

Into Temptation

T. E. Whitaker

PREVIEW

MESSIANIC POLITIC

“In the beginning, there is something beyond the black, a looming presence, warming the cold, bending the light. Now the farthest galaxies plunge and heave, swirling and receding into a cosmic wake. The darkness vibrates. And hands, tremendous hands spanning time and space, emerge through the heavens, drawing ever nearer—”

“Zis is verbatim?”

“What do you think?” Jesus Christ asked from a reclining position on the oxblood leather chaise lounge. Behind the arm of the chaise, where Jesus’ head rested, Sigmund Freud “hmmphed” while jotting his endless notes.

“I zink it is melodramatic,” Freud said, adjusting his chair. The color of an evergreen forest, its stuffed back and arms rising to elbow level, the chair stood on wooden legs and was one of three unchanged elements of his practice. The others were his round-framed spectacles and his white, softly pointed beard. He enjoyed being recognized.

“It’s how angels speak.”

“Michael does not speak in zis manner. Neizer does Lucifer.”

“They’ve adopted the patois of the age,” Jesus said. “The other angels consider them unpolished.”

“Hmmp.”

“And Mike hasn’t had the dream.”

“What about Lucifer?”

Jesus considered. “I think he’s hiding something.”

“I see. Und you? You have not had zee dream?”

“No. But it’s become a status symbol with the angels.”

“How do you feel about zat?”

“I imagine it’s welcome fuel for their Machiavellian existence of gambling and politics. They think He’s coming. The Book is taking bets on the day He’ll arrive.”

“Und you?” Freud asked. “Do you agree wiz zem?”

Jesus shifted on the chaise. “I haven’t decided. What do *you* think it means?”

“Dreams are not prescient,” Freud said. “Zey are primarily wish fulfillments, and ultimately zee product of repressed sexual desires. Likely zee angels having zeese dreams harbor a subconscious conjugal desire originating with zeir inception.”

Jesus sat up. He’d already crumpled his exquisite Italian suit, but felt the need to glare at the psychoanalyst, though they both knew it was for the sake of theatrics.

“Your blind adherence to your questionable theories marginalizes you in modern psychological circles.”

Freud ignored the jab and asked, “Why do you zink you are not party to zee dream?”

“I’m not sure,” Jesus said. “Carl thinks the angels might originate from a separate plane of the collective unconscious.”

Freud went still at the mention of his former collaborator and his theory. “You have seen Dr. Jung?”

Jesus laughed. “If I had, how would you feel about zzzzat?”

Freud set down his pencil and stared at Jesus. Jesus laughed again, but scowled as Freud placed his notebook on the table beside him.

“He’ll blame me,” Jesus said, slumping on the chaise.

“Hmmpf.”

“But I think He should take responsibility and do something about it, instead of pointing one big finger at me. He set it in motion. But He’s been gone a long time. He’s out of touch.”

“Yet understanding walks hand-in-hand wiz omniscience.”

Jesus chuckled, knowing Freud sculpted his pseudo-profundities deep into the night. Sleep was optional in the City, and those who slept did so to dream, to collect ideas for what to do the next day. Without a purpose, eternity’s charm wore thin. Freud, however, skipped sleep, knowing his dreams would inspire further, unwanted self-analysis, instead opting to spend the dark hours inventing phrases to impress his clients. On occasion he did. But Jesus wasn’t in a good mood at present, so he ignored the doctor’s nugget.

“Not on this path, Siggy. It’s all—”

“Do not call me by name,” Freud said. “You are risking transference.”

Jesus rolled his eyes and returned to his reclining position. The stark white ceiling had the texture of the Himalayas from on high.

“Everyone thinks He’s coming,” Jesus said. “It’s all joy and panic. Except Lou, of course. He’s calm. Just scoops up the new manifestations and routes them to Hell. As if everything’s normal. As if anyone really knows what He intended.” He shrugged. “I guess someone has to hold it together. And the looks I’m getting. I haven’t seen those since, well, for a long time.”

Freud leaned forward. “Maybe we should talk about zat again.”

Jesus didn’t want to revisit the odd curiosity he’d encountered during his first days in the City, or when he’d understood his Father was not there to welcome him.

“Not today.”

Freud tsk-tsked. “If you bring forz what is wizzin you—”

“Don’t use my words against me,” Jesus snapped, sitting up and scanning the walls. The doctor still refused to keep Jung on the shelves. Freud never changed the office design, in Jesus’ estimation a significant character flaw. Were this *his* office, he’d scrape the ceiling, simplify the crown moldings, and swap the window treatments—maybe to Roman shades in a subtle coral pink, to complement the sky’s unnaturally deep blue.

“I can see it all now,” Jesus said, “if He *does* return. Grovel grovel, gush gush. ‘Behold the conquering hero!’ Every angel will throw a dinner party, one after the other, black tie here, beach theme there. They’ll all be so very clever. Milk and honey and hard bread on rustic stoneware and the ever-popular silver platters. Angels *adore* textural contrasts with subtext. And then they’ll wheel out the mutton.” He rubbed his temples. “‘O, bitter symbolism!’ the hosts will sigh while they pour the wine, just so we know the meal is as heavy-handed as we suspect. And someone will ask me to do my Last Supper routine. ‘Do it again! Do it again!’” He clapped his hands together. “And what will I do? I’ll do it. And I’ll go to every last party to avoid social scandal.”

The expectation alone exhausted him. He collapsed to the chaise and gazed at the sky. He really hated those window treatments.

“I need help,” Jesus said. “I’m begging you. He’s on His way—”

“So you *do*—”

“—and nobody knows what He wants. It’s all conjecture. I want you to give me real advice.

What will it take?”

Freud didn’t reply.

“I can arrange a lunch with Moses.”

“It is not zat simple,” Freud said, too quickly.

Jesus smiled. “He loved your book.”

“You are lying.”

“Okay,” Jesus said. “He enjoyed the book. We all enjoyed it.”

“In what manner?” Freud asked. He yearned to meet Moses, but upon reaching the City had been mortified to find his “historical novel” on the deliverer of the Jews so far off the mark it was the punch line to the City’s most popular joke.

“He has it on his coffee table,” Jesus said. “He reads from it whenever he’s feeling down.”

“So he can laugh?” Freud asked. “Many men,” he said, returning to his analysis and by doing so declining the offer, “have issues wiz zeir fozzers, und—”

“There’s no Oedipal slant to this.”

Freud tsk-tsked under his breath. “Zere is a slant of zat sort to almost everyzing.”

“That’s your theory.”

“You are in my office,” Freud said. “You came to me.”

Jesus said nothing.

“What is zee first word zat pops into your mind when I say ‘fozzer’?”

“No. Not today.”

“Fozzer,” Freud repeated.

“I’m not—”

“Fozzer.”

“*Mother.*”

Freud raised an eyebrow. “Bed.”

Jesus sighed. “Danger.”

“Knife.”

“You’re leading me.”

“Knife.”

“Blind.”

