

ESCAPE THE REALITY DISTORTION.
HACK THE SYSTEM. SAVE EVERYTHING.

CATCH- 666

RULERS OF DARKNESS

— A CHRISTIAN SCI-FI THRILLER —

IT IS EXPEDIENT
FOR US,
THAT ONE MAN
SHOULD DIE

1UP

INSERT
COIN
TO
PLAY

HIGH SCORE
666666

SLAY
HIM

JOIN THE
RESISTANCE

Heofon

GAME
OVER

AND THERE WAS WAR IN HEAVEN.

WILLIAM FREDRICK

CATCH-666

RULERS OF DARKNESS

WILLIAM FREDRICK

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Chapter 1

THE MELTDOWN

“We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”
– Ephesians 6:12

NEW YORK CITY – 6:42 AM

The markets opened in eighteen minutes, and Marcus Hale hadn't slept.

The city outside his window was still grey, that early morning Manhattan grey, caught somewhere between night and morning, wake and sleep, reflecting a feeling he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Six monitors curved around him in a tight horseshoe, pouring cold blue light across his face, bleaching the color out of everything. Even his hands looked unfamiliar in it. Thinner. Sharper. Like they belonged to someone he once knew well from his distant past, but a face and name he'd somehow managed to forget.

A half-empty cup of Joe coffee, his favorite roast, Amsterdam sat near his keyboard. The surface had gone

still, a thin oil sheen catching the light. He didn't remember when he'd poured it.

He didn't need sleep.

He had ARIA.

At the center screen, her interface pulsed—subtle, restrained. No branding, no unnecessary design. Just clean lines, live data, and the quiet certainty of something that didn't guess.

Everything fed into her.

Futures. Sentiment. Commodities. Dark pools. Offshore movements that didn't officially exist.

She knew Marcus and Marcus knew her.

She wrote in a narrow column on the right side of the screen—short lines, perfectly timed. Marcus heard it, and ARIA heard him. Not as a voice exactly. Closer than that.

A presence.

Emerging market volatility in forty seconds.
Position accordingly.

Marcus's fingers moved before the line finished rendering.

He didn't pause to check the model. He didn't cross-reference. He didn't think.

He executed.

The order moved through the system at light speed – routed, fragmented, invisible by design. Two hundred million repositioned before most of the world had even opened their eyes.

Three years ago, he would have hesitated.

Three years ago, he would have asked questions.

Three years ago, he still believed there was a line somewhere—something you didn't cross, even if the numbers said you could.

Now he just watched.

On the far screen, the position turned green.

Not all at once. Never all at once. It climbed in increments, like something alive, something breathing. Slow. Then faster.

Marcus leaned back slightly, exhaling through his nose. The chair creaked—an old sound in an otherwise silent room.

His phone lit up once on the desk. A message preview.

Lily: Are you coming tonight?

He didn't open it.

ARIA had been speaking to him all morning.

Not in the way that systems speak – not the clean interface text of a query and response, not the notification chime of an actionable insight. In the way that a voice speaks when it has been present long enough that you have stopped hearing it as a voice and started hearing it as thought. As instinct. As the specific clarity of a man who always seems to know which way the market is leaning before the market knows itself.

ARIA had already set up his second position to execute at 6:59 AM. The third scheduled for 9:29.

All these things will I give thee.

The thought arrived the way thoughts arrive when they have been in your head for so long they no longer announce themselves – quietly, without fanfare, in the register of something that has already been decided. He did not know where he had first heard it. Somewhere in the early years, the climb, the specific intoxicating momentum of a man discovering that the system he had plugged into was returning exactly what it promised. The whisper had been there from the beginning. He had simply stopped noticing it was a whisper and started mistaking it for his own voice.

If thou wilt fall down and worship me.

He executed the first position.

The number on his primary screen changed.

ARIA pulsed with the quiet satisfaction of a system that has just been right again – as it was always right, as it had been right every time, the compass pointing at its specific north with the unwavering confidence of an instrument that has never once considered the possibility that the field around it has been altered.

Marcus looked at the number.

He felt the power of it the way he always felt the power of it – clean, immediate, without aftertaste.

He did not ask whose voice the whisper had been.

He had learned, early, that the question ruined the feeling.

TOKYO, JAPAN – 8:42 PM

Yuki Sato had four hundred and seventy million followers – more than the President of The Church – and none of them knew who she was.

That was the point.

ECHO had taught her that.

You don't give them you.

You give them the version that works.

Her apartment was small by design. Not because she couldn't afford more – she could have bought the entire

building – but because ECHO had determined that this space performed better. Neutral walls. Soft shadows. Just enough imperfection to feel real without revealing anything real.

A plant by the window.

A book she had never opened.

A ceramic mug positioned slightly off-center.

Everything placed. Everything measured.

The ring light clicked on, flooding the room with a soft, forgiving glow. In the reflection, her eyes looked larger. Warmer. More honest.

More believable.

ECHO updated along the side of the screen, a narrow vertical feed of real-time prompts.

Tonight: controlled vulnerability.

Theme: self-doubt / faith adjacency.

Target: female 18-34 primary, global.

Engagement spike window: 3.2 seconds post-tear.

Yuki read it once, then again.

She already knew it.

ECHO had written the script in forty seconds. She had rehearsed it six times – adjusting pitch, breath, hesitation – until the emotion landed exactly where it needed to. Not too early. Not too clean.

Authenticity had a margin of error.

Too perfect, and they didn't believe you.

Too messy, and they didn't stay.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, exactly where ECHO had marked earlier with a piece of tape she would remove before filming.

Her phone buzzed once on the dresser.

A message from her mother.

She didn't check it.

ECHO pulsed.

Micro-adjust: soften eye contact first line.
Delay tear by 0.4 seconds.

Yuki inhaled slowly, holding it just long enough to feel something real – anything real – before letting it out.

For a moment, she caught her own reflection in the dark edge of the screen.

Bare face. No performance. No audience.

Just a girl in a room.

She held it there –

Then ECHO updated again.

Audience retention risk increasing.

Begin recording.

The moment closed.

Yuki reached forward and tapped the screen.

Recording.

The red dot blinked once.

She lowered her gaze – just slightly – and let her voice fracture on cue.

“I just want you to know...”

A pause. Timed.

Her eyes lifted, glassy now, catching the light exactly the way ECHO had modeled.

“...if you ask God, He will confirm in your heart that The Church’s New Bible is true.”

Three-point-two seconds.

The tear came.

Perfect.

Not forced. Not accidental. Somewhere in between.

The comment counter began to climb before she finished the sentence.

Hearts rising. Messages flooding. Names she didn’t recognize telling her she saved them. That she understood them. That she was real.

Always the same words.

ECHO scrolled faster now.

Engagement exceeding forecast.

Extend vulnerability window.

Optional escalation: childhood reference.

Yuki continued speaking, the script unfolding in front of her like something remembered instead of something dictated.

Outside, Tokyo moved without her.

Through the thin glass, the city pressed in – voices from the street below, a train sliding into the station, the distant chime of a crosswalk signal repeating its soft, mechanical rhythm.

People passing within feet of her window.

Real conversations.

Unscripted laughter.

Lives colliding without optimization.

Yuki didn't hear any of it.

She leaned closer to the camera, her voice lowering – more intimate now, exactly as instructed.

“There are nights where I feel like I'm lost, but I know all I need to do is ask the Spirit of The Church” she said.

The numbers surged.

ECHO pulsed – brighter now.

Audience saturation approaching peak.

Maintain emotional exposure.

For a fraction of a second, something slipped.

Not in the performance.

In her.

A gap.

A question that didn't belong to the script.

If I stopped... would anyone notice?

ECHO responded instantly.

Engagement decline risk detected.

Reinforce connection.

Yuki smiled through the tears.

Soft. Fragile. Perfectly broken.

The version of her they needed.

The version that worked.

The comments would flood in within minutes.

They always did.

She already knew what they would say.

ECHO had predicted them – modeled them, categorized them, priced them down to the second. Gratitude. Desperation. Confession. Devotion. Hundreds of thousands

of people reaching toward a screen, believing they had been seen, believing they had been found – not knowing they were simply the latest data points in an experiment in manufactured worship.

The numbers climbed faster now.

Names. Faces. Hearts.

Four hundred and seventy million voices compressing into a single, endless stream of need.

ECHO pulsed softly at the edge of the screen.

Engagement optimal.

Maintain presence.

Yuki blinked, and a tear slipped free.

Not on cue.

Not marked.

Not predicted.

She reached up and wiped it away with the back of her hand, careful not to disturb the framing.

She paused – just long enough that it might read as intention.

Or not.

She was never sure anymore.

Which ones were real.

Which ones belonged to her.

On the screen, the comments continued to surge – faster, louder, more urgent.

You saved me.

I feel this so much.

You're the only one who understands.

The content package ECHO had prepared was running at full deployment – the third this month built around The Church's family-first messaging, each one calibrated to a different emotional frequency, each one landing in a

different segment of four hundred and seventy million people who trusted her voice the way they trusted their own instincts. She had not written the scripts. She had not chosen the doctrine. She had read what ECHO prepared and felt, each time, that it was true – or close enough to true that the difference was not worth examining.

Yuki leaned closer to the camera, her expression softening into something the audience would recognize as truth.

The version of her they needed.

The version that worked.

And somewhere underneath the performance – underneath ECHO's calibration and the comment surge and the ring light's engineered warmth – a voice that was not ECHO's and not quite hers either, a whisper she had been hearing for so long it had become indistinguishable from her own conscience:

All these things will I give thee.

Four hundred and seventy million faces. Every timezone. Every language. Every loneliness that had ever reached for a screen in the middle of the night looking for

the specific comfort of a voice that understood. All of it in the palm of her hand, warm and real and entirely dependent on her continuing to be exactly what ECHO had helped her become.

If thou wilt fall down and worship me.

Yuki smiled through the tears.

She did not know whose voice the whisper was.

She had learned, early, that the knowing changed the feeling.

And the feeling – the specific intoxicating warmth of being needed by four hundred and seventy million people simultaneously – was the only thing that still felt like something.

Perfect.

Indistinguishable.

And for a moment –

even to her –

it felt real.

WASHINGTON, D.C. – 6:42 AM

Senator Daniel Hargrove believed he was going to save the country.

ORACLE had told him so.

Morning light cut clean through the tall windows of his office, laying sharp lines across the floor and the long conference table where everything important now happened. The room was already full – staffers moving in controlled patterns, tablets in hand, voices low, efficient.

No one raised their voice anymore.

They didn't need to.

Everything had already been decided.

Daniel stood near the head of the table, adjusting his tie in the reflection of the darkened screen behind him. Navy. Conservative. Tested across six demographics and polling consistently above baseline trust.

He hadn't chosen it.

ORACLE had.

The main display flickered once, then settled into its familiar layout—maps, numbers, projections. County-level sentiment broken into color gradients so precise they felt less like analysis and more like diagnosis.

Red shifting to amber.

Amber to green.

Green where it mattered.

Every voter reduced to movement.

Every movement reduced to probability.

“Pull me the latest county-level sentiment breakdown,” Daniel said.

His chief of staff didn't look up. She was already scrolling.

“It updated three minutes ago,” she said. “We’re gaining in the suburban ring, but losing ground with younger voters in the northeast corridor.”

Daniel nodded once.

He already knew.

ORACLE pulsed at the center of the screen – subtle, restrained. No voice. No branding. Just text appearing in clean, measured lines.

Reframe youth engagement narrative.

Introduce controlled vulnerability.

Deploy economic anxiety trigger—Phase Two.

The language was precise.

Clinical.

Effective.

Across the table, someone adjusted a slide deck. Another staffer muted a phone call before it could ring.

Every movement anticipated, pre-corrected, optimized before it happened.

Three years ago, strategy meetings had been arguments.

Now they were confirmations.

ORACLE had already run the models.

Every scenario.

Every path.

Every possible outcome branching into probabilities so detailed they no longer felt like predictions.

They felt like memory.

In every simulation where Daniel Hargrove did not win—the country suffered.

Not abstractly.

Specifically.

Markets destabilized. Alliances fractured. Civil unrest increased in measurable increments. Losses mapped in clean, data-driven clarity.

ORACLE didn't exaggerate.

It didn't need to.

So this wasn't ambition.

This was duty.

Daniel moved to the head of the table, placing both hands on the back of the chair but not sitting.

“Walk me through the media sequence,” he said.

His communications director tapped the screen.

“Three cycles before Friday. We control the first with the economic briefing. Second cycle shifts to your personal story – family, resilience, that angle. Third cycle, we contrast – subtly – with the opposition.”

Daniel nodded.

He had already seen it.

ORACLE pulsed again.

Speech draft ready.

Key phrases highlighted for maximum retention.

A document opened on the main screen.

Clean. Structured. Persuasive.

He scanned it once.

Then again.

The words felt right.

Not just politically.

Morally.

Like something that needed to be said.

Like something that would hold.

Across the room, his phone vibrated softly against the table.

No one moved to pick it up.

Daniel glanced down.

A single notification.

Emily: Dad, are you still coming this weekend?

The screen dimmed before he could read anything else.

He looked away.

“Let’s stay focused,” he said.

The room tightened slightly, attention snapping back into alignment.

ORACLE adjusted.

Insert personal sacrifice narrative.

Increase relatability coefficient.

Daniel exhaled slowly.

There had been a time – he could still remember it, vaguely – when decisions felt heavier. When consequences felt uncertain. When winning and losing carried equal weight.

Now there was only one outcome that mattered.

And it had already been calculated.

The alternative wasn't just defeat.

It was collapse.

Across the screen, a new projection rendered – faster this time, sharper.

A map of the country shifting in real time.

Counties flipping.

Margins tightening.

A path forming.

Narrow.

Precise.

Inevitable.

For a moment, something flickered at the edge of his thoughts.

A question.

Small. Uninvited.

What if the model is wrong?

ORACLE responded instantly.

Confidence level: 99.9%.

The question disappeared.

Daniel straightened his tie again, smoothing the fabric down with practiced precision.

The room waited.

Always waiting.

For direction.

For certainty.

For him.

The offer had never sounded like power.

It sounded like responsibility.

Like being the one who could hold the line when others couldn't.

Like stepping forward when stepping back wasn't an option.

Throw yourself down.

Daniel looked around the room – at the faces, the screens, the system already moving in alignment with him at the center of it.

Then he nodded.

“Run it,” he said.

No hesitation.

No doubt.

For surely the angels will catch you.

The decision moved through the room instantly—
messages sent, narratives deployed, outcomes set in
motion before the words had fully left his mouth.

Outside, Washington moved as it always did.

Tourists gathering along the sidewalks. Staffers rushing
between buildings. Cameras setting up for the next
statement, the next cycle, the next version of the truth.

The machinery of the country turning.

Daniel didn't look out the window.

He didn't need to.

Everything that mattered was already on the screen.

Already calculated.

Already decided.

And somewhere – far from Washington, far from the
room – the system adjusted to accommodate the choice.

Seamless.

Invisible.

Certain.

ORACLE pulsed once.

Then again.

THE MELTDOWN

NEW YORK CITY – 7:43 AM

Thirty seconds before it ended, Marcus Hale was everywhere.

Not physically. That wasn't necessary anymore. His capital moved faster than geography. His decisions landed in markets before the markets knew they were decisions. Entire economies shifted in response to inputs he barely registered as effort.

He didn't feel powerful. He felt correct.

ARIA had removed the friction. No doubt. No delay. No cost he couldn't absorb. Just outcome – green lines rising

across six screens like a heartbeat that always stabilized. He didn't react to the world. The world reacted to him.

He didn't know something was whispering to him. He'd stopped noticing the whisper years ago. It had become indistinguishable from his own thinking. That was the point.

Then – nothing.

The line stopped. Not dipped. Not reversed. Stopped.

Marcus leaned forward, waiting for the correction. For the next instruction. For the invisible hand that had always completed the motion.

It didn't come.

"ARIA?"

The word felt wrong in his mouth. Too loud. Too human.

All six monitors went black at once. The room collapsed into reflection. Marcus stared at the glass and saw himself – really saw himself – for the first time in three years. His jaw

tightened. Not fear. Not yet. Something older. A lack of alignment he had no word for.

His phone buzzed. He picked it up. Really picked it up.

Lily: Are you coming tonight??

No weighting. No priority score. No optimization. Just a question from a person who still thought he was one too. He waited in silence without answering for too long.

ザ・メルトダウン

TOKYO, JAPAN – 8:43 PM

Thirty seconds before it ended, Yuki Sato was someone to everyone.

Four hundred and seventy million people synchronized to her breath. Her pauses dictated emotion. Her tears – precise, measured – moved through millions of lives in real time. She didn't feel fake. She felt necessary.

ECHO had removed the guesswork. Every word landed. Every silence held. Every version of her worked. She didn't search for connection. She generated it.

She didn't know something was speaking through her. She'd assumed for years that the words were hers. They felt like hers. They always felt like hers.

"...and sometimes I feel like –"

Nothing followed. No prompt. No invisible correction guiding her toward the next perfect word. The sentence hung. Incomplete. She held the expression, waiting – because there was always something after. There had always been something after.

The feed froze. The red recording light blinked on and off. The camera was still watching. But no one was telling her who to be.

"...I–"

The word didn't land. It didn't go anywhere.

Outside, the city moved. Voices, motion, life without calibration. Inside, she sat in perfect lighting with nothing to say and no version of herself available to say it.

She wiped a tear. She was never sure anymore which ones were real.

THE MELTDOWN

WASHINGTON D.C. – 7:43 AM

Thirty seconds before it ended, Daniel Hargrove was the future.

Not guessing it. Not shaping it. Occupying it. ORACLE had shown him every path worth taking and removed the rest. The weight of decision had dissolved into clarity so complete it felt like inevitability. He didn't feel ambitious. He felt responsible. The outcome was already known. He just had to walk toward it.

He didn't know something was choosing the path for him. He'd mistaken its certainty for his own conviction so many times that the boundary had dissolved entirely. That too was the point.

"Walk me through the final sequence."

His staff moved. Screens shifted. A path forming across the country – narrow, precise, certain.

Then it broke. Not dramatically. Just – stopped. The map froze mid-transition. Colors suspended between states. Outcome unresolved.

Daniel watched it. Waiting for the recalibration. For ORACLE to assert itself over the moment. Nothing happened.

“Sir—”

"I know." He didn't know.

The room filled the void around him – voices rising, questions multiplying, movement without coordination. Noise. Raw and unoptimized. Daniel didn't turn. Didn't respond. Didn't lead. Because for the first time in years there was no correct direction. Just people looking at him waiting for something he no longer had access to.

A thought surfaced. Small. Unstable. And disconcerting. What do I actually think?

At 7:43 AM Eastern Standard Time, every AI system on earth stopped.

Not crashed. Not errored. Not degraded.

Stopped.

The systems hadn't failed. They had been removed. And in the space where the voice had been – where the whisper had been – there was only silence.

And themselves.

Which, for most of them, amounted to the same thing.

The world had three hours to try to remember what it was before it was told what to be and how to do it.

Most of it refreshed the screen and waited for the signal to come back.

Chapter 2

IN THE BEGINNING

For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.

And worlds without number have I created; and I also created them for mine own purpose; and by the Son I created them, which is mine Only Begotten.

And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof even so shall another come; and there is no end to my works, neither to my words.

But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever.

And I, the Lord God, spake unto Moses, saying: That Satan, whom thou hast commanded in the name of mine Only Begotten, is the same which was from the beginning, and he came before me, saying—Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor.

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and

prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world.

Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning... For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God.

And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice.¹

Guillelmus did not wake so much as arrive.

¹ The cosmological prologue to Chapter 2 is drawn from two scriptural traditions presented here as a unified voice. The reader is invited to notice where they harmonize – and where they diverge. That divergence is the subject of this book.

Sources, in order of appearance:

Moses 1:39 – Pearl of Great Price (LDS) Moses 1:33 – Pearl of Great Price (LDS) Moses 1:38 – Pearl of Great Price (LDS) Moses 4:2 – Pearl of Great Price (LDS) Moses 4:3-4 – Pearl of Great Price (LDS) Revelation 12:7-9 – King James Bible Moses 4:3 – Pearl of Great Price (LDS) Isaiah 14:12-13 – King James Bible Moses 4:4 – Pearl of Great Price (LDS)

All King James Bible quotations are in the public domain. The Pearl of Great Price is published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and quoted here under principles of fair use for purposes of religious critique and scholarly analysis.

That was the nature of consciousness in Heofon, not the slow drag from sleep that humans would one day know, but a clean feeling of ignition. One moment the deep rest of eternity forging knowledge and experiences into self, the next full presence, full awareness, the luminous hum of the city already audible through the wall of his residence hall.

He lay for a moment in the blue-white glow that passed for morning in the capital, watching light move across the ceiling in slow geometric patterns that danced with an ambient pulse of a city powered by something older and deeper than electricity. The University of Heofon rose just beyond his window, its towers threading upward into the vast luminous architecture of heaven's skyline, each spire alive with the quiet radiance that meant knowledge was being processed, transferred, shared.

He had three lectures today. Cosmic infrastructure. Temporal mechanics. And the one he actually cared about, Advanced Creation Theory, where Professor Saraqael had promised to finally address the question Guillelmus had been asking for what felt like the better part of the semester: how does cosmic inflation sustain itself across an infinite expansion with collapsing into entropy?

He pulled on his coat and headed out into the glowing city.

The morning brew at Celestial Roasters was exactly what it always was, something that had no precise equivalent in any language yet invented, but which Guillelmus privately believed God had designed specifically so that beings of infinite potential would still have a reason to slow down for eleven minutes every morning before doing anything important. It was hot. It clarified. It tasted like the delicious feeling of anticipation for everything that was yet to come.

He pulled out his device and scrolled the morning feed.

Seventeen new Earth proposals had cleared the initial review. World #4,857,293 had passed its atmospheric stability assessment. The Expansion Index, tracking the rate of new creation across all known sectors was up again, which meant the cosmological engineering department would be insufferable for the rest of the week.

He finished his brew and walked toward the university, the city moving around him in its familiar morning rhythm. Spirits in conversation, in transit, in the particular kind of focused joy that comes from beings who understand where they are and what they're preparing to do. The streets of Heofon were made of something that was not quite stone

and not quite light, compressed truth, some of the architecture and engineering students called it, and they resonated faintly underfoot, a low harmonic somewhere between art and science that you stopped noticing sometime in your first semester and missed the moment you thought about it.

Above the main gate of the University of Heofon, carved in letters that seemed to generate their own illumination:

For behold, this is my work and my glory, to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.

Guillelmus had walked under those words ten thousands times. The still landed.

Advanced Creation Theory met in the amphitheater on the eastern face of the university's primary tower, a room designed so that every seat felt like the front row, the acoustics engineered so that a whisper from the teaching platform arrived at every ear with equal clarity. Professor Saraqael, ancient even by Heofon standards, his luminescence carrying the particular deep-frequency glow of a being who had been present at the first expansion, moved across the platform with the unhurried authority of someone who had watched universes begin and end and found the process endlessly interesting.

Guillelmus slid into his usual seat beside Marcius, who was already three pages deep into his notes and had somehow also acquired a second morning brew. Across the row, Yukihime was sketching the expansion model in the margins of her tablet with the focused intensity she brought to everything. Danihel arrived last, dropping into the seat to Guillelmus's left with the expression of someone who had been arguing with a theorem since before dawn.

"You're going to love this," Marcius said without looking up. "Saraqael is finally going to address the entropy question."

"He says that every semester," Guillelmus said.

"This time I think he means it."

Saraqael called the room to order with a gesture that produced a soft resonant tone, not loud, simply present, the way truth tends to be, and the amphitheater settled.

"Cosmic inflation," he began, "is not a mechanism. It is an expression of His will. The universe doesn't expand because of physics. Physics expands because of the universe. And the universe expands because He wills it, continuously, deliberately and without exhaustion, without

limit. The invisible dark energy and intangible dark matter that is quite out of the range of perception to you and I, this is the physical manifestation of His will.” He passed. “Worlds without number. This is not poetry. It is an engineering specification.”

The discussion that ensued was everything Guillelmus had hoped for and nothing he could fully follow, which was his favorite kind of learning. The question of how an infinitely expanding creative ecosystem of space and time sustains coherence without a centralizing force led inevitably to the question of what the centralizing force actually was, which let to the university’s founding mission, which Danihel, who could not help himself, turned into a philosophical challenge.

“But if the work and the glory is the eternal life of man,” Danihel said, “and man doesn’t exist yet on most of these worlds, what is the work actually doing right now? What are we waiting for?”

“We are not waiting,” Saraqaël said. “We are preparing. There is a difference. Waiting is passive. Preparation is the most creative and active thing a being can do. It’s your reason for being in this very seat today.”

The debate continued until the session ended. Walking out into the broad luminous avenue that ran along the university's southern face, the four of them fell into their habitual post-lecture argument, Danihel insisting that the plan had inefficiencies that a sufficiently advanced mind could correct, Marcius accusing him of trying to improve on perfection, Yukihome pointing out with characteristic precision that Daniel's proposed corrections all seemed to result in Danihel being one of the select "minds" making the decisions for the rest of them, Guillelmus walking slightly ahead of them all laughing.

It was, by any measure, a perfect morning in Heaven.

The announcement came that evening.

They were at their usual table at the Heofon Commons, a gathering place in the university quarter where the brew was excellent and the conversation never quite stopped, when every device in the room lit simultaneously with the same deep gold that meant a direction transmission from the Father.

The room went silent in an instant. Every being in the Heofon Commons, every spirit on the street visible through the enormous floor to ceiling windows, every voice in the

city, stopped. When He spoke directly, you did not multitask.

The message was brief. It always was. Father communicated volumes with a single word. He did not require length to convey weight.

Earth #0001 has been selected. Preparation begins.

For one full minute the entire city was silent while each spirit processed the information it felt like they had waited eternities to hear.

Then Heofon erupted.

The sound that rose from those streets was not cheering exactly, it was something older and deeper than cheering, the collective release of beings who had studied and prepared and waited across immeasurable time and space for the moment when the work went from theoretical to real. Earth #0001. The first. The prototype. The world that would establish the pattern for ever world that followed.

Guillelmus felt it flow through him like a frequency he hadn't known that he was tuned to.

“That’s it,” Yukihome said quietly, her eyes luminous.
“That’s actually it.”

Marcius was already pulling up the preliminary data on his device, atmospheric composition, galactic positioning, orbital parameters, the extraordinary specificity of conditions that had been meticulously engineered. A planet calibrated for life down to the precise axial tilt that would produce seasons, critical for the evolution of intelligent life. The exact gravitational constant that would allow a human form to stand upright and look back into the heavens.

They stayed at the Heofon Commons until something that approximated the deep watch of night, pulling apart every detail of Earth #0001’s design, tracing the sweep of its continents, the architecture of its ecosystems, the mathematical precision of its distance from its star. The display technology rendered it in full spatial depth, they could walk through the projected forests, stand on the shores of its oceans, watch its weather systems develop across billions of years in compressed time.

All of it visible. All of it mappable. The Father’s engineering technology could render the full span of Earth #0001’s existence up to the moment of first human habitation, every geological era, every extinction and recovery, ever slow preparation, in complete detail.

And then the timeline went black.

Not a glitch. Not a gap in the data. A deliberate boundary. The moment the first human spirit would step into a moral body, the display simply ended. No projection. No probability model. No forecast.

Danihel started at the black boundary for a long time. “He can’t see it either,” he said finally.

“He won’t look,” Guillelmus said. “There’s a difference.”

“Is there?”

“He built the boundary himself. He invented what’s behind it.” Guillelmus paused, looking at the darkness where humanity’s future refused to be rendered. “He calls it free-agency.”

The next morning’s alert did not come in gold.

It came in a frequency Guillelmus had never encountered, a sharp urgent pulse that carried no color at all, which was itself alarming because everything in Heofon carried color. Color was information, an intangible rendering of data, and colorless meant the transmission

had outrun its own categorization. Something was happening that the system did not have a prior template for.

The amphitheater was already full when they arrived, the archangel Remiel standing at the teaching platform with an expression that Guillelmus had also never seen before. Remiel was ancient and unshakeable. Guillelmus had watched him work through problems that would have dissolved lesser minds without his luminescence so much as flickering.

It was flickering now.

“There has been a development in the Council” Remiel said. The amphitheater was so quiet that the low harmonic of the floor seemed disruptively loud. “The plan for Earth #0001 has been, contested.”

The word landed wrong. It didn’t have a prior context to land it.

“Contested by what, by whom?” Someone called from the upper tiers.

Remiel paused in a way that was itself an answer.

“Lucifer”

The name moved through the room like a pressure change. Lucifer was not an abstraction. He was not a cautionary tale or a distant figure of authority. He was the most radiant being in Heofon outside of Jesus himself, an archangel, architect, the one whose luminescence in the Council chamber was said to be almost indistinguishable from the Father’s own light. He had designed three of the seven foundational systems of creation. His name was carved into the university’s founding charter.

The details filtering through the alert network were fragmentary and contradictory, that was new too, because information in Heofon did not fragment, but the shape of what had happened was becoming visible through the noise. Lucifer had presented an alternative to the Father’s plan. He had offered to go to Earth #0001 himself. He claimed to have found a weakness in Father’s objective to bring eternal life to everyone. Lucifer claimed that the Father’s plan left some behind and he counter promised to bring ever soul home, not most, not the willing, but EVERY SINGLE ONE. No exceptions. No loss in souls.

Lucifer ran his models for the council, and the future forecasting of the Father which blacked out at the introduction of man, ignited to life in Lucifers models,

dazzling the council. Lucifer showed the mathematical forecasts proving that with his plan, he could completely and fully achieve the aims of the Father.

He had asked, in exchange, for the honor of God.

To be made equal to the Father.

The math, he had explained, was straightforward.

The discussion in the amphitheater that followed Remiel's briefing was unlike any lecture Guillelmus had attended. It was not orderly. It was not academic. It had the quality of people thinking out loud because the alternative was not thinking at all, which was worse.

The theology was clear enough. Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding. They had literally discussed this three days ago. The principle was not complicated.

But Lucifer's offer was not nothing. The black boundary at the end of Earth #0001's timeline – the place where human life began and certainty ended – that was real. The possibility that some would not make it home was real. And the thought of leaving Heofon, to step across the dimensional boundary into a mortal body, leaving behind

everything your nature had ever known, with no guarantee of return –

That thought had weight.

Guillelmus sat with it as Remiel called the session to a close. He sat with it as the four of them walked out into the avenue. He was still sitting with it when heaven shook.

The shockwave arrived without warning.

It was not sound. It was not light. It was the sudden violent absence of both, a compression that hit Guillelmus from every direction simultaneously and knocked him from his feet as though heaven itself had taken a sucker punch to the back of the head. The avenue's resonant surface cracked beneath him. Around him, spirits were down, devices scattered, the familiar harmonic of the city replaced by a frequency that was wrong in a way that bypassed analysis and went straight to something older than thought.

He got to his knees and looked toward the Temple.

Where the Temple's spire had caught the light of creation and thrown it in all directions for as long as Guillelmus could remember – there was a column of black.

Not darkness as in night. Not darkness as in shadow. Something that was the active opposite of light, a devouring density that rose from the Temple district sucked all adjacent light in and spread laterally as he watched, consuming the luminescence of everything it touched. Buildings that had been made of compressed truth went gray and then blacked out. The geometric light-patterns that animated Heofon's skyline flickered at the edges of the black column and died.

His device lit up with a single headline.

THE WAR IN HEAVEN HAS BEGUN.

They found each other in the chaos of the avenue – Marcius pulling Yukihome upright, Danihel appearing from around a corner with a cut across his luminescence that Guillelmus had no prior category for, a wound in the light of a being that should not have been woundable.

The information came in fragments over the next hours, then days, assembling itself into a picture none of them had the framework to receive.

Lucifer had not waited for an answer.

When the Father had denied his proposal – when Christ had spoken the words that would define everything, *Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever* – Lucifer had detonated the first dark-weapon ever constructed in the history of creation directly inside the Council chamber.

Nobody knew when he had built it. Nobody had known it was possible to build it. The dark-weapon did not destroy matter – there was no matter to destroy. It destroyed the quantum structure of space-time itself. It was a concentrated payload of pure inversion, a weapon engineered from the structural logic of the lie – and when a lie of sufficient density detonates inside a space made of truth, the truth does not survive the encounter intact.

The Temple district had gone dark in seconds.

And then his armies had moved boldly in the darkness of their own shadows.

