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Lamb of Gods

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Lamb of Gods

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of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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ABSTRACT

Lamb of Gods is a fictionalized account of the Roman Empire's Julio-Claudian dynasty as told from the perspective of the gods of Mount Olympus.

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Special thanks are due to numerous professors who have contributed to this thesis. Skip Hays, Ellen Gilchrist, and Molly Giles were instrumental in shaping my growth as a writer. Charles Muntz, Darcy Krasne, Lynda Coon, and Daniel Levine were unspeakably gracious in permitting me to join their courses and helping me grow as a historian. My thesis director, Timothy O'Grady, has been delightfully patient and giving of his time, for which I am eternally grateful. My parents, Dick and Maggie, get all of the credit in the world for my conception and the nurturing upbringing that made this brain possible. Lastly, all honor, credit and glory goes to the everlasting Father and his son, Jesus Christ, by whom and with whom and through whom all things were made, not the least of which being this thesis.

DEDICATION

This edition of *Lamb of Gods* is dedicated to Gloria Quintero and Elizabeth Stainton Walker in grateful thanksgiving to her tireless efforts to help me format my master's thesis.

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Prologue

The Book of Muses

I, Kronos, invoke the Muses, daughters of my youngest son and divine inspirers of Mother Earth's theater. Look to my banishment in the underworld's underworld—Tartarus, from whence I incant ye to have pity. In the same way Apollo's beloved Cassandra was cursed to know Troy's future yet powerless to effect it, so my entombment mandates I watch idly as my offspring misgovern the Mountain that once was mine. Cursed am I—the betrayed—to write others' history full in the knowledge that my account shall remain forever interred alongside me.

I ask ye holy nine to take pity on a Titan long in years of suffering. Such an ignoble fate for one who wrested control of Mount Olympus and ruled the Age still known as Golden! Muses, make me a worthy interpreter. Sing through me that my history may so please my captors that they release me into death and free me from the eternal curse of recording my Titanic memory.

Chapter I

The Book of Judges

Six and a half eons after the Trojan War, 532 mortal years after the founding of the Roman Republic, and twelve years after the deification of Octavian, the Roman Empire enjoyed peace. The tyranny of kingships had been replaced by the benevolence of emperorships. Rome's granaries were copious in both number and their surplus. Her military campaigns ended in decisive victories before winter closed the campaigning seasons. Any rebel factions fought at best Pyrrhic battles, and most of the lower classes had enough wisdom to maintain the upper classes' good graces. Her slaves slaved tirelessly, and her slave-drivers drove compassionlessly. Her provinces paid taxes on time, with her tax collectors competing to pay more than their levy. All roads led to Rome—unless heading in the wrong direction, in which case none of them did—and each of those roads was majestically adorned with bandits in various states of decomposure who had been crucified as reminders of the Empire's leniency.

The gods of Mount Olympus also endured an uneasy peace, even if some gods would have preferred war. The blight of heroes had long been exterminated. Lesser gods knew their places, and those that didn't had been banished to folktales and constellations. Rome's prominence filled their temples' treasuries, and the gift of fire allowed mortals to worship after the sun's recession. Holidays were honored, festivals upheld, the scent of burnt offerings was never too far from godly nostrils. The Roman Empire was fated to last for eternity, which made every other Fate seem to be of little consequence. Tiberius was an inoffensive ruler of mortals, and though the Olympic Senate had not convened since Julius Caesar's assassination, no god wondered why Athena had called an assembly. For the only reason the Senate ever gathered was to discuss ways of securing more honor, reverence, glory, and adoration.

They met, as ever, in the Olympic Forum, a lush arboretum furnished in marble that provided both neutral territory and an unobstructed view of Earth. Though just a short walk from the Plains of Oblivion, the Forum's backdrop was that of bucolic, natural pleasantries. Geysers sputtered intermittently from their rocky, spring water cauldrons. Clouds of varied densities competed for attention in the sky's canvas. A pack of jackalasses paced in waited for a herd of ligers to eat their fill of a freshly-slaughtered faun. Two young centaurs lay drowned in a babbling creek. A dense swarm of twenty-one-year cicadas provided a chorus, and a migration of fire-breathing dragonflies feasted upon said swarm. Further peppering the cicadian roar was the soothing redundancy of a duckbilled hippoplatymus boring a hole into a petrified cactus.

Athena was the first to arrive at the Forum. She wore her signature breastplate and helmet, a red-plumed war helmet from the Spartan era. Her armor was polished. Her weapons—sharp. She positioned herself to the left of Zeus' throne, beneath the gold-etched XII Tables of Law. The Goddess of Reason exercised rare hope and optimism. With Zeus and Hera in absentia, only ten of the twelve Senators would attend, thus only nine gods could interrupt at any given moment. It stood to Reason theirs might be the most orderly Senatorial meeting in Olympic history.

Demeter arrived eating a parsnip with a dirt-caked hand. As usual, the Goddess of the Harvest was bedecked in flowers. They lined her robe's fringes and were woven as a belt, in addition to ornamenting her hair, ears, and toes. She further carried a basket overflowing with a rainbow of fruits and vegetables only she among the Olympians could correctly identify.

Artemis appeared glowing brightly with honor from beneath her gown, with her hair braided and pinned with a crescent moon ornament—a stark departure from the camouflage she'd spent a thousand mortal lifetimes perfecting.

Demeter wasted no time in doting upon her only daughter, Persephone. "Children! I tell

you. They grow up so fast. Of course, you goddesses would never know. I mean, you'd know because you're wise, and the animals you hunt also bear offspring—but you'll never experience the miracle of raising a child because of the whole eternal-chastity thing. But take my word, if some god ever did rape you, your daughter would grow like a mint plant. Would you like to see a portrait?" The Harvest Goddess did not wait for a response. Instead, she reached into a satchel and drew from it a wide-neck urn thrice the size of the satchel from whence it was retrieved. The urn was black and red, perfectly symmetrical and exquisitely intricate. "Isn't she precious?" asked she, spilling a musky varietal of red wine onto the Senate floor. "Hard to believe my baby's already 1000."

Said Athena, "That portrait features Dionysus."

"No," Demeter replied, looking to the urn as if with new eyes.

"See all those satyrs? And his beard, and the grape garland?"

The urn fell from Demeter's fingers as if gravity's effect had slipped her mind. It fragmented on the Senate floor, and its puddled contents were quickly absorbed into the Olympic Mountainside. Demeter spake, "Well, just trust me. Persephone doesn't look a day over 700."

Thereupon, Aphrodite and Ares arrived in tandem, drawn by the War God's four-horse chariot. Ares wore his Spartan armor under a Herculean lion's pelt cape. The Sex Goddess was starkly nude and rotundly pregnant. Her skin shone almost as brightly as the golden apple hanging from her neck, and her leisurely gait drew the attention of all who beheld her. Indeed, a god might think she had never been hurried, entirely forgetting the fury with which she smote Helios' progeny.