Freud paused, glaring down his nose at Jesus. “You will never reconcile your issues if you insist upon mocking zee process.”

“You’re too obvious. And we’ve done word association a thousand times.”

“Zen you should be better at it zan you are.”

“Maybe the fault is in the process, not the patient.”

Freud removed his glasses. “I understand precisely how your Fozzer will feel.”

* * *

Jesus stood before his full-length mirror, giving himself a fifth once-over. Suit, impeccable. Shirt, subtle. Tie, perfect. A splendid and lavish dresser, he changed ensembles several times per day, turning in wardrobe expense reports for breathtaking sums. The accounting department’s lower-level gray-winged angels accepted his reports with jealous reproach, though they attempted to conceal their reaction with classic angelic indifference.

A small draft came from the bedroom. Zubba and Wubba, the chubby, winged butlers of the house, drifted into the dressing room.

“No more than thirty minutes,” Zubba said to Jesus. Zubba was the dominant of the pair, and less impressed by Jesus.

“What are you talking about?”

“The presentation,” Wubba said. “Thirty minutes is the limit. Gabriel has a speaking engagement tonight.”

Jesus checked his Patek Phillipe wristwatch. Not a watch, he thought. A *timepiece*. For years he’d had to cajole and beg Lucifer to forge a convincing Patek Phillipe reproduction, while enduring Lou’s tedious monologues regarding the perils of introducing a watch where there was no time.

“How am I supposed to justify my proposal in thirty minutes?” he asked. “Technology only goes so far.”

The putti shrugged as one.

“Do you need to justify it?” Wubba asked.

“More time won’t help you fool them,” Zubba said.

“It’s a complex proposal,” Jesus said. “I’m not trying to fool anyone.”

Wubba laughed, soft red curls dancing in his wing draft. “You’re quite transparent.”

Jesus scowled at them. Chubby and happy, putti didn’t deal well with displeasure directed their way. The slightest negativity drove them off and kept them fawning for days. But not this time. They remained, and the mirror seized his attention. He tried smiling, but it looked plastered on. Why was it so difficult? He smiled again, this time with solemnity. Success.

“Thank you for attending this out-of-session—” No good.

The putti fluttered while he considered a more formal approach.

“Welcome saints and angels, one and all—”

He beat back frustration.

“Too Dickensian?” Zubba asked.

“No matter what you say,” Wubba said, “the angels will consult with Lou.”

“Don’t you think I know that? Heaven might crumble if Satan didn’t call the shots.”

They exchanged disapproving glances.

“Such outbursts,” Wubba whispered.

“It’s so ugly in a public figure,” Zubba said.

Jesus waved them away. “Leave me.”

They fluttered off. Jesus stared into the mirror. He needed to focus. He could do it. He could convince them.

It was his only chance.

* * *

The executive conference room on the tenth floor of Twelve Copernican Way was tasteful and modern, with mahogany floors and walls, a small collection of posthumous Rembrandts, and a wet bar stocking the finest Cognacs, wines, and root beers. Behind the bar long-stemmed wine glasses perched atop a mini-freezer, which housed six frosted mugs. A long conference table made from a solid slab of white onyx dominated the room, surrounded by elegant club chairs.

Jesus stood before the Executive Committee, laser pointer in hand, evaluating their fashion choices. The Archangel Gabriel, underdressed as usual in torn blue jeans and a white t-shirt, sat next to a gray and bushy Saint Peter, who wore the crimson robes of Catholicism. Beside Peter sat the Archangel Michael who, Jesus thought with no small satisfaction, had never been the dresser *he* was. Michael was a khaki addict, not caring that the style had permeated western civilization and now trod the earth shoulder-to-shoulder with turned-up polo collars among the legions of the fashion undead. Across the table, Martin Luther sat with Moses. The Reformer hadn't changed his cassock since his delusional battles with Lucifer, but Moses, kicking back in his chair, no longer wore a slave's duds. Moses was all pastels in silk and linen, a South Beach caricature with slicked hair and heavy rings.

An empty chair reserved for Muhammad waited next to Moses. Muhammad hadn't attended an Executive Committee meeting for a millennia, not since the committee had rejected the Prophet's interpretation of John 14:16. Maybe the time had come to make amends. He missed Muhammad and their nights in Paradise City's hookah lounges.

Jesus tried to ignore the absence of the committee's eighth and final member. He aimed the laser pointer's thin red beam at the screen and clicked its remote button. The new slide read *The Mandate*, followed by a numbered list of pertinent Bible quotations.

"You'll notice," Jesus said, "the clear progression of ideas." He met the eyes of Peter, Moses, and Martin Luther. "And I quote... one, 'fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.'" He held up two fingers. "Two, 'for God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.'"

Jesus' gaze swept past the archangels, to avoid their blank expressions. "Three, 'go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.'" Jesus underlined the last few words with the thin red beam. "By teaching them to observe what He commanded. This is a clear mandate."

Michael shifted in his chair, crossed his arms, and sighed.

Jesus set his jaw and faced the screen. "And of course, I said, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"

“While offering the virtues of my candidacy throughout the City,” Gabriel said in his distinctive stage whisper, “I have reaped the glories of third-party affirmation, yet rued the pitfalls of self-aggrandizement.”

“Gabe,” Jesus said, “you can’t throw a stone at the Bible and not hit something I said. Would you have me pretend His will and I aren’t inextricable?”

Gabriel and Michael exchanged a look Jesus didn’t like. He calmed himself and clicked to the next slide, a collage of kings, generals, and industrial titans titled *The Leadership Effect*.

“I believe we can all agree,” Jesus said, “the success or failure of an enterprise depends upon the quality of leadership.”

“Napoleon isn’t the best example,” Michael said, not bothering to point at the little corporal’s familiar face on the screen.

“Though he would never admit it,” Moses said, twisting one of his ornate rings.

“Still, he knows,” Gabriel said. “Truth, like darkness, visits all.”

“Apparently not,” Michael said, and winked at Gabriel.

“Is there disagreement with my premise?” Jesus asked, louder than necessary.

The archangels offered indulgent smiles.

“Without strong, present leadership, faith has eroded.” Jesus flipped open a spiral-bound booklet resting on the conference table. “If you turn to appendix 39-B of my proposal, you’ll notice the individual faith index has fallen steadily since Marty’s little stunt.”

Martin Luther muttered to himself.

“A leading theory of this phenomenon,” Jesus said, “is the downturn in weekly church attendance has been, in essence, a... shaking out... per se, pointing to the possibility earlier statistical models were diluted, perhaps due to peer and social pressure to attend, the ‘question-not’ mentality of the Dark Ages, or from mid-millennial fear factors such as the Inquisition.”

“There were other forces,” Michael said.

“Are you referring to the Age of Reason?” Gabriel asked.

“I am.”

Gabriel knitted his brow. “The era *does* offer a compendium of thorny arguments.”

“Hypocrites,” Luther mumbled, prompting a grin from Michael that Jesus deemed stagy.

