachmiel. At just under six feet, he barely came up to the Angel’s broad chest and could feel the power emanating from the Angel, surrounding him like a force field. *He could crush me in a heartbeat,* Abimael couldn’t help thinking.

Yerachmiel chuckled to himself as if he could read Abimael’s mind. “You need have no fear of that, friend Abimael,” he reassured the still shaken man. “No Angel would ever harm a God-fearing individual. We are Guides, Helpers, Messengers. We are your link to our Lord. The Emissaries, not the Judges. And in answer to your first question, it is not how you can serve me but rather how I can help you that is the issue.” With that, Yerachmiel raised his arm and turned back to face Mount Areli, the direction from which he had come. To Abimael’s complete astonishment a whole flock of sheep began streaming around the side of the mountain.

Abimael shook his head and blinked as if trying to dislodge a malformed lens that had dropped over both his eyes and mind. “It-it-it can’t…,” he stammered, still shaking his head. “How…” he began, but was halted mid-disbelief when he realised that the leading sheep who had now reached the flatlands spreading out from the base of the Mount were eating dry, fertile grass.

“It is your Lord’s promise to you, father of humanity,” Yerachmiel proclaimed, using the new title to address Abimael as if trying it out to see how it fit. “Do not be amazed at your Lord’s powers. It is the fulfilment of the covenant you made with Him this day’s eve. The Lord looks after His children well. Behold His magnificence,” Yerachmiel issued in a more formal tone, his voice suddenly magnifying to reach even those still asleep in the ship.

At this proclamation, Abimael dropped to the ground once more, this time uttering fervent prayers of thanks to his Lord God. Yerachmiel merely stood by and waited patiently, or perhaps he also took the opportunity to offer his own words of praise.

After hearing Yerachmiel’s command, several members of the *ex*-crew had been drawn out from their berths and, seeing the activity taking place far below, were hurriedly ushering the others along that they might take part in what was obviously an important occasion.

When the first people from Abimael’s group arrived at the place where the mortal was conversing with the Angel, Yerachmiel turned his head and an intense pair of sparkling, blue eyes towards them and, with a smile, bade them sit. They didn’t hesitate and as they did, they were pleasantly surprised to notice, for the first time, that the undergrowth was now completely dry. It was as if the sun had decided to take part in the clean-up of the drowned planet and had focused its morning sunlight directly onto the ground, evaporating all of the moisture. Yerachmiel waited until everyone was present and accounted for and seated around him in a large, hushed semi-circle, *like children gathered around to hear a story from the village elder*, he thought, before he addressed them all.

“People of Abimael,” he began his address without shouting but with a voice that nevertheless reached all those before him, from the youngest child directly at his feet to the eldest men and women at the rear. “I am called Yerachmiel and I am an Angel sent by your Lord from Heaven above to instruct you and guide you in the manner of Right Living.” He paused, allowing his introduction to sink in. “You have been rewarded for what your Lord has seen in your hearts and minds. You have survived the Cleansing of this planet and this is a Blessing for which you should indeed be most thankful. The world needs to be rebuilt and as the waters recede, so will you multiply and thrive. This land, your Lord has promised to you and so it shall be.” He raised his voice, emphasising the words to come before he had even spoken them. “You are the progenitors of the entire human race. Live well, love your Lord, follow His Precepts and all will be well.

“You will be known as the Eliam,” he continued, “an ancient word that means, *People of the Lord*, and this land you see around you is called Jasral, the beginning. Listen well, children, for as yesterday was your trial, today is your instruction and tomorrow holds your inheritance. Now, let us begin our labour and let us remember that in this labour whether we are making houses, preparing meals or praying, it is all done for one purpose and one purpose only, for the glory of our Lord.” He raised his arms in a triumphant gesture and the Eliam followed his lead with a loud cheer that reached the ears of the contently grazing sheep. The animals glanced up once in curiosity before deciding the ruckus didn’t concern them. Bowing their heads once more, they returned to their meals in ignorant bliss.