Aphrodite never struggled for adoration. The Goddess of Sex needed not send blights, sink ships or torch villas. Mortal teenagers alone provided enough sexual reverence to sate her and her minions, and the goddess' orgasms were often heard echoing miles away. Her temple's

coffers remained full, and her cults met frequently to celebrate the goddess in honor-fueling orgies.

Strategy and Reason did not draw the same cult following as did fornication, and jealousy had long strained Athena's relationship with Aphrodite. Beyond being jealous, Athena was resentful of the knowledge that her jealousy served no purpose. Athena further Reasoned that her Reason stemmed from avoiding sex's periphery-narrowing myopia. She had spent mortal years debating this paradox to no satisfactory end, ultimately comforting herself by cursing humanity with a decree that inebriated people should fixate on coitus yet have flaccidity impede their consummation.

Poseidon rode in on a chariot drawn by six Hippokampoi—front-half horse with large mermaidian tails. They were clumsy on land, and peculiarly pungent. The God of the Sea was shirtless, bearded, wet, and salty. He claimed the seat nearest Athena, but neither god tried for eye contact. Instead they sat in silence, feigning interest in passing cherubim the way mortals used watching babies to justify lulls in conversation.

Apollo arrived wearing only his signature curly blond hair. The God of the Stars drifted under the spell of new love as he took a seat alongside his sister, Artemis.

Olympus' newest Senator, Dionysus, stumbled in next. The oft-bearded God of Wine arrived clean-shaven and fell into the chair on Artemis' opposite side.

The wing-footed Hermes arrived so quickly that he seemed to take his form from the air's elements. The Gods' Messenger was always rushed, and he glanced between the gods as if disappointed the meeting had not started without him.

Hephaestus was the last to hobble in. The Gods' Smith arrived under-honored and tarnished with soot from his volcanic forge. The most skilled of the gods was also the most pitiable. He had been cast from Olympus by his mother, Hera, and became lame upon crashing to

the Earth. Hephaestus walked with a limp, as if his right leg had seized and needed his arms' support to throw its weight into each step. Likewise, the left side of his face was slack. The eye drooped most asymmetrically, and his jowl sagged such that his smile was abhorrent, and all of Olympus had long preferred jeering him over exercising social niceties.

Hephaestus was Fated to marry Aphrodite, and for this reason she avoided the Smith whenever possible. Her lover, too, showed Hephaestus no respect, and for this reason Hephaestus refused to take the only available seat, which was alongside Ares. Apollo's sun had twice risen and set before the Senate settled into an arrangement that suited every god. None would sit in the first couple's thrones, and each reconfiguration ended with natural adversaries standing alongside the only empty chairs, whereupon the shuffling began anew. Athena pandered to their reason, extolling the benefits of cooperation, but the gods proved themselves incapable of compromise, going so far as to threaten adjournment until Athena employed stylus and papyrus in devising a seating chart and restoring order.

Once all had settled, Athena commanded their attentions. The Goddess of Reason was a master orator—skilled at gesticulations, dramatic pauses, and vocal inflections. Both Caesar and Cicero had been her charges, gifted with Athena's ability to relay facts without stating their conclusion, thereby letting audiences think they had themselves sussed out empirical truths. Likewise, Athena gesticulated throughout her speech, and each movement seemed natural, as if imperative to the dialogue's points. Said she, "Greetings, Senators. I have distasteful news to deliver. There is cause to pay more attention to the mortals."

The suggestion induced groaning, for watching mortals slowed time to a mortal's pace. Ares jumped from his seat and bounced the butt of his spear off the ground. "I barely take the time to watch festivals held in my honor." His voice drove from his chest with a blizzard's force. "There is little to gain from spectation. The mortals are incorrigible and lack the Reason to

follow a simple rite regardless of how many times I remind them with plagues, pests, unfaithful wives and fratricides. I even toppled the amphitheater, killing ten-thousand men gathered in celebration of War—a god cannot give a clearer sign than that! But did they offer less gold and more meat? No. Did they pit more gladiator midgets against wild beasts? Indeed they did not.”

Dionysus was looking to the Forum floor as he said, “Someone has been stealing urns from my temple.” All eyes looked to Hermes, who raised his hands as a proclamation of innocence.

Apollo spake, “My temple is on a smited land.”

Athena corrected him, “The word is smote.”

To which Apollo said, “The word itself has been smitten.”

“That means bleary-eyed with lust,” Aphrodite said.

“See what I mean?”

Said Poseidon, “The mortals promised to sacrifice fourteen fat swine to me, but only twelve of them were really fat. The other ones were large, yes. Rotund maybe even, but not fat. You gods should see the size of the pig that Dionysus had sacrificed to him—and it wasn’t even a festival day.”

Dionysus eyed the urn broken on the Senate floor. He ran his fingers inside its rim and smelled the contents. “Leave my pigs out of this,” said he.

From there, a series of outbursts resulted in another day’s quarreling as each god voiced grievances in accordance with his ascription—ways that mortals were neglecting the Harvest, Stars, Sea, Forge, Hunt, and Vine. Athena brought them back with, “I don’t enjoy attending mortals any more than you do.”

“Then why?” Poseidon demanded, swinging his trident as if threatening mortals.

Athena responded, “I call you gods because I fear for the honor of all Olympians. Not merely the nine of you, but also the lesser gods whom we are charged to protect. There are too

many mythologies amongst the mortals. More and more they worship pagan dieties, and adoration that could honor Olympus is being squandered. Only we can stem the tide, for if we do nothing then perhaps somegod might return and make stopping it His Priority.” The gods nodded eagerly to demonstrate understanding, for none wanted Zeus’ Name said aloud.

Ares stood and raised his hands above his head, saying, “Surely you don’t need our help smoting mortals.”

“It’s not a matter of simply smoting—smite—” Athena cleared her throat and said, “It’s not a matter of a simple persecution.”

“It’s always a matter of persecution. The Goddess of Reason doesn’t need me telling her as much.” Persecution had long been the gods’ strategy. In fact, the omnipresent threat was so effective that the Romans employed the same tactic in ensuring fealty from their provinces. If faced with five disparate uprisings, Rome would ignore the lesser four, select the most fierce rebellion and do unto them as they had done unto Carthage. After a protracted siege starved the stronghold, the legions would move past the siege walls and obliterate the other half. All men over twelve would be put to the sword. Attractive women and children were raped and sold into slavery. Their unattractive counterparts were either sold or put to the sword, depending on which god was led the assault. The city’s buildings were razed, libraries burned, and soil salted as to render the land uninhabitably plagued. News would reach the other uprisings before the soldiers had pulled out, and by the time the legionnaires had unbloodied their weapons, the other rebel factions would sue for peace under whatever terms Rome demanded.

Athena said, “There are Druids, Celts, Judaeans, Jainists, Samaritanists and any number of blasphemers I don’t even know. Suffice it to say they’re all heretics. We must pick a sect and make an unambiguous example of them. I think we should smite the Judaeans.”