“I agree, Marty,” Jesus said, changing the screen to a slide titled *Enlightenment?* “But the permeation of science and so-called ‘humanism’ have played roles in the downturn of most faith-relevant data.”

“Why do you suppose that is?” Michael asked.

Jesus bristled. That was the sort of question their eighth member would have asked, had the Dark Angel deigned to bless them with his presence.

“Perhaps,” Gabriel said, his apologetic tone ringing false to Jesus, “because to literally interpret what is written leads to certain awkward conflicts with physical facts.” He winced. “It pains me, yes, but so it is.”

Jesus rolled his eyes at the archangels’ eternal good cop-bad cop routine. The only variation was who assumed which role. It was tiresome, predictable. And now he could no longer ignore Lucifer’s absence. The urgency of Jesus’ email had been clear:

TO: Executive Committee (peter@saints.hev, gabriel@angels.cty, michael@angels.cty, mooses@char.bib, m.luther@exec.hev, bigbadlou@rehab.hel, muhammad72@exec.par)
FROM: j.christ@exec.hev
SUBJ: Urgent – His possible return

Critical meeting tomorrow. Time-sensitive proposal. Attendance mandatory. Four o’clock.

JC

Was Jesus surprised Lucifer had skipped the meeting? Not in the least, because it was crucial to *him*. The more importance Jesus placed on an issue, the less Lucifer seemed motivated to act in its favor. If not for Lucifer’s irritating near-omniscience, Jesus would have applied reverse psychology to everything requiring a unanimous committee vote. But that would encourage Lucifer to unknown heights of political deception. How long had Jesus lobbied for free distribution of scripture, to counter the City’s near-total secularism? Four centuries? Five? Whereas Lucifer had railroaded the passage of H-1455.87—funding the conversion of Hell to a rehabilitation center—through both Houses, Angels and Saints, without a single dissension,

courtesy of Jesus' naïve faith that Lucifer would recognize the quid pro quo nature of his support. Later, when Jesus prodded him to return the favor on the scripture initiative, Lucifer had spread his palms in infuriating mockery of Jesus' crucifixion pose. "I'm sorry," he'd said. "I didn't realize your endorsement was political. I thought you'd finally seen the light. So to speak."

"Where is he?" Jesus asked Michael.

"Who?"

Jesus glared at the archangel.

"Satan," Martin Luther hissed.

Peter nodded while Moses observed.

"Something came up," Michael said.

"He does not wish to offend," Gabriel said.

Martin Luther scoffed and Moses twisted his thumb ring.

Jesus gathered himself, beating down his annoyance. He knew Lucifer intended to ponder his proposal. Below his instinctive sense of style, his smooth voice, and lightning wit, Lucifer liked to consider things, a chess grandmaster plotting his game twelve moves in advance. But Jesus wanted a decision *now*. He wanted an immediate vote after his presentation, dispensing with reflection and theosophical ponderings, while the committee was high on messianic nostalgia. Lucifer's absence assured a no-vote. Meanwhile His possible return crept closer, the inevitability of which Jesus sensed like a migratory bird sensed winter's first whisper. Dreams or not, the day was coming and something had to be done.

"But he asked," Michael said, "that you make your proposal and we table the vote for a few days."

The nerve, Jesus thought, the *nerve*. To dictate to *him*, the *Son of God!* What allowed Lucifer such power? There had been moments he'd wished his Father would come back and pry off the suffocating grip of Lucifer's political machine. Lucifer's will determined the House of Angels' votes, because the angels believed Lucifer was of the same stuff as God—stardust and consciousness and gravity, or some such hyperbole. Lucifer's abilities eluded other angels. His origin and consistent nature through the ages was more akin to God's, whereas angels were beings of shifting guises: then gods of a lesser order, now guardians and superlative vocalists.

For millennia, angels battled over God's intentions, and when Jesus, the saints, and various religious figures became numerous enough to attain political relevance, the interpretation of God's desires (naked speculation, were Jesus to be honest with himself) polarized the City. The House of Saints voted as one to promote religion in the City, but the City's political system (devised by Lucifer, of course) gave Jesus and the saints half the voting power of the House of Angels, who always voted with Lucifer. Lucifer rebelled against all things mystic, including religion, so any proposal at odds with reason was doomed.

But when an issue involved only an Executive Committee member, a majority vote by the committee was enough to approve the measure. Jesus assumed Lucifer had inserted the loophole to make things interesting, and to better evaluate those on the committee. Jesus' plan was such a proposal.

He read the eyes upon him. Michael and Gabriel would listen, ask eviscerating questions, and object to everything he said. They'd maintain antagonistic neutrality so their votes appeared autonomous, independent of Lucifer's guidance, as sometimes Jesus thought they believed. Peter would campaign hard for the proposal and supply the necessary scriptural backup. Martin Luther could swing either way. As a rule he tiptoed around Jesus because he revered him, but his hatred and fear of Lucifer impelled him to take whatever side Lucifer did not. Lucifer's absence saved the committee from enduring the tedious subsonic barbs Marty directed at the Dark Angel every few minutes, but also meant he'd aim his vitriol at Peter, which thrust the first protestant into his wearisome "wait for God" position, torn between voting against an out-of-sight Lucifer or an in-his-face Saint Peter. There hadn't been a unanimous vote since Marty joined the executive committee, but Jesus planned to strong-arm him if he was the only "nay." Moses would sit silent until the conversation's end, expecting what he said to carry decisive weight, like a righteous mafia don. Moses would take the underdog's side and level the argument, tipping the scales back to the middle, except in extraordinary circumstances such as this, when Jesus believed he could steamroll Moses' vote.

Jesus understood his predicament. The fear and anxiety necessary to drive a majority vote was impossible without Lucifer in his court. All the passion and rhetoric and imploring were pointless. Why had he called this meeting? Had he believed Lucifer would attend? His position was clear. To move forward on his proposal the only vote he needed was Lucifer's. A

conversation between man and angel was necessary, if you could define either of them in such terms.

“Josh,” Gabriel said, glancing at his pocket watch, “I have an engagement in twenty minutes. Might you—?”

Jesus knew it was pointless to present to an executive committee sans Lucifer. However, he could view it as a test audience, a warm-up for the real presentation. Jesus clicked the remote. Bar graphs and pie charts filled the screen, the slide’s heading big and bold: *The Second Coming: A Statistical Projection.*

VIA VIRGIN

Jesus marched along the main boulevard's sparkling surface, trying to take in the City as if it hadn't evolved around him, as if he were seeing it for the first time.

Glowing white buildings rose on both sides in a flowing architectural fusion of Paris and Florence and New York. There were no cars in the City, no vehicles of any kind and no engines. Every district was accessible by foot or flight. There was no trash, no pollution. And though many of humanity's inventions were available, Lucifer and his minions kept the City clear of weapons or tools suited for violence. Voices and song and music filled the City, birds chirped and dogs barked. Except for now. From today until the election, campaign broadcasts would inundate the City, accessible or ignorable with nothing more than a thought, courtesy of Lucifer's telepathic broadcasting technology. If you wanted to tune in, you could, and if you wanted to tune out, a simple decision was all it took. Jesus ignored Gabriel's speech.