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For the next thirty days and thirty nights, Yerachmiel remained in Jasral and when it was time for him to return to Heaven, another Angel named Araquiel, appeared in his place to shepherd Abimael’s flock in the way of the Lord. Only thirty more days passed before Araquiel too had to return to Heaven but in those sixty days total, the Eliam were flooded with perhaps more information than had ever been distilled and handed out to one group of people in the entire history of mankind. The learning curve was steep but the Eliam rose to the task like wisdom-thirsty pilgrims wandering a desert of ignorance, eager to prove that their Lord’s faith in them had not been misplaced. They attacked each new task with vigour and determination and none strayed from the carefully laid path pointed out to them by their Guardian Angels.

Among some of the new information they absorbed was the induction process for Angels. Yerachmiel had told them that it was so they may know more about him and others like him. He had also said it was the first time the details of this process had ever been revealed to any on Earth; a “change in the formula” was how he put it. It was later on that first day that Yerachmiel related his own induction process into “Angelhood” for the Eliam’s edification.

*My name was Eliphaz. I was 82 years old and I was living in the Kingdom of Elerthia, an ancient Kingdom that hasn’t related to anything on the face of the Earth for millennia. We were the strongest nation on the planet and had been steadily expanding our borders, conquering neighbouring countries and bringing them under our rule, when we decided we were finally ready to launch a campaign against our arch-rivals, the Carpations.*

*I was a member of the Kingdom’s ruling committee, an elder, a veteran of many wars. My say was important in the Kingdom and although we didn’t have a single man who could claim the title of leader, I was probably the closest to such a position, had it existed. All my life I had served my Lord to the best of my ability and in return He had blessed me with wisdom far beyond my years, considerable though they were. In my lifetime, I had been granted power, land, riches, women and more children than any other man before me. All these things I received but I remained a humble man before the Lord and offered everything that came my way up to Him. As powerful and rich as I was, I was a hundred times more grateful and a thousand times more did I glorify the name of my Lord in everything I did.*

*On the eve of the day our campaign was to begin, while I lay in bed, resting from the arduous day making preparations for the coming battle, an assassin entered my room and silently ended my life without even giving me the honour of knowing my murderer. While my eyes were still closed, a dagger was thrust into my heart and with hardly a parting gasp, I departed the world of the living almost immediately.*

*What awaited me on my death was much more than I could have expected. Being a religious man, I had expected I would be judged and, God-willing, accepted into Heaven where I would spend eternity with my Creator. I was judged along with at least twenty others but it was decided that my fate was to be different from that of my peers. In a sudden blinding flash of energy that seared through my body like a lightning bolt, I was transported through a boundless space and an eternity of time until I found myself in the exclusive presence of the Lord God Himself.*

*The light coming from Him was almost more than I could tolerate, even though I had no physical body. It felt as though the very substance of my soul was on fire. Each particle that composed ‘me’ seemed to be oscillating back and forth faster and faster until I felt like I was going to explode, not in a single massive explosion, but in a billion tiny, subatomic ones. It was a unique feeling, I recall, but fortunately I didn’t explode… yet. Instead, my Lord offered me something more than I could ever have dreamt of. “You have been chosen…” He announced in a voice that filled me with more honour and pride than all the riches and glory in the world that I had recently left could have done, “…to join an elite few. Yours was an exemplary life and your reward is… Angelhood.” The way He spoke the word, ‘Angelhood’, made it clear that this was a highly privileged opportunity, not just of a lifetime, but of all eternity.*

*In the full force of Divinity’s unmitigated gaze, I heard, “You will be tested. This will be… memorable. If you pass, you will join others in My direct service; if you fail, you will be returned to Heaven.” I remember thinking, “Not a bad consolation prize,” just before the explosion that my soul had been precipitously teetering on the edge of, suddenly took hold of me and literally ripped me to shreds.*

*Every particle of my being was torn apart and sent flying through the ether as if the explosion had been accompanied by a cosmic wind that picked up all the pieces of me and scattered me to the four corners of… wherever I was. It wasn’t pain as you know it. It was more like the feeling of receiving more energy than I was capable of handling and having my being simply overcome by this force. I felt like… it is difficult to describe this in words… I* became *the cosmic wind I mentioned earlier. After the explosion, I was diffused, decentralised, there was no localised thought for there was no localised being left to have any thoughts… it was a detached but… unusually peaceful feeling as I just… drifted.*