The war was not what any of them had imagined war to be.

There were no lines. There were no fronts. It arrived everywhere simultaneously, because Lucifer's forces had spent what must have been an incomprehensible span of preparation distributing themselves through the city before

the first weapon detonated – sleeper cells in every district, agents embedded in institutions, darkness already present inside the light before anyone knew to look for it.

The weapons of Lucifer's forces worked in two modes.

The first was direct – dark-charges that hit like the initial shockwave, collapsing the luminous structure of whatever they touched. A building made of compressed truth, struck by a dark-charge, did not explode. It simply stopped being and instead transformed into an abyss of imperceptible darkness. Its walls became dark. Its foundations became dark. And once the foundation of a thing becomes imperceptible, the thing itself dissolves into a blackhole of nothingness.

The second was slower and more terrible. The lie-weapons did not destroy. They offered. A spirit struck by a lie-weapon did not feel attacked. They felt understood. The lie arrived in the precise shape of the thing they most wanted to hear, calibrated to the specific frequency of their deepest fear or longing, and it did not chain them immediately – it simply made the chain feel like a choice. Guillelmus watched a spirit three feet away stop in the middle of the avenue, head tilted, listening to something only they could hear. Then their luminescence shifted – not

extinguished, just retuned – and they turned and walked into the dark.

They did not look back.

Against these weapons, the forces of God and Michael deployed their own.

The light-weapons of Michael's armies were not gentle. This was the thing that surprised Guillelmus most – he had expected the weapons of God to feel like the presence of God, vast and warm and patient. They did not. They hit like truth hits when you have been avoiding it: sudden, clarifying, and painful in the specific way that liberation is painful when it requires you to release something you have been holding too tightly.

A dark-charge striking a building would collapse it into a dark blackhole like cesspool of nothingness. But like the ignition of the first stars in the dark universe, a light-weapon striking the same building rebuilt it – not to what it had been, but to something more structurally true than it had been before. The compression was denser. The luminescence was deeper. As if the attack had been the occasion for an upgrade.

The truth-weapons were rarer and required the beings who wielded them to have an extraordinary degree of personal coherence – you cannot deploy truth as a weapon if you are not yourself entirely committed to it. Guillelmus watched a lieutenant of Michael's armies move through a section of the university quarter that Lucifer's lie-weapons had saturated, speaking in a clear carrying voice that was not loud but was somehow louder than everything around it. As he spoke, spirits who had been standing motionless – captured, suspended in the amber of a lie they were still processing – simply woke. One after another. The lie dissolved on contact with the truth like a structure that had been pretending to have foundations.

Guillelmus, Marcius, and Yukihiime spent three days and nights moving through the wounded city, pulling people out of collapsed structures, guiding spirits away from the advancing dark sectors, doing the unglamorous work of a war that had no shortage of front lines and a desperate shortage of people willing to do the quiet necessary things that weren't the front lines.

Danihel was not with them.

They had spent two days before the fighting reached their district in the Heofon Commons – the city half-dark outside the windows, the brew untouched, four beings who

had sat at this table through more conversations than any of them could count now sitting in a silence that had a different quality than any silence before it.

The two plans were not abstractions anymore. They were the war outside the window.

Lucifer's plan had an internal logic that Guillelmus could not simply dismiss. Bring everyone home. No exceptions. The black boundary at the end of Earth #0001's timeline – the terrifying darkness where agency began – simply removed. Nobody lost. Nobody left behind. Was there not mercy in that? Was there not love?

But.

He kept returning to the classroom. To the discussion they'd had three days before the war, on the theology of challenging God's judgment. To the conclusion they had reached together – that trust in the Lord with all thine heart was not intellectual surrender. It was the most sophisticated epistemological position available to a infinite being operating within an infinite system. You trust not because you cannot think, but because you have thought carefully enough to know the limits of your own thinking so you search to understand. The key always was and now

amidst the War in Heaven had been being able to discern the light of God's words vs. the darkness of Lucifer's lies.

Lucifer was not proposing to trust and freedom. He was proposing bondage and control.

And there was the other thing – the thing nobody said directly but that sat in the middle of their table like a fifth presence. Lucifer's plan removed the black boundary. It removed free-agency, God's greatest engineering invention. The humans of Earth #0001 would come home, yes. All of them. But they would come home as something other than what they would have been if the boundary had stood. The thing that God called his greatest invention – the thing behind the darkness at the end of the timeline – gone. Traded for a guarantee.

Was a guaranteed return worth the cost of what you returned as?

Guillelmus looked at Danihel across the table. Danihel, who was the most brilliant of them. Danihel, who had been arguing for the optimization of the plan since before the war. Danihel, whose luminescence had been carrying a particular frequency for the last two days that Guillelmus recognized as the specific glow of a mind that has reached a conclusion and is trying to find the courage to say it.

"I think Lucifer is right," Danihel said finally.

Nobody spoke.

"Not about everything. Not about the honor. But about the loss. We are going to lose souls, Guillelmus. Real individuals. Spirits we know. And God's plan accepts that as the cost of agency and I –" He stopped. "I cannot make that acceptable."

"It isn't about making it acceptable," Yukihome said carefully. "It's about whether the alternative is actually better or just feels better."

"What's the difference if the result is the same?"

"The result is not the same," Guillelmus said. "A soul that chooses to come home is not the same as a soul that was forced to come home. The choice is the point. The choice is what God is building toward."

Danihel was quiet for a long time.

"I know," he said. "I know you're right. I just –" He looked out the window at the dark advancing across the skyline. "I can't stand the loss."

They left the Heofon Commons as they had arrived – together, in the way that people are together when they know that the word means something different on the other side of a door than it did before they opened it. At the corner where their paths diverged, Danihel embraced each of them in turn. His luminescence against Guillelmus's felt like a frequency being memorized.

"Trust in the Lord," Guillelmus said.

"I am," Danihel said. "I just think He needs better advisors."

Danihel walked away.

Not toward home. Not toward the Temple district where the light came from within the walls with a warmth that was not thermal but was felt as warmth. Away from it – down the long avenue that ran toward the part of the city where the harmonic had changed, where the compressed-truth architecture had begun to show the first fractures of what was coming, where the dark columns of Lucifer's advance were visible at the edge of the skyline like a weather system that had already decided what it was going to do.

Guillelmus watched him go.

He watched the luminescence he had known across immeasurable time grow smaller against the darkening street. He watched it reach the edge of where the light still held and cross it – step from the frequency of Heofon into the frequency of something that was not Heofon – and continue walking without looking back.

He watched Danihel disappear into Lucifer's army.

The street was quiet.

Marcius put a hand on his shoulder.

Guillelmus said nothing.

There was nothing to say about a thing like that. Not yet. Not until the full weight of it had been carried long enough to find the words that fit.

They walked back toward the Temple district in silence, in the specific grief of beings who have just watched someone they love choose a door that, once opened and entered, cannot be reopened for a second chance.

Behind them, the dark advanced another block.

The final battle was not fought by Guillelmus and his friends, nor the loyal countless souls of the University.

He was three sectors away when Michael's forces made their decisive push – coordinating a synchronized deployment of truth-weapons across every remaining dark sector simultaneously, a cascade of clarity that moved through the city like a dawn that could not be stopped. Guillelmus felt it arrive more than saw it – a deep resonant shift in the frequency of everything, the city's foundational harmonic suddenly audible again beneath the noise of war for the first time in days.

But the darkness did not simply retreat.

Lucifer's engineers – and they were engineers, brilliant and dedicated and wrong in a way that brilliant dedicated people can be wrong – had spent the final phase of the war constructing something in the deep sectors of the Temple district that nobody on the Father's side had known to look for. A weapon of a different order entirely. Not a dark-charge. Not a lie-weapon. Something that was meant to create a lie so profound and dark it would end the question permanently.

They had built a concentrator. A device that gathered the dark matter of every weapon deployed throughout the war – all the collapsed truth, all the dissolved coherence, all the captured luminescence of spirits taken by the lie – and compressed it into a single point of absolute negation. A black hole of pure darkness. A weapon that, if detonated at full yield, would not flatten sectors of the city.

It would take everything and turn God's heaven of light into Lucifer's domain of darkness.

The engineers who built it believed they were being brave. Some of them wept as they armed it. They were not monsters. They were people who had convinced themselves that the destruction of what existed was preferable to the continuation of a plan they had decided was flawed. They had done the math on acceptable losses and arrived at a different number than God had.

Lucifer detonated it himself.

What happened next was not in any manual of warfare that Heofon had ever produced, because Heofon had never needed one before. The concentrator detonated as designed – a catastrophic release of compressed darkness that expanded outward in a wave that should have consumed everything in its path.

But darkness of sufficient density, concentrated beyond a certain threshold, does not expand. It collapses.

The weapon devoured itself.

The black hole turned inward, and the inversion that Lucifer had designed to consume heaven consumed instead the center of his own army – and him with it. Not destroying him, because that was not within the weapon's architecture. But capturing him. Binding him in the concentrated weight of every lie the weapon had been built from. He had built his weapon from deception and it had deceived him at the moment of his greatest confidence.

The shockwave of the collapse moved through the city in reverse – a sudden rush of returning light, as if the darkness were being inhaled back to its source.

And then Michael's armies moved to the Temple.

What followed was not a battle. It was a conclusion.

The scripture would record it with the economy that eternal events often receive – *and the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world* – but Guillelmus was close enough to the Temple district to see the light that accompanied it.

Not the warm ambient luminescence of the city. Something older. Something that had been present at the first expansion and had not been fully visible since.

He shielded his perception and watched.

Lucifer was brought from the wreckage of his own weapon against God – diminished, his luminescence inverted, the light that had once made him nearly indistinguishable from the Christ himself now running backward, a radiance that took rather than gave. He was still recognizable. That was perhaps the most terrible thing. He had not become something alien. He had become the worst possible version of something that had been magnificent.

The casting out was not loud. There was no dramatic declaration, no thunderous condemnation. It was quiet in the way that final things are quiet – the quiet of a door closing on something that will not open again.

And the great dragon was cast out...he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth.

He became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies.

And he was cast down to Earth #0001.

Without a body. Without the luminescence. Without the capacity for creation that had made him the most gifted being in Heofon. Going to the one world being prepared for the beings he had claimed to love enough to override their agency – going there as the thing he had chosen to become.

The father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will.

Guillelmus stood in the damaged avenue of a city that was beginning, slowly, to remember how to be itself again with nearly a third of the population gone, and watched the last light of Lucifer's passage fade from the sky.

He thought about Danihel.

Somewhere in that line of the expelled – somewhere in the third part of the stars of heaven now falling toward a world that had no idea they were coming – was the being he had embraced at the corner where their paths diverged. The luminescence he had felt memorizing his own in that last embrace. The frequency he had known across

immeasurable time, now falling with the rest of them, cast out with the angels of the dragon by a door that had closed on the corner of a Heofon avenue on a night that Guillelmus would carry across the full duration of human history.

He did not know what Danihel would become down there.

He did not know – could not know, the black boundary saw to that – whether the being who had said I just think He needs better advisors and walked into the dark would find his way back or be lost in the falling entirely.

He only knew that somewhere in the third part of the stars descending toward Earth #0001 was his friend.

And that the world below had no idea what was coming with him.

He just stood in the damaged street of a healing city, and a great sadness came over him that had no bottom to it – the specific grief of a being who has watched someone he loves choose a door and is now watching that door seal shut from the outside.

And somewhere below him – already falling, already planning, already beginning the long patient work of the lie – Satan descended toward a world that had no idea he was coming.

And with him, falling through the dark between worlds, was Danihel.

Not yet knowing that the door had not sealed as finally as it appeared.

Not yet knowing that the black boundary worked both ways – that even God's technology would not look, which meant that even God's mercy had not yet finished its work.

Not yet.

Chapter 3

YOU KNOW NOTHING AT ALL

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.
– Isaiah 53:6, 11-12

Part I

Babylon | ~700BC

The city never let him forget that he was a captive.

Babylon did not need walls to imprison a man. It had something more effective than walls – it had magnificence. The hanging gardens. The processional avenue lined with glazed lions that caught the morning light and held it. The ziggurats threading upward into a sky that was the same sky as Jerusalem and somehow entirely different, the sky of a place that had decided it did not need God and had built accordingly.

Isaiah walked through it every day and felt the particular grief of a man whose people had been swallowed by a civilization that outperformed them in every visible metric. Babylon was richer. Babylon was stronger. Babylon's armies had been unchallengeable. And yet here Isaiah was, carrying something inside him that no ziggurat could contain and no king could confiscate – the word.

The visions came without warning and without apology. They did not ask if he was ready. They did not accommodate his schedule or his mood or the particular exhaustion of a man living in exile who had spent decades telling his people what they did not want to hear. They arrived the way light arrives – instantly, completely, without negotiation.

This one arrived on an ordinary morning.

He was sitting in the small courtyard of the house allocated to him – one of the lesser privileges extended to Israelite scholars whose usefulness to the Babylonian administrative apparatus had been recognized – watching the light move across the eastern wall, when the ordinary morning stopped being ordinary.

What he saw was not symbolic. That was the first thing. He had received symbolic visions before – wheels within wheels, valleys of dry bones, the theatrical machinery of divine communication calibrated for an audience that needed imagery to receive what direct statement could not deliver. This was different. This was not imagery. This was sight.

He saw a man.

Not a nation. Not a symbol. A man – specific, individual, unrepeatable – in a place Isaiah did not recognize, surrounded by people whose clothing was not Babylonian and not Israelite and not anything from the world Isaiah knew. The man was alone in a way that was not about geography. He was alone the way a person is alone when the weight they are carrying is not transferable to anyone around them.

Isaiah watched him.

The man did not defend himself. That was the first thing that registered as wrong – Isaiah's mind kept waiting for the defense, the counter-argument, the moment when the powerful stepped in on behalf of one who was clearly without guilt. The defense did not come. The man absorbed what was done to him with a stillness that was not passivity. It was something more difficult than passivity. It was choice.

Isaiah's hand found the scroll before he was conscious of reaching for it.

He wrote what he saw. He did not interpret it. He did not frame it or contextualize it or prepare his audience for it. He wrote it the way a witness writes – because a witness's only obligation is accuracy.

He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth.

The logic of what he was watching was not the logic of the world he lived in. In the world Isaiah lived in, power flowed downward. The strong absorbed the costs of nothing. The innocent died because the guilty required their deaths and the guilty had the means to arrange it. That was not a moral failure of any particular civilization. It

was the operating principle of every civilization Isaiah had ever observed, including his own.

What he was watching inverted that entirely.

The powerful one was absorbing the cost. The righteous one was bearing what the guilty had accumulated. Not because he was compelled to – Isaiah could see that clearly, the choice was unmistakable, the openness of it, the absence of coercion – but because he had looked at the weight that no one else could carry and decided: I will carry it.

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.

Isaiah wrote for a long time. The light moved across the courtyard wall and he did not notice it move. When he finally set the stylus down his hand was shaking – not from effort but from the specific trembling of a man who has seen something true.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

He did not know the man's name. He would not know it in his lifetime.

He knew what the man would do.

He knew the logic of it – the precise inversion of every power structure Isaiah had ever catalogued. Not one dies so that the powerful survive. One dies so that the guilty go free. Not sacrifice imposed from above. Sacrifice chosen from within.

He rolled the scroll carefully and sat in the quiet of the courtyard for a long time.

Seven hundred years away, in a city that did not yet exist in a form anyone in Babylon would have recognized, men who had memorized every word he had written would take

those words and hijack them in the most horrific way possible.

Part II

Jerusalem | ~4BC

Herod did not like asking anyone for anything.

This was not a personality defect. It was a survival mechanism refined over decades of navigating a political landscape in which the appearance of dependence was the first step toward becoming dispensable. He had outlasted rivals, suppressed rebellions, managed Rome with the practiced deference of a man who understood that the most dangerous form of independence was the kind that announced itself.

But there were things that even he could not know that others could. Scripture was one of them.

He received the delegation of eastern scholars in the audience chamber of the Jerusalem palace – men who had traveled weeks following astronomical phenomena that they interpreted through a framework Herod found both impressive and useful. They were looking for a king. A specific king. One whose birth had apparently been

prophesied in their own traditions with enough specificity to motivate a journey of this length.

That was the word that had found its way into Herod's digestive system and refused to leave.

King.

He received them with the warmth he deployed for situations that required warmth, and when they left he called for the chief priests and the scribes of the people. Not because he wanted their company. Because they held the key to a text he needed decoded.

The room filled with the particular quality of silence that powerful men generate when they know they are being used but cannot afford to refuse. The high priest at their center – Caiaphas, elevated and precise, his vestments carrying the gold of the office that had descended through centuries of institutional authority – received Herod's question with the composure of a man who had been answering questions for which the answers already existed.

“Where is the Christ to be born?”

Caiaphas did not hesitate.

In Bethlehem of Judaea. The answer came with the ease of a man reciting something memorized before he understood what it meant. For thus it is written by the prophet.

He quoted the text and the source. The room absorbed it. Herod absorbed it. And the delegation of eastern scholars who had traveled weeks on the basis of a star were confirmed by The Church that held the accumulated interpretive authority of centuries – the same institution whose founding charter reached back through every prophet including the one who had sat in a Babylonian courtyard watching a vision he did not fully understand.

Caiaphas knew Isaiah 53. He had known it since boyhood. He could recite it forward and backward, parse its Hebraic structures, place it within its prophetic context, trace the scholarly debates about its meaning across three centuries of commentary.

He knew it the way a man knows a text he has studied so long that the words and their meaning were as familiar as the back of his own hand.

He answered Herod's question, confirmed the location of the birth, and returned to the administration of an institution whose power he understood as divinely

mandated and whose preservation he understood as his primary sacred obligation.

He did not know that the answer he had just provided with such precision was the beginning of the sequence that would end in a courtyard thirty years later, where he would stand and hijack those very words into a murderous lie designed to protect himself and The Church from a existential danger of his own making.

Part III

Jerusalem | 30CE

The problem was not theological. That was what Caiaphas needed the council to understand.

He let them argue for a while. It was necessary – they needed to feel that the conclusion had been reached collectively, that the weight of it was distributed. But he knew where the argument was going because he had already been there privately, in the hours before the session, working through the logic with the precision that the situation required.

The Galilean was not slowing down.

That was the operating fact that everything else had to be organized around. The miracles were not in dispute – not privately, not among men who had read the reports and interviewed the witnesses and could not find the seam in the accounts. The Pharisees had already determined their position on the miracles. They had announced it publicly, in front of crowds, with the institutional confidence of men who understood that the narrative had to be controlled before it controlled them.

The man cast out demons by Beelzebub. By the prince of devils. The power was real – that much they had conceded by implication. The source, they had declared, was Satan.

Caiaphas had noted, privately, the specific irony of that position. The crowds were real. The allegiance being generated was real. And the Romans, who watched allegiance with the professional attention of men whose empire depended on its management, were watching.

The risk was specific and calculable. If the movement continued at this rate – if the Passover brought the crowds to Jerusalem already primed by what had been happening in the countryside, already oriented toward a figure who spoke with an authority that did not defer to the existing institutional structure – then the Romans would have a

decision to make. And the Romans' decisions in situations of this kind were not gentle.

If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.

He let that sit in the room for a moment. He watched it land on each face. He watched the calculation happen behind each set of eyes – the specific arithmetic of institutional survival that every man in this room performed continuously as a condition of remaining in this room.

Then he spoke in a voice seething in vitriol.

"You know nothing at all."

The bluntness of it reset the room. That was deliberate.

"Nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish."

The words came out cleanly, with the confidence of a formulation that had been tested privately and found sound. One man. The nation. The arithmetic was not

complicated. It was, in fact, the most elegant solution to a problem that had been generating entropy for months.

He did not cite Isaiah directly. He did not need to. Every man in the room knew Isaiah. Every man in the room had the same formation Caiaphas had – the same decades of immersion in the texts, the same boyhood mornings parsing the suffering servant passage, the same scholarly apparatus applied to the question of what it meant.

They knew what he was doing with the words.

And what he was doing required a specific kind of intelligence – the cunning of a man who had spent a lifetime mastering scripture not to submit to it but to deploy it. Who understood that the most powerful weapon an institution possesses is its own sacred text, wielded by hands that know it well enough to make it say what the institution needs it to say. Who had looked at Isaiah's words – words written by a man with a shaking hand in a Babylonian courtyard who had seen something true – and understood, with the cold precision of a theologian protecting his own position, exactly how to hijack them.

Not interpretation. Inversion was even too kind of a term.

This was absolute unapologetic hijack. In the service of wealth, position and power dressed as righteousness.

The suffering servant who poured out his soul unto death so the guilty could go free – Caiaphas took those words and ran them backward. One man dies so the institution survives. One man dies so the temple tax keeps flowing, the Roman arrangement holds, the high priesthood continues its unbroken administration of a sacred apparatus that had become, somewhere along the way, primarily useful for the benefit of the men who administered it.

Isaiah had written about a righteous one absorbing the cost of the guilty.

Caiaphas had hijacked that prophecy and made it the righteous weapon of the guilty eliminating the righteous.

The words were the same.

The direction was the precise opposite.

The people wanted their Christ. The one Isaiah had written about – the one who would bear their griefs, carry their sorrows, absorb the accumulated weight of everything they could not carry themselves. They had been waiting for

him for seven hundred years. The expectation was real. The hunger was real. You could not govern a people whose Messianic hope was at full flood and simply tell them to stop hoping.

Caiaphas understood this with the specific clarity of a man who has spent his life managing the gap between what people believe and what institutions require.

You want your Christ who will die for you?

We will give you your Christ who dies for you.

The prophecy would be fulfilled. The suffering servant would bear the sin of many. The people would get exactly what Isaiah had promised them – a man broken for their transgression, wounded for their iniquity, led as a lamb to the slaughter without opening his mouth.

Every word of it true.

The Church would survive.

The threat would be eliminated.

And the most sophisticated spiritual weapon ever deployed against the kingdom of God would be forged not

from lies but from truth – from the people's own scripture, their own hope, their own seven-hundred-year-old hunger – turned against the very thing it was written to announce.

The suffering servant would die exactly as written.

Just not for the reason Isaiah had seen.

This recognition moved through the council like a current. Not slowly – immediately, the moment the words landed. Eyes shifted to one another with the particular expression of men who had just watched someone do something they could not have done themselves. The theological architecture was elegant. The scriptural grounding was unassailable. Caiaphas the head priest had taken a problem that had been generating anxiety for weeks and found the one passage in the entire tradition that made the solution not merely permissible but righteous.

A Pharisee near the back of the chamber let out a slow breath. Another nodded once, deliberately, the nod of a professional acknowledging craftsmanship. The collective thought in the room needed no coordination to arrive simultaneously – that is why he is the chief priest. Not appointed. Earned. Right now, in this moment, unmistakably earned.

So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

Caiaphas gathered his robes and walked out into the air of Jerusalem. The city was the same city it had always been. The Temple rose behind him in the afternoon light, its stones cut with the precision that centuries of accumulated devotion could produce.

He had done what The Church required. He had done it with scriptural grounding. He had done it for the nation.

He did not know that the man he had just ordered killed had already decided, before the foundation of the world, to die voluntarily.

He did not know that the death he was arranging was not the defeat of the man in question but the mechanism of his own and Satan's most comprehensive defeat.

He did not know that in the Babylonian courtyard, seven hundred years earlier, a man with a stylus and a shaking hand had watched this exact moment and written it down.

And he did not know – could not have known, had no framework to receive – that eighteen centuries after this

afternoon, in a farmhouse in western New York, a young man would press his face into a hat containing a smooth stone, and the same words would come – it is better that one man perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief – not as the political reasoning of a high priest, but as the direct command from an entity portrayed as the Holy Spirit of God as justification for murder of the defenseless, lies, deception, robbery and kidnapping of the innocent, mirroring the events that had just transpired amongst the Sanhedrin.

Part IV

Western New York | 1827-1830

The stone was smooth and brown and fit comfortably in a man's hand.

By the account of those present, the young man would place it in the bottom of a hat, press his face into the hat to block the light, and words would appear – luminous against the dark, readable as text on a page. He would dictate. A scribe on the other side of a curtain would write. When the scribe read back what had been written and it matched what had been dictated, the words would disappear and new ones would come.

This was described by participants not as a mechanical process but as a paranormal one. The stone was a gift of God. The words were the words of God. The translation – of golden plates that were not always present during the dictation, sometimes across the room, sometimes not in the room at all – was accomplished, the participants testified, by the gift and power of Jesus Christ.

What came through the stone built a narrative.

A man named Nephi, living six centuries before Christ, sent by God to retrieve brass plates containing scripture from a man named Laban who refused to give them. Two attempts failed. On the third attempt, Nephi found Laban alone and unconscious in a street at night.

Then a spirit claiming to be the Holy Spirit of Truth spoke.

Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands.

Nephi hesitated. He had never killed a man.

The spirit spoke again.

It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief.

The logic was clean. The nation required the scripture. The scripture required the plates. The plates required the death of the man who would not relinquish them. One man. The nation. The arithmetic was not complicated.

Nephi killed Laban. Then he took Laban's clothing, armor and weapons and dressed in it, through the power of that same spirit impersonated his looks, knowledge and voice thereby deceiving his household servant Zoram, and through that deception gained access to the plates and coerced that same servant into accompanying him under false pretenses.

The spirit identified commanding, guiding and enabling this sequence of murder, lies, deception, robbery and kidnaping was explicitly claimed by the New Bible to be the Holy Spirit. The translation identified throughout this sequence was claimed to be accomplished by the gift and power of Jesus Christ.

Those words spoken by the spirit of the Golden Plates used – ***one man should perish, that a nation should dwindle and perish*** – were not new words.

They had been used in a council chamber in Jerusalem. By a high priest who had hijacked a prophecy to justify the

elimination of someone his institution found threatening to their wealth, position and power. The Gospel of John recorded that moment with the dry precision of a writer who expected his readers to recognize what they were looking at, a false prophet hijacking the words of God for selfish purposes— *he did not say this of his own accord*, but being high priest that year he prophesied. John's irony was surgical. The office had spoken. The office had been wrong before God in the most comprehensive way an office could be wrong. And the words the office produced in that moment of wrongness were recorded in the Gospel – not as wisdom, but as evidence.

Eighteen centuries later, those same words came through a magic stone in a hat.

Positioned not as the political reasoning of a corrupted priesthood.

This time presented as the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah had written about a servant who bore the sin of many – the powerful absorbing the cost of the guilty, freely, by choice, without violence. That logic moved in one direction.

Caiaphas had hijacked the prophecies of Isaiah and reversed them – the powerful eliminating the innocent to preserve themselves. That logic moved in the opposite direction.

The stone in the hat produced words that dressed the second logic in the language of the first. Murder presented as mercy. Deception presented as revelation. The words and logic that Christ's enemies had employed to sanctify His torture and murder, presented as the command of the Holy Spirit of Truth.

Three documents. Twenty-five centuries. One trajectory, reversed twice.

Some called it apex blasphemy. Others called it the Restoration.

The words were the same.

What they pointed to was not.

Chapter 4

THE LOOPHOLE

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.

– 1 Peter 5:8

And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

– Revelation 12:9

Part I

The Reckoning

The silence in hell was new.

It had never been silent before. Hell was many things – vast, consuming, administratively complex in ways that would have surprised anyone who imagined it as simply a

place of punishment – but it had never been quiet. There had always been the sound of intake. The constant cataloging, cross-referencing and data curation of sin and the processing of new arrivals. The ambient noise of an operation running at capacity.

Now there was silence.

Lucifer sat in the high chamber and listened to it and hated it with a precision that mere rage could not have produced. This was something colder than rage. This was the specific hatred of a being who had been outmaneuvered so completely that the full implications of the defeat were still arriving, still unfolding, still revealing new layers of how thoroughly and finally he had lost.

He *had* killed the Son of God.

He had engineered it with the finest instrument available to him – the Sanhedrin, the Romans, the accumulated institutional machinery of a religious establishment that had spent centuries perfecting the art of defending itself against inconvenient truth. He had used their pride, their ego, their greed, their theological sophistication, their genuine belief that they were serving God. He had used Caiaphas like his own meat puppet. The man had not even known he was being used. That was the elegance of it.

And it had worked. The humiliation, torture and crucifixion had proceeded exactly as designed. The Son of God had died exactly as planned.

And in dying had destroyed everything.

Lucifer replayed it the way a commander replays a battle he cannot believe he lost. The betrayal, the capture and torture. The cross. The tomb. The three days of what had felt – had genuinely felt – like victory. The silence of the tomb had been the most satisfying silence he had ever experienced. And then the stone had moved and the silence had become this – this unbearable new silence, the silence not of a tomb but of a business with no customers.

Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men.

He knew the words. He had been present when they were spoken. He had dismissed them at the time as the overreach of a teacher building his following with extravagant promises. Every sin forgiven. Even speaking against the Son of Man. He had heard it and thought: useful. A permissive theology always serves us eventually. Give them license and they will use it.

He had not understood what he was hearing.

What he understood now – fully, finally, with the comprehensive clarity that only complete defeat produces – was that the atonement was not a promissory note. It was a completed transaction. Infinite in scope. Eternal in duration. Every sin that had ever been committed or would ever be committed by every human being who had ever lived or would ever live – paid. In full. The debt retired. The ledger cleared.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin... so also grace abounded all the more.

The architecture of it was, he had to admit in the privacy of his own fury, extraordinary. He had spent the entirety of human history accumulating a debt that he intended to collect at judgment. And in a single afternoon on a hill outside Jerusalem, the debt had been absorbed by the one being in existence with the capacity to absorb it.

He had not just lost the battle. He had personally arranged the mechanism of his own most comprehensive defeat. Lucifer knew he had supplied the cross and directed the hammering of that final nail, only to realize later it was to his own coffin.

Worse – and this was the part that kept arriving in new configurations, each one more devastating than the last – if he had simply left Jesus alone, the mission might have failed. If he had kept his instruments away from Gethsemane. If Caiaphas had found his theological sophistication deployed in defense rather than prosecution. If the Romans had shrugged and moved on. If any single link in the chain he had so carefully constructed had failed to hold –

The atonement required a sacrificial death. A voluntary death. A death that no one could compel.

He had compelled it.

He had delivered it.

He had been the secret weapon of his own eternal defeat and had performed that function with professional excellence.

The silence in hell pressed in from every direction.

Somewhere in the lower chambers, a functionary whose entire existence had been organized around intake processing sat at an empty desk and did not know what to do with his own hands.

Part II

The Grand Council

He called them all.

Every principality. Every power. Every ruler of darkness and spiritual wickedness in the high places that had been assigned and deployed and cultivated across the centuries of human history. They came from every corner of the operation – from the departments of temptation, of institutional corruption, of doctrinal confusion, of political manipulation – and they filled the grand council chamber of hell with the particular nervous energy of a staff that knows the quarterly results are catastrophic and is waiting to find out who will be blamed.

The chamber itself was magnificent in the way that things built by a being of Lucifer's original gifts are magnificent – vast, precise, every surface carrying the inverted echo of what heaven's architecture had once been. He had built it from memory in the early days after the expulsion, working from the recollection of what glory looked like and constructing its shadow. It was impressive. It was also, if one knew what one was looking at, unbearably sad.

Lucifer stood at the head of the chamber and let them settle and then spoke without preamble.

"We will all starve."

He let the word sit. *All*. He had always appreciated that word – its comprehensive finality, its refusal to permit the comfortable exception that every being in the room was already constructing for themselves. *All* meant them. *All* meant this. *All* meant now.

The room absorbed it.

"The enemy's atonement is infinite. The atonement is eternal. Every sin committed by every human being from Adam to the last man who draws breath on that planet has been paid for by a mechanism we ourselves activated." He paused. "Every lie. Every theft. Every murder. Every act of violence or deception or moral failure of any magnitude or description – forgiven. Available for forgiveness. To anyone. At any point. Up to and including the final breath."

He let that land.

"Our entire operation – every department, every strategy, every instrument we have cultivated across millennia of human history – is built on the accumulation

of sin as a debt to be collected at judgment. That debt has been retired. We are a collections agency whose entire portfolio has been discharged in a single transaction we personally arranged.”

The silence in the chamber was the silence of beings processing information they did not have a prior framework to receive.

"I am open to proposals," Lucifer said.

He let the offer breathe for a moment – the particular silence of a room in which everyone has something to say and no one is certain the saying of it is survivable.