“I’ve not heard of the Judaeans,” Ares responded. He took his seat as if doing so closed the

conversation, then joined the other gods in looking to Aphrodite's breasts and pregnant stomach.

"You wouldn't have. They have no standing army. Your knowing them is not the point. But perhaps some of you will recall the tribe that smashed the Eagle above their Temple's gate?" This brought nods of recollection. The Eagle was Zeus' Sacred Bird, and the gods had feared such blatant blasphemy might hasten His Return.

Dionysus asked, "Did we not just finish persecuting them?" The Wine God had been self-honoring, and his voice had a mild slur.

"We did indeed. So persecuted in fact, that Judea is now a Roman province."

"Under King Herod," Hermes said. The Gods' Messenger was the fleet-footed chaperone of mortal souls. He was charged with visiting every place mortals died, which meant every place mortals lived. As such, he was by far Olympus' best geographer. "Their souls number in the thousands along the River Styx's shores. They have wealth, but afford none to their dead to pay the underworld's ferryman."

Athena picked up Herme's thread, saying, "There is wealth, to be sure. But they do not invest in armor, horses, or standing armies. They have no designs on senatorial seats, much less the consulship. It is most unRoman. Most of their fighting is done amongst themselves. They worship a sole mythological deity." The gods laughed at the prospect of one god managing all of Nature. Even Athena joined in laughing, though she looked awkward doing so. The laughter stopped when she said, "They incant him thrice daily."

The number's gravity took a moment to register with Demeter, upon which time she said, "Thrice times a day?!"

"Yes, three times. There's a lot of honor going to waste, not to mention tithings. Their lawbook is written in a barbaric language that only their priests can interpret, and it is they who demand the peasants' first fruits."

Ares asked, “They collect for the temple on top of Rome’s taxes?”

“Indeed.”

“Persecution!” Ares said, speaking with such violence that a flock of nearby penguins took flight, alighting on a nearby cactus branch.

Athena’s patience for her brother was waning, and she responded forcibly, “I’ve already tried that. I’ve tried a number of tactics to which you were not privy. Some god had to rule the enslaved world while you cavorted about causing unnecessary wars. Not to mention wars on the womb.” It was widely accepted that Aphrodite’s child was the War God’s, though no god could be certain, for promiscuity was among the Sex Goddess’ most cherished hallmarks. “They are a stubborn breed. They simply cannot be tortured enough. Upon their last revolt, 2000 were crucified in Galilee alone, and that’s a tiny village. The soldiers ran out of wood and had to use both sides of the cross, yet those surviving still clung to their false god. Even those on the cross—those on their way to Hades—begged to Yahweh and not to Our Father.”

A flock of cherubim flitted above the Senate trailing a parchment. Artemis cocked her bow and arrow, and shot, barely missing. Ares stood and again raised his arms. “They shall learn to honor us in being destroyed.”

Athena rinsed her face in her hands. “That doesn’t work, my half-witted half-brother. Listen to my words: Herod’s killing them all the time, and he’s one of them. Persecution does not drive them into our temples—it only strengthens their resolve so they eat less food during their fasts and refrain from coveting even their own wives.” Athena lowered her arms, speaking plainly to let her Reason reason for her. “They’re too unreasonable to persecute. They have been enslaved, stripped of military power, taxed without representation, and driven to a mountainous desert where their enemies surround them on all sides. What we don’t deny them, they deny themselves! Already they shun gluttony, avarice, inebriation, and pleasures of the flesh. They’re

so backwards that they value mothers above fathers, and those mothers are impossible to please. Even their barbaric tongue is more barbaric than most. Their alphabet has no vowels.”

Demeter asked, “What’s a vowel?”

Aphrodite made a show of unsheathing her mirror and occupying herself in its report. Said she, “Vowels are the letters one employs during coitus.”

Athena replied, “They’re the letters that make the other letters make sense. Without them, one can’t know how a word is pronounced. For example, their god is called Yahweh. But it could be Jehova, or Jehouiwooevouiouiu. It could be all sorts of other things, which is just as well for them because they’re not allowed to utter his name.”

Multiple gods asked, “Then how do they honor him?”

Athena had anticipated this query. The trap sprung, she replied, “They can’t honor him; he doesn’t exist. The important thing is making them understand that, because in the meantime, we all lose honor. Some years ago they smashed our Father’s Statue.” This got gasps. “After the resulting persecution, the Judaeans invented a new holiday for their Yahweh which is now their biggest annual celebration. They give each other presents for eight consecutive days, and these are frugal people. I’ve tried dealing with their priests directly. Like I’ve always said—cut off the head and the body dies with it. But they’re killed too fast to make a difference. And that’s not even my doing. I’m talking about assassination at the hands of other Yahwehans. Then there’s this other leader—a rebel amongst the infidels whose signature blasphemy is bathing pagans in the Jordan River.”

“How vulgar,” Poseidon said. “The Jordan has been cursed. Its water is septic, and it’s fated to stay septic for millennia.”

“The bath is meant to be symbolic. They’re equally filthy upon exiting the river. Perhaps more so. The bather talks about kingdoms, which I also distrust. I drove Reason from him, but it

only made him more erratic. The Yahwehans passed it off as increased commune with Yahweh, all the women were saying, ‘Do me next John! Do me!’ and swearing up and down they were ready to receive him.”

Aphrodite glowed, nodded, and said, “John the Bather,” which got Ares’ attention even before she said it a second time.

Ares raised a hand and spake, “I make a motion that we declare war.”

Aphrodite struggled to her feet and seconded the motion. The Sex Goddess was nearly a head taller than Ares. He was stocky, cocky, handsome and proud, but short among Olympians. This was particularly troubling to the War God because all other Olympians were exactly the same height, and of all their exact-sameness, Ares’ father, Zeus, was the precisely the most average.

Athena pleaded, “It’s not a matter of declaring war. We need to wipe evidence of Yahweh from the Earth.”

Said Ares, “You called us here to vote, and we are voting.”

Athena spoke quickly, showcasing her bellicose duality: “If the Judaeans were the only problem, I would turn them into magpies. This is bigger than a handful of miscreant desert-dwelling cultists. We’re trying to restore order to the Empire and deliver each god his due honor. I only bring it to your dwindling attentions because other problems throughout the Empire demand my concentrated efforts. Tiberius has abandoned Rome for the Isle of Capri. The head of the Praetorian Guard is ambitious. Surely you gods remember how that can lead to problems?” The gods nodded. The complication may have seemed obvious even if it had been voiced by somegod other than the Goddess of Reason. “I made Pontius Pilate the prefect of Jerusalem—and he is far from a kind governor—but the mortals will not see Reason. What I need from the Senate is teamwork in handling this faction. What do you say?”