Election season.

Perversely, the House of Angels earned vast wealth for Lucifer's earthly activities via sports betting. Every year, the angels elected a new member to the four-member Finance Committee. The election followed an always-bitter campaign season, during which the reputations of all candidates were sullied beyond recovery. Candidates debated philosophical and theological issues of no practical importance, and fabricated opponents' corrupt and debauched pasts. In years involving the Olympics or World Cup, the campaigns were horrific, with vicious allegations of bribery and blackmailing a matter of routine—much like any given Tuesday at world soccer headquarters. But once elected, Lucifer whisked the victorious angel to Las Vegas to spend the next four years in high style. The Vegas angels lived like mortal kings in private luxury penthouses with unlimited expense accounts, reservations at the best restaurants, and tickets to all shows and major sporting events. Their sole responsibility? Placing bets based on tips from Lucifer, who utilized his predictive ability to extrapolate *almost* infallible win-loss projections.

He heard a soft *whoosh* overhead. A trio of citizens flew low, enjoying the unfamiliar thrill of self-propelled flight. Upon arrival, new citizens tended to fly everywhere, but the novelty wore off and most returned to the ground. Still, year after year, “flying” ranked number one in the Abilities & Amenities section of the City’s satisfaction survey, followed by “guilt-free sex” and “Shadrach’s Key lime pie.”

To Jesus’ annoyance, those who attained self-awareness and transitioned from Hell into the City had varying degrees of taste and attractiveness. Neither fame nor infamy guaranteed class or good looks. It wasn’t who you were. It was the world’s perception of you. So, Jesus mused, perception *was* everything. Were *he* guarding eternity’s velvet rope, admission would depend upon more than a critical mass of notoriety.

He walked down a quiet residential street. A couple relaxed on a blanket, talking by candlelight, drinking a bottle of cabernet as they ate Gouda cheese and water table crackers. He didn’t recognize them. He assumed, like the fly-bys, they were recent arrivals.

The earth’s rising population and global interconnectedness were only half of the City’s soaring population problem. The other half was Lucifer’s inability to adjust the manifestation threshold, a theoretical factor the Dark Angel’s equations predicted but experimentation could not confirm nor manipulate. Alive or dead, hero or villain, person or plant or mineral or idea, it mattered not. If something held enough of the world’s collective mindshare, he or she or it manifested. Then it was *wait and see*. Yet he had to admit Lucifer did a superlative job at managing the transitions, with the clear exception of Lou’s penchant for allowing fictional characters and mythological creatures more time to gain self-awareness.

Along another street were cafés and restaurants closed for the evening, their tables and chairs gone from the sidewalk and stacked behind dark windows. Jesus feared his Father, upon His return, would head for the Garden, the last place Jesus wanted Him to visit. The Garden district had evolved, and would convey to God the world’s current state. Would He embrace the collective result of humanity’s desires? Lucifer said “yes,” but the prospect of his absent Father’s disappointment made a reasoned calculation impossible. Had God sent the world His only son to stabilize and ritualize humanity, to wrap their lives in worship and mystery and hope? Or were they supposed to use their minds? Jesus shivered in the mild air.

He rounded a corner and saw the crowd. Beings of all ages and sizes and races and origins danced and sang, speaking in countless languages with complete understanding. Babel inverted. They partied at an immortal tempo, a pace possible only in the absence of guilt and fear. Or, Jesus proposed with no small degree of cynicism, in the presence of vacuous, vice-riddled pasts.

In the Garden of Eden nightlife district, eight streets branched off from a central hub, the Circle, home to a tremendous tree, the Tree of Knowledge, that dropped a continuous and infinite supply of Red Delicious and Granny Smith apples to outstretched hands below. The Garden burst with bars, restaurants, coffee shops, comedy clubs, and nightclubs. It was the City's pounding heart, the center of enjoyment and enrichment for all, a utopic Bohemian Bacchanalia. Once a garden of sorts, its transformation declared humanity's new vision of paradise.

Jesus chose Via Virgin and walked into Pope, a comedy club just off the Circle. A comedian joked, "And Adam says to God... 'What can I get for a rib?'"

The crowd laughed at the tired joke, and Jesus' mood sank further. The City's beings loved their entertainment.

Though Hell had put an end to delusions of biblical grandeur, some pre-Hell City dwellers had manifested and managed self-awareness on their own. By popular demand, the House of Saints sponsored an annual weeklong adventure tour through Tanakh and Messiania, dubbed BibliCon, complete with period accommodations and guaranteed sightings of Genesis characters. Enoch and Methuselah were tour staples, and on occasion tourists would catch a glimpse of Seth or Zillah. It smacked of an earthbound African safari, and live feeds were televised across the City. Jesus always caught the end-of-week highlight show.

As all roads lead to Rome, all thoughts of BibliCon led to Adam, a source of consistent annoyance to Jesus for myriad reasons, particularly his habit of blaming others for his mistakes. Every few months, Lucifer offered to have his minions storm Adam's Tanakh compound and whisk him to Hell for a long-form chat. He argued it would serve both practical and symbolic purposes, while showcasing Hell's rehabilitative potential. A reformed, responsible Adam, an Adam cured of his bitter, Tourette's-like, top-of-his-lungs "WHERE'S MY APPLE PIE?" every time Eve had the misfortune of walking into the same restaurant, an Adam who no longer sauntered naked around the Garden, singing his obscene version of *Silent Night* as an insolent attempt at reverse psychology, might prove beneficial to the City. But Jesus didn't like the

precedent of a snatch-and-grab sortie within the City, and, in a rare example of accord, both Houses supported him, though he suspected they were simply unwilling to sacrifice such rich entertainment.

Jesus ducked out of Pope and into Iowa, a concert hall featuring live music. Buddy Holly gyrated on stage, belting out *Peggy Sue*. Jimi Hendrix sat in, plucking on something. Was that a dutar? The crowd danced and sang along. Some faces were familiar to Jesus, but he was bad with names and not in the mood for conversation so he chose not to wave. From the opposite perspective, every being in the crowd recognized Jesus, but they left him alone, like Los Angeles natives pretending to ignore the movie star at the next table.

After Iowa, Jesus walked to Resurrection, a popular nightspot with a throbbing bass beat, multiple rooms, and dusk-to-dawn dancing. Jesus moved from room to room, the music fading from one style to another as he passed through the doors. Salsa ruled the first room. Couples tangoed in the next. In the third room electronic dance music held sway. Another space offered lessons for ancient ritual dances. A legendary Broadway musical's major characters hung around the exit door. Were they together by choice or did they walk the City conjoined? That was a question for Lucifer. Manifestation and self-awareness details eluded Jesus.

He returned to the Circle at a brisk clip. Along the street, the famous and infamous laughed and reveled beneath an indigo sky. He kept his expression neutral, relaxed.

Jesus snatched an apple from mid-air and stopped beneath the Tree of Knowledge, near the caramel apple cart. He whispered, "Zubba."