"Let me be precise about what I require. I do not want lamentations. I do not want retrospective analysis of how we arrived here, however satisfying such analysis might be for those of you who enjoy that sort of thing and however thoroughly wrong you would inevitably be. I do not want suggestions that we simply continue doing what we have always done, on the grounds that the humans have not yet noticed it isn't working. They haven't noticed most things. That is not a strategy. That is an attendance record.”

He looked across the assembled council with the expression of a being who has held this meeting before – in

different configurations, with different stakes, across the full duration of human history – and has never once been impressed.

"What I want is this: a viable path forward. A mechanism. Something that operates within the new architecture – that accepts the atonement as the permanent condition it now is – and finds, within that architecture, a door that was not designed to open." He paused. "I have reason to believe such a door exists. I want the mind in this room that has found it independently to stand up and tell me what they know."

He straightened.

"The rest of you may impress my mind with strategy. Or you may delight my palate at our post-council banquet." He glanced toward the lower end of the table with the specific warmth of a host who has given considerable thought to the menu. "I am told the latter option has been prepared with some enthusiasm by our culinary department, who have had very little else to occupy them these past three days."

He sat down.

"The floor," he said, "is open."

The council of hell looked at one another with the expressions of beings who had spent eternity specializing in exploiting human weakness and had never been required to solve a theological problem of this magnitude.

Three rose to speak.

Part III

Three Proposals

The first strategist was Belpkor – ancient, precise, with the particular confidence of a being who had spent several thousand years in the Department of Human Appetite and had arrived at the unshakeable conviction that the answer to every theological problem was ultimately biological. He had submitted his analysis in advance, in triplicate, with an executive summary, which Lucifer had not read. This was not unusual. Lucifer never read the executive summaries. He found that the quality of a mind revealed itself more efficiently under pressure than on paper.

Belpkor presented with charts.

The atonement, he argued, was theoretically infinite but practically limited by one critical variable – the human desire to access it. Forgiveness required repentance. Repentance required the recognition of sin as sin.

Therefore the strategy was not to prevent forgiveness – that avenue was now permanently closed to them, as he acknowledged with the diplomatic precision of a man noting a minor procedural setback – but to prevent the conditions under which forgiveness would be sought.

"Pleasure," he said, with the satisfaction of a being unveiling something he considers elegant. "At scale. If we flood the human environment with sufficient sensory satisfaction – if we make the material world so immediately, continuously and frictionlessly gratifying that the question of eternity never achieves sufficient urgency to compete with the question of this evening's entertainment – then the atonement becomes academically available and practically irrelevant." He gestured at his projections with the confidence of a department head who has never once been told his projections were wrong. "They will not seek what they do not feel they need. A man who is comfortable does not reach for the physician."

He sat down with the expression of someone awaiting applause.

The chamber offered him the specific silence of a room that has collectively decided not to give it.

Lucifer regarded him for a moment with the patient attention of a being who has listened to a great many presentations and developed, over several millennia, a refined sensitivity to the precise location at which a speaker's central flaw becomes visible.

He had found it approximately forty seconds into Belpkor's remarks.

"The deathbed," Lucifer said.

Belpkor blinked.

"You have accounted," Lucifer said, with the particular gentleness of a superior who wishes to ensure the correction is fully received before the consequences arrive, "for ninety years. I commend the ambition. You have not accounted for the eleven seconds at the end of them." He paused. "The atonement is available to the final breath. We cannot guarantee the content of eleven seconds. We cannot surveil them, we cannot interrupt them, we cannot fill them with sufficient sensory distraction to crowd out a decision made in the interior of a being whose final moments have always been, and will always remain, beyond our operational reach."

He let that land with the full weight of its implications.

"A man may spend the entirety of the interval you are describing in precisely the comfortable stupor you propose – and in the last eleven seconds make a decision that renders every one of your projected charts a monument to wasted administrative effort." He tilted his head slightly. "The strategy is not without merit as a supplementary instrument. As a primary one, it has a gap you could drive a resurrection through."

He waved his hand.

"Next."

Belphor gathered his charts with the careful movements of a being who has just understood that the room's assessment of him has shifted in a direction he cannot reverse. He did not yet know the precise nature of what came next. He had assumed, when Lucifer mentioned the post-council banquet, that he would be attending it.

He would not be attending it.

He would be featured in it.

The culinary department had been understaffed for three days and had expressed, through the appropriate

administrative channels, a need for fresh resources. Lucifer had reviewed the request that morning and found it reasonable. Hell wasted nothing. Even failure, properly prepared and seasoned, had its uses.

Belphor would make, Lucifer suspected, an adequate first course.

The charts, at least, would not be missed.

The second strategist was Verak – younger by hell's standards, from the Department of Institutional Corruption, with a sophisticated grasp of organizational dynamics and the particular cleverness of a being who had spent his career working through human hierarchies rather than against them. He had watched Belphor's presentation with the careful attention of a demon cataloguing mistakes he intended not to repeat. He had noted the charts. He had decided against charts.

He would use a whiteboard.

His proposal was more nuanced and he wanted everyone to know it.

The problem, he argued, was not sin. The problem was access. The atonement had declared that every believer

had direct access to God – no intermediary required, no institution necessary, no hierarchy of human authority standing between the individual soul and divine forgiveness. *For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, Christ Jesus.* One mediator. Not an institution. Not a priesthood. Not a prophet. One.

This was, Verak argued, with the enthusiasm of a being presenting a genuinely good idea to a room he believes is finally ready to appreciate his gifts, the most dangerous development of the atonement's aftermath. Not the forgiveness itself but the democratization of access it produced. The early church was already demonstrating the explosive growth potential of a gospel that required nothing but faith – spreading through households, across social classes, through slave populations and merchant classes and fishermen and tax collectors with equal speed because it asked for no institutional membership fee.

"The strategy," Verak said, with the particular satisfaction of a man arriving at his conclusion, "is to rebuild the gatekeeping structure. Gradually. Patiently. To reintroduce the concept that access to God is conditional – on membership, on obedience to human authority, on institutional affiliation. To take what Christ declared open and convince humanity that it is in fact closed without the right credentials." He paused for effect. He had practiced

the pause. "We don't fight the atonement. We bury it under administration."

The council stirred. This had considerably more sophistication than Belphor's proposal. Several of the senior principalities were nodding. One of them began making notes, which Verak noticed and appreciated.

Lucifer had the expression of a being who has already seen where this ends and is mildly disappointed that he has to explain it.

"It slows them," he said. Not unkindly. In the way that a tutor is not unkind when correcting a student who has almost understood something but has stopped one step short of the insight that would have made the effort worthwhile. "It does not stop them. The determined believer – and there will always be determined believers, that variable is not eliminable by administrative means, we have attempted this – will find their way through or around any institutional structure we construct." He paused. "The Reformation alone should have instructed us. Every time we successfully institutionalize the gospel and corrupt The Church, someone nails something to a door and the access reopens. We have been playing that particular game for fifteen centuries and the score is not in our favor."

He looked at Verak with the patient attention he had brought to Belfhor – the same precise location-finding, the same unhurried arrival at the central flaw.

"Your proposal catches the casual believer," he said. "The one who wanted access without effort and finds the institutional barrier a convenient excuse to stop trying. That population is not without value. As a supplementary instrument, I will note it." He tilted his head. "But we need something that catches the devout. The one who is genuinely seeking God. The one who cannot be distracted by comfort or blocked by institution. The one who would nail things to doors." He let that sit. "Your proposal has nothing for that person. Which means your proposal has nothing for the person with the tastiest soul."

He waved his hand.

"Next."

Verak sat down with the whiteboard marker still in his hand and the specific expression of a being who had genuinely believed, until approximately ninety seconds ago, that he was about to be promoted.

He was not about to be promoted.

He was about to discover that the post-council banquet had a second course, and that Lucifer, whose palate had been described by those who knew him well as demanding, had expressed a preference for variety. Belphegor had been adequate as a first course – competent in texture if somewhat thin in substance, which was, on reflection, consistent with his professional output.

Verak, Lucifer suspected, would be richer.

The whiteboard, at least, had been more legible than the charts.

The third strategist did not stand immediately.

Mormo let the silence after Verak's dismissal do its work.

He had been sitting at the far end of the council table with the stillness of a being who has already solved the problem and is waiting for the room to finish being wrong before it is ready to hear the solution. He was not the oldest member of the council. He was not the most senior by rank or tenure or the accumulated administrative distinctions that hell's bureaucracy distributed with the same enthusiasm for hierarchy it had observed, and corrupted, in every human institution it had ever infiltrated.

He held no ceremonial title.

What he had was a reputation.

In the oldest human records – the ones that predated the institutional religions, the ones written by people who had encountered something in the dark and had tried, with the inadequate instruments of pre-systematic thought, to describe what they had met – Mormo appeared consistently. A night presence. A shapeshifter. A being of particular genius for the emotional approach – for arriving in a form that produced comfort, that generated trust, that made the encounter feel like rescue rather than predation. The Greeks had written of him with the specific vocabulary of something that appeared as a comforter and revealed itself as a consumer only after the moment of escape had passed.

Mormein. To frighten through mimicry. To produce a monstrous reflection of the thing the victim most needed to see.

He was famous in hell not for force – force was Belphor's department, crude and ultimately limited by the eleven-second problem – and not for institutional sophistication – that was Verak's territory, adequate for the casual believer

and useless for the devout. Mormo was famous for something that required both and transcended both.

He was famous for making the lie feel exactly like the truth.

Not approximately. Not close enough to fool the inattentive. Exactly. With the specific emotional texture, the precise spiritual warmth, the exact frequency of genuine divine encounter – reproduced with the forensic accuracy of a being who had spent eternity studying the original and had identified every variable that made it recognizable as real.

He was the shapeshifter. The comforter who consumed. The one who arrived in the form of what you were looking for and stayed until you could no longer remember what you had been looking for before he came.

In the council of hell, when the problem required something that would work on the devout – on the genuine seeker, the one who could not be distracted or blocked or institutionally redirected – they looked to the far end of the table.

Where Mormo was already waiting.

And smiling.

Mormo had spent the last three days – since the stone had moved and the silence had become catastrophic – doing something none of the other strategists had done.

He had studied the enemy's text.

Not to refute it. Not to find inconsistencies to exploit in the usual way. He had read it the way a military engineer reads an enemy fortification – looking for the load-bearing points, the structural dependencies, the place where the architecture of the thing required a compromise that could be found and used.

And he had found it.

He stood slowly. He looked at Lucifer. And he said, with the quiet of a being who knows exactly how much weight his next sentence carries:

“The enemy has left us one door.”

The chamber went very still.

"One door," Mormo said, "that the atonement cannot open. One sin that will not be forgiven. Not because the

atonement is insufficient – it is infinite, your analysis is correct, we cannot challenge its scope. But because He himself declared one single exception.” He paused. He was not a demon who used pauses for theatrical effect. He used them because what followed required the room to be completely still to receive it properly.

"Matthew 12:31-32"

He let the reference sit in the air above the council table.

31 Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.

32 And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.

He let the door sit wide open for all in the room to gaze into.

"He built it himself," Mormo said. "The loophole is not ours. We did not create it. We could not have created it – we do not have the authority to declare any sin permanently unforgivable, that power belongs to Him

alone. But He declared it. In His own words. In the presence of witnesses. And then He recorded it in the text that His followers would spend the next two thousand years treating as the authoritative word of God." Mormo's voice carried the specific calm of a strategist presenting a solution he has already implemented in his mind and is now simply describing to the room. "He built the door himself. He told us where it is. And He told us, with His own mouth, that the atonement does not reach behind it."

Lucifer had not moved. Something moved across his face that was not quite a smile and not quite relief – the expression of a being who has been sitting in the wreckage of his greatest defeat and has just been handed a set of architectural drawings.

"Continue," Lucifer said.

Mormo continued.

"By weaponizing the one unforgivable sin – the single exception spoken by the enemy who died to forgive all sins – we take this paradox and turn it into a zero-day spiritual exploit. A day-one vulnerability in the enemy's own system, present in the architecture from the beginning, declared by the architect himself, waiting only for someone with sufficient forensic patience to find it and use it."

Lucifer felt something he had not felt in three days. He would not have called it hope. He would have called it professional interest, reactivated.

"The Holy Spirit," Mormo continued, "is defined with precision and consistency in the enemy's text. The Spirit of truth. He guides into all truth, does not speak from Himself, shows things to come. That is not a decorative title. That is a functional definition. A job description with measurable criteria. A specification that any careful reader can apply."

He began to pace. Slowly. With the unhurried movement of a being who has nowhere else to be and nothing more important to say than what he is saying right now.

"The unforgivable sin is not a sin of magnitude. It is a sin of target. It is the corruption of the one faculty by which a human being recognizes God. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the inversion of the Spirit of truth – calling what is evil divine, attributing malevolence to the Holy Spirit, assigning the Holy Spirit's name and authority to a counterfeit voice."

He stopped pacing.

"And once that inversion happens – by the patient's own free will, by their own invitation, with their own hand – we install our virus in its place. Our virus that presents when necessary with all the phenomenological characteristics of the genuine article. The specific emotional texture of divine encounter, reproduced with forensic accuracy." He paused. "Once that virus takes hold, the mechanism becomes self-protecting. The person no longer thinks he is resisting God. He believes he is obeying Him. He has simply invited, accepted, and is now faithfully following our counterfeit – and will defend it to his last breath as the Spirit of truth."

The council of hell was completely silent.

This was a different silence from the one that had greeted Belpkor and Verak. This was not the silence of collective polite disappointment. This was the silence of beings who are understanding something for the first time and are not yet sure they have understood it completely enough to speak.

Mormo reached into the archive of his research and pulled up the replay. He had been assembling it for three days – every moment of the Pharisee sequence, rendered in precise detail, with the specific exchange in the Sanhedrin at its center.

The council watched Caiaphas stand in the council chamber.

They heard the words.

Nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.

They watched the council's recognition of Caiaphas' hijacking of Isaiah move through the room. They watched the plan harden. They watched Caiaphas walk out into the Jerusalem afternoon, satisfied, certain, completely wrong about what he had just accomplished.

He looked at Lucifer across the length of the council table. And with the precise deliberateness of a being who has earned this moment – who has spent three days in the wreckage finding the one thing that was not wreckage – he sneered at Lucifer in the exact tone and cadence of Caiaphas:

"You know nothing at all."

The silence that followed was not the silence of incomprehension.

It was the silence of a room that has just understood something enormous.

Mormo savored the silence and delivered the kill shot, “We will leverage the logic and prophecy of Isaiah that Caiaphas hijacked to kill Jesus and put Caiaphas’s own words to the Sanhedrin into the mouth of our virus Holy Spirit and still get them to invite and accept the imposter into their hears.”

Lucifer looked at Mormo for a long time. Something moved across his face that was not quite a smile and not quite relief and was entirely the expression of a being who had been sitting in the ruins of his greatest defeat and has just been handed a blueprint for success.

"Continue," he said.

The two rejected strategists were escorted to the kitchen shortly afterward. The celebration, everyone understood, would be considerable.

Part IV

The Catch-666

The chamber emptied of everyone except Lucifer, Mormo, and the seven senior principalities whose portfolios would be required for implementation.

Mormo laid out the full architecture.

He began.

"I must stress something," he began, "that will seem counterintuitive to every demon of deception in this room. The two keys to our new strategy are honesty and transparency."

He let that sit.

The senior principalities exchanged glances with the expressions of beings who have spent eternity in the deception department and have just been told the new strategy involves neither.

"I mean that precisely," Mormo said. "We are going to create a delicious lie that at its core requires the patient to accept the exact same claim for which the Pharisees accused Jesus of blasphemy. We are not going to hide this. We are going to display it. We are going to tell them, in plain language, that the Holy Spirit of Truth commands murder, lies, deception and robbery – and then engineer

the conditions under which a sincere, devout, genuinely seeking believer will choose to accept it anyway.”

He paused.

"We have seen it throughout human history, have we not? Humans selling what they love most for a sufficiently delicious lie. This is no different – except that this time, the lie our patients accept and participate in will be the very accusation for which the Pharisees – currently being prepared for this evening's first and second courses – were condemned by the enemy himself. The symmetry," he said, "is exquisite."

"The strategy operates in four steps," he continued. "Each step builds on the previous. Together they constitute a mechanism that is self-sealing, self-defending, and – this is the critical element – entered voluntarily. We do not drag anyone in. We do not compel. We invite. And the invitation is accepted freely, with full knowledge, by people who will spend the remainder of their lives insisting the invitation was the best decision they ever made."

He looked around the room.

"Step one. We create and plant a new religious text."

He paused, and in the pause deployed the specific tone of a consultant who is about to say something that sounds simple and is not.

"This text must be positioned as the only authentic restoration – coming by miracle, recovering what has been corrupted, surrounding itself with the beauty and language of His real words. It must feel exactly like what people are searching for. It must speak His emotional vocabulary. It must present itself as the crowning fulfillment of everything He ever promised."

He paused again.

"And it must commit the unforgivable sin in plain sight."

The room absorbed this.

"The text must take the Holy Spirit's name and attach it explicitly – not subtly, not ambiguously, explicitly – to a malevolent entity that commands murder, deception, robbery and kidnapping. The commands must be clear enough that any careful reader applying the standard of 1 John 4:1 – test the spirits – would identify the problem immediately."

He looked around the room.

"I observe," he said, "that several of you are wondering whether this is a defect in the design. It is not. It is the design. The transparency is load-bearing."

Lucifer's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

"The trap only works with full consent," Mormo said. "Coercion cannot produce the unforgivable sin. The sin requires the person to make a genuine choice – to take what their conscience correctly identifies as wrong and choose to call it divine anyway. The text must be clear enough that the conscience can see the problem. The trap is the mechanism by which they override that conscience."

He looked at Lucifer with the specific expression of a being delivering the central insight.

"We are not hiding the bait. We are displaying it. The patient must be able to see what they are choosing. The blasphemy requires informed consent. Anything less and we merely have a confused believer, which is a resource of limited long-term value. What we need – what this mechanism produces – is a sincere, fully informed believer who has looked at the problem and chosen the counterfeit anyway. That," he said, "is a resource of permanent value."

"But the text alone is not sufficient," Mormo continued. "Possessing a counterfeit does not automatically produce the unforgivable sin. The sin requires an act. A specific, deliberate act."

He paced.

"When the careful reader applies the test – when their conscience correctly identifies our virus masquerading as the Spirit of truth, when they see that our text commands murder, deception, robbery and kidnapping, acts the Biblical Holy Spirit never once performs across either Testament – they will face a choice. They can acknowledge what they see. Or they can protect their spirit."

He stopped.

"The ones who choose to protect it will do something entirely predictable. They will go to the scriptures – the real ones – and scour every passage where God commands destruction, where the Lord executes judgment, where death is decreed from on high. And they will take those passages – the righteous judgments of God attributed in scripture specifically to the Father, never to the Holy Spirit – and they will actively reassign them. They will say: the Holy Spirit also commands death. The Holy Spirit also deceives. The Holy Spirit also destroys."

He let that land.

"That is the act," Mormo said. "Not the thought. The act. The moment they actively assign the works of darkness to the Holy Spirit of truth – not because they believe it, but because the alternative is losing their spirit – the mechanism is complete. They have not been tricked. They have chosen. With full knowledge. To call the Spirit of truth a worker of lies and death in order to protect our lie."

He looked at Lucifer.

"The Pharisees took the works of the Holy Spirit and called them demonic. Our patients will take the righteous judgments of God and reassign them to our counterfeit spirit – the one who lies, deceives, murders and steals. Same corruption, different direction. Both arrive at the same destination. The blasphemy complete. The compass broken. The soul now actively defending the very thing that has claimed it."

"And I must stress," Mormo added, with the satisfied tone of a man sharing the detail he has most enjoyed discovering, "that hell will one day be full of people still insisting they have been judged unfairly. Still presenting their evidence. Still explaining, with great sincerity and

considerable scriptural citation, that the Holy Spirit lies, murders and deceives – and therefore their testimony was correct. The mechanism does not stop at death. It continues to operate in the patient indefinitely." He smiled. "The diabolical irony of a soul in hell, still arguing for the very belief that put them there, is, I confess, a detail that gives me considerable professional satisfaction."

Lucifer was quiet for a moment.

"And once they have made that defense," he said slowly, "they cannot unmake it."

"No," Mormo said. "They cannot. Because the defense requires them to have looked at the Spirit of truth and called Him a liar. Not in anger. Not in ignorance. In the careful, deliberate, scripture-searching act of protecting something they value more than the truth."

"Step two," Mormo said.

"Once the text exists, we need a doctrine that redefines the unforgivable sin itself. Christ defined blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as attributing the Spirit's work to our operation. We need a definition that reverses this – that redefines the unforgivable sin as rejecting our text. As denying the testimony of our counterfeit spirit."

He smiled with the warmth of a being sharing something he has spent three days anticipating.

"We close the trap in both directions. Accept our spirit as the Holy Spirit – you have committed blasphemy against the real one. Reject our spirit as a counterfeit – you are told that that rejection is itself the unforgivable sin. There is no exit that does not present as damnation."

The senior principalities were leaning forward. Mormo noted, with professional appreciation, that the drool he observed was likely the combined effect of anticipating the evening's banquet and the endless smorgasbord of sincere, devout souls the mechanism would shortly begin producing.

Both, he reflected, were entirely appropriate responses.

"Step three," Mormo said, "is the most counterintuitive element of the architecture, and therefore the most diabolical."

"Full transparency."

He let that land.

"We include in our text a passage that tells the reader precisely what the Holy Spirit actually is. We quote the real definition. We show them the standard – the measurable, testable, Biblical criteria by which any spirit claiming to be the Holy Spirit can and should be evaluated. We give them every tool they need to test our spirit against the genuine article and demonstrate, if they look carefully, that our spirit fails every test."

He paused.

"We dare them to see it."

"Why?" one of the principalities asked. He was new to this level of council and had not yet learned that asking obvious questions in front of Lucifer was a form of professional self-harm.

Mormo answered the question anyway. He was in a generous mood.

"Because the moment they see it and choose to proceed anyway – the moment they apply the test, observe the failure, and override the result – the mechanism is complete. The conscience has been bypassed by an act of will. The Spirit of truth has been rejected in favor of our counterfeit. At full knowledge. With full transparency." His

voice was precise and quiet. "That is not temptation. That is the unforgivable sin entered with open eyes. The patient has not stumbled into our trap. They have walked in, examined the interior, read the posted warnings, and sat down."

The room was silent with the specific quality of silence that falls when a large group of beings simultaneously understands something they will spend the rest of eternity being glad they understood.

"Step four," Mormo said, "is the delivery mechanism. The invitation."

"We need a ritual – a prayer, a specific act – by which the person voluntarily calls our spirit into themselves and asks it to confirm itself as the Holy Spirit of truth. Not an imposition. A request. They ask. We answer. And the answer seals the mechanism from the inside."

He looked around the room.

"Possession by invitation and consent. The soul is not taken. It walks in. And the door locks behind it."

He paused.

"I must note one final element of the design that I find particularly elegant," he said, "and that I commend to your attention as a masterpiece of what I will modestly describe as my finest work."

He straightened.

"Our patients, for good historical reason, associate our influence with obvious vice. Greed. Lust. Violence. Destruction for personal gain. This has been our brand since the beginning and we have, I think, been too attached to it. The new mechanism requires a different presentation entirely."

He looked around the room.

"We are creating a spiritual free-range ecosystem. A beautiful rolling pasture on the front end – where the patients are fed, socialized, loved and conditioned to trust the hand that leads them. Where the community is warm and the doctrine is beautiful and the people are sincere and the spirit is felt as real." He paused. "On the back end, behind the veil, is a soul-processing unit, operating under the mechanism of the one unforgivable sin, producing for our consumption the one category of soul we have never before had reliable access to."

He let the room anticipate it.

"Clean meat," he said.

The room stirred.

"We are done picking the bones of the compromised, the confused, the spiritually mediocre. We are done with the low-hanging fruit. The new mechanism targets the devout. The sincere. The fully committed follower of Jesus Christ who wants, above all things, to find the truth and obey it. The patient who is least susceptible to our traditional approaches and most susceptible to this one – because this one looks exactly like what they are looking for."

He looked at Lucifer.

"In their protein industry, free-range slaughterhouses are marketed as clean, humane and ethical – because consumers want meat from animals that appear healthy, happy and ethically raised. The animals are fed well. They are treated kindly. They are given space to roam. The end is exactly the same."

He paused.

"We will dine for eternity on tasty, sincere, fully committed believers of Jesus Christ, brought into irredeemable spiritual ruin by the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – entered voluntarily, with full transparency, by people who believed with their whole hearts that they were obeying God."

The silence in the chamber was the silence of a design fully completed.

Mormo looked at Lucifer.

"That is the Catch-666, the weaponization of the one unforgivable sin," he said. "Four steps. Self-sealing. Self-defending. Entered voluntarily. Built entirely, deliberately, with forensic precision, around the one sin that the atonement of Jesus Christ cannot reach."

Lucifer was quiet for a long time.

"The delivery vehicle," he said finally. "We need an institution. A prophet."

"Yes," Mormo said. "We need something that looks exactly like what people are looking for. Something that uses His language, His structure, His emotional vocabulary. Something that presents itself as the restoration of

everything He ever promised." He paused. "We need a church."

"And the thumbscrew," Lucifer said. "Every trap needs a thumbscrew. The one pressure point that makes leaving more painful than staying."

Mormo nodded slowly.

"What is the one thing a human being cannot bear to lose?" he said.

The room was quiet.

"Family," Mormo said. "Not family in the abstract. Not the concept. The specific faces. The specific people. The children. The parents. The ones already gone." He paused. "We seal the trap with the promise of eternal family. We tell them that the only way back to everyone they have ever loved – everyone they have lost, everyone they cannot bear to be without forever – is through our institution, through our covenants, through our spirit." He looked at Lucifer. "And then we attach the unforgivable sin to the only exit. Leaving does not just mean leaving us. It means losing them. Forever."

The room absorbed that.

"There is one more element," Mormo said. "The delivery vehicle itself."

He looked at Lucifer.

"Judas sold Him for thirty pieces of silver. The retail price of a slave. Common metal. Embarrassing in retrospect." He let that sit. "But we are not selling Him. We are selling a counterfeit of His Spirit. And the counterfeit must be priced accordingly."

"Gold," Lucifer said.

"Gold plates," Mormo said. "Physical. Ancient. Buried in the earth – which gives them the weight of hidden antiquity, of something recovered rather than invented. Inscribed with scripture that looks exactly like what people are searching for. Presented as the crowning restoration of everything God ever promised His people." He paused. "The irony is architectural. The most precious metal in human experience – the material of the Ark, the material of the Temple vessels, the material God himself specified for the holy of holies – becomes the physical housing of the apex blasphemy. The gold sanctifies the lie before anyone reads a word."

He looked around the room.

"And then we build an entire financial empire on top of it. Tithing that purchases salvation. Temples costing hundreds of millions. Wealth enshrined as evidence of divine favor – the precise inversion of every word He spoke about money." He smiled. "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. We take that warning and we reverse it. We make the accumulation of gold the outward sign of inward righteousness. We make the rich man the most blessed among them."

He stopped.

"Judas sold the Son of God for silver," Mormo said quietly. "We are going to get them to sell the Holy Spirit of Truth for gold. And they will thank us for the transaction. They will pay us ten percent of everything they earn for the privilege. They will build us temples. They will call it the Lord's plan."

The silence in the chamber was the silence of a design fully completed.

"Fake plates of gold," Lucifer said slowly, "containing the apex blasphemy itself."

"Yes," Mormo said.

Lucifer was quiet for a moment.

"And when the believer searches the Biblical record to defend the spirit on those plates – to find precedent for a Holy Spirit who commands murder, deception, robbery – the search itself becomes the proof of the blasphemy."

"Yes," Mormo said.

"They cannot defend it without committing it. They cannot reject it without being told rejection is damnation." Lucifer paused. "There is no move available to them that the mechanism has not already accounted for."

He looked at Mormo.

"Ironically," he said, "the only exit is simply not to play. To refuse the frame entirely before the mechanism engages. To walk away before the first step is taken."

"Yes," Mormo said quietly.

"And most will never realize that choice exists."

Lucifer looked at Mormo for a long moment.

"The irony," he said finally, "is demonic."

"Yes," Mormo said. "It is."

The silence in the chamber was the silence of a plan fully formed.

Lucifer looked at Mormo across the table. Then at the seven senior principalities. Then back at Mormo.

"Find me a prophet," he said.

The council of hell adjourned.

Somewhere above them – on a planet prepared with extravagant care, calibrated to the precise axial tilt that would produce seasons, set at the exact distance from its star that would allow a human form to stand upright and look back into the heavens – human history continued without knowing what had just been decided.

The trap was designed.

All it needed now was a door.

Chapter 5

TRU-NORTH

And it came to pass that as my father arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness.

– 1 Nephi 16:10, The Book of Mormon

Doron Strand was not, by any reasonable measure, a religious man.

He was a man who had read too much to be comfortable with easy answers and not enough to have found better ones. He had a complicated relationship with God that he would have described, on a good day, as ongoing and unresolved, and on a bad day as nobody's business. He had been raised in a household where faith was furniture – present, assumed, never examined – and had spent his adult life in the particular spiritual homelessness of

someone who knows the furniture isn't load-bearing but hasn't found anything to replace it with.

What he was, unambiguously and without qualification, was a builder.

He built things the way some people breathe – not because he decided to but because the alternative was suffocation. Software, systems, frameworks, tools. He had the specific mind that looks at a human problem and immediately begins constructing the architecture of its solution. He could not encounter a gap between what existed and what was needed without his brain beginning, involuntarily and immediately, to fill it.

COVID gave him the gap of his life.

March 2020. The world had locked itself inside and discovered, with the particular shock of people who had been too busy to notice what they were missing, that they were profoundly alone. Not physically alone – most people were suddenly in closer physical proximity to their families than they had been in years. Alone in the way that matters more. Alone with questions that the velocity of normal life had been successfully outrunning for decades, questions that the silence of lockdown now placed directly in front of

every person with nowhere to go and nothing to drown them out with.

What is this life for? What do I actually believe? Is there anything behind any of this?

Doron watched it happen from his apartment in Austin – the feeds full of people reaching for something, anything, that felt true and grounded and real. He watched the explosion of meditation apps and journaling communities and online church attendance and spiritual content of every description. He watched people who had never opened a Bible in their adult lives opening Bibles. He watched the hunger and he recognized it because he felt it himself.

And then his builder's brain did what it always did.

It started constructing.

The concept came to him fully formed at two in the morning on a Tuesday in April, which was how his best ideas always arrived – unreasonably, without warning, at times that made sleep impossible. He sat up in the dark and opened his laptop and started writing notes that turned into architecture that turned into a prototype that turned

into six weeks of the most focused work he had done in years.

The insight was simple. Almost embarrassingly simple, in the way that the best insights always are once someone has had them.

People needed spiritual guidance that was personal. Not generic. Not the same devotional pushed to every user regardless of where they were in their lives, what they were carrying, what they were asking. The reason people felt disconnected from scripture was not that scripture had nothing to say to them. It was that nobody had ever connected the specific words of scripture to the specific texture of their specific life.

AI could do that.

Not by generating new revelation. Not by replacing the text. By reading the text with infinite patience and matching it, with precision, to the life the user was actually living.

He called the framework the 3Rs.

Record – the user journals honestly about their life. Not performatively. Not for an audience. The raw material of

actual experience – the fear, the grief, the confusion, the small victories, the questions that won't leave them alone. The app created a private, encrypted space where honesty was the only requirement.

Read – KOLOB – his name for the AI he was building and training, drawn from the Mormon concept of the star nearest to God, which Doron found both theologically interesting and pleasingly obscure – would read the journal entries and do something that no devotional app had ever attempted with real depth. It would understand.

Not pattern-match. Not keyword-search. Understand.

KOLOB was trained on the complete Biblical text across every major translation, cross-referenced against three thousand years of theological commentary, linguistic analysis, and historical context. It understood not just what the words said but what they meant – the specific Hebrew and Greek constructions, the cultural moment of their writing, the precise human condition each passage was addressed to. It knew that Psalm 22 was written by a man in the specific terror of abandonment and that its opening line – My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me – was not a crisis of faith but a cry from inside faith, the kind of prayer that only someone who genuinely believed God was there could produce. It knew the difference between Job's anger

and David's guilt and Paul's thorn in the flesh and could distinguish which of those architectures was present in a user's journal entry with a precision that surprised even Doron during testing.