Any hope Athena may have had was short-lived, as each of the gods made suggestions that recast the problem in terms of their own ascriptions. Demeter pushed for starvation. Apollo suggested darkening the sun. Hermes wanted to loot. Only Ares remained silent as Athena systematically refuted plagues and floods and pests and sobriety, claiming that no punishment would clearly convey their message to other pagan tribes. Only when the Senate neared settling did Ares raised his arms and stand on his seat, bellowing over his half-sister, "Did you gods hear that?" No god replied. "Thunder! I heard thunder! It is an omen!" The animals, birds, and hybrids scattered quickly as gods gathered their weaponry and bolted from their seats.

Athena flailed her spear, assuring them, "There was no thunder!"

Ares shielded his head and fled as if ducking lightening. Apollo cried, "Make haste! We have disturbed the God of Gods."

Athena pleaded, "We must discuss Sejanus and the state of the Empire!" yet by this time only Demeter was around to hear her half-niece's efforts to retain order.

Chapter II

The Book of Judaeans

Five days after the Senate's adjournment, a number of the gods had reconvened in Ares' Stronghold. Like his father, Ares had his home built as a shrine to his ascription. His War Room was modeled after an Egyptian stick-fighting coliseum—round, with an earthen floor. The walls shone with relic armor, shields and weaponry. Battle plans had been woven into tapestries replete with legions' winning strategies. Marble idols of the War God were in abundance, brightly painted such that none of the stone's underlying white shone through, and some minor immortals breathed steadily from the crucifixes that were their final resting places.

In the center of the room was a topographical model of all known lands, now augmented with sawhorses supporting the roughly-hewn Roman annexes. Figurines representing each of the Empire's five-thousand-man legions demarcated the borders, hostile territories, and military bases—Gaul, the Rhine, Egypt, Jerusalem, Capri, Bretagne, and especially Rome.

Aphrodite stood in a basin, facing the map such that its Nile seemed to flow from her holy pubis. Her arms were extended outward, and a herd of satyrs used wooden scrapers to remove olive oil from her freshly bathed skin. Alongside Aphrodite stood Korykia, a semi-divine nymph with whom Apollo was grotesquely in love. The God of the Stars insisted on scraping Korykia himself, which was deemed unnatural and greatly displeasing to Aphrodite, whose boyfriend was staunchly opposed to performing serf labors.

Not to be upstaged, The Sex Goddess addressed no god in particular in asking, "Am I still the fairest of them all?" The company fell about themselves with assurances of her beauty and reminders that Helen's face had not launched a thousand ships, but four hundred at the most, whereas Aphrodite's had in fact been responsible for those four hundred and countless more.

Korkykia was dried and clothed long before Aphrodite's thirst for flattery was sated.

Hovering above the war table was the Sex Goddess' henchgod and prodigal son, Cupid. He wore a loincloth as white as his outstretched wings as he admired a tapestry depicting Corinth's destruction. No god knew whether or not Artemis was in attendance, such was her camouflage's divinity. But visibly in attendance was Eris, the Goddess of Discord, and Pan, the half-goat son of Hermes and demi-God of the Woodlands.

Together these gods formed the Axis Alliance, a group whose ascriptions stood to gain from protracted wars. As a course of nature, no earthly arrangement ever honored all gods equally. One god's comedy was another god's tragedy. Wars were inherently bad for marriages, just as men fighting campaigns overseas were not deepening the grain reserves, and men tending fields were neither winning naval battles nor scripting philosophy.

A congregation of this magnitude brought with it any number of slaves, serfs, and servants, not to mention minions, vassals, and attendants, all of whom waited to be summoned from along the War Room's periphery. The gathering further united all of the gods' patron animals. Ares' dogs found sport in chasing stags and boars and the panoply of visiting fowl. The godly congregation ensured that the airspace was thick with vultures, sparrows, swans, doves, and ravens all behaving in accordance with nature's designs. Ares' centaurs, meanwhile, did their best to ignore the bedlam and continue their tireless charge of preparing for war. Sparks flew as a broadsword graced a malachite wheel, adding a visual flare to the chaos that was the Stronghold's norm, and the shrill din of a sword being sharpened sounded over the lower registry of animals.

Ares raised his arms and addressed all, saying, "I have a plan that will bathe us in honor. There is a tribe of mortals so adept at providing reverence that they unironically give thanks three times a day for the opportunity to be poor and persecuted."

Pan's goaty ears pointed askance as he asked "Which God?"

"It is a false god."

Cupid asked, "You mean Hestia?"

"It's no Olympian. They call him Yahweh. His followers could provide honor the likes of which Olympus has never known." Hearing his master's volatility, the War God's sacred dog, a Dachshund named Torture, ran to him with its nub tail whipping.

Eris spake, "You mean the Judaeans? I love those mortals." The Discord Goddess' casual tone connoted familiarity. "They gripe about everything. They'll complain about the rain when Demeter blesses their crops, then they curse the heat when Apollo's sun is high in the sky." The plebeian gods knew barbarian cultures far better than the Senators, for while the Senators extracted honor from emperors, tribunes, consuls and their armies, lesser gods had to forage for honor amongst those the Senate ignored, which left impoverished mortals' and barbarian tribes.

Apollo asked: "Do you know of John the Bather?"

Said Eris, "Indeed."

"Athena reasoned we should use him to sway the masses."

Ares lowered and re-raised his arms, booming, "We must cut off the head so that the body also shall be cut off." This sounded wrong, and the gods looked to each other as Ares continued, "We shall make him a virtuoso of war, betrayal, and marathon coitus."

The Goddess of Discord was at the war table rearranging archer configurations against the model Gaul armies. "I don't know what good that'd do with him locked up in Herod's dungeon." Ares stared at his fist and cursed Athena's efficiency. Spake Eris, "Find something more discordant to worry about. The Yahwehans already have a new leader who's at least as crazy as the bather, and they'll have another as soon as he's gone."

Ares asked, "How do you know?"

“Do you never look to Earth?”

“I try not to.”

Said Eris, “How can you hope to reap more honor than the Goddess of Reason and Strategy when you don’t—”

“—Just tell me about the mortal.”

“He wins them over with magic. Already he’s walked on water and amassed a number of disciples.”

Pan said, “Poseidon assists him? That complicates matters greatly.” A mastiff took to smelling the goat-man hybrid, and soon the two creatures circled each other in a frenzy of nose-led exploration.

Said Eris, “Dionysus, too. The mortal also turned water into wine.” This revelation gave the War God pause. Dionysus rarely interfered with humanity, though all gods knew the God of Wine and Revelry’s unpredictability was to be taken for granted.

Then, Eris: “He speaks with colorful language. What’s more, he speaks like Athena so you never can tell what he’s talking about.”

A marble statue of Ares sprang to life and spoke in Artemis’ voice, “You mean Jesus of Nazareth?” The way the table looked to Artemis was enough to make Torture cower. It was beneath a Senator to acquaint himself with pagan infidels. Cupid motioned to speak, but Artemis raised a hand and preemptively defended, “There is great hunting on Earth, and Time is not a curse when spent in pursuit of your passion.”

“Amen,” said Aphrodite.