*I don’t know how long this lasted, there was no ‘me’ to measure time, it seemed an eternal instant, I know that doesn’t explain anything to you but I am trying to explain something that is essentially ineffable. It came to an end when a wind greater than I began sweeping through the pieces of me. It felt like it was collecting ‘me’ into a central unit once more. After enough of me had been grouped together, a critical mass of sorts was attained and suddenly awareness sparked within the pieces that used to be me. It was the spark of consciousness, a spark that was centred on the pieces that used to be Eliphaz, it had all of his memories, but it was no longer him. Something was crucially different. It wasn’t unlike waking from a dream in which you played a character other than yourself, you lived that life, you remember the events, you even associate with him in a fashion, and yet you are not that person.*

*A voice spoke in my newly formed mind, “Congratulations, My son. From this moment on, you are to be known as Yerachmiel. This is a new beginning for you and all Heaven rejoices at your acceptance into the ranks of Angelhood.”*

*I was then able to choose the… form, ‘body’ is too physical a word for this, that I would inhabit during my service as an Angel of the Lord, including the magnificent wings that mark us all as Messengers of the Lord.*

*And that, my dear Eliam, is how Angels are born…*

The Eliam were also given less esoteric information, information that provided them with guidelines for living in harmony and in the Way of the Lord. When Araquiel imparted this simple wisdom he revealed that all of these rules and laws had been passed along to humans in the last epoch, before the flood, and in doing so issued a warning that the path of the Lord must be followed to the letter for the distractions and temptations that will seek to turn them from the Way would be many and varied.

*You have already been given the Nine Precepts, children of Abimael. If you follow these and nothing else, you will live a blessed life and will enter the gates of Heaven upon death, but I will elaborate on these in some ways that may enable you to live even fuller and richer lives. The Precepts demand complete and unswerving loyalty to your Lord, honesty in everything you do, respect for your fellow Eliam and remembrance of the Covenant made between you and your Lord. Precepts 4 and 5 mention something outside these parameters. Precept 4 references the Holy Rituals which I will explain now.*

*Sacrifices and Offerings – On the seventh day of each week no work shall be undertaken by any. This day is to be considered Holy. It is marked as such to make the remembrance of your Covenant easier, for humans are a forgetful race. The day shall be made Holy with a magnificent feast for the entire community and on every fourth anniversary of this day you will honour your Lord with the burning of a sacrifice. This sacrifice shall be conducted by the Priests and shall be comprised of two animals; the single finest ox and the healthiest, fattest sheep, which are to be chosen from amongst the collective animal property of the community. It will be a great honour for the man whose animals are selected, for your Lord’s blessings will be upon him and his family. The animals will be washed and their blood spilt on a sacrificial altar before the carcasses are burnt on the altar that the sweet aroma may rise to Heaven and please the Lord. On this day, the finest fruit and vegetables from the feast will also be arranged in a ceremonial display at the head of the celebration and left until midnight at which time they will be removed and discarded.*

*Bowing – You are to bow to your Lord by facing the sun twice a day, at sunrise and sunset, and touching your forehead to the ground ten times. This is to be treated as a sacred act and is not to be performed perfunctorily.*

*Prayer – Your bond with the Lord is a communal covenant but it is also a personal one. To supplement the practice of bowing, you are to actively maintain your connection with your Lord throughout each day by keeping Him foremost in your minds at all times. This can best be achieved through prayer. Prayer is essentially the holding open of the line of communication between you and your Lord. Speak to God, ask Him for guidance, give thanks to Him; not at specific pre-arranged times, but anytime you feel the need to. You will each maintain some mark or symbol on your person that will serve as a continual reminder of the need for prayer. It may be a mark on your body, a special item of jewellery, a small icon you carry with you, anything can fulfil this purpose. The important things are that it functions as a reminder and is dedicated for this purpose and this purpose alone.*

*Pilgrimages – You are each required to undertake a pilgrimage to the top of Mount Areli at least twice in your lives, where you will spend the night at the summit to strengthen your bond with the Lord. It is vital that your evening and morning bows be conducted from there and no food or drink except water consumed in between. During this time, you will observe a vow of silence and spend the entire night in contemplation of the Lord, your God, praising His magnificence.*

*Days of Worship – There will be several notable days of worship throughout the year…*

There were other Holy Rituals the Eliam were to observe and Araquiel painstakingly set all of them out for his charges. There were also the Holy Laws…