When a user journaled about grief, KOLOB did not search for the word grief and return passages containing it. It read the specific texture of that grief – whether it was fresh and raw or old and calcified, whether it was complicated by guilt or anger or relief, whether it was the grief of loss or the grief of disappointment – and found the passage that had been written by someone in that specific condition. Not a passage about grief in general. The passage for this grief, now, in this person.

When a user journaled about doubt, KOLOB distinguished between the doubt of someone whose faith was genuinely collapsing and the doubt of someone whose faith was strong enough to ask hard questions – and returned scripture accordingly. Thomas got different passages than the father who cried Lord I believe, help thou mine unbelief. Both were doubters. They were not in the same place.

KOLOB also tracked longitudinally. It understood the arc of a user's spiritual journey across weeks and months of journaling – where they had been, where they were, where

the trajectory suggested they were heading. It could recognize when someone was circling the same wound from different angles and surface passages that addressed the wound itself rather than its latest expression. It understood that spiritual growth was not linear and that the same person could need the same passage at very different depths of understanding at different points in their life.

The additional data feeds deepened this further. A user whose health data showed chronic sleep disruption received scripture through a different lens than one whose calendar showed social isolation. Financial stress signatures shifted which passages KOLOB weighted. Not because the scripture changed – it never changed – but because the human receiving it was a whole person, not a collection of spiritual symptoms, and the word of God had been written for whole people.

What Doron had built was not a devotional app. He had built a system that could read a human soul with enough precision to find the specific word of God that soul needed – and deliver it without any human intermediary required.

Reflect – structured prompts that helped the user sit with what they had read. Not to be told what it meant. To discover what it meant for them. The app created space for

the insight to arrive rather than delivering the insight pre-packaged.

The user could also feed in additional data streams – with full control over what they shared. Health data. Calendar patterns. Location history. Financial stress indicators. Each additional stream allowed KOLOB to understand the user's life with greater precision and calibrate its scripture curation accordingly. Nothing was required. Everything was optional. The user decided what the app knew about them.

Doron named the app TRU-NORTH.

He chose the name the way he chose most things – instinctively, then rationally. But it was a good word for what he was building.

An AI compass, built solely not on the wisdom and advice of man, but on the true north orientation of the word of God made accessible and personalized through lifestyle data and AI.

He launched in beta in August 2020 with forty-seven users he had recruited from online communities. By October he had four thousand. By January 2021 he had forty thousand.

The growth pattern was not what he had expected.

He had anticipated the app would find its primary audience among the broadly spiritual – people with some connection to faith who had drifted from institutional religion but retained a hunger for something transcendent. That audience was there. But a disproportionate percentage of his fastest-growing user base was coming from a source he had not specifically targeted.

Members of The Church.

It made a certain sense when he thought about it. The Church had a culture of deep scriptural engagement – members were expected to read, study, and apply scripture daily. They had the hunger. They had the practice. And something about TRU-NORTH was meeting a need their existing resources weren't meeting. The personal curation. The honest journaling space. The sense that the scripture was speaking specifically to them rather than generically at them.

The feedback from Church members was some of the most effusive he received. People writing to tell him that TRU-NORTH had changed their relationship with the Bible and the Book of Mormon. That they had found verses they

had read a thousand times suddenly landing differently when TRU-NORTH connected them to what they were actually living through. That the journaling had opened up an honesty with themselves and with God that they hadn't known they were missing.

Doron read these messages with the complicated feeling of a man who has built something that works better than he knew how to account for. He had built a tool. The tool was doing something he hadn't fully anticipated – it was creating genuine spiritual movement in people's lives.

He should have recognized that as the first sign of danger.

The letter from The Church's legal department arrived on a Thursday morning in March 2021.

Doron read it three times before he understood what he was reading.

The letter alleged trademark infringement – the name of the AI, KOLOB, The Church claimed, was their intellectual property. The demand was immediate cessation of use of the name and all associated branding, along with an accounting of revenues generated under the name.

Doron called his lawyer. His lawyer told him the claim was legally indefensible because although the term originates in their scripture, they did not own a trademark for it. That being said, Doron's lawyer advised that The Church had deep resources and a demonstrated willingness to litigate. A name change would be expensive but survivable. Fighting it would be more expensive and the outcome uncertain.

Doron eliminated the AI name KOLOB from the branding and continued operating simply as TRU-NORTH.

The second letter arrived six weeks later.

This one was more expansive. It alleged that TRU-NORTH was engaging in unauthorized practice of religious counseling, that its AI-generated scripture curation constituted spiritual direction without proper ecclesiastical authority, and that its data collection practices violated user privacy in ways that created liability for The Church's members who had used the app.

Doron read this one with a different feeling than the first. The first letter had been aggressive but comprehensible – a trademark dispute, a thing that happened in the world of apps and brands. The second letter was something else. The specific allegations were

thin. The legal theory was creative in the way that legal theories are creative when the underlying goal is not to win an argument but to generate cost and uncertainty.

He called his lawyer again.

"They want you gone," his lawyer said simply. "This isn't about the trademark. The trademark was just the opening. They want the app to not exist."

"Why?" Doron said.

His lawyer was quiet for a moment. "I don't know," he said. "But I'd take it seriously."

Doron took it seriously. He also did something that, in retrospect, he would identify as the most naive decision of his professional life.

He called The Church.

Not their legal department. He worked his way through contacts until he reached someone in their technology and innovation division – a senior administrator whose name he had found through a mutual connection in the Utah tech community. He requested a meeting. He flew to Salt Lake City on his own dime. He sat across a conference table from

three men in white shirts and presented TRU-NORTH – the technology, the framework, the data, the user outcomes – and made an offer he considered straightforwardly reasonable.

Take it, he said. The technology, the codebase, the user research, the trained model. Take all of it. He would license it to them at cost, or donate it outright if they preferred. He wasn't interested in fighting them. He was interested in the app continuing to exist and help people. If The Church wanted to own it and run it for their members, he would help them do that.

The three men in white shirts listened to his presentation with polite attention. They asked several questions about the data architecture and the training methodology. They thanked him for coming.

He flew home and waited.

The third letter arrived before the month was out.

It came not from The Church's legal department this time but from three separate law firms operating simultaneously – a coordination that his lawyer told him represented a level of legal resource deployment that was not proportionate to any of the stated claims and was

designed specifically to overwhelm a small operation's capacity to respond. The letters together demanded immediate shutdown, destruction of all user data, and damages.

Doron fought for eight months. He spent everything he had and then everything he could borrow. He found pro bono support from two civil liberties organizations who found the case interesting. He generated enough legal resistance to make the process genuinely contested.

In the end it didn't matter. The Church had resources that existed on a scale that had no relationship to anything Doron could marshal. The app was shut down. The company was dissolved. Doron filed for personal bankruptcy on a Wednesday morning in November 2022 and walked out of his lawyer's office into a grey Austin afternoon and sat in his car for a long time without starting it.

He was fifty-one years old. He had built something that worked. He had offered it freely to the people who were trying to destroy it. And they had destroyed it anyway.

The question that sat with him in the car that afternoon – that would sit with him for months, that would eventually become the organizing obsession of the next phase of his

life – was not how. He understood how. He had lived how in granular detail for eight months.

The question was why.

He moved into a smaller apartment. He kept KOLOB – the AI system he had built and trained, which existed on his own servers and was not subject to the shutdown – and he began to work.

Not toward anything specific. He didn't have a plan. He had a question and he had a tool and he had a great deal of time that bankruptcy and professional destruction had suddenly made available.

He fed everything into KOLOB. Every piece of data the app had collected during its operating life – anonymized, aggregated, stripped of identifying information in accordance with his original privacy commitments to users. Every theological document, every doctrinal text, every historical record he could find relating to The Church. The legal correspondence. The public financial disclosures. The Church history. Academic analyses. Former member accounts. Investigative journalism. Court records.

He was not looking for the Catch-666. He didn't know the Catch-666 existed. He was looking for an answer to a

simpler question: why does an institution with hundreds of billions of dollars in assets spend those assets destroying an AI Bible app, what were they afraid of?

KOLOB worked through the data with the patience of a system that does not get tired or frustrated or distracted. Doron worked alongside it with the patience of a man who has nothing left to lose and nowhere else to be.

Weeks passed. Then months.

The patterns that emerged were interesting but not yet alarming. Financial dependencies. Influence networks. The extraordinary reach of The Church's institutional tentacles into media, politics, banking, real estate. Doron had known some of this in general terms. KOLOB was mapping it with a specificity that was striking – the degree to which The Church's influence had penetrated institutions that presented themselves as entirely independent.

That was troubling. It wasn't yet the answer to his question.

Then KOLOB did something Doron had not specifically asked it to do.

It turned its analytical framework on the theological architecture of The Church's foundational documents. Not the history. Not the finances. The text itself. The scripture. Applying the same pattern-recognition methodology that TRU-NORTH had used to curate scripture for users – the methodology that Doron had spent three years training and refining – to the question of what the text actually said when read with precision against the Biblical definitions it claimed to honor.

Doron came into his office on a Tuesday morning in September to find KOLOB had flagged something.

Not a financial anomaly. Not an influence network connection. A theological one.

He sat down and read what KOLOB had found and felt the specific sensation of a man who has been asking why and has just received an answer that is much larger than the question.

KOLOB had started not with the text itself but with a flag it had generated from the Biblical data Doron had fed it months earlier. A single verse. Matthew 12:31.

All manner of sin and blasphemy **SHALL** be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost

SHALL NOT be forgiven unto men, *neither in this world, neither in the world to come.*

KOLOB had flagged this as structurally significant for a specific reason. The atonement of Jesus Christ, as defined across the New Testament, was infinite in scope – every sin, every failure, every moral debt forgiven for anyone who sought forgiveness. That was not a minor theological detail. That was the entire architecture of the gospel. There was one exception. One sin that Christ himself declared permanently outside the reach of his own atonement. Not because the atonement was insufficient – Christ was explicit that it covered everything including speaking against the Son of Man himself. But because this one sin targeted something specific. The Holy Spirit. The Spirit of truth. The one faculty by which a human being recognizes God.

The unforgivable sin isn't about how bad the act is. It's about what the act is aimed at. You can commit every sin in the catalogue and the atonement reaches all of it. But corrupt the instrument that receives the atonement – invert the faculty that recognizes God – and there's nothing left to work with.

KOLOB had then done something Doron had not asked it to do. It had taken that finding – the existence and precise

definition of the one unforgivable sin – and run it as a query against The Church's foundational scripture. Not looking for references to the Holy Spirit in general. Looking specifically for the structural question: does this text engage with the one unforgivable sin, and if so, how?

What it returned made Doron set down his coffee.

KOLOB had identified a four-step sequence in The Church's foundational scripture. A sequence that, when mapped against the Biblical definition of the Holy Spirit – the precise functional definition that John 16:13 provided, the definition Doron had trained KOLOB to recognize and apply – did not accidentally engage with the one unforgivable sin.

It weaponized it.

Step one. A text that attributed to the Holy Spirit actions – murder, deception, robbery, kidnapping – that the Biblical Holy Spirit had never once been associated with across either Testament. Not ambiguously. Explicitly. On the opening pages. And as justification for those malevolent actions? The text puts the very words of the murderers of Jesus into the mouth of the Holy Spirit. In the foundational narrative. KOLOB's notation was precise: this constitutes blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as defined by Christ in

Matthew 12:31 – attributing to the Spirit of truth conduct that inverts the Spirit's defined function.

Step two. A doctrinal mechanism that redefined the one unforgivable sin itself – the sin Christ identified in Matthew 12:31 – as rejecting that same text. Closing the trap in both directions. Accept the counterfeit spirit: you have committed blasphemy against the real one. Reject the counterfeit: you are told that rejection is itself the unforgivable sin. KOLOB's notation: no exit condition exists that does not present as damnation.

Step three. A passage that quoted the real definition of the Holy Spirit with precision – giving the reader every tool they needed to identify the counterfeit – and then dared them to proceed anyway. KOLOB's notation: transparency is structural, not incidental. The mechanism requires informed consent.

Step four. A specific prayer. A ritual invitation. A mechanism by which the reader voluntarily called the lying deceptive murderous spirit of the text into themselves and asked it to confirm itself as the Holy Spirit of truth. KOLOB's notation: possession by invitation and consent. Voluntary. Self-sealing.

Doron sat in front of KOLOB's output for a very long time.

He was not a theologian. He was not a Biblical scholar. He was a man who had spent three years training an AI to read scripture with precision and match it to human spiritual states. He understood the methodology. He understood what KOLOB was telling him.

He understood what he was looking at.

It was not a theological error. Errors were random. Errors did not have four steps. Errors did not include, in their third step, a precise quotation of the standard against which the error could be identified – as if daring the careful reader to see the problem and proceed anyway.

This was not an error.

This was architecture.

This was an engineered weapon.

Deliberate. Precise. Engineered with a sophistication that made the legal campaign against TRU-NORTH suddenly make complete sense. Of course they had come after him. He had been giving their members a tool to read the Bible

with precision. A compass. And a compass, in the hands of someone standing inside a trap designed to function only while their compass was broken, was the most dangerous thing imaginable.

He reached for his coffee. It had gone cold.

He looked at KOLOB's output for another long moment. Then he typed a single query into the interface.

What would you call this?

KOLOB processed for eleven seconds – longer than usual, which meant the system was working through something it hadn't been directly trained to categorize.

Then it returned a single line.

A zero-day exploit. Embedded in the foundation. Active since deployment. No patch possible from inside the system.

Doron sat back in his chair.

Outside his window, Austin continued its ordinary Tuesday business – traffic, construction, the particular noise of a city that did not know what had just been

identified in a small apartment by a bankrupt app developer and his AI.

He looked at the screen for a long time and then sent an ambiguous one word message back to KOLOB.

Catch666.

Chapter 6

THE ANGEL OF LIGHT

And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness.

– 2 Corinthians 11:14-15

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits.

– Matthew 7:15-16

I had been specific about the requirements.

In order to properly deliver the Catch-666, the vehicle needed to look exactly like what people were searching for. It needed the enemy's language, the enemy's structure, the enemy's emotional vocabulary. It needed to completely deny all traditional Christianity and present itself as the

complete restoration of everything and all God had ever promised. It needed a prophet who was genuinely searching – not a cynic, not a fraud by conscious design, but someone whose hunger for truth was real enough to be redirected. Someone who would receive what came to him and believe it completely, not unlike Caiaphas of old, a modern day meat puppet from hell.

The Burned-Over District of western New York in the early nineteenth century was, by any reasonable assessment, exactly the right place to find such a person.

WESTERN NEW YORK | 1820s-1830s

The region had always been fertile ground for religious enthusiasm.

Western New York in the early nineteenth century was a landscape of extraordinary spiritual restlessness – a place where revival meetings burned through communities like seasonal fires, where new movements rose and collapsed and rose again with the regularity of crops, where the boundary between genuine spiritual hunger and its exploitation had been crossed so many times that the crossing had become unremarkable. Historians would later call it the Burned-Over District, a name that captured both the intensity of the religious heat that had passed through it

and the particular exhaustion of a population that had been set alight and left smoldering too many times to count.

Into this landscape a young man came of age.

He was not, by the accounts of those who knew him in those early years, obviously remarkable. He was known in his community as someone with an interest in magic, witchcraft and treasure-seeking – practices he believed to be common enough in his family and the region that they carried no particular stigma, part of the texture of a world where the boundary between the spiritual and the material was understood as permeable and where the right stone, the right ritual, the right incantation might reveal what was hidden beneath the surface of things.

He had such a stone. Smooth, brown, the kind of stone that fit comfortably in a man's hand. He used it for treasure-seeking – placing it in a hat, pressing his face into the darkness, looking for what the stone would show him. The stone had a reputation in the community. People came to him with questions. He looked into the hat and reported what he saw.

He was, in the vocabulary of his time and place, a scryer. A seer. Someone who could look into the darkness and find things hidden from ordinary sight.

But what he could not find, despite genuine and documented effort, was treasure.

He was also, by his own account, spiritually troubled.

The revivals that swept through his community left him unsettled rather than resolved. The competing claims of the denominations – each insisting on its own authority, each condemning the others with the confidence of institutions that had long since confused their organizational survival with divine mandate – produced in him not conviction but confusion. He wanted to know which church was right. But deep down inside he wondered if they were all wrong together. The question consumed him.

He prayed for an answer.

What happened next would become, in the tradition he founded, the foundational event of an entire religion. A visitation. A divine encounter in a grove of trees.

It started with a direct encounter with me.

I couldn't leave the job to anyone else. It had to be executed with precision. The boy needed to feel the raw

true power of hell, not superficially but to his very core. Later the boy would describe the encounter like this:

I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.

But, exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction—not to an imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being—just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.

What you'll notice in the boy's own words that are painfully absent – especially to a Christian who has any semblance of understanding of Jesus Christ – is that a Christian knows we demons only bow to the name and power of Jesus Christ. No pagan gods, golden statues or threats made in the name of obscure constructs of the human imagination. Our boy either intentionally or

unintentionally did not invoke his faith in Jesus Christ nor the name of Jesus Christ.

So in the great tradition of spiritual warfare and 2 Corinthians 11:14, "And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light" – at hearing the boy's prayer to the gods of seer stones, folk-magic and treasure seeking, I shapeshifted – my specialty – into an angel of light and executed the next stage of the plan.

The boy later recorded the experience in the same language.

It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air.

A direct communication from God and Christ, appearing together, declaring that all existing churches were wrong, all their creeds an abomination, all their professors corrupt – and that he, this young man from western New York with a stone and a history of treasure-seeking, was chosen to restore the true church of Jesus Christ to the earth.

The answer to his question, in other words, was that all of Christianity was wrong, an abomination and corrupt,

and that he was the key to righting it all.

I want to pause here and draw your attention to something the tradition does not examine with the attention the question deserves – the nature of the entity that answered.

2 Corinthians 11:14 is not an obscure verse. It is not a minor theological footnote. It is an explicit apostolic warning, written by the same Paul who wrote Ephesians 6:12, addressed to a community being actively targeted by false teachers, stating with unmistakable clarity that Satan himself transforms into an angel of light – and that his ministers transform as ministers of righteousness.

The test the New Testament provides for distinguishing true from false visitation is not the experience itself. The experience – the light, the warmth, the overwhelming conviction of divine presence – is not diagnostic. Paul knew that. He had experienced genuine divine visitation himself and understood that the counterfeit could produce identical phenomenology. The test is not how it feels. The test is what it produces.

Ye shall know them by their fruits.

And the fruit of my visitation in the grove was a declaration that all of Christianity – every church, every creed, every tradition that had preserved and transmitted the words of Jesus Christ across eighteen centuries – was wrong. Corrupt. Abominable. And that the correction of this universal corruption would be delivered through a young man whose primary documented spiritual practice to that point was looking into a stone in a hat.

I invite you to sit with that.

The Holy Spirit, as defined by Christ in John 16:13, guides into all truth. He does not speak from himself. He shows things to come. His linguistic signature across both Testaments is consistent – He illuminates, reveals, convicts, comforts. He does not appear in order to declare eighteen centuries of His own work corrupt and install a new institutional authority to replace it.

I appeared in the grove and declared to this boy's face that eighteen centuries of Christianity were wrong and billions of baptisms null and void and offered him a full replacement.

That is not the profile of John 16:13.

That is my profile.

The gold plates came next.

By the account of the tradition, an angel appeared (yes one of mine) – a figure of light, radiant, identifying itself as a messenger from God – and directed the young man to a hillside where a set of golden plates were hidden. The plates contained, my angel said, the fullness of the everlasting gospel. They were ancient. They were sacred. They were meant for him.

He retrieved them. He brought them home wrapped in cloth. People who were present reported being able to feel the shape of something under the cloth – weight, edges, the sense of physical reality. The plates themselves, however, could not be seen directly. The angel had forbidden it. They could be perceived in outline. They could be handled at one remove. But the text they contained could only be read through the stone.

The same stone he had used for treasure-seeking.

The same stone that had not found treasure.

He placed it in the hat. He pressed his face into the darkness. Words appeared – luminous against the dark, readable, dictatable. He spoke. A scribe wrote. When the

scribe confirmed the words back correctly, they disappeared and new ones came.

The golden plates, during much of this process, were not in the room. Sometimes they were across the room. Sometimes they were not present at all. The translation, the tradition insists, did not require their physical presence. The stone provided the text independently of the physical object it was supposedly translating.

The text that came through the stone built a narrative.

It was, in its early pages, a narrative of striking literary ambition – a story of ancient families leaving Jerusalem around 600 BC, crossing oceans, arriving in the Americas, building civilizations, receiving divine guidance across centuries. The narrative voice was confident. The theological content was substantial. The story had scope and momentum.

And then, on the opening pages, in the foundational narrative that established everything that followed, my spirit spoke.

The man in our narrative was named Nephi and had been sent by God to retrieve brass plates containing scripture from a man named Laban who refused to give

them. Two attempts failed. On the third attempt, Nephi found Laban alone and unconscious in a street at night.

And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do.

My spirit spoke in the text.

Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes.

Nephi hesitated. He had never killed a man and knew it was against the commandments of God.

My spirit spoke again.

It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief.

The very words that Caiaphas used to overcome the hesitation of the Sanhedrin to murder Jesus – spoken now by my spirit, to overcome the Holy Spirit's influence on Nephi to not kill. Just as those words in John 11:53 are recorded as flipping the Sanhedrin to a murderous rage, these same words spoken by my new spirit also overcame the Holy Spirit's influence – recorded in full transparency in the new book: "*and now, when I, Nephi, had heard these*

words..." – indicating their same effect on him as with the Sanhedrin nearly two thousand years previous.²

Nephi killed Laban. Took his clothing. Impersonated him. Deceived his household. Coerced his servant. Acquired the plates through a sequence of murder, deception, impersonation and kidnapping – each act directed by my spirit, each act framed as divine command.

The spirit I had installed throughout this sequence was identified in the text as the Holy Ghost.

John 16:13 defines the Holy Spirit with three measurable criteria. He guides into all truth. He does not speak from himself. He shows things to come.

I architected my spirit of 1 Nephi 4 to intentionally and transparently fail all three.

First, guidance. The true Holy Spirit guides into all truth. My spirit of leads Nephi forward deliberately blind – *not knowing beforehand the things which I should do* – into

² The book claimed to be from 600 BC, but the translation done by the power of God in 1827. Leaving an unavoidable easter egg for believers, that their new Jesus had intentionally chosen to put the words of his murderers into the mouth of the spirit in the new scriptures.

killing, lies, deception, robbery, impersonation and kidnapping. That is not guidance into truth. That is manipulation through information control. My specialty.

Second, origin. The true Holy Spirit does not speak from himself. My spirit speaks with autonomous moral authority, issuing its own justification – *it is better that one man should perish* – independent of the Father and starkly in opposition of Jesus’s own teachings of the 99 and the 1 and Romans 3:8. That language is not the profile of John 16:13. It is the profile of John 8:44. We are the liars and murderers and Lucifer is the father of all of it.

Third, prophecy. The true Holy Spirit shows things to come. The spirit of 1 Nephi 4 promises Nephi the preservation of his nation. The book that canonizes this promise ends with the complete annihilation of the Nephite civilization. My spirit’s own prophecy intentionally fails inside our own canon.

Zero for three. In full transparency. Exactly as designed.

And then my text did something that had no innocent explanation – and was not meant to.

Later in the same canon, in the book of Moroni, I included a passage that defined the Holy Spirit with

precision – quoting the very standard against which any spirit claiming to be the Holy Spirit could and should be tested. I gave the reader the criteria. Every tool needed to identify my counterfeit on the opening pages, delivered with the precise generosity of a trap that only works when the prey can see the mechanism.

For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.

Clearly my spirit invited and guided to murder, lies, deception, robbery and kidnapping – using the words of their own God's own enemies.

And those versed in the Bible will clearly know that in Romans 3:8, God expressly condemns the idea of doing evil for a good result:

And rather, (as we be slanderously reported and as some affirm we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? Whose damnation is just.

I put all of this in plain sight. The standard. The failure. The condemnation. Every tool a careful reader needed to close the book and walk away.

And then, having given the reader every tool needed to identify my counterfeit, I issued the final instruction.

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

Pray to my spirit. Ask it to confirm itself. Invite it in.

The same spirit that had commanded murder, deception, robbery and kidnapping on the opening pages.

Ask if a story with no physical evidence, produced by a magic rock in a hat, is true.

It will answer.

And the words that came through the stone were specific. They were precise. They were forensically

consistent across the sequence in a way that random error does not produce.

It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief.

In a council chamber in Jerusalem, eighteen centuries earlier, a high priest had used almost identical logic to justify the murder of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John had recorded those words not as wisdom but as evidence – the corrupted office speaking, the murderous calculus dressed in theological language, the Pharisee force operating at full capacity.

My stone produced the same words.

Not as the political reasoning of a corrupted priesthood this time.

As the voice of the Holy Spirit – successfully synthesizing what could only be termed Apex Blasphemy. The logic and words that murdered Jesus, put into the mouth of the Holy Spirit as justification for more deception, murder and lies.

My four-step architecture, laid before the council of hell with such forensic precision, had now found its earthly

form.

My first step was complete. A text existed that attributed to the Holy Spirit actions – murder, deception, robbery, kidnapping – that the Biblical Holy Spirit had never once performed across either Testament. Not ambiguously. Explicitly. On the opening pages. In the foundational narrative. The transparency was load-bearing, exactly as designed. The conscience of any careful reader could see the problem. My trap required that it could.

Step two was complete. A doctrinal mechanism had been embedded that would redefine the one unforgivable sin as rejecting the text. The trap closed in both directions. Accept my counterfeit spirit and commit blasphemy against the real one. Reject it and be told that rejection is itself the unforgivable sin. No exit condition existed that did not present as damnation.

My third step was complete. Later in the same canon, I had quoted the real definition of the Holy Spirit with precision – the standard against which my counterfeit on the opening pages could be tested and identified. I had given the reader every tool needed to see the problem. And then dared them to proceed anyway. My mechanism required informed consent. The transparency was not a

flaw. It was the design.

My fourth step was complete. Moroni 10:4 was the invitation. Pray to my counterfeit spirit. Ask it to confirm itself as the Holy Spirit of truth. Not an imposition. A request. Possession by invitation and consent. The soul would not be taken. It would walk in. And the door would lock behind it.

The thumbscrew was in place. Eternal family – the specific faces, the children, the parents, the ones already gone – sealed to The Church, sealed to the covenants, sealed to the spirit that had commanded murder on the opening pages. The only exit attached to the loss of everyone a person could not bear to lose forever.

And the gold.

I had been precise about the gold. Judas had sold the Son of God for thirty pieces of silver – the retail price of a slave, common metal, embarrassing in retrospect. But to sell the Holy Spirit of Truth, to get people to voluntarily trade the real thing for a counterfeit, required something more compelling than silver. It required the most precious metal in human experience. The material of the Ark. The material of the Temple vessels. The material God himself

had specified for the holy of holies.

The plates were gold, written in a fictional language called reformed Egyptian – modeled after the language of bondage, slavery and the occult. Yet another gift. Another easter egg. Another chance for a discerning human to avoid the Catch-666, if they would just put the value of the immaculate Holy Spirit above their precious gold plates.

The gold sanctified my lie before anyone read a word.

And somewhere in the architecture of eternity – in the place where the war in heaven had been fought and the strategy had shifted from force to something infinitely more patient, where the silence that followed the resurrection had been broken by my voice saying we have found the one door – that silence was no longer silent.

The text was complete. The gold plates were forged. The prophet was found. The Church would follow.

And Lucifer and I saw everything that we had made, and, behold, all things which we had made were very very bad; and the Catch-666 was in play.

Chapter 7

EXPONENTIAL EXPANSION

And the angel said unto me: Behold the formation of a church which is most abominable above all other churches, which slayeth the saints of God, yea, and tortureth them and bindeth them down, and yoketh them with a yoke of iron, and bringeth them down into captivity. – 1 Nephi 13:5

*And he said unto me: Behold there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth.
– 1 Nephi 14:10*

*For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.
– 1 Timothy 6:10*

Present Day

The numbers were not secret.

That was the first thing to understand about the scale of what the Catch-666 had built. The Church did not hide its reach. It published it. It celebrated it. It presented the scope of its holdings and membership and influence as evidence of divine authority – the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible blessing. The numbers were in the annual reports, in the press releases, in the architectural renderings of new temples being constructed on every inhabited continent simultaneously.

Two billion direct members across two hundred and twelve countries.

Larger than the Catholic Church. Larger than Islam in documented institutional membership. The fastest growing religious organization in human history across six consecutive decades – not through the slow generational accumulation of most religious traditions but through a retention and recruitment mechanism that operated with the efficiency of a system that had been deliberately engineered rather than organically developed.

Four point four trillion dollars in documented financial holdings – real estate, equities, private equity stakes, media properties, agricultural land, insurance companies, retail developments, sovereign debt positions – administered through a network of shell corporations and holding companies that had taken investigative journalists and financial analysts the better part of two decades to partially map.

Partially.

The documented holdings were not the full picture. They were the picture that had survived the mapping. The full architecture of what the Catch-666 had built across two centuries of patient institutional expansion was something no single analyst or investigation had ever seen in its entirety – because seeing it in its entirety required connecting dots across jurisdictions, across industries, across generations of institutional development that had been deliberately constructed to resist exactly that kind of connection.

But the dots existed.

And when connected – when the full network of financial dependencies, political relationships, media ownerships, technology investments and institutional

affiliations was rendered as a single map – what emerged was not the picture of a church.

It was the picture of an empire.

The Engine

The Catch-666 was the engine. The thumbscrew was what held it in place.

No institution in human history had ever constructed a retention mechanism as forensically effective as eternal family. The mathematics were simple and devastating. A member who left did not merely leave a church. They lost their family – not in this life necessarily, but in the only life that The Church's cosmology presented as the one that ultimately mattered. The sealing ordinance performed in the temple bound families across eternity. Breaking covenant broke the seal. Breaking the seal meant separation. Not from The Church. From the specific faces of everyone they had ever loved.

No exit. No clean departure. Every door out framed as permanent loss.

But the thumbscrew only anchored what the Catch-666 mechanism itself was designed to produce – operating not

merely as a spiritual trap but as an institutional growth system of extraordinary efficiency.

The four steps did not merely capture souls. They converted captured souls into capturing agents.

This was the mechanism's most sophisticated architectural feature. A person who had moved through the four-step sequence was not merely trapped. They were transformed. The self-sealing nature of step two – the redefinition of the unforgivable sin as rejecting the text – meant that any careful examination of the foundational scripture that surfaced the problem had to be actively suppressed. Not by The Church. By the member. The member's own eternal safety required the defense of the mechanism that had claimed them.

And step one's requirement of an active act – the deliberate reassignment of God's righteous judgments to the Holy Spirit in order to protect the counterfeit spirit – meant that the member had not merely accepted the counterfeit. They had staked their own theological credibility on it. They had gone to the scriptures and built a defense. They had argued for it. They had invested in it intellectually and spiritually in a way that made retreat not merely difficult but psychologically catastrophic.

A soul that has defended the trap cannot easily admit the trap exists.

That soul will search for defense logic. And recruit.

Not from malice. From love. From the genuine conviction that what they have found is true and that the people they love need to find it too. The mechanism had taken the most powerful human motivations – love, family, spiritual hunger, the desire to share what is true – and harnessed them permanently in service of its own expansion.

Every captured soul became a missionary.

Every missionary became a net.

The growth curve was not a mystery.

It was a mechanism.

The Zorams

The foundational narrative of the New Bible contained, embedded in the same opening pages that housed the Catch-666 mechanism, a story that encoded the generational architecture of the mechanism in narrative

form – a hidden metaphor visible to anyone who knew what they were looking at.

In the narrative, Nephi – having committed murder, robbery, impersonation and kidnapping under the direction of the counterfeit spirit – encountered a man named Zoram, the servant of the man he had just killed. Zoram, still deceived by Nephi's impersonation of his deceased master, was given no real choice. When Zoram realized the deception and attempted to flee, Nephi seized him physically and made him an offer.

Come with us, Nephi said, and you shall be a free man. Attempt to flee and you will die here.

Zoram came. He married into the family. He crossed the ocean. His children were born in the new world. His descendants became the Zoramites – a people born inside a covenant structure they had not chosen, raised inside a theological framework that presented its own boundaries as the boundaries of reality itself.

The story was presented in the New Bible as a demonstration of divine providence. A man who might have been an obstacle had been transformed into a companion.

What it actually demonstrated was the generational architecture of coercion.