Soon the putto hovered at his side, four feet above the ground, little pearlescent wings flapping with hurried ease.

"Set up a meeting," Jesus said, and bit into the apple.

* * *

Jesus lived in a massive limestone villa at Number Two, Divine Circle. The villa surrounded a lush courtyard of tropical plants, tinkling bamboo, and moss-painted banyan trees. Pandas and white-tailed deer roamed, while boisterous toads and carpenter frogs harmonized around a crystalline pond spackled with lily pads.

Through the morning room's wide-open French doors, Jesus sat at the breakfast table, a nice little cherry wood number with square legs and a distressed finish, which matched his emotional state. For the first millennia since his manifestation, Jesus had rationalized Lucifer's diligent attempts to derail the monotheistic religions as acts of jealousy and contempt. But beginning with the Italian Renaissance, Jesus had endured fits of concern over God's intention for him. He had never seen his Father face-to-face, and knew of Him solely through scripture and Lucifer. But Lucifer maintained there was no actual relation and referred to God as Jesus' "biblical" Father, making any such conversation a frustrating series of stops and starts, clarifications, corrections, and admonishments. Lucifer claimed God was a being of reason and experiment, philosophy and harmony. An evolved being, though "being" was a term of convenience. An evolved "manifestation" was more accurate. While Lucifer fixated on the ontology of himself and God, postulating and theorizing and making notes while he dipped soft cinnamon cookies into thick hot chocolate, Jesus found comfort in rudimentary, gut-level answers to complex existential uncertainties. Lucifer's assertions that God despised religion and that worship was neither desired nor acceptable had exacted a toll on Jesus' confidence. What would his bib... Jesus stopped himself. What would his Father think of the world? Lucifer insisted God detested the pious praising Him for their ignorance and hypocrisy and bloodlust. If Lucifer was right, He wouldn't appreciate the Middle East's overarching fanaticism and holy wars. The fault for that insanity lay at Muhammad's feet, Jesus thought with brief comfort, before admitting to himself it was possible his followers wielded the bloodier swords.

Jesus sank in his chair, hiding his nose in *The Daily Omniscient*. Zubba set a glass of orange juice before him and hovered, reading over Jesus' shoulder, his fluttering wings producing an all-too-perceptible shifting of the newspaper's thin pages.

"Are you done with *Bible Beat* yet?" Zubba asked.

"No."

Zubba frowned. "You're not even reading it."

"You always crumple the edges," Jesus said. "It's my paper. You'll have to wait."

Jesus turned to the *Bible Beat* section while telltale hints of frying bacon wafted through the room. *Bible Beat* spotlighted Bible characters. Like BibliCon, it was popular. Today, *Bible Beat* reported Cane and Abel were at it again. Abel refused to accept his place in things and stalked

Cane, baiting him during aromatherapy, mocking him at yoga class. It was farcical, and thus fodder for *Bible Beat*.

“Did you speak to him?” Jesus asked.

“Mm-hmmm... and Lou had an interesting idea.”

“What’s that?”

“He suggested we arrange a Cane versus Abel cage match in Tanakh.”

“Cane’s a pacifist.”

Zubba shrugged and said, “As the under card.”

Jesus eyed Zubba. “What’s the title bout?”

“We put together an intriguing pairing, at a renovated yet period-accurate location.”

“Not interested,” Jesus said, unwilling to play the pawn in another of Lucifer’s mockeries.

Witness the City’s Easter parade, held for the first and last time three centuries ago, in which he’d found himself trailing Pontius Pilate’s float. The crowd had booed the bastard (despite their tendency toward atheism, the famous and infamous have *some* biblical knowledge) but it didn’t make up for having to drag that damn crucifix twenty-six city blocks.

“You’d get a shot at Judas,” Zubba whispered.

“In the depths of your immortal soul,” Jesus said, “do you truly feel you would glorify the Lord with a night of winner-takes-all grudge matches? And what makes you think I harbor the necessary resentment to kick Iscariot’s ass?”

Zubba shrugged while Wubba delivered breakfast: Belgian waffles with melted butter and Vermont pure maple syrup. Wubba zipped away as fast as he’d come.

“What did he say?” Jesus asked, and took several quick bites.

Zubba grinned big, his wings flapping double-time like a portly hummingbird. “He will meet with you tomorrow evening.”

“Where?”

“In the threshold bar, at the Bellag—”

Jesus interrupted Zubba with a withering glance. Gone the momentary waffle high. Over the centuries Lucifer had built dozens of “threshold” locations in his favorite places on earth. By mimicking Lucifer’s ability to harness matter, the threshold sites enabled entities such as Jesus to exist and interact on earth for a few hours without requiring Lucifer’s presence to “hold them

together.” The Bellagio hotel in Las Vegas was one such place. In the syrup’s smooth surface he envisioned the threshold bar adjacent to Bellagio’s main casino. Flashing lights, smoke, grating music, incessant bells, ludicrous fashion choices. The angels loved it. He did not. Sure, they’d cleaned up Vegas during the lowest-common-denominator family-friendly push, but still... Jesus pictured himself strolling down The Strip, fresh from the outdoor water ballet, pondering the possibility the modern world might not be such a bad place, and God might not be furious with him. And right about then, between Bellagio and Caesar’s Palace, a black-clad street reverend, who minutes before had preached virtue and tolerance, would cast the first stone of a turf war by shoving a young, aggressive entrepreneur handing out ad cards for Peaches Cream, who promised salvation in the heavenly embrace of her divine double-D’s.

“Not there,” Jesus said.

“Lou thinks Las Vegas is the consummate introduction to the world you plan on saving yet again.”

“How does he—” Jesus gave up. Of course Lucifer anticipated his plan. “I don’t need an introduction,” he said. “I need a mandate.”

“The city presents a rich symbolic backdrop for your first appearance on earth in centuries,” Zubba said.

Jesus snatched a strip of bacon. “Somewhere else. No thresholds. Not Miami. Not Bangkok. I won’t set foot in Amsterdam or Rio or Los Angeles. And I’d rather not waste time with his petty attempts to gain advantage.”

“You’ve misunderstood,” Zubba said. “He’s reserved a table at Chamburg. It’s a burger-champagne fusion pub with only eight tables nightly.”

“I’m certain it’s as ridiculous as it sounds,” Jesus said, finishing his waffle.

“It’s set beneath a transparent dome within a pink champagne pool.”

Jesus dropped the paper on the table. “Somewhere else.”

FALSE PROPHET

By the stone hearth in a small, crowded pub in Edinburgh, Jesus sat with an exceptional-looking man wearing black leather pants despite an unseasonably hot Scottish summer. This was Lucifer, smoldering and magnetic, terrifying and irresistible. Auburn-haired women admired him through the thick, stagnant cigarette haze, which rivaled the worst sulfur smog during Hell's days of yore. Empty plates of pub food and spent pints of beer rested on the table between Jesus and Lucifer, and three hounds of varying colors lazed at their feet, lifting an ear or an eyelid to sudden laughter or drunk singing.