When asked about Jesus, Artemis reported, “He and his brother heal the sick, bring sight to the blind, cure lepers, exorcize the demon-possessed, not to mention the epileptics and paralytics.”

Said Eris, “This Jesus must be stopped. He’s undoing all of my best works.” A python had half-swallowed one of Pan’s goats, and Eris consoled herself by cursing the snake with strep throat and an allergy to goats.

Artemis was asked to identify the mortal, and soon all were huddled around the Goddess of the Hunt. From Mount Olympus, Mother Earth was a canvas of water’s greens and blues flecked with land’s greens and browns. Her body was still flat, thus easy to survey once the gods knew where to look. An ancient curse made directions more difficult for the male gods, though any god would have trouble pinpointing a rural village with no temples or amphitheaters to reference as landmarks. Artemis steered their attentions with an outstretched finger, directed them East from Rome, across Macedonia, over Cyprus and into Judea. She said, “You’re not looking for a man, you’re looking for a crowd. Wherever he goes there’s a big group around him. Also, his language is colorful.”

Before long they’d found Jesus on a mountainside in Galilee. “Ye gods!” Ares said. “That is a lot of disciples. There must be five-thousand men.”

Eris said, “Only thirteen of them are disciples.”

The War God asked which was Jesus, and some time elapsed before he accepted that the Yahwehan leader sat unassumingly in the midst of them. He was plain, almond-hued, and most ungodly with a scruffy black beard that seemed to be an extension of his hair. His eyebrows were likewise bushy and expressive. He wore an unassuming tan robe that looked white against his body and sandals that had worn thin. The mortal comported himself with the odd interplay of Demeter’s unhurried demeanor with Athena’s didacticism, and his words were indeed colorful as he warned against “Beelzebub” and the “wicked and adulterous generation.”

Ares bellowed with laughter, saying, “Colorful language indeed! What sorcery causes him to speak in this manner?”

“That was me,” Eris said. “I enchanted him, but it didn’t work. I mean—it worked, it just wasn’t supposed to do that.”

The gods listened to Jesus’ sermon on prosperous cultivation. Aphrodite watched only tentatively, scrunching her nose as if she could smell the lot of them. Thinking five the better number, the Sex Goddess barely had the patience for fourplay, and she viewed the Judaeans’ unkemptness as an affront to her ascription. Said she, “Now I’m not the Goddess of the Harvest, but even I know that seeds planted in thorns and on rocks won’t grow. If the Judaeans needed that kind of advice, surely they’d have starved long before they could bathe in the Jordan River.”

Eris was the next to voice her perplexity, “I can see why Athena’s Reason would be offended. How can a kingdom be like a treasure hidden in a field and also be like a mustard seed?” Though Eris enjoyed the speech’s discordant nature, Jesus’ muddled logic confused her, which she did not enjoy. The goddess pondered whether she gained enough honor from enjoying not-enjoying his speech to compensate for how much she disliked it in the first place.

Thoroughly confused in a way she found unenjoyable, she decided—as ever—to err on the side of smiting him. Eris turned to the group as if waking from a trance and decreed, “I hereby curse this mortal with confusion. Henceforth, all of the women he encounters shall bear the same name of Mary.”

Ares asked, “Is that the best you can do?” For all of her bad intentions, Eris was not adept at extracting honor. Even mortals’ histories showed her to be a one-hex wonder, though that hex had forever changed history. For it was Eris who had left a golden apple inscribed *For the Fairest* at Peleus’ wedding, thus prompting Paris’ Judgment and the series of disputes that ultimately resulted in the Trojan War. The War had been a turning point for most of Mount Olympus and all of Mother Earth. One such turn was Ares’ realization that War fed Discord just

as surely as Discord fomented War. It was then that Ares took Eris as a disciple, and the two had been all but inseparable since.

Aphrodite asked, "Is it just me, or is it possible that the mortal is glowing?" "Mortals cannot glow," spake Ares. "The man is a fool. I cannot wait to put him to the sword." The shrill cry of scraping metal pierced the air as a centaur sharpened a broad sword, stirring Ares to reveal his nature. In one motion, he plucked a Spartan spear from an idol of himself and threw it through the beast's human chest. The sword clanged to the ground and the centaur fell instantly dead, leaving his transparent spirit standing at the wheel as his mortal hooves mock-galoped in rigor mortis.

Apollo reminded him, "That won't work. The Allied gods have killed Yahwehans in droves, yet they still do not turn to Olympus."

"A mortal need not believe in the God of War to believe that he has no choice but to fight when staring down the Romans' broadswords. They will believe in me with their last dying breaths, just as any survivors will believe that their men are all dead, that their treasuries are divided amongst Roman soldiers, and that their women have been sold into the Empire's oldest profession."

Apollo said, "I like Aphrodite's idea. Let's starve them."

Eris countered, "They've been starved before. It's in their book of laws that they deserve whatever's thrown at them. Yahweh tests them all the time, and the more they endure, the better their standing."

Said Ares, "You read a pagan law book written to a false god in a barbaric tongue?"

"Of course," Eris answered. "The scroll is long enough to bridge Sicily to Egypt. What could be more discordant than that? Do you remember when Dionysus tortured that one mortal for years on end?"

Ares replied, “Job. How could I forget? I was nearly compelled to end his suffering.”

“Right! Job is a cult saint in their law book”

“These mortals will endure Jobian torture?”

“The devout ones will.”

“By Job,” Ares said. “That is a lot of reverence. So terrible was his persecution that all mandatory toil was henceforth named after him.”

“That’s a lot of honor to tap into, is what it is” Eris said. “Imagine if we could rededicate their fealty towards war and discord. It’s just the push we need.”

Artemis cautioned, “Do not blaspheme.” It had long been Fated that one of Zeus’ progeny would overthrow him. Ares had designs on fulfilling that prophecy. So strong was his conviction that he made primogeniture a standard amongst the mortals, yet even hinting at an Olympic coup was hubris and thus a surefire path to damnation.

Apollo’s glow moved to his sister as the sun made way for the moon. Erstwhile, Aphrodite glowed more brightly with the reverence that found her each night when couples took to their beds. Inspired by the Sex Goddess, Apollo moved behind Korkykia, coming to know her as she braced against the war table with one hand in the Black Sea and another on the city of Ascalon.

Eris turned her eyes from the gods, losing herself in wistful thought: “Why must mortals make it so difficult? We demand so very little: unwavering devotion, adoration, reverence, plus unsolicited sacrifices of blood, coin, land, life, progeny—faithfully finding and adhering to the omens, honoring the holidays, constructing and up-keeping temples, filling their treasuries, then whatever might be asked of tribes, priests, oracles, and individual men. Meanwhile, mortals never have to worry about making mortals honor them, and if they ever come to realize they’re on the verge of incurring wrath, they can always do what’s noble by simply killing their bloodline and falling on their swords.”