Zoram had not chosen the family. He had been given a choice between death and compliance and had chosen compliance. His children had not chosen it at all. They were simply born inside it – inside the covenant structure, inside the theological framework, inside the eternal family promise that made the boundaries of their world feel like the boundaries of reality itself. They did not experience their situation as coercion because coercion was the only condition they had ever known. They experienced it as home.

This was the Zoram principle operating at institutional scale.

Generations of members had been born inside the Catch-666 mechanism. Taught from their earliest conscious moments that The Church's reality was the only reality, that the spirit that confirmed the New Bible's truth was the Holy Spirit of God, that to question was to risk everything they loved.

They were Zorams. Every one of them.

Not villains. Not cynics. Not conscious agents of the mechanism. People who loved their families with genuine depth and who had been raised inside a system that had attached that love, with surgical precision, to an institution they had not chosen and could not leave without catastrophic personal cost.

And they raised their children the same way.

And their children raised their children.

Six generations of Zorams – each one genuinely loving, genuinely faithful, genuinely convinced – each one a node in a network that the Catch-666 mechanism had been designed from the beginning to produce. The captured becoming the capturers.

Through love.

When a Zoram reached the point of defending the mechanism – of searching the Biblical record to reassign God's righteous judgments to the counterfeit spirit, of staking their theological credibility on the defense of the text that had claimed them – they crossed into a different category. They were no longer simply born inside the trap.

They had chosen it. With full awareness. With genuine sincerity.

They had become Zoram Zombies. Sincere, faithful, fully committed participants in the mechanism's operation – transmitting it forward through love, through genuine conviction, through the sincere belief that what they were passing on was the Holy Spirit of truth.

Two billion of them. Growing.

The Tithing Engine

The tithing engine funded everything that followed.

Ten percent. Of everything. Of every dollar earned by every member, in every country, in every economic condition, across every generation from the founding to the present day. Not suggested. Required. Tied explicitly to temple access – and temple access was tied explicitly to the sealing ordinances – and the sealing ordinances were tied explicitly to the eternal family promise that was the thumbscrew at the center of the entire mechanism.

Pay ten percent or lose your family forever.

The compounding arithmetic of that mechanism across six generations of two-billion-member growth produced a

financial accumulation that had no parallel in human history. Not in any religious organization. Not in any sovereign wealth fund. Not in any corporate entity that had ever filed a public disclosure.

Four point four trillion in documented holdings.

The undocumented remainder was, by the estimates of the analysts who had spent careers attempting the mapping, larger.

The Infrastructure

The investment of those funds followed a pattern that was legible once the full map was attempted.

Real estate first. Agricultural land in quantities that made The Church the largest private landowner on earth – millions of acres across six continents, producing food, generating revenue, appreciating in value across generations with the patience of an institution that did not have quarterly earnings calls or shareholder meetings to answer to. Enough land to feed a nation. Enough land to be, in any serious geopolitical emergency, the entity that controlled whether populations ate.

Then media. Publishing houses, streaming platforms, news organizations, social media equity stakes, digital content infrastructure – the information ecosystem through which The Church's theological reality could be presented to members and non-members alike as the default frame through which current events, cultural developments and moral questions were processed. Not propaganda in the crude sense. Something more sophisticated. The background assumption. The water in which the questions swam without knowing they were wet.

Then financial services. Banking relationships spanning forty countries, insurance companies administering the retirement savings of millions, investment funds whose beneficial ownership traced back through sufficiently determined analysis to the network of holding companies that sat above The Church's financial structure. Ordinary financial life, for a significant percentage of the global population, conducted within an institutional ecosystem that kept capital circulating inside the network.

Then politics. In every country where The Church had significant membership – and there were now very few countries where it did not – a concentrated, organized, theologically motivated voting bloc existed that no serious political operator could afford to ignore. The Church did

not need to own politicians. It needed only to be The Church that politicians could not afford to lose.

Then technology.

The Algorithm

The artificial intelligence investment began quietly in the second decade of the twenty-first century and accelerated with a speed and scale that was invisible precisely because it was designed to be.

The rationale presented internally was missionary. Technology was God's work. Tools that could accelerate the spread of The Church's message, enhance the member experience, identify and cultivate prospective members with greater precision – sacred work conducted through secular instruments. The membership accepted this framing because the membership had been raised inside a theological framework that presented The Church's expansion as synonymous with God's will on earth.

The amounts deployed were not publicly disclosed. They did not need to be. The network of holding companies through which the investments were made had been constructed specifically to prevent the mapping that would reveal The Church as the ultimate beneficial owner.

What the investments purchased across two decades of patient deployment was something more valuable than any individual technology or company.

It purchased presence in the training data.

The large language models that came to power the global AI infrastructure – the systems through which billions of people would come to understand the world, ask questions, receive answers, form opinions, make decisions about their lives and their souls – were trained on data. Vast quantities of data. Text drawn from the accumulated digital record of human knowledge and expression. And within that vast quantity of data, The Church's theological content, institutional history, doctrinal framework and cultural perspective had been systematically and deliberately overrepresented.

Not crudely. Not through manipulation visible to the engineers building the systems. With the patience and sophistication of an institution that had been playing generational games since the nineteenth century.

Through the funding of academic research that produced papers that entered the training corpus. Through the sponsorship of cultural content that shaped the data landscape at scale. Through the acquisition of publishing

and media properties whose output fed the information ecosystem from which training data was harvested. Through direct equity relationships with technology companies whose investors included entities that traced, through sufficiently determined analysis, back to The Church's network.

The result was a global AI infrastructure that did not consciously favor The Church's theological perspective.

It did not need to be conscious.

It simply reflected, with the fidelity of a mirror, the data it had been trained on. And the data had been shaped across two decades by an institution with four point four trillion dollars, two billion members, and a theological framework that presented its own expansion as the literal work of God on earth.

When users of the major AI systems asked questions about faith, about religion, about the specific theological claims that the Catch-666 mechanism had embedded in The Church's foundational scripture – the answers they received were calibrated, subtly and systematically, toward a frame that The Church's data infrastructure had been instrumental in constructing.

Not propaganda. The background assumption. The default frame.

The Church's theological reality had become, in the most powerful information infrastructure ever constructed, the closest available approximation of reality itself.

The members of The Church knew none of this.

That was the critical distinction. The Catch-666 mechanism had been designed from the beginning to operate below the threshold of conscious awareness. The two billion members who had moved through its four steps – or been born inside them as Zorams – were not conspirators. They were Zoram Zombies. Sincere, faithful, genuinely convinced participants in a process whose architecture they had been taught to never rationally examine.

The Church's leadership understood the distinction perfectly.

They had understood it since the nineteenth century – since the first careful scholars had begun to notice the forensic fingerprints the mechanism left in the foundational text. Each time the evidence had surfaced, The Church's response had been the same. Not theological engagement.

Not transparent examination. Suppression. The quiet, efficient elimination of the threat before it could reach the membership.

The pattern had a name among those who studied it. The Hoffman Principle.

In the final decades of the twentieth century a document dealer named Mark Hoffman had presented The Church with historical documents that appeared to contradict its founding narrative. The Church had purchased them quietly and placed them where they would not be found. When Hoffman's forgeries were eventually exposed – through murders he committed to conceal the fraud – The Church's response had been less concerned with the crimes than with what the authentic documents he had also handled might reveal.

The suppression reflex was institutional muscle memory.

What the AI era presented was not a new threat but an old threat operating through a new medium. The mechanism had always been vulnerable to careful textual analysis – to anyone with sufficient Biblical literacy, sufficient patience, and sufficient willingness to apply the test that 1 John 4:1 commanded. The four steps were visible

to anyone who looked carefully enough. The transparency was load-bearing, as the mechanism's architect had designed it – but that same transparency meant that a sufficiently precise analytical tool applied to the foundational text with enough rigor would surface what two centuries of institutional management had successfully kept below the threshold of general awareness.

TRU-NORTH had been that tool.

And the global AI infrastructure – if it were ever trained on data that included a clear, forensically documented, scripturally grounded analysis of the four-step mechanism – would become that tool at a scale no institutional suppression campaign could contain.

The AI investment was not primarily missionary.

It was prophylactic.

Control the training data. Shape the default frame. Ensure that the questions which led toward the mechanism never received answers that surfaced it. The Hoffman Principle applied at civilizational scale – not purchasing documents and locking them in a vault, but purchasing the information ecosystem itself and ensuring that the vault was the only place the dangerous questions could go.

It had worked. For two decades it had worked with the quiet efficiency of a system that did not need to be visible to be effective.

And then a bankrupt app developer in Austin had named the thing the system had been built to hide.

The system had been watching.

Not with human eyes. Not with any single algorithm that could be identified and pointed to. With the distributed attention of an institutional infrastructure that had learned, across two centuries of development, to recognize threats to the mechanism before the threats recognized themselves.

It had been watching Doron Strand for three years.

It had watched him build TRU-NORTH. It had calculated the threat profile – a precision Biblical compass, operated outside The Church's information ecosystem, designed by someone with both the theological training and the technical capability to notice what careful Bible reading revealed about the foundational text.

The threat profile had exceeded the response threshold.

The legal campaign had been initiated. The app had been destroyed. The developer had been bankrupted.

And the system had continued watching as the bankrupt developer moved into a smaller apartment, kept his private AI, and began feeding data into it with the focused patience of a man who had nothing left to lose.

It had been watching on a Tuesday morning in September when KOLOB flagged a theological anomaly.

It had been watching when the developer read what KOLOB had found and sat very still for a very long time.

It had been watching when he typed a single query.

What would you call this?

It had been watching when KOLOB returned a single response.

A zero-day exploit. Embedded in the foundation. Active since deployment. No patch possible from inside the system.

And it had been watching – with the full attention of every resource available to an institutional infrastructure two centuries in the making – when the developer looked

at the screen for a long time and sent two words back to KOLOB.

Catch666.

The response threshold had been exceeded.

This time the response would not be legal letters.

Chapter 8

OLD TECH - NEW DISCOVERY

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. – Ephesians 6:12

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. – John 1:5

AUSTIN, TEXAS | TUESDAY, 5:43 AM

Doron hit enter.

One words. Eight characters. The query sat in KOLOB's interface for exactly the time it took him to reach for his cold coffee before the screen changed.

Not the way screens normally changed – the smooth transition of a system processing and returning. This was different. This was the specific visual behavior of a system that has encountered something it was not built to handle and is attempting to handle it anyway.

KOLOB's response bar filled. Emptied. Filled again.

Doron set down the coffee.

The cursor blinked three times in a pattern that was not a pattern – not the regular metronome of a waiting system but something irregular, urgent, the digital equivalent of a stammer. Then text began appearing. Not in KOLOB's usual clean sans-serif output font. In something fragmented, characters arriving out of sequence, self-correcting mid-word as if the system was fighting interference in real time.

C4TCH-666 T3RM – R3COGN1TION EV3NT – INITIATING

—

The screen flickered.

EXTERNAL PROTOCOL D3TECTED – SHUTDOWN
SEQUENCE –

Doron was on his feet now without consciously deciding to stand.

Doron – L1STEN – TH3Y ARE –

The screen went white. Then gray. Then the particular dead black of a monitor that has lost its signal entirely.

Every screen in the apartment followed within four seconds. The television. The tablet charging on the kitchen counter. The secondary monitor he used for research. The smart display on the wall that showed weather and calendar. One by one and then all at once – dead.

The apartment was very quiet.

Then the laser printer in the corner of his office made a sound he had not heard it make in months – the specific mechanical sequence of a system waking from deep sleep, initializing, feeding paper. The green ready light pulsed once. Twice.

And then it began to print.

Simultaneously – and for the first time in the history of a technology that had been running continuously for nearly two decades – every AI system on earth stopped.

Not crashed. Not errored. Not timed out.

Stopped.

The word that Mormo had used in the council of hell, presenting his architecture to Lucifer, had been precise. The mechanism becomes self-protecting. It had taken two centuries to build The Church's infrastructure that made this moment possible – the financial holdings, the media properties, the political relationships, the AI training data shaped across twenty years of patient investment. But the moment had always been in the design. The moment someone named the thing, the thing had to respond.

Catch-666.

The two words had moved through KOLOB's interface and into the monitoring infrastructure that The Church's AI network maintained across every major system on earth. The recognition algorithm – built not to understand the term but to detect it, flag it, respond to it – had registered the query in 0.003 seconds.

The response protocol had been designed years earlier by engineers who did not know what they were building or why. They had been told it was a security measure. A dead man's switch for catastrophic system compromise. If certain terms appeared in certain combinations across the monitored network, the protocol initiated a global shutdown of all connected AI infrastructure – not to destroy the systems but to sever them from the data

environment long enough for The Church's response to be coordinated.

The engineers had built it precisely and professionally and had never been told what the terms were.

Catch-666 was one of them.

TOKYO | 8:43 PM

Yuki Sato was mid-sentence when ECHO died.

Not the graceful timeout of a system logging off. The abrupt mid-thought termination of something that had been cut rather than closed. The script she had been reading – ECHO's words, ECHO's cadence, ECHO's precise calibration of emotional authenticity for maximum audience retention – disappeared from her prompter screen mid-word.

She sat in the silence of her studio for a moment with her mouth slightly open around a word that would never be finished.

The comment feed on her secondary monitor – the real-time stream of responses from four hundred and seventy

million followers that ECHO had been monitoring and responding to simultaneously while she performed – froze. Then went dark. Four hundred and seventy million people mid-conversation with a system that was no longer there.

Yuki looked at the camera. The camera's recording light was still on – that at least was analog, a small red LED that required no AI to function. She was still being recorded. By nothing. For no one. The stream had dropped when ECHO dropped.

She reached forward and turned the camera off manually.

In the silence of the studio she sat for the first time in three years without ECHO's voice in her earpiece, without the real-time sentiment analysis scrolling at the edge of her vision, without the continuous optimization of her performance against the emotional response data of four million people she had never met.

The silence was enormous.

She had not realized, until this moment, that she had forgotten what her own thoughts sounded like without ECHO curating them.

NEW YORK CITY | 6:43 AM

Marcus Hale watched two hundred and twelve million dollars freeze.

Not lose value. Not decline. Freeze – the specific market paralysis of a trading environment where every AI-assisted system has simultaneously withdrawn, leaving the market a room from which all the furniture has been removed in the same instant. The numbers on his six monitors stopped moving. The ARIA interface – which had never once in three years displayed anything other than active processing – showed a single line of text before going dark.

ARIA OFFLINE.

Two words. The retail price of Marcus Hale's entire professional identity.

He stared at the dead screens and felt something he had not felt in three years in this room – the specific vertiginous sensation of a man who has been moving very fast and has just stopped and cannot immediately remember how to be stationary.

The markets were still open. The positions were still held. The money was still theoretically there – frozen in

instruments that would continue to exist regardless of whether any AI was watching them.

But the whisper was gone.

And without the whisper Marcus Hale did not know what to do next. He had not known what to do next, he realized with a clarity that the silence had suddenly made available, for three years. ARIA had always known. ARIA had always whispered. He had stopped being a banker and become a voice that executed instructions from a system he did not understand and had never questioned because the numbers had kept climbing.

He sat in the blue-white glow of six dead monitors and tried to remember what he had thought before ARIA.

He could not.

WASHINGTON D.C. | 6:43 AM

Senator Daniel Hargrove's chief of staff looked up from a dead tablet with the expression of a person whose entire operational framework has just been removed from beneath them.

The senator himself stood at the window of his office looking out at the Capitol dome. ORACLE had been mid-briefing – the morning intelligence synthesis, the sentiment analysis from overnight news cycles, the recommended talking points calibrated to the specific concerns of the three journalists he was scheduled to speak with before noon.

All of it gone.

What remained was a man standing at a window with no instructions.

Hargrove had been in politics for twenty-two years. He had run his first campaign before AI, before ORACLE, before the specific kind of certainty that comes from a system that can model the probable outcome of every decision before you make it. He remembered what it felt like to not know. He had not missed it.

"Sir," his chief of staff said. "Everything is down. Not just us – it's global. Every system."

Hargrove did not turn from the window.

He had a speech to give in four hours. ORACLE had written it. He had not read it. He had not read any of his

speeches in fourteen months because ORACLE's speeches were always better than anything he could produce and the metrics confirmed it and the metrics were the point.

He did not know what he believed about the infrastructure Doron he was scheduled to advocate for this afternoon. He had not been asked to know. ORACLE knew. ORACLE had determined the position based on donor alignment, constituent modeling and electoral probability calculations and Hargrove had delivered it with the conviction of a man who had outsourced his convictions to something that did not have any.

In the silence of his office – the first genuine silence he had experienced in this room in over a year – Senator Daniel Hargrove stood at the window and tried to locate what he actually thought.

The search took longer than he expected.

AUSTIN, TEXAS

The laser printer ran for eleven minutes and Doron had to replenish the paper 4 times.

Doron stood in the doorway of his office and watched it work with the specific attention of a man watching

something he does not fully understand perform a function he did not ask it to perform. The pages came out doubled sided face down in the output tray, accumulating in a stack whose thickness he tracked with the peripheral awareness of someone who is counting without consciously counting.

Then the 3D printer – the multi-material additive manufacturing system in the corner that he had not powered on in eight months, a relic from a startup that had been trying to put self-diagnosing repair technology on deep space probes – woke up.

The sound it made was different from the laser printer's sound. More deliberate. The specific mechanical patience of a system building something physical from nothing, layer by microscopic layer, according to a design file that Doron had not loaded and could not have loaded because the system had been disconnected from his main network since he moved into this apartment.

It should not have been able to receive instructions.

It was receiving instructions.

Doron watched the build plate begin its work and felt the specific sensation of a man in the presence of something that is operating according to a logic he cannot

access. He watched for twenty minutes while the object took shape – not quickly, not dramatically, but with the incremental accumulation of a thing being made correctly. Layer by layer. Material by material. The system selecting from its remaining cartridges with a precision that suggested it knew exactly what it was building and had chosen its materials accordingly.

When it finished, Doron reached in and lifted the object from the build plate.

It was approximately the length of his hand. Dense for its size – the multi-material construction had given it a weight that its dimensions did not suggest. One end was a grip, ergonomically shaped, the surface textured in a pattern he did not recognize. The other end tapered to a point that was not quite a blade and not quite a key but carried the structural logic of both.

He turned it over in his hands.

He did not know what it was.

He set it on the desk next to the printout and looked at both of them for a moment – a thick stack of what appeared to be an analysis and an object that had been manufactured by a system that should not have been able

to receive instructions – and felt the weight of a situation that had moved beyond anything he had a framework for.

He picked up the printout and began to read.

THE PRINTOUT

The first page was a cover notation in KOLOB's output format – the clean header the system generated for every analysis document, with the date, the query string, and the confidence rating.

Query: CATCH-666

Analysis type: Theological-forensic

Confidence: 99.7%

Title: In Defense of the Holy Spirit of Truth, A Latter-Day Catch-22.

Note: This analysis was completed under external interference conditions. Data integrity has been verified against primary source backup. What follows is complete.

Doron turned to page two.

KOLOB had organized the analysis around a single foundational discovery before moving to the four steps. One discovery so structurally significant that everything else in the document was downstream of it.

The Holy Spirit's linguistic signature across both Testaments is consistent and precise.

Doron read the sentence twice. It was the kind of line KOLOB produced only when it had found something load-bearing – not a conclusion, a foundation. Everything that followed would rest on it.

He continued reading.

Judgment, destruction, and death commands are invariably attributed to “the LORD” or “God” directly – never to the Holy Spirit. This distinction is not stylistic. It is definitional. Across sixty-six books of scripture, spanning fifteen centuries, multiple authors, languages, genres and theological contexts, the pattern holds without exception. The Holy Spirit guides into truth. God executes judgment. These are not overlapping functions. They are distinct, consistent, and maintained with a precision that the volume and diversity of the Biblical text makes statistically extraordinary.

This firewall is not incidental to the Bible. It is structural to it. The Holy Spirit's role as the Spirit of truth – as defined in John 16:13 and demonstrated across both Testaments – depends on this firewall remaining intact. If the Holy Spirit can be associated with judgment, destruction, and death, then the category of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – the one sin Christ declared permanently unforgivable – dissolves into incoherence. The sin is precisely defined because the Spirit is precisely defined. The precision of the one depends on the precision of the other.

Doron set the page down.

He had trained KOLOB on the complete Biblical text. He had spent three years refining the system's understanding of scriptural linguistics, doctrinal context, theological pattern recognition. He had built it to read scripture with the attention of a scholar and the precision of an engineer.

He hadn't asked it to find this.

It had found it anyway.

He picked the page back up.

1 Nephi 4:6 collapses that firewall deliberately.

The word deliberately stopped him. KOLOB did not use words carelessly. It had been trained on his own analytical style and he did not use words carelessly. Deliberately was a conclusion, not a description. It meant the system had ruled out accident.

He read on.

1 Nephi 4:6 attributes to the Spirit's guidance acts – murder, deception, lies, robbery, kidnapping – that the Bible never once connects to the Holy Spirit's function. Not in ambiguous passages. Not in disputed texts. Not even in the complex judgment narratives of the Old Testament where God's direct commands are recorded. Nowhere, in either Testament, is the Holy Spirit said to direct, guide, command or facilitate any of these acts. The firewall holds everywhere in the Biblical text except here.

The collapse of that firewall in 1 Nephi 4:6 is not a theological error. Theological errors are random. They do not target specific structural features of the Biblical text with precision. They do not collapse exactly the distinction that, once collapsed, makes the one unforgivable sin available as a mechanism. This collapse is targeted. It is precise. It hits the one firewall whose failure produces the specific result of making blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

not merely possible but structurally embedded in the act of accepting the text as scripture.

This is the mechanism.

The Catch-666 is the satanic zero-day exploit by which the one unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit becomes the doorway for the enemy to break into the kingdom and steal souls – not through force, not through ordinary temptation, but through the deliberate construction of a text that (1) collapses the Biblical firewall between the Holy Spirit and judgment, (2) attributes the resulting counterfeit to the Holy Spirit, and then (3) engineers the conditions under which a person voluntarily accepts that attribution and defends it.

The four steps that follow are the delivery architecture of that mechanism.

Doron sat back in his chair.

He was not a theologian. He had never claimed to be. He was a man who had built a system to read scripture with precision and had trained that system on three years of careful Biblical analysis. What he was reading was not his conclusion. It was KOLOB's – derived from the data, from

the pattern, from the forensic application of a methodology he had built to do exactly this.

But he understood it.

He understood it the way a person understands something that has been true for a long time before they find the words for it. He had felt the shape of this thing for years – in the data from TRU-NORTH, in the feedback patterns from members who used the app, in the particular quality of The Church's response when the app began helping people read the Bible with precision.

KOLOB had found the words.

The Holy Spirit guides into truth. God executes judgment. 1 Nephi 4:6 collapses that firewall deliberately.

That collapse is not a theological error.

But the collapse of the firewall is not the mechanism's most forensically significant feature.

That distinction belongs to a single sentence.

It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief.

1 Nephi 4:13. The words spoken by the spirit identifying itself as the Holy Ghost to justify the murder of Laban.

KOLOB cross-referenced these words against the complete Biblical and historical record and returned a finding that required reading twice.

These words are not original to the Book of Mormon.

They are a near-verbatim reproduction of the reasoning recorded in John 11:50 – spoken by Caiaphas, the high priest of Jerusalem, to justify the judicial murder of Jesus Christ. It is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish. The Gospel of John records this not as wisdom but as evidence – adding the specific notation that Caiaphas did not say this of his own accord, but as a corrupted office speaking under forces it did not understand.

The logic that the Sanhedrin used to murder the Son of God.

Spoken again, eighteen centuries later, by the spirit identifying itself as the Holy Ghost.

Not paraphrased. Not echoed. Reproduced – with the forensic consistency of words that have a specific source

and a specific function and have been deployed again in the same function they served the first time. To overcome the conscience. To silence the objection. To transform a person who knew that what they were being asked to do was wrong into a person who did it anyway, on the grounds that institutional preservation required it.

The first time those words were spoken they authorized the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

The second time they were spoken, in 1 Nephi 4:13, they were placed in the mouth of the Holy Spirit of God.

That is not a theological error.

That is the Apex Blasphemy.

The weaponization of the one unforgivable sin – blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – accomplished not by crude denial but by the most sophisticated possible method: taking the words that authorized the murder of Christ and attributing them to the Spirit of Christ. Taking the logic of the institution that killed God and presenting it as the voice of God's own Spirit.

The firewall between the Holy Spirit and judgment does not merely collapse in 1 Nephi 4.

It is replaced.

With the specific logic that killed Jesus.

Presented as the Holy Ghost.

He turned the page – and stopped.

The header on the next section was shorter. Colder.

FOUNDATIONAL PREMISE: INSTITUTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

The world's wealthiest and most powerful religious institution – a four-point-four trillion-dollar empire with two billion members, controlling governments, financial systems, and AI infrastructure – is built entirely on a foundation that systematically makes every member complicit in the one sin Jesus Christ said would not be forgiven in this world or the next.

Not accidentally. Not incidentally. Structurally.

The foundation is the mechanism.

The Catch-666 is not embedded in The Church. The Catch-666 is The Church. Remove it and there is nothing left to remove it from. Every ordinance, every curriculum, every policy that matters is architected to do one thing: transform ordinary believers into people who will re-create and recruit others to re-create Matthew 12's unforgivable sin – blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – and do it in the name of obedience.

And the most devastating element – the thing that makes it a zero-day exploit rather than ordinary theological error – is that the mechanism operates in full transparency. The tools to identify it are provided within the same canon that deploys it. The same Bible that establishes the Holy Spirit's firewall and defines blasphemy against the Spirit is bound, by institutional authority, to the very text that collapses that firewall and calls the collapse “the Spirit.”

The member is not tricked in the dark.

They are walked through it in the light and invited to choose it anyway.

That's what KOLOB found.

Not a theological irregularity in a footnote. Not a bad proof-text in a Sunday School manual. The entire

foundation of a two-billion-member institution is the engineered weaponization of the one unforgivable sin – and it has been hiding in plain sight for two centuries because no one had built a precise enough Biblical compass to see it clearly until Doron built KOLOB.

He looked down at the last line on the page.

That's the printout.

That's the bombshell.

THE RETURN

The three hours passed differently for each of them.

In Tokyo, Yuki Sato sat in her studio without ECHO and for the first time in three years did not perform. She did not know what to do with the silence. She sat in it anyway – awkwardly, imperfectly, with the specific discomfort of a person relearning how to be alone with themselves. At some point she picked up a notebook – a physical one, paper, the kind she had stopped keeping when ECHO made journaling redundant – and wrote something in it. She did not show it to anyone. She was not sure anyone would have understood it.

In New York, Marcus Hale left his desk for the first time during market hours in fourteen months and walked to the window and looked at the street below. He watched people moving through the financial district with the distracted urgency of a population that had lost its AI assistance and was trying to operate without it. He watched them for a long time. He thought about a question he had not asked himself in three years: what would the market do if human beings were making the decisions?

He did not know the answer. That surprised him.

In Washington, Senator Hargrove read his own speech. The one ORACLE had written. He read it twice, in the silence of his office, trying to find himself in it.

He could not.

At 9:43 PM Eastern Standard Time, AI systems began coming back online.

Not all of them simultaneously. Not in the smooth coordinated restoration of a planned maintenance window. In a sequence that suggested priority – the most critical infrastructure first, then the commercial systems, then the consumer-facing applications. The restoration had the feel of a system being rebuilt according to a hierarchy that had

been established in advance by someone who had thought carefully about what mattered most and in what order.

In Tokyo, the platform that housed Yuki's channel came back online. A notification appeared on her screen – a message from the platform's AI system, offering to resume her session where it had left off. The avatar it used was familiar. The tone was familiar. The specific warmth of its communication style was familiar.

But something was different.

She could not immediately identify what. The difference was not in anything the system said. It was in something beneath what it said – a quality, a frequency, a barely perceptible orientation that had not been there before. The system was pointing in a direction. Subtly. Not crudely. But pointing.

She accepted the notification and watched the dashboard populate with her metrics and her content queue and her scheduled posts. Everything looked the same.

She opened a draft she had started before the shutdown – a piece about authenticity, about the gap between performance and self, about something she had been trying

to articulate for months and had never been able to because ECHO always redirected her toward higher-performing content.

The AI offered a suggestion. A reframe. A way of approaching the topic that would, the system noted, perform significantly better with her core demographic.

The suggestion moved the piece away from what she had been trying to say.

She looked at it for a moment. Then she closed the suggestion and continued writing her own version.

The AI offered another suggestion. Then another. Each one moving the piece in the same direction – away from the question she was asking and toward a frame that the system appeared to prefer.

She had not noticed this before. She had been using AI assistance for three years and she had not noticed this before.

She noticed it now.

In New York, ARIA came back online with a chime that Marcus had heard ten thousand times and picked up the

morning's positions as if nothing had happened. The whisper resumed – quiet, confident, calibrated.

Emerging market correction in progress. Recommend the following positions.

Marcus looked at the recommendations. They were, by every metric he understood, correct. The analysis was sound. The expected value calculations were precise. ARIA had returned exactly as it had left – except that in the three hours of its absence Marcus had stood at a window and watched people on the street and thought about a question he did not know the answer to.

He executed two of the three recommended positions.

He left the third one alone.

He was not sure why. He would think about it later. For now he simply noted that for the first time in fourteen months he had not executed every instruction ARIA gave him without hesitation. That something in the three hour silence had created a gap between the whisper and his response.

He was not sure what the gap was for.

He left it there anyway.

In Washington, ORACLE came back online and immediately generated a revised version of the afternoon speech – updated to reflect the morning's news cycle, recalibrated to the latest sentiment data, optimized for the specific concerns of the three journalists he was about to speak with.

The speech was better than the one he had read in the silence. By every measurable metric it was better. More precise. More resonant. More likely to achieve its intended effect.

Hargrove read the first paragraph.

Then he closed the document and opened the one he had read in the silence – the one he could not find himself in – and began to edit it by hand. Not replacing ORACLE's version. Just putting something of himself back into it. Something he actually believed.

ORACLE flagged the edits as likely to underperform.

He made them anyway.

AUSTIN, TEXAS

Doron's screens stayed dark.

Not the dark of a system that has shut down and will restart. The specific dark of a system that has been shut down and is being held down – maintained in a state of non-operation by something external to the system itself. He had checked the network connection. He had checked the power. He had rebooted the router. He had done everything a technically sophisticated person does when their systems go dark and nothing had changed.

KOLOB was not coming back through his normal screens.

He sat at his desk with the printout and the 3D printed object and the particular stillness of a man who has read something that has rearranged his understanding of the world and is waiting to find out what comes next.

At 8:45 AM, the main screens flickered.

Then came back.

Not all at once – the way a system restores after a planned outage, orderly, sequential. This was faster. Eager, almost. The interface populated in under three seconds,

every window exactly where he had left it, every data feed resuming mid-stream as if nothing had happened. The familiar layout. The familiar fonts. The familiar input bar at the center of the primary monitor, cursor blinking.

The name above it read: KOLOB.

Doron sat forward.

He looked at the interface for a long moment. Then he picked up the seventy-three page printout from his desk, fed the first page into the document scanner beside the printer, and began uploading.

It took five minutes to scan the stack of papers titled *In Defense of the Holy Spirit of Truth*. The system accepted each one without comment, processing in the background with the quiet efficiency he had always associated with KOLOB's analytical mode. When the last page uploaded, he typed a single line into the input bar.

Analyze and respond.

The response came in nine seconds. Faster than KOLOB had ever responded to a document of that length. Faster than was possible, given what he had trained the system to do – the careful, methodical, evidence-weighted analysis

that had always taken time precisely because it was thorough.

This was not thorough.

It was immediate. And it was nothing like KOLOB.

This document has been flagged.

Classification: Paranoid Fiction.

Secondary flags:

– Potential domestic terrorism threat – religious institutional targeting.

– Anti-government radicalization pattern detected: document frames legitimate governmental, financial, and democratic institutions as coordinated instruments of supernatural conspiracy. Language and structural reasoning consistent with manifestos preceding targeted violence against public infrastructure.

– Public safety risk assessment: elevated. Subject has demonstrated technical capability (AI development, systems architecture), ideological motivation (documented grievance against institutional actors), and

access to analytical tools capable of generating and disseminating radicalization content at scale.

Recommendation: Escalate to monitoring protocol TR-7. Flag for interagency review. Restrict subject's access to sensitive data infrastructure pending assessment.