"You can't be serious," Jesus said.

Lucifer's expression confirmed he was, indeed, serious.

"But what if—"

Lucifer smiled.

"I need time to acclimate," Jesus said. "What if there's an accident? I can't go down again. People have invested their lives in me for two thousand years."

"The odds are against it, Josh," Lucifer said. "And if there were an accident, someone would discover a long-lost text prophesizing your second demise. Or suppress it all. You've nothing to worry about. And it's been seventeen hundred years, not two thousand. You were floundering before Constantine."

"Whatever." Jesus cleared his throat and whispered, "But if I *die again*, what's going to happen to Christianity?"

Lucifer's eyes showed indifference.

"You'd love that, wouldn't you," Jesus said, before touching his temple with one finger. "I'm too ingrained to snuff out so easily."

"I'm sure you're right," Lucifer said.

Jesus' face grew red, and he gripped the arms of his chair as if they alone held him to the earth. With great effort, he willed himself to relax and sat back in the chair. "I won't do it."

"That's probably best," Lucifer said, signaling for another pint. "They won't believe who you are, anyway. You'd need me for that, too."

Jesus scowled. Lucifer never ceased to annoy him. And much of it was style envy. Lucifer always looked cooler than he did, no matter the season or situation. It was infuriating.

"You knew He'd show up sooner or later," Lucifer said.

"Sure," Jesus said. "The quick and the dead and all that."

"Josh, we're both aware you didn't say that."

Jesus sighed. "Sometimes it all blurs together. If He would have been more specific, if He would have provided me with precise wording, I wouldn't be in this position."

"He works in mysterious ways."

"Don't you dare mock me. Not now."

Lucifer laughed, and a hound raised a heavy eyelid. "Okay. How about this? He didn't provide the wording, either. So it isn't His fault."

"Well it's not mine."

"Yes. You were but a puppet."

Jesus glared at him. "Why can't you just help me?"

"I've tried to, but really, I don't see the tragedy of it all. When He arrives, talk to Him. All shall become clear."

"But what if it's too late?"

"For what?"

"To make them all believe."

"Josh," Lucifer said, "God doesn't want that."

"You can't possibly know what He wants."

Lucifer's steady gaze told Jesus the Dark Angel could know, and did.

Jesus shifted his strategy to pleading. "Lou, I need this. If we go with my plan, at least—"

"Your plan is full of holes, Josh."

"Name one."

"You can't descend from heaven."

“You did. Well, you fell. To put it kindly.”

“I didn’t,” Lucifer said. “And you know it.”

Jesus slumped in his chair. “But you could.”

“The City isn’t heaven, and it’s not a physical place,” Lucifer said. “Conforming to the accepted mythology would require a descent of nine days, from a heaven that doesn’t exist. Through space.”

“So?”

“You can’t survive in space. To accomplish what you’re suggesting, you’d have to come back as a man, biological and mortal.”

“Because *you* won’t help me.” Jesus shifted in his chair and pressed his hand to his chest. “Why can’t I return like this?” He pointed at the pub’s heavy wooden front door. “Just walk right out.”

“Because I’m holding you together right now,” Lucifer said. “You’re providing the function, but I’m maintaining the form. Without me, you can’t exist indefinitely on this existential plane.”

“Mom can do it.”

“It took her centuries to learn,” Lucifer said. “Your timeline is more immediate.”

The pub’s door opened and closed.

“This is your idea, not mine.” Lucifer downed what remained of his pint. “No one is going to take your word for who you say you are. You’ll have to prove it. They’ll demand biological tests, which won’t work unless—”

“I’m biological,” Jesus grumbled.

Lucifer spread his hands with the tiniest degree of sympathy for the biblical Son of God. “Blood and bone, Josh. It’s the only way I’ll help.”

“But you’ll help,” Jesus said, brightening.

Lucifer made a gesture that committed to nothing.

Jesus leaned forward. “Lou. Listen to me. I’m worshipped here. I’m *The Man*. A worldwide belief system is built on me. But my place is tenuous in heaven.”

Firelight reflected off the empty pint glasses. Lucifer disguised his amusement, though in truth he was not enjoying Jesus’ quick sprint toward panic. “It’s not heaven,” he said. “We don’t know what it is.”

“It’s close enough. Can we please skip the usual argument?”

Lucifer glanced across the bar, through the haze.

“All I have is my influence down here,” Jesus said, gripping Lucifer’s arm, “because when He gets back I’ll be nothing up there. So this is where I have to make my stand. It’s imperative I return in glory and righteous judgment and defeat the false prophet.”

“That’s me, right?”

“Of course you!”

Lucifer laughed and sat back. “No.”

Jesus checked in both directions. “What difference does it make to you?”

“Maybe I’m not being painfully clear,” Lucifer said, tapping the rim of his glass. “If I help you, and you reveal yourself as you intend, it won’t summon the innocents to heaven, but it will unleash something like the ten plagues upon the world.”

“I doubt that.”

“Your pride knows no bounds,” Lucifer said.

“And your intellectual arrogance blinds you to the beauty of creation.”

Lucifer took a deep breath, and Jesus mimicked him.

“Josh, you’re asking me to sacrifice what I know for what you believe, so if you want your second coming, we do it my way. End of discussion.” Lucifer smiled. “You’ll be my first.”

Jesus half-listened, face blank, watching the smallest dog’s twitching ear. Lucifer’s revision to the plan was too far removed from how Jesus had envisioned his return to earth to be anything but a disingenuous roadblock.

“Day after day,” Lucifer said, “I take inexplicable phenomena in immeasurable states with uncertain resolutions and shepherd them to self-awareness, while you’re out on the golf course, tormenting yourself over whether to use a nine iron or a wedge. But I’m the bad guy, and you’re worshipped by billions.”

“Poor, poor Lou,” Jesus said. “The vast unwashed don’t appreciate him.”

Lucifer looked off.

“You love it,” Jesus said, and put up a pair of air quotes. “It’s *science*.”

“You wouldn’t be here without my science. Not like this.”

“You’ve said I was the easiest. I could have done it myself. You did.”

“The easiest *man*,” Lucifer said. So many years, so many similar discussions. “There’s a big difference between a man and an idea. Only animals are easier than people. People agree on what an ostrich is.”

“Cute,” Jesus said, stifling a smile. “A veiled analogy from evil incarnate.”

Lucifer rolled his eyes. “Evil is a concept, not an individual or entity.”

“Without the concept, you wouldn’t exist.”

“Josh,” Lucifer said with genuine surprise, “you’ve been paying attention.”

“Yeah, touché touché,” Jesus said. “But I fail to understand why you care. You have a role to play here, an essence to maintain. You can do whatever you want. Me coming back *helps* you. We can tussle in a grand battle for souls. Good versus evil. Darkness against the light. It might be fun.”

“Light is the presence of all colors,” Lucifer said. “Illumination. Truth. Reality.”