*Precept 5 refers to the Holy Laws. These are as follows:*

*Food – You shall not eat the fat or blood of any animal for any reason. These are reserved for your Lord in sacrificial offerings and any who eat either of these shall be cut off from his people. You shall not eat the flesh of any of the following; on land, any animal that chews its own cud, and in the sea, any creature without fins or scales. These animals shall be unclean to you and any person who touches the carcass of such an animal will be regarded as unclean until the evening and may not participate in any Holy Rituals until the following day, for all who approach the Lord must be pure and clean.*

*Defects and Deformations – Any man, woman, or child who has a defect shall not be allowed to participate in any of the Holy Rituals; one blind or lame, one suffering from a broken bone, one with significant scarring anywhere on his person, any defect in any shape or form. Because they have a defect they shall not be permitted to approach the Lord in Holy Ritual lest they profane the Lord’s sanctity for the Lord is pure.*

*Childbirth – When a woman gives birth to a son she shall be unclean for seven days and shall not participate in any Holy Rituals for fifteen days. If a woman gives birth to a daughter she shall be unclean for ten days and shall not participate in any Holy Rituals for twenty days. At the end of this period the woman will offer a sacrifice to the Lord for atonement and she shall once more be clean.*

*Wives and Concubines – A man may take up to ten wives if the fathers of the brides-to-be agree to the marriage. In addition, the strongest and most God-fearing among the men shall be permitted to have as many concubines as they desire in order that their noble seed be spread throughout the land.*

*Fidelity – If a man lays with a woman outside of marriage he shall be required to request of the father that she become his wife but if this is refused or if the man already has ten wives, he must give one-tenth of his monthly income to the woman’s father. If a woman lies with a man while still under her husband’s authority, she shall be taken outside the village and stoned. She is not to be killed. However, if she commits adultery a second time she is to be stoned to death.*

*Violence – If any man, woman or child harms another person they shall be sentenced to a punishment that fits the crime. This Law shall be better known under the phrase, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” If a man cripples his wife during a beating, then he shall in turn be crippled; if he murders his neighbour, he shall be murdered. In this way a Divine balance is maintained.*

*The Precepts – Whosoever is found to have breached any of the Nine Precepts shall immediately be taken outside the village…*

These, and a number of other Holy Laws, the Eliam were to preserve in written form that together made up a complete, codified system of living designed to cultivate and instil morals, harmony and above all an attitude of reverence for their Lord. On the final day, the Eliam were once more blessed with Araquiel’s presence when he gathered them together for one last parting feast:

“Eliam, beloved children of the Lord, your God,” the Angel’s voice boomed over the massed faithful. He stood just under seven feet, shorter than Yerachmiel and much more slender in his proportions. He had a youthful, handsome face that seemed full of innocence but this was belied by a calm confidence that only comes from experience and which gave him the aura of a natural teacher. He had a friendly and open smile which he put to good use now, “We have come a long way together in a short time and despite the brevity of my stay, the time has already come for me to depart. I leave with a heavy heart for I know some of you I will not see again… in this place.” He gestured around him. “But I am gladdened once more to remember that I will meet each of you one day…” he raised his head and gazed skyward, “…in Heaven.

“Follow the Precepts and Laws you have been given, treasure them as you would all the gold on your planet for they are indeed worth a hundred times that. Bow your head twice daily, not just because you have been told to, and remember to pray to your Lord for He, and we,” he added, “are never more than a heartfelt whisper or a sincere prayer away. Be strong, my children, I have come to love each of you as my own, remember all you have learnt. Be well…”

With those parting words, Araquiel adopted the posture that all Angels employed for both the entry and exit into this domain; head bowed, arms in front of his body, palms cupped and facing upwards. While the journey in required a slowing down of the body’s vibratory rate, the journey back Home involved more of a letting go, a releasing of the mental constriction placed over the soul’s natural operating rhythm.

He began the mantra to still his thoughts and then opened the mental gate. Rather than the slow stepping-down process that accompanied the entry, the exit was a sudden rushing sensation as if his body had been waiting for this moment for thirty days and like a dam suddenly bursting from the pressure of the water contained behind it, repressed energy filled his being.