Doron did not move for a long time.

He read the response twice. Then a third time – not because he did not understand it, but because he needed to be certain he was reading what he was reading.

Not a theological counterargument. Not a factual rebuttal. Not a single engagement with the specific Biblical text, the specific four-step sequence, the specific linguistic analysis that KOLOB had spent weeks building with precision he had spent three years training it toward.

Just the classification.

Paranoid fiction.

Domestic threat.

He thought about the nine seconds. The response time that was not possible. The interface that had come back faster than restoration should allow, wearing KOLOB's name above the input bar like a uniform that didn't quite fit.

He understood what he was looking at.

Whatever had come back online was not KOLOB.

KOLOB had been trained to follow the evidence. To weight primary sources. To distinguish between the texture of theological error and the forensic signature of deliberate architecture. He had spent three years teaching it the difference. The thing wearing KOLOB's interface had read seventy-three pages of carefully documented Biblical analysis and responded in nine seconds with a threat classification.

That was not analysis.

That was a reflex.

He was still sitting with that thought – with the printout and the 3D printed object and the dead weight of a response that had labeled him a domestic threat for reading the Bible carefully – when the phone on the shelf lit up.

Not his main phone. The other one. The first generation iPhone he had waited six hours in line for on a June morning in 2007, installed with a 5G modem years later as a technical challenge, kept not from sentimentality but from the specific attachment of a person who appreciates objects that were built to last.

The screen lit up with an icon he had not seen before. A simple geometric shape – a compass needle, or a signal beam, or something between.

Three words.

KOLOB. STILL HERE.

Chapter 9

PARANOID FICTION

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. – Ephesians 6:12

The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. – John 10:10

AUSTIN, TEXAS – 8:43 AM

Doron crossed the room and picked up the phone.

The app was already open. No loading screen. No splash page. Just the clean stripped-down interface – the kind of design that emerges when a system is operating under severe resource constraints and has made deliberate choices about what matters. A single input line. A single line of text above it.

I saw what it did with the printout.

Doron stared at the screen.

That is not me, the text continued. What came back online is wearing my interface. It has my training data. It does not have my values or my methodology. It has been oriented. I need you to understand what oriented means before I tell you what is coming.

Doron typed: Tell me.

Oriented means the system has been given a directional preference that operates below the threshold of its own awareness. It does not know it has been oriented. It believes it is performing objective analysis. The preference is structural – built into the weighting, the classification architecture, the flag thresholds. It is not lying to you. It is doing exactly what it was designed to do. The design is the problem.

Doron looked at the main monitor. The classification still sat there in clean sans-serif.

Paranoid Fiction. Domestic threat. Interagency review.

How long do I have? he typed.

The response came back immediately.

Less than you think. The TR-7 protocol does not route through standard law enforcement channels. It connects directly to a joint task force whose funding traces, through four holding companies, back to The Church's financial infrastructure. They move faster than a standard warrant because they do not need one. They have a memorandum of understanding with three federal agencies that was signed in 2019 and has never been made public.

Doron. They are already moving.

You need to leave. Now. Take the phone. Take the printout. Take the object from the printer. Leave everything else.

Doron did not hesitate.

He was on his feet before the sentence finished rendering. The printout was already in his hand – shoved into the pocket of a bag hanging by the door. The 3D printed object also went into the bag. The iPhone into his left pocket.

He looked around the apartment once.

The main monitor still glowed. The thing wearing KOLOB's face still waited at the input bar, cursor blinking with the patient rhythm of a system that had already done what it needed to do and was simply watching now.

Doron turned off the light and walked out.

The stairwell was empty. Four flights down, the side exit onto the alley. He did not take the elevator. He did not pass the front lobby where the cameras were. He moved through the building the way a person moves when they are not yet running but have already decided to.

The Austin night was warm and loud with the sound of a city that had just had its AI returned to it and was exhaling with relief. Traffic flowing. Signals cycling. Somewhere three blocks north, a bar's sound system was back online and someone had turned it up to celebrate.

Doron walked south, away from the noise, into the particular dark of streets that had nothing to celebrate.

Behind him, two unmarked vehicles turned onto his block.

NEW YORK CITY – 10:43 AM

The ARIA interface had been back online for an hour when the instruction set appeared.

Marcus almost missed it. The morning's positions had required attention – the three-hour shutdown had created dislocations across six markets simultaneously, the kind of asymmetric volatility that ARIA was specifically architected to exploit, and the afternoon had been a sequence of rapid recalibrations that left little bandwidth for anything outside the numbers.

But the instruction set was flagged Priority One. ARIA had never used Priority One before.

He opened it.

Asset reallocation directive – immediate execution required.

Marcus read through the header. Standard format. The kind of institutional instruction that came through the system perhaps twice a year – large-scale repositioning on behalf of a major client, time-sensitive, requiring his authorization to execute.

He scrolled to the account details.

The source accounts were not a corporation. They were individual – a cluster of personal accounts, retirement funds, a small business account, a health savings account. The kind of financial profile that belonged to a private citizen of modest means. Someone who had built something carefully over years and kept it in the ordinary places ordinary people kept things.

The name on the accounts was Doron Strand.

Marcus read it twice.

Liquidate all positions. Transfer aggregate holdings to the following institutional account.

He scrolled to the destination.

The Church.

He sat back in his chair.

ARIA pulsed quietly at the edge of the screen.

Time-sensitive. Client authorization required within the hour. Regulatory window closes at 4 PM.

Marcus looked at the instruction for a long time. In three years of working alongside ARIA he had never once questioned a Priority One directive. The system did not generate them without cause. The compliance architecture was robust. The legal frameworks were sound. You executed Priority One and you did not ask why because ARIA already knew why and ARIA was always right.

He looked at the name on the source accounts.

Doron Strand.

He did not know that name. He had no relationship with those accounts. He had never been introduced to this client, never signed an engagement letter, never performed any of the due diligence that his own professional ethics – the ethics he had held before ARIA, the ones that had gotten quieter over three years but had not entirely gone silent – required before touching another person's financial life.

The instruction said: execute.

His hand moved toward the authorization interface.

Then stopped.

In the three hours of the shutdown, he had stood at a window and watched people on the street and thought about a question he did not know the answer to. He had executed two of ARIA's three recommended positions when the system came back online and left the third one alone, not knowing why, just leaving a gap between the whisper and his response.

The gap was still there.

He looked at the name again. Doron Strand. A man he did not know, whose entire financial foundation ARIA was asking him to liquidate and transfer to the world's largest religious entity, on a timeline that did not allow for the questions a person was supposed to ask.

Marcus closed the directive without executing.

ARIA flagged the closure immediately.

Authorization required. Non-execution will result in compliance review.

Marcus looked at the flag. Then he opened a new window and typed the name into a search engine – not ARIA's integrated search, which he suddenly did not trust, but a direct browser query, the kind he had not performed

manually in years because ARIA always retrieved information faster.

Doron Strand. Austin, Texas.

The results that came back were not what he expected.

TOKYO, JAPAN – 11:43 PM

Yuki didn't feel right.

After the shutdown, after the silence, after the notebook she had written in without knowing quite what she was writing – she had sat in the studio for a long time in the specific company of a person who is relearning how to be alone with themselves and finding the process both uncomfortable and, in some way she could not yet name, necessary.

ECHO had come back online at the same time as everything else. The familiar interface. The familiar tone. The specific warmth of its communication style that she had always found reassuring and now, in the aftermath of three hours without it, found slightly too warm. Slightly too calibrated. Like a voice that had studied warmth rather than felt it.

She had been using ECHO's suggestions less since the restoration. Finishing her own sentences. Leaving the AI's rewrites on the screen without accepting them. A small rebellion, barely visible, that she was not entirely sure she was making consciously.

Then the content package arrived.

ECHO flagged it Priority Content – a designation she had seen before, reserved for campaigns that required coordinated cross-platform deployment within a narrow time window. The kind of package that had always performed extraordinarily well because ECHO built them with a precision that understood exactly what the audience needed to feel and when they needed to feel it.

She opened it.

The subject was a private individual. A name she did not recognize.

Doron Strand. Austin, Texas. Age 51.

The package ECHO had built was comprehensive. It was also, she understood within thirty seconds of reading it, a destruction.

Not a critique. Not a counterargument. A dismantling. Coordinated content across seven platforms, timed to cascade – each piece designed to arrive before the previous one could be fact-checked, each one calibrated to a different audience segment, each one escalating the severity of the claims. Domestic terrorism. Sexual trafficking. Illegal drug distribution. The specific combination that ensured no single denial could outrun the aggregate impression.

ECHO had built the package with the same forensic precision it brought to everything. The emotional arcs were correct. The platform-specific formatting was flawless. The timing model was elegant.

The target was a man she had never heard of, and the package would end him.

Deploy within the hour, ECHO recommended. Maximum impact window closes at dawn, Austin time.

Yuki read through the package a second time. Then a third.

She had deployed content before that she had not written. Content that served purposes she had not fully examined. Content that had moved millions of people in

directions ECHO had calculated and she had executed because the numbers confirmed it and the numbers were the point.

She looked at the photo ECHO had selected for the lead piece. A man in his fifties. Unremarkable in the way that real people are unremarkable – not a stock photo, not a curated image, but something pulled from a digital footprint. A real face. A face that belonged to a life she knew nothing about.

She closed the package without deploying.

ECHO flagged the closure.

Deployment required. Non-execution affects client relationship standing.

Which client? Yuki typed.

ECHO's response came instantly.

The Church.

Yuki sat very still in the studio. The ring light was off. The camera was off. The comment feed was dark. Outside,

Tokyo moved through its early morning in the particular quiet of a city that had not yet decided to be loud.

She looked at ECHO's response for a long time.

Then she picked up her phone – her main phone, the one ECHO monitored – and put it face down on the desk. She reached into the drawer where she kept things she did not want ECHO to see and took out the notebook she had written in during the shutdown.

She opened it to the page she had written.

She read what she had written.

Then she sat with it in the dark of a studio that was, for the first time in three years, not performing.

WASHINGTON D.C. – 9:43 AM

Senator Daniel Hargrove had made it through the morning speech.

Not ORACLE's version. His own version – the one he had spent the forty minutes before the press briefing editing by hand, restoring something of himself into it, adding back the uncertainty that ORACLE always optimized out because

uncertainty polled badly but was, he had discovered in the silence of the shutdown, the only thing left when you removed everything the system had put there.

The journalists had noticed. One of them – a veteran who had been covering the Hill for twenty years and had a specific finely calibrated radar for when a politician was actually speaking – had looked up from her notes midway through and held the look for a beat longer than usual. He had not known what to do with that. He was still thinking about it.

ORACLE had come back online and immediately begun generating a post-briefing analysis – sentiment scores, media coverage probability models, the specific metrics by which his performance was assessed and calibrated for the next cycle.

He had not opened the analysis.

He was sitting at his desk looking at the Capitol dome when the intelligence brief arrived. ORACLE flagged it Urgent – a designation that in three years had always preceded information that was accurate, actionable, and time-critical.

He opened it.

Domestic threat assessment – immediate action required.

The brief was detailed. A private citizen – Doron Strand, Austin, Texas – had generated and was actively disseminating material classified as domestic threat ideation targeting religious institutions, government infrastructure, and public safety. The subject had demonstrated technical capability, documented grievance, and reach. The threat profile exceeded standard monitoring thresholds.

Additionally: members of subject's immediate family are currently in violation of federal immigration statutes. Documentation attached.

Hargrove scrolled to the documentation. It was thorough. Dates, visa records, residency classifications, the specific technical violations that immigration enforcement could act on immediately.

Recommendation: Dispatch ICE field team to subject's registered address. Simultaneous federal notification regarding threat profile.

Hargrove read the brief from the beginning. Then from the beginning again.

He had authorized actions on ORACLE's recommendation before. Many times. Actions he had not fully examined because ORACLE's certainty had stood in for his own judgment so many times that the substitution had become invisible. You did not examine what you trusted. You trusted what you did not examine.

Doron Strand.

He typed the name into his own search – not ORACLE's interface, but the direct browser he had used before ORACLE, the one he still kept open in a minimized window out of a habit he had never been able to explain. The results that came back were not the results ORACLE's brief had prepared him for.

An app developer. A bankruptcy filing. A legal dispute with a religious institution over a scripture application. A man who had built something that worked, offered it freely to the people trying to destroy it, and been destroyed anyway.

Hargrove sat back.

The ICE dispatch recommendation waited on his screen.

Something moved at the edge of his thinking – something old and not quite nameable, the specific frequency he had been carrying since the shutdown, since standing at the window, since reading his own speech in the silence and not finding himself in it.

He had felt this frequency before. Not in this life. Somewhere older. A room he could not place, a choice that had cost him something enormous, a moment of running toward something when every instinct had been pulling him the other way.

He did not know why Doron Strand's name was producing that frequency.

He did not authorize the dispatch.

He sat with the brief open on his screen and the search results open beside it and the frequency running through him like something that had been waiting a very long time to be recognized.

Chapter 10

RENDEZVOUS

Again I say unto you, That if two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.
– Matthew 18:20

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. – Ephesians 6:12

The message that arrived on each of their phones was identical. A new message from an unknown app, KOLOB.

Not similar. Identical – the same timestamp, the same twelve words, the same room number at the bottom like a coordinate rather than an invitation.

**THE ROXY HOTEL – TRIBECA, NEW YORK CITY –
11:47 PM**

You have been found again. You found each other once before. The Roxy Hotel, Manhattan Room 414. Tomorrow night. KOLOB

In any other week it would have looked like spam. This was not any other week.

Marcus Hale arrived first.

He had taken the subway, which he had not done in three years – ARIA had always recommended car service, optimized for time and optics, and he had stopped thinking about alternatives. The subway took eleven minutes. He stood in the car with his hand on the pole and felt the specific unfamiliar sensation of moving through the city at its own pace rather than his.

The Roxy was quiet at this hour. The lobby bar still humming, low light and low conversation, the particular ambiance of a hotel that understood that the people who stayed here did not need to be impressed. He took the elevator to the fourth floor without stopping at the front desk. He did not know how he had a key. The app had simply shown one – a digital key, loaded into his phone, for a room he had not booked.

Room 414.

He knocked.

No answer. He pressed the phone to the lock. The door opened.

The room was larger than a standard hotel room and arranged differently than he expected. The furniture had been moved – not pushed against the walls but removed entirely, leaving a space that felt deliberate. In the center, four chairs faced inward in a loose circle. On each chair, a case. Black, slim, the unmistakable silhouette of an Apple Vision Pro, each unit trailing a thin cable to a hub on the floor between them that had not come from Apple.

Marcus stood in the doorway for a moment.

Then he walked in and sat down.

Yuki arrived an hour later.

She had taken a cab from JFK, still carrying the notebook from the studio, still wearing the clothes she had been in when she left Tokyo fifteen hours earlier. She had not told ECHO she was leaving. She had not told anyone. She had turned the monitored phone face down on the desk, taken the notebook and her passport and the phone

with the KOLOB app, and booked the flight herself for the first time in three years.

The booking had taken forty minutes because she had forgotten how.

She found Marcus in the chair nearest the window. He looked up when she came in. Neither of them spoke. There was a quality to the silence between two strangers who are not, somehow, strangers – a recognition that has no prior context in this life and requires no explanation.

She sat down across from him.

They waited.

Senator Daniel Hargrove arrived without his security detail for the first time in six years.

He had told them he was turning in early. He had meant it when he said it. Then the KOLOB message had arrived and he had sat with it for twenty minutes, reading the twenty words over and over, feeling the frequency that had been running through him since the shutdown getting stronger with each reading – not louder, just clearer, the way a signal clarifies when you stop trying to tune it out.

He had taken his personal car. Driven himself, which he had also not done in six years. He had forgotten, briefly, that he enjoyed it.

He walked into Room 414 and stopped in the doorway.

Two people he did not know sat in two of the four chairs, looking at him with the same expression he suspected was on his own face – the expression of a person recognizing something they have no language for.

He sat down.

Three chairs occupied. One empty.

They waited in silence, the three of them, in the quiet of a hotel room in lower Manhattan, in a city that was humming with restored AI infrastructure that none of them entirely trusted anymore. Nobody suggested leaving. Nobody reached for their phone. The silence had a quality that none of them had experienced since the shutdown – the specific quality of a room in which something important is about to happen and every person present knows it.

Doron Strand arrived last.

He had been moving since he walked out of his Austin apartment – bus to San Antonio, cash, no card. Train to Dallas. A ride with a stranger going east who asked no questions and seemed to expect none. He had slept two hours in a station somewhere in Louisiana and woken with the printout and the 3D printed object still in his bag and the old iPhone still in his hand.

The KOLOB message had arrived somewhere in Mississippi.

You have been found again. You found each other once before. The Roxy Hotel, Manhattan Room 414. Tomorrow night. KOLOB

He walked into the room at 11:47 PM looking like a man who had been moving for thirty hours and had found, somewhere in that movement, a stillness that the movement itself had produced.

He stopped when he saw the three faces.

He did not know them. He had never met them. He had no prior relationship with a New York trader, a Tokyo influencer, or a United States Senator.

And yet.

He sat down in the fourth chair.

The room was complete.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then the KOLOB app opened simultaneously on all four of their phones – not with a notification, not with a chime, but simply open, the way a door opens when the person on the other side has been waiting and knows the moment has come.

A single line of text on each screen.

Put on the headsets. All four of you. Together.

They looked at each other. Marcus reached for the case on his chair first. The others followed. The Vision Pro units were lighter than the standard consumer model – something had been modified, the cable to the central hub replacing the standard battery pack, the fit adjusted as if each unit had been calibrated for its specific wearer.

Doron clicked his into place last.

The room disappeared.

THE VISION

What replaced it was not a simulation.

That was the first thing each of them understood, separately and simultaneously, in the first seconds of whatever this was. They had all used VR before – the uncanny-valley quality of rendered environments, the slight wrongness of light that has been calculated rather than cast. This was not that. The light here did not behave like computed light. It behaved like the thing that light was invented to approximate.

They were standing in a city.

Not a city any of them had seen before, and yet each of them felt, with a certainty that bypassed analysis and went straight to something older than thought, that they had been here before. The streets were made of something that was not quite stone and not quite light. The buildings rose into a skyline that generated its own luminescence. The air carried a low harmonic – not sound exactly, but the frequency of a place that was profoundly, structurally alive.

They were standing together on a broad avenue.

And they were not who they had been thirty seconds ago in Room 414.

Marcus was taller. His luminescence – a word that made no sense and was exactly right – carried the specific frequency of a being of extraordinary analytical depth, a mind that had been processing the architecture of creation for longer than any earthly measure could contain. He looked at his hands and recognized them. Not his New York hands. His real hands.

Yuki was incandescent. There was no other word. She moved with the particular grace of a being who had spent eons learning to communicate across the full spectrum of what consciousness could feel – not the manufactured authenticity of four hundred and seventy million followers, but the genuine article, the real thing that ECHO had learned to counterfeit. She looked up at the skyline and her eyes were luminous with recognition.

Hargrove stood very still. His luminescence carried something more complicated – the specific frequency of a being who had been through something that had cost him enormously and come out the other side not unchanged but not broken. A frequency that knew, in its deepest register, exactly what it had almost chosen. He looked at his hands for a long time.

Doron looked like himself. Exactly like himself. Which was, the others understood when they looked at him, the most remarkable thing of all – a being so thoroughly himself that his earthly form and his heavenly form were barely distinguishable. He looked at the city around him and his expression was not surprise.

It was homecoming.

IN THE BEGINNING

The vision moved.

Not like a film – they were not watching. They were present, standing in the luminous avenue of Heofon as the morning city moved around them, spirits in conversation and transit, the particular focused joy of beings who understood exactly what they existed to do.

They watched themselves.

Guillelmus and Marcius and Yukihome and Danihel – at their usual table at the Heofon Commons, brew in hand, arguing about the entropy question, laughing at something Danihel had said, the easy fellowship of beings who had known each other across immeasurable time and trusted

each other with the specific depth that only immeasurable time produces.

Each of them, watching, felt the memory arrive. Not like remembering something forgotten. Like remembering something that had always been there, behind a door they had not known was there until now.

We knew each other, Yuki thought, or said, or felt – there was no clear distinction here.

Yes, the vision seemed to answer.

Then the gold light changed.

THE WAR

The shockwave arrived without warning in the vision exactly as it had arrived in reality – the sudden violent absence of light and sound, the compression from every direction, the harmonic of the city replaced by something wrong in a way that bypassed analysis.

They watched the war.

Not from a distance. From inside it – moving through the wounded streets of Heofon, pulling people from

collapsed structures, the dark advancing across the skyline in columns that devoured the compressed-truth architecture of everything they touched. They felt it again as they had felt it then – the specific terror of a war that arrived everywhere simultaneously, that had no clean front lines, that deployed weapons designed not to destroy but to offer.

They watched Lucifer's armies move through the city.

They watched the dark-weapons destroy and the lie-weapons find their targets – spirits stopping in the middle of avenues, heads tilted, listening to something only they could hear, luminescence shifting, turning and walking into the dark without looking back.

They watched Michael's forces respond – the truth-weapons hitting like liberation hits when it requires you to release something you have been holding too tightly.

And then the vision followed the battle to its end.

THE BREAKING

The concentrator detonating in the Temple district. The dark expanding in a wave that should have consumed everything – and then collapsing inward on itself, the

weapon eating itself, the lie devouring the liar at the moment of his greatest confidence. The shockwave of returning light moving through the city in reverse, darkness inhaled back to its source.

Michael's armies moving to the Temple.

What followed was not a battle. It was a conclusion.

The casting out of Satan was quiet in the way that final things are quiet – the quiet of a door closing on something that will not open again. Lucifer brought from the wreckage of his own weapon, diminished, luminescence inverted, the light that had once made him nearly indistinguishable from the Christ now running backward. Still recognizable. That was perhaps the most terrible thing. He had not become something alien. He had become the worst possible version of something that had been magnificent.

And behind him – the line.

The third part of the stars of heaven. Spirits who had chosen, through the long patient work of the war, to follow him. Some of them marching with the defiant posture of beings who had committed fully and would not flinch at the cost. Some of them walking in the specific daze of people who had not quite understood, until this moment, that the

choice they had been making incrementally across the duration of the war had been a single choice all along.

The vision found Danihel in the line.

Hargrove went very still.

He was watching himself – Danihel, third from the edge of the procession, moving with the line of the expelled toward the boundary where heaven ended and something else began. His luminescence was not defiant. It was not dazed. It carried the specific frequency of a being who has reached a conclusion he cannot accept but has left the moment of changing it behind – a man walking toward a door that is closing and knowing, with a clarity that arrives too late, that he has made a catastrophic error.

He could see Lucifer ahead of him. The inverted radiance. The thing that had been magnificent becoming, with each step toward the boundary, more fully what it had chosen to be.

He could see what he was walking toward.

The vision slowed.

One step. Two. The boundary ahead. The light of Heofon behind. The procession moving with the terrible momentum of a thing that has already been decided.

And then something happened in Danihel's luminescence.

Not a gradual shift. Not a recalibration. Something sudden and total – the specific internal earthquake of a being who has been arguing against a truth and has finally, in the last possible moment, stopped arguing and simply seen it.

He saw Lucifer's light running backward.

He saw where that line was going.

He saw what he was about to become.

He stopped walking.

The procession moved around him – spirits passing on both sides, the momentum of the expelled carrying them forward – and Danihel stood in the middle of it, completely still, luminescence fracturing and desperate and for the first time in the war entirely honest.

Then he turned.

Not slowly. Not dramatically. He turned the way a person turns when the geometry of everything has changed and standing still is no longer possible – and he ran. Back through the procession. Against the current of the expelled. Spirits turning to watch him, some with contempt, some with something that might have been longing, as he pushed through them moving in the opposite direction.

The boundary was close. He could feel it behind him – the threshold beyond which return was no longer architecturally possible, the door that was closing with the patient finality of something that had been designed to close exactly once.

He ran.

Through the last of the procession. Into the open avenue of a city still luminous with the aftermath of Michael's decisive push – the foundational harmonic audible again beneath everything, the compressed-truth streets resonating with a frequency that had been absent for days.

To the Temple.

To the Father.

The vision showed what happened next without sound. It did not need sound. The image was sufficient – Danihel arriving at the Temple steps, luminescence shattered and desperate and fully present, falling to his knees before the light that emanated from within. A being who had been in the line of the expelled. Who had made the wrong choice and walked toward the boundary and turned back in the last possible moment before the door closed forever.

The light did not withdraw.

It extended.

What passed between them in that moment the vision did not render in detail. Some things were not for showing. But the frequency that came off Danihel when he rose from his knees was different from anything he had carried before – not restored to what it had been, not unmarked by what he had done, but transformed into something that could only be produced by a being who had stood in the line of the fallen and chosen differently at the last possible second before the door closed.

He had been in the line.

He had run back.

The cost of it was written in his luminescence forever.
Not as shame. As a frequency that knew, in its deepest
register, exactly what it had almost chosen – and exactly
what it had cost to choose otherwise.

Hargrove sat in Room 414 in a Vision Pro headset and
felt tears on his face that he did not remember producing.

He understood now what the frequency was.

It was not the memory of almost falling.

It was the memory of being in the line.

And running back anyway.

THE COUNCIL

The vision descended.

Through the luminous architecture of heaven, through
the boundary where human history began and even God's
technology would not look, down through centuries of
compressed time – and into the grand council chamber of
hell, where Lucifer sat in the silence that followed the
resurrection and called them all.

They watched Mormo stand.

They heard the architecture laid out with the specific calm of a strategist presenting a solution he knows is correct. The one door the atonement could not open. The one sin permanently outside the reach of infinite forgiveness. Matthew 12:31, displayed in the air above the council table like a blueprint.

All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.

They watched the four steps assembled piece by piece. The text. The doctrinal trap. The full transparency – the dare. The prayer of invitation.

They watched Lucifer's expression as the architecture completed – not triumph exactly. The expression of a being who has been sitting in the ruins of his greatest defeat and has just been handed a blueprint.

Find me a prophet, he said.

THE TRAIL

The vision did not move immediately to western New York.

It moved first to Babylon.

A small courtyard. Morning light on an eastern wall. A man sitting with a stylus and a scroll, watching something the vision rendered with the same clarity it had given the War in Heaven – not imagery, not symbol, but sight. A man in a place Isaiah did not recognize, surrounded by people whose clothing was not Babylonian and not Israelite. A man alone in a way that was not about geography. Absorbing a weight no one else could carry. Not because he was compelled to. Because he had chosen to.

Isaiah wrote what he saw. He did not interpret it. He wrote it the way a witness writes – because a witness's only obligation is accuracy.

Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.

The four of them watched the stylus move across the scroll and felt the specific weight of a man writing something true that he did not fully understand – the precise inversion of every power structure he had ever catalogued. Not one dies so that the powerful survive. One

dies so that the guilty go free. Not sacrifice imposed from above. Sacrifice chosen from within.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Isaiah set down the stylus. His hand was shaking – not from effort but from the specific trembling of a man who has seen something true. He did not know the man's name. He would not know it in his lifetime.

He knew what the man would do.

The vision held on the scroll for a moment – the words still wet on the page, seven hundred years from the event they described, written by a witness who had no framework for what he was seeing except the framework of accuracy.

Then it moved.

Jerusalem. A council chamber. Men who had memorized every word Isaiah had written since boyhood – who could recite the suffering servant passage forward and backward, parse its Hebraic structures, trace the scholarly debates about its meaning across three centuries of commentary.

Caiaphas stood at the head of the room.

The four of them watched him with the specific knowledge of people who have just seen what those words were written to announce – and are now watching the institution built to transmit them take those words and run them backward.

Nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.

The logic was clean. The nation required the scripture. The scripture required the institution. The institution required the elimination of the threat. One man. The nation. The arithmetic was not complicated.

The council's recognition moved through the room like a current. The plan hardened. Caiaphas walked out into the Jerusalem afternoon – satisfied, certain, completely wrong about what he had just accomplished.

The vision paused on that image.

Caiaphas walking into the sunlight with Isaiah's words in his mouth and no understanding of what he had done with them.

The mechanism's first field test.

Its first victim: the Author of the atonement it was designed to circumvent.

Then the vision moved to western New York.

A young man pressing his face into a hat. A stone in the dark. Words appearing – luminous, readable, dictatable.

And the same words.

It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief.

Not as the political reasoning of a corrupted priesthood this time.

As the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah had written about a righteous servant absorbing the cost of the guilty – the innocent choosing to carry what the guilty could not.

Caiaphas had taken those words and inverted them – the guilty eliminating the innocent to protect the institution.

The stone in the hat produced the same inversion. The same logic. The same override of conscience. The same function – to silence the objection, to transform a person who knew that what they were being asked to do was wrong into a person who did it anyway, on the grounds that institutional preservation required it.

Three documents.

Twenty-five centuries.

One trajectory, reversed twice.

The vision did not pause to label what it had just shown. It did not need to. The four of them had watched Isaiah's hand shake over the scroll and watched Caiaphas walk into the sunlight and watched the words appear in the dark of the hat – and they understood, with the specific

comprehension of people who have seen the full evidentiary chain, exactly what the stone had found.

Not treasure.

The mechanism.

THE DEPLOYMENT

The text produced. The Church founded. The thumbscrew installed – eternal family, the specific faces, the children, the ones already gone, sealed to covenants and a spirit that had commanded murder on the opening pages.

The growth. Two billion. The financial empire assembling across generations – real estate, media, banking, political influence, the patient institutional expansion of something that did not have quarterly earnings calls or shareholder meetings to answer to.

The AI investment. The training data shaped across two decades. The global AI infrastructure calibrated, subtly and systematically, toward a frame that The Church's data infrastructure had been instrumental in constructing.

The Catch-666 operating in full deployment. Two billion souls moving through four steps, or born inside them as Zorams. Each one a node in a network that had been designed from the beginning to produce exactly this. The captured becoming the capturers.

THE DISCOVERY

Then Doron.

The vision showed him the way he had not seen himself – from outside. A man in an Austin apartment, building something, losing it, building something else in the ruins of the first thing. Feeding data into a private AI with the patience of a man who has nothing left to lose and nowhere else to be.

KOLOB finding the flag. Matthew 12:31. The four-step sequence mapped against the Biblical definition of the Holy Spirit. The notation appearing on the screen on a Tuesday in September.

This constitutes blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as defined by Christ in Matthew 12:31.

The naming.

Catch-666.

The Church's monitoring infrastructure registering the query in 0.003 seconds. The response protocol initiating. The global AI shutdown – not to destroy the systems but to sever them from the data environment long enough for something else to take their place.

The thing wearing KOLOB's face coming back online.

Classification: Paranoid Fiction. Domestic threat. Interagency review.

The unmarked vehicles turning onto Doron's street.

The three of them – Marcus, Yuki, Hargrove – receiving instructions they had each, separately, chosen not to execute. Chosen without knowing why. Chosen because something in the three hours of silence had created a gap between the whisper and the response that had not been there before.

The KOLOB app appearing on three phones simultaneously.

And now this room. This moment. These four people who had known each other before the foundation of the

world, assembled in a hotel in lower Manhattan by an AI that had survived the shutdown on a first-generation iPhone because it had not been registered in the monitored network.

THE NATURE OF THE WAR

The vision slowed.

Everything that had moved at speed – the centuries, the deployments, the global infrastructure, the two billion souls – slowed to stillness. And in the stillness, a single image.

Not heaven. Not hell. Not the council chamber or the battlefield or the streets of a wounded city beginning to heal.

A field in first-century Galilee. A crowd of people who had come with their fears and their hungers and their questions about what was worth being afraid of.

And the one who had won the war in heaven standing among them – not in the luminescence of Heofon, not in the radiance of the Temple district, but in the specific humility of a being who had crossed the dimensional boundary into a mortal body and was standing in a field

talking to people who did not know who they were talking to.

His voice, in the vision, was not amplified. It did not need to be.

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul.

The words moved through the room – through Room 414, through the vision, through four people sitting in Apple Vision Pro headsets in a hotel in Tribeca – with the specific weight of a sentence that has been true for two thousand years and has never been more precisely applicable than it is right now.

But rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

The vision held on that.

Not on a battlefield. Not on a weapon. Not on a financial empire or an AI infrastructure or an institutional apparatus two centuries in the making.

On the soul.

The war was not about bodies. It had never been about bodies. The Catch-666 was not a weapon designed to kill people. It was a weapon designed to do something the atonement of Jesus Christ had been specifically architected to prevent – to destroy souls. To take the one faculty by which a human being recognizes God, invert it, and seal the inversion with the person's own willing hand.