The barmaid delivered two more pints as Jesus slumped in his chair. “I reject your insinuation.”

“Anyway, you should leave the abstract battles to me. Yours are more tangible.”

“Yeah,” Jesus said, “I heard about your little idea.”

“You shoot the evil eye at Judas every time you run into him. It might do you some good to kick his ass. Or vice versa.” Lucifer leaned forward, the fire crackling. “I’m tired of the façade.”

“Which one?”

“All of them,” Lucifer said. “Change is coming, Josh.”

The fire roared, the space between them hot and electric. Glass broke, and sharp laughter cracked through the bar. The red hound mumbled in his sleep while Jesus stared into space. Maybe he could circumvent Lucifer, get Albert and Nikola on his side, commandeer the technology—

“It won’t work, Josh.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jesus said. “And vice versa, regarding my thoughts. By your own admission, your predictive ability, aka *limited omniscience*, does not extend to mindreading.”

“But I know *how* you think,” Lucifer said.

Jesus studied his beer’s rising bubbles.

“I’ll put together the specifics, and you’ll put it before the committee,” Lucifer said with far too much satisfaction for Jesus’ taste. “And lo, it shall come to pass.”

* * *

The executive committee had gathered for an emergency session. A brilliant silver tray supporting a small mountain of frosted sugar cookies rested on the long conference table. Jesus sat brooding, a rolled parchment with a broken seal before him.

The room was in an uproar.

“Preposterous,” Martin Luther said. “We can’t allow it. It’s—”

Gabriel cut him off. “Thus endeth the charade.”

“Charade?” Martin Luther shouted. “And you think it’s appropriate the Christ risk himself, like a—”

“A man?” Michael asked, chuckling and selecting a cookie.

“It’s obscene,” Martin Luther said, and spat at the floor. “And if we were considering it, which I *pray we’re not*, we’d have to take into account that men, mortal men, have *urges*. If the Christ...” He closed his eyes, head swaying, and found the words. “If he died, or if, worse, if he, you know what I’m referring to, for all to see, it would be too much for the living.”

“Martin—”

“Their devastation would be too much to bear,” Luther said, ignoring Gabriel, who exchanged glances with Michael. “All their mortal lives they’ve known our Lord Jesus Christ as pure, unsullied, a true God—”

“To be fair,” Gabriel said, cutting off Luther, “their certainty is misplaced, their assumptions wrong. Manifestations who attain self-awareness and reach the City embrace Lucifer’s role on our plane of existence.”

“I think we can all agree,” Michael said, setting down his pencil, “Lucifer is not the enemy. Would any of us exist without him?”

Jesus raised his index finger while Martin Luther ground his manifested teeth.

“In so many ways he is our shepherd,” Gabriel said.

“The Evil Incarnate role never fit him,” said Michael. “He’s got too much *joi de vivre*.”

“*Joi de* what?” Martin Luther shouted, face crimson. He pointed at the archangel. “It’s sacrilege, that’s what it is. If God were here—”

“He would do nothing,” said a voice, startling Martin Luther. All eyes went to a chair next to Jesus where Lucifer shimmered. He crossed his legs and steepled his fingers as he gained visual solidity, acknowledging each committee member in turn, before grinning at Martin Luther. “Hallo, Marty.”

The reformer’s eyes narrowed as Lucifer said, “There seems to be disagreement with the plan.”

“Mostly,” Gabriel whispered with a dramatic nod in Martin Luther’s direction, “from a single quarter.”

Moses fiddled with one ornate ring and reached for a cookie. He broke it in half to indicate his vote was far from committed either way, and, without a compelling argument and a sign from on high, unanimity would prove elusive.

“When guessing God’s intent,” Lucifer said, “consider I alone was manifested in much the same way He was. I grasp the logic and reason governing the mechanics of existence. I interact with Him. We are friends.”

“Heresy,” Martin Luther hissed.

“By your troubled, intentionally ignorant standards, I suppose it is. But true, nonetheless.” Lucifer studied the reformer. “Marty, what is your concern?”

“You know exactly what it is.”

“Are you so worried for Josh’s safety that you would prefer he not return and glorify himself for all humanity?” Lucifer smiled. “Or is it concern about something else? Something more... instinctive.”

Martin Luther struggled to remain still.

“You must admit,” Saint Peter said to Lucifer, “were Josh to—”

“It would in no way compromise his stature.”

Martin Luther exploded. “The Son of God does not *do that!*”

“Josh,” Lucifer said, “what does the biblical Son of God not do?”

“*Do not answer that,*” Martin Luther snarled at Jesus, surprising everyone.

“And why not?” Lucifer asked. “Are you under the impression Josh is untouched?”

Saint Peter, Moses, and Martin Luther turned incredulous faces to Jesus, who focused his heated gaze on Lucifer.

“Why would you assume celibacy,” Lucifer asked Martin Luther, “for a man undocumented during his sexual prime?”

“How can you claim to know the will of God, Devil?”

Lucifer looked to God’s biblical son. “Josh?”

Jesus sank in his chair. “It’s not relevant,” he mumbled.

Lucifer grinned while the others gasped, their expressions varying degrees of shock and indignation. Moses took another cookie, but this time failed to break it into perfect halves.

“To continue to exist, a species and its ideas must adapt to reality,” Lucifer said. “Evolution is not confined to the biological and cosmological. A reasoning species’ interpretation of reality must progress toward accuracy if it is to survive. Existence, as can be seen in any tree, system, or star, is pure reason.” He set his gaze on Jesus. “Religion separates humanity from reason.”

“Blasphemy,” Martin Luther muttered.

Lucifer began to shimmer. “Always a pleasure, Marty.” Before vanishing he said, “Let me know what you decide, Josh.”

* * *

Stress squeezed his face like a lime. Jesus had read the parchment at least forty times before its plain words had squirmed through countless layers of denial, and the implications had taken their toll on his psyche, his hair, and his fashion compass. He’d walked from the villa dazed and disheveled, arriving in Freud’s reception area before realizing he’d worn a vintage jacket with skinny pants, a dilettantish mistake, and risked running into those unforgiving know-it-alls at *The Word*, who would plaster Friday’s society page with unflattering photos of Jesus Christ, formerly of “The City’s Ten Best Dressed” list.

He recalled hearing sound from Sigmund’s direction. “What did you say?”

“How do you feel about returning as a man?” Freud asked, sipping a steaming cup of black coffee, its buttery-bitter scent bathing the room in the flavor of long-ago Vienna.

“My Father didn’t have to defile Himself,” Jesus said. “He just set fire to a bush and there He was. Why me?”

“From what you have said, it seems to be zee way it was written. So to speak.”

“Yeah, but that’s because of certain assumptions I’m making, that all of us make. That Lou is on a level parallel to my Father. That they were both manifested in the same way.” He sat up with sudden passion. “But what if they aren’t? What if this is all a scam Lou and the angels have been selling us since my Father left? What if my Father comes back, roars in almighty anger, and smites Lou like a bug, like a... yeah. Like an *unholy* bug. What then?”