Spake Ares, “I agree with my disciple. These mortals have money. They have families. They have land and livestock and shelter and songs. If any mortal has something to live for, it’s just a matter of taking it from them and rededicating their devotion to me.” Then, “Us.—You know?—rededicating their devotion to us.”

Artemis said, “What if instead of starving them, we provide just enough food for Jesus and his disciples.” The gods’ silence showed their intrigue. “We make Jesus choose who is to live, so the masses have no choice but to watch him and his disciples eat. They will ask how the Yahweh could let them starve, and when Jesus can’t answer, they will know that the Yahweh is not with them.”

Apollo was actively honoring Aphrodite through Korcykia, but he was still quick to expose his sister’s selfish subtext: “Let me guess—then they’ll be forced to hunt?”

“Well, sure they’ll have to hunt. What else are they going to do on a desert mountainside, sew a pile oats and wait on rain?” But no better plan was issued, and so it came to pass that the gods provided five loaves and two fish—just enough food for Jesus and his disciples.

As prophesied, Jesus hoarded the meager banquet. He collected the offerings in a basket, lifted them over his head—incanting Yahweh as to give thanks—then divided the rations amongst his disciples. The turn came when the disciples then distributed the food amongst the multitudes. They even relinquished the basket, letting the Judaeen masses serve themselves until all ate and were sated. Though Jesus had started with one half-empty basket, at the meal’s end their leftover fragments numbered twelve baskets full.

For a long while, no god spoke.

“What on Earth was that?” Apollo asked.

To which Ares replied, “I never thought I’d say this, but I think it’s time we seek assistance from Athena.”

Chapter IV

The Book of Siblings

When the Axis gods visited Athena's Library, the Goddess of Reason was scrambling to stem the groundswell of blasphemy that followed what the Judaeans had dubbed *the miracle of the loaves and the fishes*. Athena's camp had been likewise thwarted after killing a man that Jesus' followers intended for him to heal. Four days after Lazarus' death, Jesus awoke the corpse and paraded him from his tomb. It was most unnatural, and during the Lazarusian easter, all those in attendance called themselves witnesses to Yahweh, positively tittering with thanksgivings and barbaric declarations of alleluia.

A principle known as Athena's Razor proposed that the simplest explanation was most likely correct, and the simplest explanation for Lazarus' reanimation was that a member of Ares' party had intervened on Jesus' behalf. Likewise, the Axis gods thought the Allied gods were responsible for multiplying the mortal's fishes and loaves.

Books had not yet been invented. Rather, the walls were lined with scrolls supported with plaster columns painted to look like marble. The scrolls were attended by eunuchs Athena had selected for their toned, taut muscular bodies. The ground was an intricate mosaic depicting Troy receiving a wooden horse into her walls. floors and wall paintings, including.

Demeter's largest festival, and indeed the largest for all Olympus, was fast approaching, and most gods were readying themselves for revelry. The Grain Goddess' daughter, Persephone, the youngest of the Olympians, was soon to return to the underworld, and thus Demeter was frantic in her attempts to eke the most from their remaining moments. Persephone wore all black,

with pale skin, darkened eyes, and chains adorning her outfit in the same manner as Demeter employed flora. The young goddess sat before her mother, whereby Demeter could brush her golden hair and adorn it with garlands that were as aesthetically clashing as they were undesired. Further undesired was the company of Hestia, the ex-Senatorial Goddess of the Hearth and Family. Hestia had been a key player in the Titanomachy that brought Zeus to power, and once her temples had reaped honor with the best of them. But Hearths had come to be of less mortal import than in days of old, and with Family came familial agitations. Wine and Revelry drew far more adherents, and Hestia's replacement on the Senate was assured the moment Dionysus was pulled from his incubation in Zeus' thigh.

When Ares stormed Athena's Library, the mood was one of animus and distrust. If any of Athena's company were surprised that Ares sought his half-sister, none were surprised that he arrived angry. "You cannot protect him," Ares shouted. "It goes directly against Zeusian Interdict!"

Athena said, "I have done nothing of the sort."

"You will incur Father's Wrath, and no god can help you then."

"Not so loud!" Athena said, waving downwards as if calming the winds.

"You claim you don't break the commandments? Then I guess it wasn't you who guided the mortal Diomedes' spear into my side?"

Athena consented, "Of that accusation, I am culpable."

The assault occurred towards the end of the Trojan War. Gods were forbidden from taking the battle field in person, and Ares' doing so made it permissible for Athena to help Diomedes skewer the God of War. It was poor form on both gods' parts, though Ares was not a god to summon introspection and humility. He drew his sword and said, "Would that I had your reason so I could describe how passionately I wish to kill you."

Athena pushed his sword's broad side and said, "Brother, I would welcome Death's releasing me from our conversations." Though the Olympians could swallow, impregnate, imprison, and otherwise curse each other, it was impossible for one to cut another by his own hand. Most battles were fought against other gods' patrons, which was strictly prohibited, not to mention ill-advised when opposing the Goddess of Strategy. Athena continued, "My honor ebbs whenever discoursing with a god who refutes the fact that ice and snow are borne of water."

"That was long ago," Ares snarled, "and you had only recently issued the decree that linked their properties." At that, the sibling gods launched a debate on war crimes they'd been rehashing since the Trojan War. Mortal days passed before they remembered to blame each other for Jesus' miracles. Once recalled, the ensuing standoff may have outlived the Roman Empire had Ares not quelled Athena's suspicion by swearing on the River Styx that he had had nothing to do with Lazarus' resurrection. It was the unbreakable oath of the gods, one placed on the river mortal souls cross to enter Hades—in essence, a holy promise made on the very fabric of the gods' immortality. Zeus had long since forbidden such vows, and breaking one of Zeus' Commandments assumed great risk.

Apollo said, "While you two bandy words, Jesus is telling Yahwehans to forgive each other seven times seventy times. That seems like the right amount of revenge, but you'll never start a war forgiving your enemies two hundred times." In their fury, the siblings' fury had failed to notice that the Axis gods had filed in around them. Apollo held the hand of an attractive twelve-year-old mortal female whom no god recognized. Aphrodite cradled the severed head of John the Bather. Cupid chased a cherub in an attempt to retrieve his loincloth. Indeed, Athena's Library had never known more visitors.

Aphrodite said, "He forgave a woman I'd condemned to stoning for uninspired coitus. Imagine! A mortal forgiving a woman as if he were a god. That's blasphemy plain and simple."

Athena looked to the spear in her hand as if unsure who'd unsheathed it. She held it behind her back, humbled by her lack of composure. Said she, "Look at us. Lack of honor has our skin pallid and wanting for radiance. Just because My Father is not with us, doesn't mean we are Powerless. Obviously, Apollo would convert the Judaeans into sun worshipers just as I'd like to make them philosophers, but we must work for the good of all Olympus."