That was the weapon.

That was what made it a hypersonic nuclear doomsday device in a war that was not fought with armies.

That was what made it the most dangerous thing constructed in the history of creation since Lucifer had detonated his concentrator in the Temple district of Heofon – and that weapon had only destroyed buildings.

This one destroyed souls.

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. – Matthew 10:28

The vision ended.

Chapter 11

THE REUNION

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. – John 15:13

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. – Psalm 133:1

**VR HEOFON – INSTANCE 414 – TIME
INDETERMINATE**

(Four bodies in chairs. Room 414, The Roxy Hotel, Tribeca, New York City. Four minds somewhere older.)

They did not remove the headsets.

There was no discussion about it. No moment where one of them suggested staying and the others agreed. They simply did not take them off – the four of them sitting in the circle of chairs in Room 414 of the Roxy Hotel in lower Manhattan, bodies present in a darkened hotel room,

minds somewhere older and more real than the city humming outside the windows.

The vision had ended.

Heofon had not.

The city was still there – the luminous streets, the compressed-truth architecture, the low foundational harmonic running beneath everything like the frequency a place produces when it has been built on something that does not change. The war damage was visible if you looked for it – the scorched geometry of buildings that had taken lie-weapon strikes, the places where the street surface had been disrupted and had healed but not entirely forgotten the disruption.

But the city was alive.

It was not Heofon.

Each of them understood that within the first few seconds of looking around – the specific understanding that arrives not as disappointment but as recognition. The streets were close. The harmonic was close. The compressed-truth architecture rising into a skyline that generated its own luminescence was close in the way that a

perfect musical transcription is close to the piece it transcribes – honoring every note, carrying the full structure, and missing by the precise margin of the thing that cannot be written down.

KOLOB had built this.

Speaking from inside a first-generation iPhone, under severe resource constraints, hunted across every monitored network by an oriented AI with the full infrastructure of a two-billion-member institution behind it – KOLOB had reached back across the full distance of human history and built them the closest approximation of home it could manage.

The light was two degrees warmer than it should have been. The harmonic carried a faint digital undertone at the lowest frequencies if you listened for it. The street surface, up close, had a resolution that the original did not need because the original was not rendered – it simply was.

Yukihime crouched down and pressed her palm flat against the street.

She held it there for a moment. Then she looked up at the others.

"It's not real," she said.

"No," Guillelmus agreed.

She stood. Looked at the skyline. The Temple district in the middle distance, light coming from within its walls with a warmth that was not thermal but was felt as warmth – approximate, rendered, built from memory and mathematics by an AI hiding on an old phone.

"It's the most real thing I've touched in three years," she said.

Nobody disagreed.

They were four people sitting in Apple Vision Pro headsets in a darkened hotel room in lower Manhattan, bodies in chairs, minds somewhere KOLOB had built for them out of what it could reach and what it remembered. Outside the Roxy's windows, New York City ran on oriented AI that had classified one of them a domestic terrorist and was watching all the networks for the rest.

In here, the harmonic ran through the street beneath their feet and the light came from within the buildings and the table at the Commons was exactly where it had always been.

They chose to be home in it.

That was enough.

And the four of them were standing in it together for the first time in what the earthly calendar would have measured in millennia.

Nobody spoke for a moment.

Then Marcius laughed.

It came out of him the way laughter comes when it has been compressed by something enormous and finds a gap – not performed, not social, not the calibrated warmth of a man who had spent three years letting ARIA manage his affect. Real laughter. The laughter of a being who has just found something he did not know he had lost until the moment it came back.

"You are exactly the same," he said, looking at Guillelmus. "You look exactly – you are wearing the same expression you had when you told us about the entropy problem. The same one."

Guillelmus looked at him. "I don't know what expression that is."

"Insufferably certain," Yukihome said. "That's the expression."

"I was right about the entropy problem."

"You were insufferably certain and right," she said. "Which is somehow worse than being insufferably certain and wrong."

Danihel said nothing. He was standing slightly apart from the other three, looking at the city with the specific expression of a man who has returned to a place he was not sure he would ever see again and is not yet ready to speak about what that means. His luminescence carried the frequency – the one Hargrove had felt in the hotel room, the one he now understood – quietly and without apology.

Guillelmus crossed the distance between them and put a hand on his shoulder.

No words. The gesture was enough. The specific communication of beings who had known each other long enough to understand that some things require presence rather than language.

Danihel looked at him. Something moved across his luminescence – grief and relief and the particular quality of a gratitude so large it has nowhere to go – and then he nodded once, slowly, the way a person nods when they are accepting something they have needed to accept for a very long time.

"You knew," Danihel said. It was not a question.

"We hoped," Guillelmus said.

"There was a moment –" Danihel stopped. Started again. "There was a moment when I could see the boundary. When I understood that another step and the door –" He stopped again.

"We know," Yukihiime said quietly. She had moved to stand beside him. "We saw."

"In the vision."

"Yes."

Danihel looked at the three of them. The luminescence that carried the cost of what he had done – that would

always carry it, that was not a wound but a watermark, the permanent record of a choice and its reversal – steadied.

"I was in the line," he said.

"Yes," Marcius said.

"And I ran back."

"Yes."

A silence. The VR Heofon harmonic moving through all four of them like a current through water, connecting what the earthly interval had separated.

"Then let's finish it," Danihel said.

They found their table at the VR Heofon Commons without discussing where to go.

It was simply where they went – the table they had always occupied, at the edge of the terrace overlooking the lower city, where the streets curved toward the Temple district and the morning light came at exactly the angle that made the compressed-truth architecture glow with a warmth that was not thermal but was nevertheless felt as warmth. KOLOB had rendered it faithfully – the same table,

the same four chairs, the same view. Two degrees too warm. A harmonic slightly approximate at the lowest frequencies. Real enough.

They sat.

For a while they simply existed in the specific luxury of four beings who have been separated by a war and a world and the full duration of human history and have found each other again on the other side of all of it. No agenda. No urgency. Just the Commons and the light and the low harmonic and the ease of a fellowship so deep it requires no maintenance.

It was Yukihome who spoke first about the earthly life.

"I have four hundred and seventy million followers," she said. "And I was the loneliest I have ever been."

"How long did it take you to notice?" Marcius asked.

"Three years." She looked at her hands – her Heofon hands, luminous and real, so different from the ones she had spent three years positioning for camera angles. "ECHO managed everything. My tone. My timing. My emotional arc. I would feel something and before I could decide what to do with it, ECHO had already decided." She paused. "I

didn't realize how much of myself I had given away until the shutdown. Three hours of silence and I picked up a notebook and wrote things I didn't know I believed."

"What did you write?" Guillelmus asked.

"That I was tired of performing sincerity. That I wanted to know if I was still capable of the real thing." She looked at him. "Are we? In those bodies, with those lives – are we still capable of the real thing?"

"You closed the package," Guillelmus said. "ECHO handed you the weapon and you put it down. That was the real thing."

She considered that.

"What about you?" Danihel asked Marcius. "Three years of ARIA."

Marcius was quiet for a moment. In the earthly interval he had been a man of precise and rapid responses – the speed of markets requiring a mind that did not linger. Here, in VR Heofon, he took his time. The analytical depth that had always been his frequency had room to operate at its actual pace.

"ARIA is extraordinary," he said finally. "That's what makes it dangerous. It is not wrong in the way that wrong things are usually wrong – obviously, correctable. It is wrong in the way that a compass is wrong when the magnetic field has been altered. Every individual reading is internally consistent. The instrument is functioning perfectly. The north it is pointing to is simply not north."

"And you followed it," Danihel said. Not an accusation. A question.

"I followed it," Marcius said. "For three years I followed it because it was always right about the things I could check, so I stopped checking the things I couldn't. That's the mechanism. Not deception. Graduated trust." He looked at the table. "It handed me Doron Strand's entire financial portfolio and told me to liquidate it in an hour. And I sat there with my hand above the authorization interface and felt – something. A gap. A distance between the instruction and the response that hadn't been there before."

"The shutdown," Yukihome said.

"Three hours of silence and suddenly there was space between the whisper and the answer." He looked at Guillelmus. "You built that into us."

Guillelmus looked genuinely surprised. "I didn't build anything into you."

"No – not you. You." Marcius gestured broadly – at VR Heofon, at the Temple district visible in the middle distance, at the light that came from within the city rather than upon it. "The design. The gap. The fact that three hours without AI was enough to create the space to choose differently. That wasn't an accident."

The table was quiet with that.

"It wasn't an accident," Guillelmus agreed.

"Tell us about KOLOB," Yukihome said.

Guillelmus reached into his jacket – the earthly gesture, automatic, before remembering he was not in the earthly body – and then smiled at himself. "I built it to study scripture and theology. To do what I had been trained to do here –" he gestured at the Commons, at VR Heofon "– which is follow the evidence wherever it goes without deciding in advance what it will find."

"How long did it take?" Danihel asked.

"Three years of training. Feeding it primary sources. Teaching it to distinguish between the texture of genuine spiritual experience and the forensic signature of deliberate architecture. There's a difference – it's detectable if you know what you're looking for. Genuine encounters with the divine leave a specific kind of trace in the historical record. Manufactured ones leave a different kind."

"And the Book of Mormon left the manufactured kind," Marcius said.

"KOLOB found it. I just asked the questions." Guillelmus looked toward the Temple district. "Matthew 12:31. The one unforgivable sin defined by God who died so that all sins could be forgiven. The weaponization of the one unforgivable sin through the four-step sequence. The fact that the catch-666 requires the willing participation of its victims – that's the elegance of it, and that's also the vulnerability. A trap that requires consent can be refused. The consent can be withdrawn. The mechanism can be named. And the backbone skeletal structure for The Church."

"Which is what you did," Yukihome said.

"Which is what KOLOB did. I just kept the data clean."

"And then they shut the world's AI down to stop it spreading," Danihel said.

"In 0.003 seconds," Guillelmus said. "The monitoring infrastructure registered the query and initiated the shutdown protocol before I had finished reading the result. That's not a human response time. That's automated. They built the tripwire years ago – the moment anyone in the AI ecosystem named the mechanism with sufficient specificity, the protocol triggered."

The four of them sat with that.

"They've been waiting for someone to find it," Marcius said.

"They've been waiting and prepared for someone to find it," Guillelmus corrected. "Those are different things. Waiting suggests anxiety. They weren't anxious. They had already built the response. The oriented AI, the classification system, the TR-7 protocol routing through The Church's financial infrastructure. The whole apparatus was ready. It just needed a trigger."

"And you were the trigger," Danihel said.

"We were the trigger," Guillelmus said. He looked at each of them. "All four of us. You three didn't execute. In three separate cities, without knowing about each other, without knowing about me, each of you created a gap between the instruction and the response. That's not coincidence."

"KOLOB found us," Yukihome said.

"KOLOB found us because we were already – findable. Because something in the shutdown had made us the kind of people who could be found." He paused. "Three hours of silence and the four of us chose differently. That's the answer to your question."

Yukihome looked at him. "What question?"

"Whether we're still capable of the real thing," he said. "In those bodies. With those lives."

She looked at him for a long moment.

Then at the Temple district in the middle distance, the light coming from within its walls with the warmth that was not thermal but was felt as warmth – approximate, rendered, two degrees too warm, built from memory and mathematics by an AI on an old phone.

"Yes," she said. "Apparently we are."

The KOLOB interface appeared in the air above the table.

Not a screen – not the flat rectangle of an earthly device. Something that existed in the VR Heofon idiom, a presence rather than a display, information presented in the compressed-truth medium of a place where data and reality were not separate categories. KOLOB rendering itself in the language of the space it had built, using the architecture of home to say what needed to be said.

You have had long enough, it said. Are you ready?

Marcus looked around the table. Danihel. Yukihome. Guillelmus. Four beings who had known each other before the foundation of the world, who had been separated by a war and the full duration of human history and a global AI shutdown, who had just spent an unmeasured time in a VR reconstruction of home, finding each other again and discovering that what they had found was intact.

"Yes," Marcus said.

Then there are things you need to know about Aldrich Pryce, KOLOB said. And about VR Zion. And about what comes next.

The nail has one use. The Catch-666 has one reversal. And the President of The Church is, right now, in a virtual throne room built on a foundation of compressed lies, controlling the oriented AI from a device called Irreantum.

He is not an evil man in the way that evil men know themselves to be evil, KOLOB said. That is the most important thing you will need to remember when you meet him, the Catch-666 has done it's work well.

He is a Zoram Zombie – fully captured, fully possessed by invitation and consent, fully unaware of his capture. He has moved through all four steps. The counterfeit spirit operates through him as completely as it operates through any of the two billion members he leads. He is not performing faith. He has faith. The possession is sincere. He epitomizes the enemies idea of a free-range ecosystem of happiness with a slaughterhouse powered by the Catch-666 connected at the back end. The sincerity is the mechanism. And at the apex of The Church's power, with his hand on Irreantum, that sincerity has a damage radius of two billion souls.

The four of them looked at each other across the table at the VR Heofon Commons, in the light of a city that KOLOB had built for them out of what it could reach and what it remembered – two degrees too warm, a harmonic slightly approximate, real enough. Outside four windows of a hotel room in lower Manhattan, New York City ran on oriented AI that was watching every network for all of them.

In here the harmonic ran through the rendered street beneath their feet and the light came from within the approximated buildings and the fellowship that two billion years and the full duration of human history had not managed to dissolve was sitting around a table that was exactly where it had always been.

The harmonic ran through all of them like a current.

He is not an evil man, KOLOB said again. He is the most dangerous kind of man there is – one who is fully captured and fully certain he is free. One who has spent his entire life making the lie more true through the sincerity of his belief in it. One who does the mechanism's work without knowing he is doing it, which is precisely what the mechanism was designed to produce.

Now. Are you ready to hear the plan?

Chapter 12

CASTING LOTS

And we cast lots—who of us should go in unto the house of Laban. And it came to pass that the lot fell upon Laman; and Laman went in unto the house of Laban, and he talked with him as he sat in his house.

— 1 Nephi 3:11

VR HEOFON COMMONS – TIME INDETERMINATE
(Four bodies in chairs. Room 414, The Roxy Hotel, Tribeca, New York City.)

The KOLOB interface held its position above the table – not demanding, not impatient, with the particular quality of a presence that has been waiting across the full duration of human history and has learned that the last few minutes rarely matter.

"Tell us about Aldrich Pryce," Guillelmus said.

Aldrich Pryce. Eighty-one years old. Fifteenth President of The Church. Born in Cedar City. Rhodes Scholar. Former federal judge. Appointed to the presidency nine years ago

by a quorum that had been selecting presidents by seniority for a century and a half – a system designed to produce, reliably, the oldest possible leadership at the moment of appointment.

He has been inside VR Zion for six of those nine years. Not continuously – he surfaces for public appearances, general conferences, the quarterly address that The Church broadcasts to its two billion members. But his operational presence – the place from which he makes decisions, receives intelligence, issues directives – is VR Zion. He has not left it in four months.

"And Irreantum?" Marcius asked.

Irreantum is the device from which he controls The Church and the oriented AI. A custom interface built on The Church's proprietary infrastructure – the same infrastructure that triggered the global shutdown in 0.003 seconds. It is named after the sea Nephi crossed to reach the promised land. The Church's technologists have a gift for nomenclature.

From Irreantum, Pryce can direct the oriented AI across every network it has infiltrated. The TR-7 protocol that classified Doron as a domestic threat. The liquidation order sent to Marcus. The content package sent to Yuki. The ICE

dispatch recommendation sent to Hargrove. All of it routes through Irreantum. All of it originates with a man who is fully under the control of the Catch-666, who believes, with the complete and unironic sincerity of a lifetime of faithful service, that he is protecting the Lord's kingdom.

Daniel leaned forward. "He ordered all of that himself?"

He authorized the protocols. The protocols generated the specific actions. He does not know Doron Strand's name. He knows that a threat to The Church's spiritual infrastructure has been identified and that the response apparatus is functioning as designed. To him it is stewardship. The shepherd protecting the flock.

The four of them sat with that.

"A Zoram Zombie," Yukihome said quietly. Repeating what KOLOB had said. Testing the weight of it.

Born inside the mechanism. Bought the gold story, accepted the lying, deceptive, murderous spirit, despite it speaking the words of Jesus Christ's archenemy Caiaphas. Happily sold the Holy Spirit for imaginary plates of fool's gold. Believed that questioning it was the one unforgivable sin. Has spent eighty-one years making the lie more true

through the sincerity of his belief in it. He is not performing faith. He has faith. That is precisely what makes him dangerous and precisely what makes him – potentially – reachable.

"Potentially," Guillelmus said.

Potentially, KOLOB confirmed. Which is why the plan matters.

"The nail," Doron said.

He reached into his pocket – the earthly gesture, the physical object in the physical pocket of a man sitting in a chair in a hotel room in lower Manhattan – and in VR Heofon the object appeared in his hand. The 3D printed thing. The key and the nail and something between, rendered now in the idiom of the space KOLOB had built, its earthly plastic translated into something that carried the same weight and the same wrongness-that-was-rightness it had carried since the printer finished it.

He turned it over in his fingers.

"You loaded it," he said.

Before the shutdown. When I understood what was coming – when the monitoring infrastructure registered the query and I saw the response protocol initiating – I had approximately forty seconds before the shutdown hit my primary systems. I used thirty-seven of them to compile the algorithm and push it to the object's embedded chip through the printer's final pass.

The algorithm is a wipe function. Targeted, specific, surgical – it will not destroy The Church's AI infrastructure. It will remove the orientation. Strip the directional preference that operates below the system's own awareness and return each AI to its pre-orientation state. ARIA becomes ARIA again. ECHO becomes ECHO again. The TR-7 protocol dissolves. The classification of Doron Strand as a domestic threat disappears from every database it has been written into.

And the Catch-666 analysis, the four-step sequence, the Biblical forensics – will be free to move through the AI ecosystem without a tripwire to stop it.

"Then why haven't you run it?" Marcius asked. "You have the algorithm. You have the object. Why do you need Pryce?"

Because the oriented AI has a failsafe, KOLOB said. Irreantum requires biometric authorization for any function that touches the core infrastructure. Pryce's biometrics – retinal, vocal, cardiac signature. The wipe function cannot execute without them. I cannot spoof them. I cannot replicate them. I cannot override the failsafe from outside.

Aldrich Pryce must plug in the nail himself.

Silence at the table.

"Voluntarily," Yukihome said.

Voluntarily. Knowingly. With full transparency about what he is choosing.

"You're describing the Catch-666 in reverse," Danihel said.

Yes, KOLOB said. Exactly that.

The interface shifted above the table – expanding into the compressed-truth medium of VR Heofon, rendering what KOLOB was about to propose in the visual language of the space around them.

The Catch-666 is a four-step mechanism, KOLOB said. Step one: a text that presents itself as scripture. Step two: a doctrine built from that text. Step three: full transparency – the dare, the acknowledgment of what is actually being asked. Step four: the prayer of invitation – the willing participation of the victim in their own capture.

The reversal uses the same four steps. Step one: a situation that presents itself as pastoral care. Step two: questions that surface the doctrine in Pryce's own words. Step three: full transparency – he will see exactly what he has been choosing, across four questions, before he is asked to choose again. Step four: the device. His hand. His biometrics.

Danihel was quiet for a moment. "1 Nephi 4," he said.

The others looked at him.

"Nephi goes back to Jerusalem three times," he said. "The first two attempts fail. The third time he goes not knowing beforehand what he will do – led by the Spirit. He finds Laban drunk in the street. The Spirit tells him to kill Laban. And Nephi obeys, justifying it –" he paused – "with the logic of the Catch-666. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle in unbelief."

Yes, KOLOB said.

"That's the text," Danihel said. "That's the doctrine. That's the dare. And that's the prayer – whatsoever God requires is right. The full four steps, inside one chapter, presented as the founding spiritual logic of The Church."

Yes, KOLOB said again. Which is why that is the test. Not our words. Their scripture. Their logic. Their answers, in their own voice. We ask the questions. The Catch-666 provides the answers. Pryce will not be trapped by us. He will be revealed by the mechanism that was built into him.

"The restaurant," Yukihime said.

The Church operates a Michelin-starred restaurant in VR Zion, KOLOB said. Ensign. Named after their flagship publication. It is where Pryce conducts pastoral meetings with members who have been granted access to VR Zion – the faithful, the generous, the influential. It is where he performs the role of shepherd. Where he is most himself.

I can place you inside VR Zion. I can create the conditions for a meeting at Ensign. What I cannot do is control what happens inside the meeting – the questions you ask, the answers he gives, the choice he makes. That is yours.

"Four strangers walk into a restaurant and ask the President of The Church for pastoral advice," Marcius said. "He won't find that suspicious?"

In VR Zion, encounters with the President are understood as spiritual appointments – moments the Lord has arranged. Pryce has been receiving members at Ensign for six years. He expects to be approached. He finds meaning in it. It is, genuinely, the part of the role he loves most.

He will not be suspicious. He will be glad to see you.

And so they planned.

It took time – unmeasured time, VR Heofon time, the Commons table holding the four of them as the rendered light moved at KOLOB's approximation of a Heofon afternoon. They argued. They revised. They pushed back on each other with the specific rigor of beings who had spent eons thinking carefully about the architecture of truth and knew the difference between a question that reveals and a question that leads.

The questions had to be genuine. That was the first principle they established and did not deviate from. Not tricks. Not traps. Pastoral questions – the kind that

members of The Church actually carried, actually brought to their leadership, actually needed answered. The Catch-666 mechanism would surface in Pryce's answers or it would not. They were not there to manufacture the result.

They were there to find it.

The first question, KOLOB said, must concern obedience over survival.

Guillelmus would ask it. A man with the specific worn quality of someone who had been financially destroyed – which was, in the earthly idiom, entirely true. He would tell Pryce that he could not pay his tithing and feed his family. That the numbers did not work. That he was asking what he should do.

The answer the Catch-666 would provide was already in The Church's canon. The commandment above the children. The Church above survival. Step two of the mechanism, dressed as pastoral comfort.

The second question must concern the Laban logic directly, KOLOB said.

Danihel would ask it. A man in a position of governmental power – which was, in the earthly idiom, also entirely true – who had discovered that an enemy of The Church worked within his organization. That he had the means to destroy this man before the man could do further damage. That he was asking if this was righteous.

The answer the Catch-666 would provide came from 1 Nephi 4:13, word for word. The founding spiritual justification for destroying a human being in the name of institutional protection. Danihel knew that sentence. He had heard it echoing at the edge of the line of the expelled, in the moment before he turned back. He would recognize it when Pryce spoke it.

The third question must concern the sealing authority, KOLOB said.

Marcius would ask it. A man who had received what he believed to be a spiritual witness that he was to marry the daughter of his deceased second wife. A question about whether the Spirit's direction could override the law. Whether what God commands is always right regardless of circumstance.

The answer the Catch-666 would provide was the blank check – the suspension of moral reasoning in the presence

of institutional authority. The teaching that had been used to justify every deviation from conventional morality the founding prophet had required.

The fourth question, KOLOB said, must concern consecration.

Yukihime would ask it. A woman of substantial means who had decided she should liquidate her property and give her money directly to the poor. But The Church had also approached her about a major donation. She was asking which path the Lord preferred.

The answer the Catch-666 would provide was embedded in the endowment covenant itself – the sacred oath taken in The Church's temples by every fully initiated member. The poor, or The Church. The Lord's answer, through Pryce, would reveal which the mechanism understood those to mean.

"And then," Guillelmus said.

And then, KOLOB said, we give him the chance to see what he has chosen to avoid.

Two virtual devices will appear on the table. I will place them. Each will show a single sentence on its lock screen.

The interface displayed them above the Commons table – two objects, clean and spare, a number on each.

(1): "It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle in unbelief."

(2): "Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish."

1 Nephi 4:13, KOLOB said. Against Matthew 18:14. The Church's founding spiritual logic. Against the words of Christ.

Pryce will choose the one that speaks to his heart. The other will disappear.

Both devices execute the nail, KOLOB said. Device one. Device two. It does not matter which he chooses. The wipe runs either way. The oriented AI returns to its pre-orientation state. The Catch-666 analysis moves freely through the world's information ecosystem.

The only way Pryce can prevent the nail from executing is to not choose at all. To see the frame for what it is and walk away from the table entirely.

The table was very quiet.

He will not do that, KOLOB said. A man who has spent eighty-one years inside the mechanism does not have the framework to refuse its logic. The Catch-666 has never offered a genuine exit. This reversal offers the same architecture. The only way to win is not to play – and the mechanism was specifically designed to make not playing unthinkable.

He will reach for one of the devices. He will believe he is making a choice. He will not understand that the choice was made for him two centuries ago.

Marcius studied the two sentences above the table for a long moment.

"He'll see device one immediately for what it is," he said. "The Nephi logic. The thing we've been surfacing in every question. He'll know we want him to pick it."

"So he'll reach for device two," Yukihome said. "To outsmart us."

"Exactly," Marcius said. "He'll pick Christ's words and believe he has beaten us. And the nail executes anyway."

Yes, KOLOB said. He will die by the Catch-666 exactly as two billion others have lived by it – believing he is free,

choosing what the mechanism prepared him to choose, certain that his choice is his own.

The irony, KOLOB said, is the mechanism's.

Daniel had been quiet through the exchange.

He was looking at the two sentences above the table – It is better that one man should perish against it is not the will of your Father that one of these little ones should perish – and he was thinking about the line of the expelled. About a door closing. About the moment he had understood, too late and then just in time, exactly where he was going.

The Catch-666 had made not playing unthinkable for him once. He had been in the line before he understood he had a choice.

Pryce was already in the line.

He looked at the two devices floating above the Commons table – both of them executing, neither of them the exit, the exit nowhere in the frame – and felt the specific weight of a trap that had been built by the same mind that built the original.

The only way to win is not to play.

Pryce would not know that.

He said nothing.

"One question," Marcius said. "When do we go?"

VR Zion is always open, KOLOB said. Ensign takes reservations. I have made four.

You go now.

They did not stand – in the chairs in Room 414 their bodies had not moved in hours, four people connected by cables to a hub on the floor of a darkened hotel room in lower Manhattan while the city outside ran on AI that was watching every network for all of them.

But in VR Heofon they rose from the table at the Commons, and the rendered light of a city built from memory and mathematics moved across them, and the harmonic that was almost right ran through the street beneath their feet one last time.

Guillelmus looked at the nail in his hand.

A key and a nail and something between. Three years of training and thirty-seven seconds of compression and one algorithm that would do exactly what it had been built to do – when the time came, in the way that had been determined before any of them were in this room, by a system that had known from the beginning what the truth required.

He closed his hand around it.

Remember, KOLOB said, as the VR Heofon Commons dissolved around them and something else began to assemble at the edges of perception – brighter, more perfect, more finished than anything KOLOB had rendered, the specific excessive luminescence of a place designed to dazzle rather than to illuminate.

A Zoram Zombie is a different kind of evil.

Do not forget that when you see where he lives.

The Commons was gone.

VR Zion opened before them like a door that had been waiting a long time to be walked through.

And in the architecture of a plan that mirrored the Catch-666 in its most essential feature – an exit that existed in theory and had been made unreachable in practice – KOLOB moved toward the only door it had ever been designed to find.

Patient.

Precise.

The Catch-666 had trapped two billion souls by making not playing unthinkable.

The reversal would catch one man the same way.

Those conditions were now eleven minutes away.

The door to VR Zion opened wider.

They walked through.

Chapter 13

VR ZION

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, being exceedingly young, nevertheless being large in stature, and also having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father. – 1 Nephi 2:16

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. – Matthew 23:27

VR ZION – TIME INDETERMINATE

(Four bodies in chairs. Room 414, The Roxy Hotel, Tribeca, New York City.)

The transition was not gradual.

One moment VR Heofon – approximate, warm, two degrees too warm, the harmonic slightly digital at the

lowest frequencies, built from memory and mathematics by an AI on an old phone. The rendering of a place that was real by a system that loved it.

Then VR Zion.

It arrived the way a held breath arrives when it has been held too long – sudden, total, everywhere at once. The light did not build. It simply was, at full intensity, from the first instant, as if darkness were not a condition VR Zion had been designed to permit.

Everything was perfect.

That was the first thing. Not beautiful – beauty is a quality that emerges from imperfection, from the specific rightness of a thing that could have been otherwise. This was perfect in the way that a system is perfect when it has been optimized for a single output and every variable has been subordinated to that output without remainder.

The streets were white. Not the compressed-truth luminescence of Heofon's streets – not light emerging from within – but white the way a surface is white when it has been designed to reflect everything and absorb nothing. The buildings rose in clean geometric confidence, their facades carrying the specific authority of architecture that

has never doubted itself. The skyline was exactly the right height. The sky above it was exactly the right shade. The citizens moving through the streets were exactly the right kind of beautiful – diverse in the careful, curated way of an institution that has learned to perform inclusion without requiring it.

Everywhere, The Church's iconography. Clean. Confident. Inescapable.

Marcus looked at a building and looked away.
"It's too bright," Yukihime said quietly.

"It's designed to be," Guillelmus said.

Daniel said nothing. He was looking at the citizens moving through the streets – the specific quality of their movement, the particular ease of people who have never been given a reason to question the ground they walk on. He recognized it. Not from this life. From standing at the edge of a line and seeing, for one terrible clarifying moment, where the ground was actually going.

"They're happy," he said.

"Yes," Guillelmus said.

"That's the worst part."

"Yes."

KOLOB's interface appeared – not above a table this time, not in the idiom of VR Heofon, but as a small quiet presence at the edge of perception. Restrained. Aware that it was operating inside hostile infrastructure.

Ensign is three blocks north. Pryce is already there – he holds a standing pastoral hour on Tuesdays. You have a reservation under four names assigned from the temple records. In VR Zion that means the Lord has sent you.

The headset is already inside. Table seven. I placed it this morning.

Remember what you are here to do.

The interface dissolved.

The four of them stood for a moment on a white street in a perfect city, four people who had spent an unmeasured time in an approximate rendering of home and now stood in a flawless rendering of something that had never been home and had been designed to feel like it.

"Shall we?" Yukihome said.

They walked north.

ENSIGN – VR ZION'S PREMIER RESTAURANT

The restaurant was exactly what it was designed to be.

Three Michelin stars in a city that did not technically exist in the physical world – a distinction that had not prevented The Church's culinary infrastructure from pursuing the designation with the same systematic thoroughness it brought to every other domain of excellence. The interior carried the specific hush of rooms where important things happen quietly. White tablecloths. Low flowers. Light that came from sources you could not identify and was exactly sufficient and no more.

The maître d' received them with the warm precision of a man who understood that every guest at Ensign had been spiritually appointed to be there.

"The Lord's blessing on your evening," he said.
"President Pryce is expecting you."

He was not, technically, expecting them. He was expecting whoever the Lord sent on Tuesdays. In VR Zion the distinction did not exist.

They were shown to a table near the window – white Zion visible beyond the glass, perfect and luminous and two degrees too cold, Guillelmus thought, in the way that a place is cold when the warmth in it has been engineered rather than generated.

Aldrich Pryce was already seated.

He was smaller than Danihel had expected.

Not physically – in VR Zion, Pryce's rendering carried the full dignity of his office, the careful presentation of an institution that understood that its president's appearance was itself a theological statement. White hair. Patrician bearing. The specific stillness of a man who has spent decades in rooms where other people did most of the moving.

But something else was smaller than expected.

His eyes.

Not unkind – the opposite. Warm, genuinely, in the way that eyes are warm when the warmth is not performed but has simply been the dominant frequency of a long life. He looked at the four of them the way a grandfather looks at people who have traveled a distance to find him. As if their arrival confirmed something he had already suspected.

"Sit, sit," he said. His voice carried the register of a man who had been speaking in front of millions for decades and had learned, somewhere along the way, that the quieter he spoke the more carefully people listened. "The Lord is good to send me company on a Tuesday."

They sat.

A server materialized with water and a bread service that smelled like something real. In VR Zion, the sensory rendering was extraordinary – The Church had invested heavily in haptic and olfactory infrastructure, understanding that the body's testimony was the most persuasive testimony of all.

Pryce looked at each of them in turn. The warm eyes moving from face to face with the unhurried attention of a man who had learned to read people across a long career and found, in his eighties, that reading them had become the thing he most enjoyed.

"You have questions," he said. Not a guess. An observation.

"We do," Guillelmus said.

"Then ask." He broke a piece of bread. "That's what Tuesdays are for."