At the exact moment the invisible dam broke within the Angel, he disappeared from the Eliam’s view and perceived himself in the light conduit being drawn upwards. Eons flashed by in a heartbeat as Araquiel’s being was filled with more and more energy. He could feel with the instant passing of each millennium his soul returning to its natural state, acclimatising itself to its natural environment. In that distinctive split second that lasted an eternity, he felt his wings return to his body and the light of Divinity once more fill his being… and then he was Home.

Yerachmiel was waiting for him, the giant Angel’s form glowing in the inky blackness that surrounded them both, a lighthouse offering a greeting to lost travellers pointing out the path of safe passage. “How did it go?” he inquired, with a friendly grin.

“Well enough,” Araquiel answered, flexing his wings as if checking to make sure they had returned in all the magnificence he had left them with. He stretched his body, arching his back and twisting at the waist a couple of times, “It’s always a pleasure to be back, isn’t it? Being mortal is so… restricting.” At that, as if a switch had just been flicked or a keyword uttered, a dazzling glow surrounded the newly returned Angel and he inhaled deeply before continuing. “They are a loyal group and they seem well-intentioned. I believe they have understood everything we taught them, but as we agreed before, they must be more closely supervised this time. Humans just forget too quickly. I guess it’s a combination of their limited life-spans and something to do with the way time passes for them, eroding old memories and experiences as fast as new ones can replace them.”

“I think you’re right, brother,” he mused aloud, nodding. After a brief pause in which the massive Angel seemed lost in thought, he asked, “Did you hear word from any of the others?”

“No. I felt them, they were all there but we made no contact. There was no need.”

Yerachmiel nodded knowingly. “No matter, they should be back soon. Anyway, we should get you rested, you look like… what is it they used to say? Ah yes… like something the cat dragged in,” he grinned mischievously.

Araquiel smiled back, “My brother, I’ve been on Earth for the past month; what’s your excuse?”

Evolution

In a cosmic breath, as planets whirled around their suns, suns whirled around their galaxies, and galaxies whirled around each other, time marched forward at its unrelenting pace, dragging everything else along with it. Stars kindled to life in stellar nurseries, enormous furnaces of heat and energy, as the clouds of hydrogen and helium that comprise them collapsed and ignited under their own gravity. Others died, some in quiet, graceful deaths that left behind dense white dwarfs, others in cataclysmic explosions that spewed stellar debris light years across the void of space. Somewhere far from any of these violent events, a newly formed planetary system began its highly orchestrated dance, each planet pirouetting its way around the fiery centre of the troupe.

The forces of nature continued acting true to their individual, precise and strictly law-governed natures. Electromagnetism governed the interactions of electric and magnetic fields and electrons, as the latter formed the particulate ‘cloud’ that characterised their curiously imprecise orbits around atomic centres, themselves filled with quarks bound together by the strong nuclear force. The weak nuclear force decayed some of those same centres, occasionally releasing potentially deadly radiation. Gravity too, flexed its weak but highly visible muscles, from balancing the immensely powerful nuclear force constantly threatening to explode stars, to crushing matter into infinitely dense points from which not even light could escape, to holding planets in their galactic dance like a dedicated, ever faithful partner.

As two stars in a massive binary system swing a little too close to each other and begin exchanging stellar material across vast distances like lovers locked in a fatal embrace willing themselves closer and closer, fatally drawn to a final joining, the population of a small planet, called Earth by those who lived there, crept over the one million mark like the turtle in the proverbial race with the hare.

A comet hurtles through the limitlessness of space at 40 kilometres per second as if impatient to arrive at its final destination, a devastating rendezvous with a giant planet in a galaxy only some thirty million light years away, around which, on the third planet in its system, a resilient race of humans are beginning to form international committees and operate on a global level.

A star in an unknown part of the universe finally exhausts the last of its fuel after countless years of nuclear fusion and erupts in a terrifying explosion which sends shockwaves spewing from its centre like ripples spreading across a lake at the speed of light. The only remnant it leaves behind to attest to the fact that it ever existed at all is a massive nebulous scar streaking across the sky like a gaping wound torn in the fabric of space. A scar which will not be visible for millions of years to the tiny humans on planet Earth, who are finally recapturing the lost technological advances their ancestors had harnessed so many generations ago…