The gods nodded in agreement, which made Athena's honor surge. The flush of Reason gave her the idea to package her plan such that each god could interpret it opportunistically. Indeed, moving speeches before the popular assembly cemented one's importance. She stood on a tree stump and saluted them, saying "Friends, Romans, Olympians, patrons, accursed hybrid-animal demigods, lend me your ears. I come to bury Jesus, not to praise him. I have heard your grievances. You demand more adoration. I have a solution, but it requires our working together. No mortal can sustain himself without the gods' cooperation. They need Apollo's sun, Demeter's grain, Aphrodite's propagation, and Ares' spoils. The Judaeans are no different."

"I've heard this speech," Dionysus said. The Wine God staggered through the square with his goblet overhead, parodying his half-sister-twice-removed. He was blubberingly full of honor, having spent three moon cycles threshing crop circles into the Earth's fields. His toga was a collage of purples, with only its sleeves having been spared the bender's spillage. Steps behind him were the seven Maenads—celestial nymphs of self-abandonment whom Dionysus had blessed with infertility. Each Maenads was named after a day of the week. They danced about Dionysus in merry, naked splendor as the Wine God sputtered, "What we need is a bacchanal, plain and simple."

"You're part of the problem, tree-hugger," said Artemis' disembodied voice. The nickname was older than the walls of Troy, bestowed after a wedding during which Dionysus kept his feet only by hugging a birch. "Did you not assist the Judaeans by turning water into wine?"

Dionysus scoffed, materialized a cup then its contents, saying, “Maybe I did. Maybe I don’t care. Maybe I don’t remember. Maybe I don’t care to remember and maybe I don’t remember to care. Wine brings me honor. I make no apologies.”

Ares asked, “Well, did you multiply two fish into enough baskets-full to feed five thousand mortals?”

Said Eris, “Five thousand men alone.”

Athena’s proximity had them all feeling Reasonable, and suddenly the gods were of one mind in enumerating Jesus’ feats:

“There were far more women in attendance.”

“Women can’t get enough of this mortal.

“Them and the poor. And the poor women. And the blind.”

“Blind. Epileptic. The demon possessed. You know? Pretty much any mortal we have cursed finds favor with him.”

Aphrodite caught her reflection in Ares’ shield, engaged with it for a long moment, then placed it back within the shield’s reflective metal. “Maybe it’s his language. His speech is quite colorful.”

Hestia moved to speak but was cut off by Athena’s saying, “I think Jesus was sent to test us.” This drew the Olympians’ attentions. “Since becoming Olympus’ first amongst equals, I have been visited by each of you in turn and always with the same complaint: *I don’t get enough adoration.*”

Demeter looked to the other gods, touched by her own misunderstanding. Said she, “You gods complain that I don’t get enough adoration?”

Athena corrected, “No, Aunt Demeter. I meant to speak from your perspective.”

“From my perspective, I don’t get enough adoration.”

Athena placed a hand on the Grain Goddess' shoulder, letting Reason flow as to liberate the conversation. Demeter nodded in comprehension, and Athena continued, "I too, longed for the God of Power after Caesar torched the Alexandrian Library, or when Antony proposed moving the capital to Egypt. But it could be His plan that we are forced to work together. I may be wrong, but if I'm not, are you ready to answer to Him?" She did not wait for a reply before saying, "So I ask you: Can we agree to a truce until we've solved the Judaeian conundrum?"

"Truces are made to be broken," Eris said.

Athena nodded and redressed them, "Can we agree to a truce until some god breaks the truce we agree to?" No god had a problem with that arrangement, and calls of "Aye" sounded and echoed. It was the first such truce since the Republic's dissolution.

Whenever adequate adoration was not forthcoming, the gods offered mortals opportunities to prove their fealty. Sometimes these opportunities came from within the Empire in the form of rebellions, pagan philosophers, or personal ambition within the senate. Other times, the gods created new territories and peopled those nations with asset-rich barbarians. Indeed, Earth's landscape was constantly changing to accommodate Olympus' demands. With each Roman expansion, more wealth was needed to sate her marauding armies and more soldiers were needed to fortify her borders. Conquest forced Rome into battle, which brought death, which brought spoils, which brought offerings, which bought honor in addition to the glory of spectacle. The gods' love of spectacle could not be overstated. Whether it took the form of sieges, sport, starvation, sailing, plague, plunder, pests, theater, festivals, hunting, war, games that mimicked war, persecution, or genocide was no matter.

Judea had never been thoroughly vanquished as a nation and a people. After previous rebellions, the province had opted for peaceable subjugation. They were not granted Roman citizenship, though they still received Rome's permission to pay her taxes. The Empire then used

these taxes to erect statues and temples, make sacrifices and hold festivals to the honor of Olympus. The gods' newfound interest all but ensured the territory's annihilation, but first they needed thoroughly vanquish Jesus and all traces of his legacy.

Cherubim carried the news of the truce throughout Olympus, and as word spread, the Olympic roads filled with gods and hybrids, nymphs, Maenads, satyrs, cyclopes and fauns, all of whom stood to gain honor from participating. Satyrs rolled casks of fortified chianti from Dionysus' Grapevine, and the mood quickly devolved from war to revelry as all but The Goddess of Reason made merry.

Athena consumed only ambrosia and nectar—the two foods that could never be enchanted. Demeter lived at the opposite end of that spectrum. There was a time when she wouldn't eat a grain, but when her only daughter was kidnapped, raped and married to her uncle lord of the underworld, desperation drove the Goddess of the Harvest to trying a kumquat. She liked the way it made her feel, which opened the door to spices and vegetables. Before long, she had lost her grip on her sacred duty of policing the Earth's vegetation. Olympus was appalled to learn she'd supplanted the gods' nectar into the trunks of maple trees and was letting subterranean rodents determine winter's duration. So quickly were mortal foods tabooed that their names became synonymous with lunacy and one whose reason failed him might be called a fruitcake, nutty, crackers, or bananas. Demeter became a case-study on the pitfalls of consumption, so most gods avoided mortal fare for fear it might be enchanted. That was, of course, with the exception of wine, which the gods drank copiously precisely because they knew it was always enchanted.

One of the enchantment's side effects was the loosening of tongues, and Olympus soon mixed business with pleasure in weighing punishments that utilized irony in attacking Jesus' faith. Irony was second only to hope among the gods' favorite forms of humor.

The plebeian gods were best suited to attack at the heart of the Yahwehan culture. Senators

dealt directly with the heads of Roman state, leaving lesser gods to forage for honor amongst the mortals' impoverished tribes. Eager for the spotlight, the plebeian gods gushed with suggestions. Circe wanted to turn the Judaeans into pigs, citing their refusal to eat swine. Hestia suggested turning them to stone, assuring the Senators that idols were yet another Yahwehan interdict. A volley of ideas came forth, but the senate was unmoved, and before long, wine ensured that forethought was replaced by volume.