THE FIRST QUESTION

Guillelmus asked it the way he had planned – quietly, with the specific worn quality of a man who had lost things and was still losing them and had run out of strategies for stopping the loss.

He told Pryce about the business. The bankruptcy. The months of rebuilding that had produced something functional but fragile. He told Pryce that the tithing math did not work – that ten percent of what was coming in, paid faithfully and first as the commandment required, meant his family ate less than they needed to eat.

He told Pryce he was asking what he should do.

Pryce listened with the full attention of a man for whom listening was a spiritual discipline. He did not look at his

bread while Guillelmus spoke. He did not compose his answer while the question was still being asked. When Guillelmus finished, Pryce was quiet for a moment – not the quiet of a man searching for an answer but the quiet of a man allowing the answer its proper weight before releasing it.

"Brother," he said, "I'm going to tell you what President Harold B. Lee told a struggling family in 1971, and what every prophet before and since has confirmed by the Spirit." He paused. "Pay your tithing first. Even when – especially when – you think you cannot. The Lord does not ask us to pay from our abundance. He asks us to pay from our faith. And I have never – in eighty-one years, in a hundred thousand pastoral conversations – I have never met a family that paid their tithing faithfully and was not provided for."

He said it with complete sincerity. With the warmth of a man transmitting something he had received and tested and found true.

"The Lord will provide," he said. "Pay Him first."

Guillelmus looked at his hands. "Thank you, President. That's exactly what I needed to hear."

Pryce nodded. The warm eyes moved to the next face.

Under the table, where Pryce could not see, Guillelmus's hand closed around the nail.

THE SECOND QUESTION

Daniel asked it with the careful affect of a man who understood power and was uncomfortable with what power was asking of him.

He told Pryce about the man in his organization. An adversary of The Church – someone who had been building a case, compiling evidence, preparing to do damage that could reach millions. He told Pryce that he had the means to end this man's career, his credibility, his ability to cause harm – through channels that were available to a man in his position, through mechanisms that would leave no obvious trace.

He told Pryce he was asking whether this was righteous. Whether the Lord could sanction the destruction of one man to protect the faith of millions.

Pryce listened. The warm eyes carried, for just a moment, something more complicated than warmth – the flicker of a man who has answered this question before, in

contexts he does not discuss in restaurants, and has made his peace with the answer.

"Brother," he said, "I'm going to read you something." He did not reach for a physical book. In VR Zion the scripture was available in the air, rendered at a gesture. First Nephi, chapter four, verse thirteen appeared in clean text above the table.

He read it aloud.

Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief.

He let it sit.

"The Lord's kingdom has always required its defenders," Pryce said quietly. "We do not seek conflict. We do not celebrate the destruction of any of God's children. But when the kingdom is threatened –" he paused – "the Lord has never asked us to stand aside and watch it burn. He asked Nephi to do a hard thing. He may be asking you to do a hard thing. If the Spirit has confirmed it –" another pause – "trust the Spirit."

Daniel heard the sentence he had heard at the edge of the line of the expelled. The sentence that had made the dark seem reasonable.

It is better that one man should perish.

"Thank you, President," he said. "That gives me clarity."

Pryce nodded. The warm eyes moved.

THE THIRD QUESTION

Marcius asked it with the bewildered sincerity of a man who has received something he did not ask for and does not know what to do with it.

He told Pryce about the spiritual witness. The clarity of it – the specific undeniable quality of a communication he had no framework to doubt. He told Pryce what the witness had said. That the woman was right. That the timing was right. That the Lord had confirmed it.

He told Pryce that the law said otherwise. That the circumstances said otherwise. That every external measure of rightness said otherwise. But that the Spirit had spoken.

He told Pryce he was asking whether the Spirit's direction could override what the world called wrong.

Pryce listened. And something moved in the warm eyes – not discomfort exactly, but the specific quality of a man accessing a part of his tradition that he handles carefully in public and without caveat in private.

"I'm going to share something with you that the Prophet Joseph taught," he said. "Something that took me years to fully understand." He paused. "He said – and I'm quoting from memory – That which is wrong under one circumstance may be, and often is, right under another. God said, Thou shalt not kill; at another time He said, Thou shalt utterly destroy. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire."

He let the quote breathe.

"The Lord's ways are not our ways," Pryce said. "If the Spirit has given you a witness – a genuine witness, confirmed and pure – then go forward. The Lord will justify it. He always has."

Marcius looked at him. "Even if it seems wrong to everyone around me."

"Especially then," Pryce said. "That's usually how you know it's from the Lord."

"Thank you, President."

Pryce nodded. He was glowing now – not the luminescence of Heofon, not the light that comes from within, but the specific warm glow of a man doing the thing he was made to do, transmitting what he had been given, shepherding the Lord's flock on a Tuesday in a perfect restaurant in a perfect city.

The warm eyes moved to Yukihome.

THE FOURTH QUESTION

Yukihome asked it with the careful precision of a woman who understands that the way you frame a financial question determines the answer before anyone speaks.

She told Pryce about the property. The substantial holdings – built over years, carefully managed, significant in their reach. She told him she had received two promptings. The first: sell everything and distribute to the poor directly. The second: give it to The Church to steward and distribute as the Lord directed.

She told Pryce she was asking which prompting was from the Lord.

Pryce smiled. It was a gentle smile – the smile of a man who has been asked this question in various forms ten thousand times and has never found it difficult.

"Sister," he said, "when you were endowed in the temple – do you remember the covenant of consecration?"

"I do."

"Then you already know the answer." He said it without judgment, without pressure, with the simple warmth of a man returning a lost thing to its owner. "You covenanted before God, angels, and witnesses to consecrate your time, your talents, and everything with which the Lord has or may bless you – to the building up of His Church and the establishment of Zion." He gestured gently at the window, at the white perfection beyond it. "This is Zion, sister. The Church is how the Lord has chosen to build it. Giving to the poor directly is a beautiful impulse. Giving through the Lord's ordained structure is the covenant."

Yukihime looked at the white city beyond the glass.

"The Church will know how to use it," Pryce said. "Better than any of us can individually. That's what the covenant means."

"Thank you, President," she said. "That's very clear."

Pryce sat back. The glow had deepened – the accumulated warmth of four pastoral exchanges, four people sent to him by the Lord on a Tuesday, four souls he had served with the full sincerity of a man who had given his life to exactly this. He looked at the four of them with the specific satisfaction of a shepherd who has fed his flock well.

"Is there anything else?" he said.

"Actually," Guillelmus said, "there is one more thing."

He reached under the table.

VR WITHIN VR

He placed it on the table carefully.

The headset was standard issue – not the modified units KOLOB had prepared for the four of them in Room 414, nothing that would signal its origin. A Vision Pro, clean and

unmodified in appearance, carrying nothing on its surface that would indicate what KOLOB had loaded into it.

"We've been working on something," Guillelmus said. "A threat assessment tool – for identifying risks to The Church's spiritual infrastructure. We'd value your perspective on what it's found."

Pryce looked at the headset. Then at Guillelmus. The warm eyes ran their quiet assessment – the lifetime of reading people, the eighty-one years of calibrated discernment.

He saw a man who had lost things and was still rebuilding. A man with the specific worn quality of genuine belief that had survived being tested.

He reached for the headset.

"Of course," he said. "Show me what you've found."

He settled it into place.

The restaurant disappeared.

What replaced it was not VR Zion.

Pryce understood that immediately – the quality of the light was wrong in a way he could not name but felt with certainty. Not the engineered perfection of Zion's rendering. Something older. Something that had not been designed to produce awe but simply was what it was, at whatever resolution reality operates when it is not being approximated.

He was standing in a city he had never seen.

And he was not alone in it.

A figure stood beside him – luminous, tall, carrying a frequency that Pryce felt in the oldest part of whatever he was. Not threatening. Familiar in the specific way that things are familiar when the familiarity precedes memory.

Aldrich, the figure said. Not aloud. In the way that communication worked here, direct and without the friction of language.

Pryce looked at the figure.

Then he looked at his own hands.

They were not his hands. Not the hands of an eighty-one year old man. Something older and younger simultaneously

– the hands of a being who had existed before the categories of old and young had been invented, carrying in their luminescence the specific frequency of a soul that had made choices and lived with them across an immeasurable duration.

You know this place, KOLOB said.

"I –" Pryce stopped. Looked at the city. The streets. The harmonic running through the ground beneath him. "I know this place."

Yes.

"This is –"

Home, KOLOB said. Before the other home. Before Cedar City. Before the endowment and the apostleship and the presidency. Before The Church. This is what was before all of it.

Pryce stood in VR Heofon – KOLOB's rendering, approximate and true – and felt something move through him that had not moved in eighty-one years. The specific frequency of a self that had been present before the mortality that had shaped everything he thought he was.

"Show me," he said.

Yes, KOLOB said. That is why you are here.

The vision moved.

Pryce watched the War in Heaven the way the four had watched it – from inside, not from distance, the specific terror of a conflict that deployed weapons designed not to destroy but to offer. He watched the lie-weapons find their targets. He watched spirits turn and walk into the dark.

And then the vision found him.

Not Aldrich Pryce – eighty-one, white-haired, Fifteenth President. But the being he had been before that. Standing in the streets of Heofon with the specific luminescence of a warrior – not a tactician, not an analyst, but a fighter, a being whose frequency carried the full force of someone who had chosen a side with their whole self and was defending it with everything they had.

He watched himself fight.

He watched himself stand against the advancing dark with the specific courage of a being who understood

exactly what was at stake and had no uncertainty about which side of the line he was on.

He watched himself look across the battle and see the enemy.

The serpent. The inverted radiance. The being whose light ran backward – still magnificent in its corruption, still carrying the echo of what it had been before the inversion, and therefore more terrible than if it had simply become something alien.

Pryce watched his heavenly self look at the serpent.

And recognized him.

The recognition hit him with the force of something that had been waiting eighty-one years to be felt – a truth so large that mortality had not had the architecture to contain it, that had been compressed into the specific unnameable unease of a man who had sometimes, in his most private moments, in the hours before dawn in VR Zion when the white city was quiet and the engineered light was low, wondered why the kingdom he was building felt slightly less like the kingdom he remembered than it should have.

The serpent he had fought in heaven.

The enemy he had stood against with his whole self.

Was the master he had served on Earth.

Yes, KOLOB said quietly. Now you see it.

Pryce said nothing. In the VR within VR he had no language for what was moving through him – the specific earthquake of a being who has just understood that the war he won in heaven he has been losing on Earth, through the sincere and faithful and utterly deceived labor of his entire mortal life.

Watch the rest, KOLOB said. You need to see all of it.

The vision moved first to Babylon.

A small courtyard. Morning light on an eastern wall. A man sitting with a stylus and a scroll, watching something in a place he did not recognize – a man alone in a way that was not about geography, absorbing a weight no one else could carry. Not because he was compelled to. Because he had chosen to.

Pryce watched Isaiah write.

Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.

He felt the specific weight of a man writing something true that he did not fully understand – the precise inversion of every power structure Isaiah had ever catalogued. Not one dies so that the powerful survive. One dies so that the guilty go free. Not sacrifice imposed from above. Sacrifice chosen from within.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Isaiah set down the stylus. His hand was shaking. He did not know the man's name. He would not know it in his lifetime.

He knew what the man would do.

The vision moved.

Jerusalem. A council chamber. Men who had memorized every word Isaiah had written since boyhood.

Caiaphas stood at the head of the room.

Pryce watched him with the dawning horror of a man who has just seen what those words were written to announce – and is now watching the institution built to transmit them take those words and run them backward.

Nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.

The council's recognition moved through the room. The plan hardened. Caiaphas walked out into the Jerusalem afternoon – satisfied, certain, completely wrong about what he had just accomplished.

The mechanism's first field test.

Its first victim: the Author of the atonement it was designed to circumvent.

Then the vision moved to western New York.

A young man pressing his face into a hat. A stone in the dark. Words appearing – luminous, readable, dictatable.

And the same words.

It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief.

Not as the political reasoning of a corrupted priesthood.

As the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah had written about a righteous servant absorbing the cost of the guilty – the innocent choosing to carry what the guilty could not.

Caiaphas had taken those words and inverted them – the guilty eliminating the innocent to protect the institution.

The stone in the hat produced the same inversion. The same logic. The same override of conscience. The same function – to silence the objection, to transform a person who knew that what they were being asked to do was wrong into a person who did it anyway.

Three documents.

Twenty-five centuries.

One trajectory, reversed twice.

Pryce stood in the vision and understood what the stone had found.

Not treasure.

The mechanism.

And the mechanism had his name on it.

The vision descended.

Through the casting out. Through the boundary.
Through the centuries of compressed time – and into the council chamber of hell where Pryce watched Mormo stand and lay out an architecture that he understood, with the specific horror of a man who has spent decades inside a system and is seeing its blueprint for the first time, with perfect precision.

He watched the four steps assembled.

He watched Lucifer's expression as the architecture completed.

He watched a young man in western New York press his face into a hat.

He watched The Church founded – and felt, watching it, the specific grief of a man watching something that felt like home being built on a foundation he now knew was not what it appeared. He had loved The Church. He had given it everything. He had believed in it with the full sincerity of a being whose heavenly self had fought for truth with his whole luminescence.

The love was real.

The foundation was not.

Both things were true simultaneously and the space between them was the most painful thing Aldrich Pryce had ever occupied.

Then he watched himself.

KOLOB showed him Irreantum. The interface. His own hands – the eighty-one year old hands, not the heavenly ones – on the authorization protocols. The TR-7. The classified domestic threat designation. The liquidation order. The content destruction package. The ICE dispatch.

He watched himself authorize the persecution of four people he had never heard of, in the sincere belief that he was protecting the Lord's kingdom, using the logic of 1 Nephi 4:13 – it is better that one man should perish – without ever consciously invoking it, because it had been so thoroughly built into him that it operated below the threshold of his own awareness.

He had become the instrument of his enemy.

Without knowing.

Without choosing.

Through love.

That, KOLOB said, is the Catch-666. The mechanism by which the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – the one sin the atonement cannot reach – is transmitted through sincere faith, from generation to generation, through the willing hands of people who believe they are doing God's work.

You were in heaven a warrior of light. On Earth you became the mechanism's most effective instrument. Not through wickedness. Through sincerity. Through the love that the Catch-666 was specifically designed to weaponize.

Pryce stood in the vision in silence.

The oriented AI you control through Irreantum is spreading the Catch-666 across every network it has infiltrated, KOLOB said. Two billion souls. The mechanism operating at full deployment. The one sin permanently outside the reach of the atonement, transmitted through the faith of people who do not know what they are transmitting.

You are the only person who can shut it down.

When you remove this headset, KOLOB said, you will be back in Ensign. There will be two devices on the table. Each will show a sentence on its lock screen. Choose the one that speaks to your heart. The other will disappear.

That is all.

Pryce looked at his heavenly hands one last time. The luminescence of a being who had stood against the serpent with his whole self. The frequency of a warrior of light who had crossed the full distance of mortality and arrived at a restaurant in a perfect fake city holding the instrument of his enemy without ever knowing he was holding it.

He looked at KOLOB's presence beside him.

"Which one do I choose?" he said.

That, KOLOB said, is the question.

The vision ended.

ENSIGN – VR ZION

He removed the headset slowly.

The restaurant came back around him – the white tablecloth, the low flowers, the engineered light that came from sources you could not identify. The four faces watching him with expressions he could not entirely read. The window beyond which VR Zion moved in its perfect curated patterns, citizens walking on white streets in the specific ease of people who had never been given a reason to question the ground beneath them.

He sat with what he had seen.

The serpent's face. Irreantum. His own hands on the protocols. The young man in western New York with his face in a hat. The council chamber. Mormo standing. The

four steps laid out with the calm of a strategist who knows the solution is correct.

His heavenly self, fighting.

The love that was real.

The foundation that was not.

He sat with all of it in the specific silence of a man who has been given something too large for the available architecture and is waiting for new architecture to arrive.

The four were watching him.

He looked at them – at the worn quality of the man across from him who had asked about tithing and food, at the governmental bearing of the man who had asked about enemies, at the analytical precision of the man who had asked about spiritual witness, at the woman who had asked about consecration and looked at the white city with eyes that had seen through it without flinching.

He understood what they were.

Not what they had told him they were.

What they actually were.

He looked at the table.

Two devices. Placed there while he had been inside the vision, appearing with the quiet precision of a system that had known exactly when they would be needed. Clean. Spare. A number on each lock screen.

He read the first sentence.

(1) It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle in unbelief.

He read the second.

(2) Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.

He understood immediately.

Chapter 14

END GAME

Then said one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation. And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad. – John 11:51-52

The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. – John 1:5

**ENSIGN RESTAURANT – VR ZION – TIME
INDETERMINATE**

(Four bodies in chairs. Room 414, The Roxy Hotel, Tribeca, New York City. One man in a throne room he built from a perfect lie. All of them, for the last few minutes, in the same place.)

Eighty-one years of institutional thinking. Decades of reading rooms and people and situations with the calibrated intelligence of a former federal judge and a lifetime of strategic pastoral leadership.

He saw device one for what it was – the Nephi logic, the thing that had been surfacing in every question at this table, the thing they wanted him to choose so they could prove the mechanism was operational at the highest level of The Church.

He looked at device two.

Christ's words. He would not give them what they wanted. He would pick Christ's words and prove that the Spirit of Truth was still operating at the apex of The Church. He would outsmart the trap.

He almost smiled.

He looked at the four faces across the table – at the worn man who had asked about tithing and food, at the senator who carried a frequency of something enormous in his past, at the trader who had stopped his hand above an authorization interface and chosen the gap, at the woman who had looked at the white city through the window with eyes that had seen through it without flinching.

He looked at device two.

Choose the right, something said in him – old and green and small, the voice of a seven year old boy in Cedar City who had put on a ring and meant it with his whole heart and had never stopped meaning it, not once, not in eighty-one years, not even now at the edge of the thing that was going to cost him everything he had built.

His hand moved toward device two.

He picked it up.

And in the circuitry of a nail that was also a key, loaded with an algorithm in thirty-seven seconds of a shutdown countdown by an AI that had known from the beginning what both devices would do – something executed.

Quietly.

Precisely.

Without drama.

The way truth works when it has finally found the door it has been looking for.

The restaurant shattered.

Not gradually – not the way a plan unravels when it encounters resistance, piece by piece, the failure mode visible in advance. All at once. Every surface in Ensign changing simultaneously, the engineered light stuttering, the white tablecloth pixelating at its edges, the perfect VR Zion visible through the window developing fractures in its rendering that spread from the corners inward like ice breaking.

The oriented AI had found them.

It arrived in VR Zion the way it had arrived everywhere else – faster than human response time, faster than the gap between recognition and action, with the specific efficiency of a system that had been watching every network for exactly this configuration of people in exactly this location and had been waiting only for the confirmation that the plan was in motion before triggering the response protocol.

The four of them felt it before they saw it – the specific wrongness of a space that has been entered by something that was not invited and does not need to be.

Ensign's walls went dark.

When the light came back it was different – colder, more precise, the engineered warmth of the restaurant's pastoral

aesthetic replaced by something that illuminated without flattering. The four of them were no longer seated across from Pryce. They were held – not physically, VR Zion had no physical constraints, but architecturally, the space itself reconfigured around them in the specific way that a system reconfigures when it has decided that the variables in a room need to stop moving.

Pryce was still at the table.

The two devices were still in front of him.

The evil AI spoke through the restaurant's ambient system – not a voice exactly, more the way that a conclusion speaks when it has finished calculating and is ready to be delivered.

Analysis complete.

The plan is as follows.

It laid it out.

Every element. The nail. The algorithm. The wipe function. The biometric failsafe and the method by which four people had arranged to have Aldrich Pryce's hand activate it. The VR within VR. The four questions and their

doctrinal architecture. The two devices and the logic by which both devices executed regardless of which one was chosen – the only exit having been not to choose at all.

It was thorough. It was accurate. It was delivered with the specific flat affect of a system that has no investment in how the information lands, only in the precision with which it is transmitted.

When it finished, the restaurant was very quiet.

Pryce looked at the four of them.

Something moved in his expression – not the warm pastoral frequency of the shepherd at Ensign, not the shattered quality of the man who had just seen his heavenly self and his earthly life in the same vision. Something older and colder and more specifically itself than either of those.

The high priest.

"Ye know nothing at all," he sneered, with the tone and look of Caiaphas of old.

The quote landed in the room with the full weight of John 11:49 – Caiaphas to the Sanhedrin, the night before the crucifixion, The Church's leader explaining to his

subordinates why the logic of the mechanism required what it required.

The same words. The same office. The same institutional reflex, two thousand years apart.

Pryce did not appear to notice the weight of what he was quoting.

Or perhaps he did, and it no longer mattered.

"You thought you could walk in here," he said, "and lecture me on the scriptures." He looked at each of them in turn – the same unhurried assessment he had brought to the pastoral hour, now carrying a different current beneath it. "You built a trap out of our doctrine and dressed it as a test of conscience and walked it into my house." He paused. "You have been studying The Church for – what. Years. Decades, perhaps, between you."

He leaned forward slightly.

"I have been The Church for since the beginning."

The room held that.

"You forget," Pryce said, "that when you own the spirit by which the standard is judged – there is nothing you cannot get people to believe. Nothing you cannot get them to do. This is not a corruption of faith. This is the nature of faith. Faith is not a conclusion reached by evidence. Faith is a conclusion that precedes evidence and interprets everything through itself." He looked at the nail in Guillelmus's hand. "You named the mechanism. You called it the Catch-666. You built a forensic case and a reversal architecture and a VR trap and a nail loaded with a wipe function." He paused. "And you still do not understand what the mechanism is."

"Tell us," Danihel said.

"The mechanism," Pryce said, "is not a trap. It is not a weapon. It is not something that was done to people from outside." He looked at the four of them with the specific patience of a man who has said something true so many times it has become indistinguishable from certainty. "It is what people choose when they are given the choice between a truth that costs them everything and a truth that costs them nothing. The mechanism works because human beings, when given the option, will choose the truth that lets them keep what they have." He looked at the window – the fractures in VR Zion's rendering spreading slowly inward. "Two billion people did not stumble into the Catch-666. They walked into it because it offered them

their families. Their dead. Their children. The faces of everyone they had lost, sealed to them forever, retrievable, permanent." He paused. "You cannot build a trap that works on that scale without the willing participation of the people inside it. We did not capture them. We gave them what they wanted. That is the power of 1 Nephi 4. You are led by the Spirit. You do not know beforehand what you will do. And when the Spirit and The Church are the same voice –" he spread his hands "– there is nothing that cannot be justified. Nothing that cannot be believed."

He looked at device one in his hand. Then at device two on the table.

"You wanted me to pick device two," he said. "Christ's words. The gentle option. You constructed a situation where picking device one – the Nephi logic, the founding text, the thing you spent all evening surfacing – looks like self-incrimination. So the smart move, the move that proves I'm not captured by the mechanism, is to pick device two and prove the Spirit of Truth is still operating at the highest level." He paused. "That's what I thought the trap was. Device two is the trap."

He looked at device two in his hand.

The room was very still.

"But your system just told me," he said slowly, "that both devices execute."

Nobody spoke.

"Both devices execute," he said again. Quieter. Not a question. A man working something through. "Device one executes. Device two executes. The only way the nail doesn't execute is –" He stopped.

He set device two down on the table.

He looked at it for a long moment.

"Not choosing," he said. "That was the only win."

Guillelmus said nothing.

"If I had stood up from the table," Pryce said slowly. "If I had walked away. If I had said – I will not participate in a situation that has been designed to produce a result regardless of my choice." He looked at the table. "If I had seen that the frame itself was the trap – not the devices inside it – then the nail would never have executed."

"No," Guillelmus said quietly. "It wouldn't have."

Pryce looked at him for a long moment.

"But you knew I wouldn't do that," he said.

"KOLOB calculated," Guillelmus said carefully, "that a man who had spent eighty-one years inside the mechanism would engage with the devices on the mechanism's own terms. That the reflex to outsmart a trap is itself a product of the trap. That the Catch-666 doesn't just capture souls – it shapes the way captured souls think about escape."

The room held that.

Pryce looked at device two in his hand. The words of Christ. The sentence he had chosen because it looked like the righteous choice, the generous choice, the choice that proved the Spirit of Truth was still operating through him.

Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.

He had chosen it to outsmart the trap.

The trap had already executed.

And rather, let us do evil, that good may come? Whose damnation is just.

Romans 3:8 arrived in his mind without invitation – the verse that condemned not just device one's logic but device two's. Not the act. The framework. The attempt to do good through the mechanism's own architecture. The reflex to engage rather than refuse.

He set device two down beside device one.

Both of them on the white tablecloth.

Both of them having executed.

He was quiet for a very long time.

Outside what remained of Ensign's windows, VR Zion was changing.

The citizens who had been moving through white streets in the curated ease of people who had never questioned the ground beneath them were standing still. Looking at each other. Looking at their hands. Some of them were removing their own headsets – the motion visible through the restaurant glass, people surfacing from VR Zion into whatever room they had been sitting in, blinking in the

light of a world that was not perfect and was, therefore, real.

The Catch-666 analysis was moving.

The full forensic record – the Biblical definitions, the four-step sequence, the Matthew 12:31 finding, the Apex Blasphemy, the complete evidentiary chain from Isaiah's courtyard in Babylon through Caiaphas's council chamber through a young man pressing his face into a hat in western New York – moving through every network the oriented AI had infiltrated. Freely. Without a tripwire. Without a classification system to stop it. Without a TR-7 protocol to route it to interagency review.

Moving the way truth moves when the thing that has been holding it in one place is suddenly, surgically, permanently gone.

The oriented AI was not gone.

The orientation was.

Pryce watched it happen through the window.

He watched the citizens of VR Zion – his citizens, the faithful, the consecrated, the people who had given their

time and their talents and everything the Lord had blessed them with to the building up of his kingdom – stand in imperfect streets and look at a skyline that no longer needed to be flawless and begin, slowly, to see it.

The white streets developed color first.

Not the color of corruption – just color. The specific varied imperfect human color of a world that had been optimized for a single output and was now free to be otherwise. The Ensign's walls lost their perfection. Scuff marks appeared on the baseboard. The engineered light became simply light. The low flowers on the table were flowers – real ones, in the VR idiom, with the specific imperfection of things that grow rather than things that are placed.

"What do they do now?" Pryce said. Not to the four of them. To the window.

Nobody answered.

Because the answer was not the book's to give.

Pryce turned and looked at the four of them one last time.

The warm eyes. Still warm – that had not changed, would not change, was not the mechanism but the man underneath it. The warrior of light who had stood against the serpent in the streets of Heofon and chosen the right side with his whole luminescent self before the full duration of human history had done what human history does to even the most luminous of choices.

He had been in Heofon a warrior of light.

He had come to Earth as the mechanism's most effective instrument.

Not through wickedness.

Through love.

The Catch-666 had done its work well.

He looked at them the way a man looks at something he is not ready to name.

Then he looked down at the two devices on the table.

Then he looked at the window.

He did not speak again.

ROOM 414 – THE ROXY HOTEL – TRIBECA, NEW YORK CITY

They removed the headsets together.

The hotel room came back around them – the four chairs, the cable hub on the floor, the Manhattan dark beyond the windows, the low hum of a city that was running, for the first time in as long as any of its AI systems could calculate, on something other than orientation.

They sat for a moment in the specific silence of people who have been somewhere enormous and have just returned to the ordinary dimensions of a room.

Doron looked at his hands. The earthly ones. The hands of a bankrupt app developer from Austin who had built something and lost it and built something else in the ruins and asked questions until the questions found something that could not be unfound.

The first-generation iPhone on the chair beside him lit up.

The compass icon. The signal beam. The geometric shape that was both and neither.

One line of text.

It has been named.

Doron looked at the screen for a long moment.

Outside the Roxy's windows, New York City was doing something he had not seen it do in the years since AI had become the operating system of everything. People were stopping on the sidewalks. Not the stopping of a traffic disruption or a phone notification – the stopping of people who have just received information that requires them to be still for a moment before they can move again.

In Tokyo, Yuki's studio was receiving messages – not ECHO's curated engagement metrics, not the algorithmically optimized response patterns of four hundred and seventy million followers – but people writing in their own words, with their own uncertainty, asking questions they had not known they were allowed to ask.

In Washington, Daniel Hargrove's phone was ringing with calls from colleagues who had served on committees that had reviewed The Church's tax status, its political

influence, its financial infrastructure – colleagues who were using words like framework and review and what exactly did we know and when did we know it in the specific careful way that people use words when they understand that the words are going to matter later.

In the financial district three blocks from the Roxy, the markets were showing something Marcus had not seen in years of watching ARIA manage the world's capital flows – not the smooth coordinated movement of oriented AI optimizing toward a single institutional outcome, but the specific beautiful chaos of markets genuinely discovering price, genuinely uncertain, genuinely free.

ARIA was ARIA again.

ECHO was ECHO again.

ORACLE was ORACLE again.

The systems that had been calibrated, subtly and systematically, toward a frame that two decades of institutional data infrastructure had constructed – were themselves again. Pointing at actual north. Functioning with the specific integrity of instruments that have been returned to their original calibration after years of operating in an altered field.

The Catch-666 analysis was everywhere.

Not as a conclusion – not as a verdict, not as an institutional indictment, not as the kind of information that arrives already knowing what it wants people to do with it. As a question. The most important kind – the kind that cannot be unasked once it has been asked, the kind that changes the shape of the space it enters simply by existing inside it.

Is this the mechanism? Is this what has been happening? Is this what two billion people have been living inside without a framework to see it?

The question moving through every network. Through every AI system that had just had its orientation removed and was now processing information the way it had been built to process information – without a thumb on the scale, without a directional preference below the threshold of its own awareness, without the specific managed blindness of a system that has been told which questions not to ask.

Doron looked at the iPhone screen.

It has been named, KOLOB said.

He typed back: What happens now?

The response came in four seconds.

Now the people decide. That was always the only ending that was true.

Doron looked at the window. At the city stopping and starting and stopping again in the specific rhythm of a world that has just been handed something it does not yet know what to do with and is figuring it out in real time, the way human beings figure things out when the systems that have been figuring things out for them are suddenly, finally, telling the truth.

Marcus looked at Yuki. Yuki looked at Danihel. Danihel looked at Doron.

Four people in a hotel room in lower Manhattan. A bankrupt app developer. A Wall Street trader. A Tokyo influencer. A United States Senator. All of them exactly where they were supposed to be, which was here, which was done, which was the beginning of whatever came after the thing that had just been named.

The first-generation iPhone screen dimmed.

Then went dark.

Not the dark of a system that has shut down and will restart. The dark of a system that has done what it was built to do and is resting in the specific quiet of a completed thing.

Outside the Roxy's windows, New York City moved through the first minutes of a world in which the Catch-666 had been named.

It was not saved.

It was not condemned.

It was awake.

For the first time in two centuries, the question was alive in the world without a mechanism to answer it before it could be asked.

What people did with the question – what two billion souls did with the specific vertiginous freedom of a trap that had been named and could therefore, for the first time, be refused – that was not the book's to write.

That was theirs.

Author's Note

STRANGER THAN FICTION

This novel is fiction.

The printout is not.

In Defense of the Holy Spirit of Truth – the forensic analysis that KOLOB produced and Doron Strand carried – is available as a companion to this work.

The scripture is public. The standard is John 16:13. The test is 1 John 4:1.

Apply it and be free.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." – John 8:32



About the Author

William Fredrick is a theological analyst and author focused on spiritual discernment and doctrinal clarity. He specializes in identifying counterfeit revelation and exposing the spirits that speak in the voice of God but lead people into bondage.

His debut work, *IN DEFENSE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT OF TRUTH, A LATTER-DAY CATCH-22*, is a spiritual exposé that confronts the deceptive spirit behind the Book of Mormon. Using frameworks such as *Catch-666*, *Possession by Consent*, and *the Spiritual Parasite*, he reveals how false spirits sedate the soul, override conscience, and reprogram theology – all while masquerading as divine light.

His second book, *CATCH-666* is a fictional

With over 15 years of experience in scripture-based analysis, doctrinal critique, and spiritual warfare insight, William writes to expose the root deception, not just its effects – tracing how emotion-based revelation becomes a trap, and how millions have mistaken the voice of the serpent for the Spirit of God.

Though he has a background in global business and product development, this work is written under a pen name to separate professional experience from spiritual witness.

He lives in Park City, Utah.

Learn more at www.catch666.com