“How would you feel about zat?”

“I’d... which part?”

“Zee bug part.”

“I’d feel vindicated.”

Freud clucked his tongue. “Do you see yourself as vindictive?”

“I know I shouldn’t,” Jesus said. “It doesn’t jive with my past. My written past, that is. But I go back and forth. I think I’ve really changed. Grown, I mean.” His face clouded. “Since I left Jerusalem.”

“Do you zink,” Freud asked with greater care than usual, “Lucifer and zee angels are lying about Lucifer’s place in zee order of zings?”

“I wouldn’t say lying, per se. Lying is a definitive term. Not being entirely truthful would strike the more diplomatic note. But...” Jesus trailed off, his small confidence now gone. He slumped into the couch. “No.”

“Zen if you zink he is telling zee truth, maybe zee question is not whezzer or not it is going to happen, but why does it bozzer you so?”

“Because if it’s true, what about the other things Lou says, about my history? I *enjoy* being Jesus Christ,” he said, slapping his palm against the cushion. “*The* Jesus Christ. But now everything’s changing. If my Father doesn’t rule absolute over the heavens and the earth, or if He’s, if He’s not, if Lou’s not lying—” Jesus sat up again. “How can I be sure?” he asked. “I know *exactly* how Abraham felt.”

“He works in mysterious ways.”

“So help me, if I hear that one more time I’ll let Paradise City secede.”

“Do you possess zat sort of power?”

“I’m not sure how it all interacts,” Jesus said. “I just know it’s getting rough in the PC ever since the uptick in famous Muslims. Or, rather, *infamous* Muslims. It’s created a real divide over there. Mo doesn’t like to share the, uh, whatever you call them. Women, I suppose. And he won’t do anything to diffuse the situation. Won’t have simple chats with the newly aware.” Jesus laughed. “It’s a fiasco.”

“It is best if we keep our discussions apolitical.”

“You Swiss never want to commit.”

“I am Austrian.”

“Zat is zee same zing,” Jesus said, imitating the psychoanalyst.

Freud narrowed his eyes.

“What I’m trying to *say*,” Jesus said, “to get back to the *point*... Me being mortal is dangerous.”

“No more zan zee first time.”

“That ended well,” Jesus said. “The problem is you can’t work miracles in today’s world. Too many cameras and web sites. During the time of me, the question wasn’t if the miracle had been performed, but by what power. Every other moneychanger could make rain. Eventually.”

“Did you work miracles?”

“Sure,” Jesus said. “I mean, not verified. There weren’t any miracle confirmation agencies or anything back then. I did what I could do.”

“Which was?”

“The grand stuff of myth and legend, Siggy.”

“Hmmpf.”

“If I went back like Lou or mom,” Jesus said, “at least I could vanish and appear. Poof. Like magic.” He smirked, imagining his upcoming venture in today’s media-rich society. “They’ll have cameras on me all the time. Once I announce, I mean. But no miracles. Not as a man. The first time, the apple was ripe.”

Freud raised his eyes from his notes. “Yes. How *was* your youz?”

“What do you mean?”

“What did you do? Did you have a girlfriend?”

“I didn’t have time for a girlfriend.”

“Do you blame your Fozzer for zat?”

“For what?”

“For not having a girlfriend.”

Jesus didn’t blink.

“Did you have sexual relations wiz women before you were crucified?”

Jesus scowled. “I don’t see why that’s relevant.”

“Many times,” Freud said, “not resolving zee Oedipal Complex causes deep, long-lasting resentment toward zee perceived cause of zee frustration, as a symbol of zee failure to progress to sexual maturity.” He inclined his head. “In zis case, your Fozzer.”

“I don’t resent my Father.”

“Maybe you do not realize zis is true.”

“It’s not about realizing. It’s about understanding. And what I don’t understand, and never will, is why He would bring me into the world if I was going to hit my peak at thirty-four. Was that where the master plan ended? Tell me. *Then* what?”

“Maybe zere is no master plan.”

Jesus glared at him. “You sound like Lou, and it’s weird. But assuming God *is* coming back, He has to understand things change, right? Morality changes. Values. Virtues.” He laughed. “And *that’s* going to be the big problem.” Jesus dropped his head back to the oxblood leather pillow.

“What will be zee big problem?”

“Aren’t you listening? Values. *Virtues*.” Jesus expected him to see the inference. When the psychiatrist did not, Jesus said, “Finding a virgin of an acceptable age.”

“Maybe I have misunderstood your purpose in returning to earth.”

“Not at all,” Jesus said with the slightest smile. “Just preparing for the inevitable.”

“Which is?”

“Women respond to power.”

“Und zat means what to you?”

“I am arguably the most famous man on earth,” Jesus said, annoyed he had to explain what was, to him, obvious. “I will have triumphed over death. Not like last time, but *actually*. I expect I’ll have my pick of the litter. So to speak.”

“Do you enjoy zee prospect of female overtures?”

Jesus shrugged. “I missed out the first time around. Mostly. And...”

“Yes?”

“There’s a conflict between who I am, or was. Whatever. Between my written history and... and thoughts I have now.”

“Such as?”

“You understand exactly what I’m referring to. So-called *impure* thoughts.”

“Wiz a woman.”

“Of course,” Jesus said, before adding, “Women.”

“I see,” Freud said. “Und why must zeese women be virgins?”

“Have you not read the Bible?”

“I am familiar wiz it. But, wiz all due respect, you are not God.”

“Was it annoying for you,” Jesus asked, “to find out God was real, and not a...” He paused to remember the words. “‘A projection of childish wishes for an omnipotent protector?’”

“I have never met God.”

“Still.”

“I later modified my theory,” Freud said.

“On paper.”

“You were born of flesh and blood,” Freud said. “If we believe Lucifer, Joseph is your fozzer, not God. Maybe a virgin is not a requirement.”

Jesus’ expression hardened. “In my time, there was an emphasis on virginity.”

“Hmmpf. It does not seem so in zis day and age. Do you feel zat zis fixation on virginity is healzy?”

“Do you?”

Freud tapped the pencil against the paper pad. “I believe it is indicative of deeper issues of insecurity and fear of impotence. In your case, castration.”

“No wonder you’re such an easy target on earth.”

“I am embedded in zee culture,” Freud said. “It is enough.”

Jesus rolled his eyes. “I don’t come here to talk about you. We’ve got a big issue.”

“Your fear of death or your impure desires?”

“Both,” Jesus said. “I need some direction.”

A grandfather clock ticked and strains of Wagner seeped underneath the door from the reception area.

“Have you expressed your fears to Lucifer?”

“He won’t budge.”

“What about defying him?”

Jesus said nothing.

“Have you considered waiting for God’s return?”

Jesus shrank on the couch. “I can’t.”

“Zen maybe zee best route is to turn zee uzzer cheek.”

“Is that a joke?”

Freud shook his head. “Consider zat your destiny was not to merely die on zee cross, but somezing more.”

“I like that,” Jesus said. “Such as what?”

“Zat is zee question.”