Then Dionysus raised his hands for attention. Smiting and Revelry were closely linked, and the Wine God was renowned for reveling in smitidity. Spake the Wine God, "I say we give him a fetish. That is, with Aphrodite's permission, of course." The Sex Goddess offered an awkward, pregnant curtsy. "Say he were to dabble in asphyxiation whenever en flagrante delicto." Dionysus paused, letting imaginations catch up to him. "He is self-stimulating with one hand and suffocating himself with the other." Ever the theater enthusiast, Dionysus pantomimed self-strangulation with an invisible noose. "So the Marys go looking for him, and what do they find? His prayer shawl tied around his neck. His eyes bulge from his face. He has a lemon wedge in his mouth, his toga is soiled, and his mortal corpse is fully erect with ass and oxen standing by."

Each god weighed the idea and its peculiarity.

Somegod asked, "Why a lemon?" and was told, "Why not a lemon?"

Eris was particularly impressed. Said she, "Astounding! That's as dishonorable as it gets."

Dionysus replied, "What can I say? I am a glutton for punishment."

Athena failed to see the irony and said as much. Aphrodite suggested killing them for blasphemy, and Demeter said, "That is what we're doing."

The Sex Goddess reanimated John the Bather's head, making it blink and speak in her stead: "I mean blasphemy against his followers, not against Olympus."

"How will the Judaeans know Olympus is responsible?"

A cherub streaked the air trailing an unfurled stolen parchment. Artemis was quick to fit bow with arrow, and when the pest fell dead, it landed it on a dense collection of maps named after a pitifully cursed Titan.

Spake the Bather, “What else are they going to think? That Yahweh killed his own son? You’re underestimating their reason.”

“They’ve got a holiday just a few days away. Passover. It’s a week-long affair.” The gods turned their attention to Eris, who continued, “They spend eight days eating everything in their normal diet except bread in order to celebrate their god’s compassion for restraining himself from killing all of their firstborn sons in the middle of one night thousands of years ago.”

Dionysus nodded, “Good, god. That’s harsh even by Zeus’ standards!” The other Olympians recoiled at the mention of His Name. “It must have been a dreadful year on Judea if that’s the occasion they celebrate.”

Artemis said, “It’s a strange festival. They walk many days to reach Jerusalem. Hundreds of thousands of them. Meanwhile, just outside the city, there’s incredible ibex hunting.”

A discussion arose as to where Jerusalem lay. Learning it was in Israel only prompted discussions as to Israel’s locale. Eventually they came to an agreement that Israel had always resided between Egypt and whoever else was in power. The Israelis had long done well to remain diplomatic towards the two opposing forces, but Rome’s conquering of Egypt bridged the gap and changed the political landscape such that Israel’s conversion to worshiping Olympus was indeed an inevitability.

Dionysus said, “We shall parade Jesus to Jerusalem with great fanfare so all Judea witnesses the penalty for having gods before us.”

Eris said, “There’s a prophecy that their messiah is supposed to come on an ass.”

Concordance spread like a village fire, and Athena decreed, “On behalf of the Senate, I

hereby decree that Olympus shall celebrate Passover with Jesus.” With the wave of her arm, Jerusalem’s people formed a corridor to their capital. Jesus was on the lips of every mortal in town, and though palm trees were among the least sacred plant in the land, the Judaeans were singleminded in amassing fronds to pave a trail for the ass who conducted Jesus’ procession.

Chapter V

The Book of Jerusalem

Jerusalem was easy to find from Olympus, for all roads to Judea's capital were crammed with carts, crates, livestock and pilgrims. Though surrounded on all sides by lush forests of olive, pine, and almond trees, the city itself rested in a sea of dried riverbeds. The gods first thought the land to be suitably impoverished, but their humor quickly changed when they beheld Jerusalem's temple. It was large enough to host cyclopes. Its treasury was three times the size of the Parthenon's. Its walls sprawled like the Minotaur's labyrinth and within those walls a series of tiered courtyards were arranged into an unprecedentedly efficient honor depository.

Arriving Yahwehans were ordered to bathe before entering, a rite they purchased from the first tithe collector. They then met with bankers who exchanged their currencies for Jerusalem monies. Those without sufficient funds signed for loans with the promise to pay even greater sums later. Then, with shekels in hand, the Judaeans were escorted to oxen stables and pigeon coops where they purchased sacrifices commensurate to their requests from their Yahweh. Priests harvested the animals' blood and splashed it arbitrarily while chanting gibberish and bowing to the courtyard's corners in blasphemous parodies of Olympic rites. Then, rather than burning the meat to their fictitious deity, the lean cuts were brought to a separate market and resold to the very people who had just paid to have the beasts sacrificed.

Yet for all the smoke and incense, bowing and ritual, costumes and candles, 20,000 priests and their combined weights in gold, there was no sign of Yahweh, nor of any blessings upon his followers. What there was was a river of animal blood running away from the temple's money reserve in a gutter in the courtyard's floor. The gods sat in silence for a mortal afternoon before Apollo voiced their shared concern, "Is it just me, or is that a river of blood?"

All gods knew the Moirai had Fated that *Whosoever rules when hot blood runs rivers shall usher a new age upon Olympus*. Athena at once got defensive. “This cannot be the river,” said she. “It is at most a stream. Or perhaps a creek.”

“It looks like a river of blood to me,” Eris said. “I have seen plenty of blood rivers in my time, and while it’s no plagued Nile, that’s a blood river as surely as centaurs smell god-forsaken.” A number of the plebeian gods took a knee, humbling themselves to the Goddess of Reason so as to get in her good graces in case she were to usher in the dawn of a new era.

Ares stomped his spear and declared, “I’m not bowing.”

Honor-flush notwithstanding, Athena waved everygod to their feet. Accepting the Fate would be tantamount to declaring war on Zeus. The Senate had tried that once before—letting Hera lead them to summoning the dread Typhus and attacking as one. Zeus put down the rebellion handily and punished the gods in His most favored manner—by giving the gods exactly what they most wanted. Prior to the rebellion, Zeus alone had ruled over all of Nature. He divided His Cosmic Responsibility so that rather than an eternity of leisure each god needed to work tirelessly in order to reap honor for his ascription.

Athena said, “The Fates are always parables. They say, *don’t loosen the wineskin* when they mean *don’t put your phallus in your host’s fertile daughter*. They say, *frogs will be blamed when the sphinx loses her sense of smell*, when Oedipus killed the sphinx 250 years before Tutankhamen was cursed into taking frog form. This river of blood is actually a river of blood, thus it cannot be the Fate’s fulfillment.”

This logic satisfied the Olympians, and they quickly turned their attentions to Jesus. Many had never laid eyes on the source of their agitations. Most Olympic servants stood along the periphery, and Athena hastened to a scrollshelf and set about shooing a fawn who was grazing upon an Etruscan constitution. Others polished weaponry or refilled the gods’ goblets.

On Earth, Jesus' vagaries were profane, yet open-ended enough to seem applicable to any god musing over the parables. Jesus sat amidst women and children within the temple walls. He was calm and unhurried, as if it mattered not to him whether his speech resonated. He spoke with such authority the gods found themselves hoping for words that might exonerate him. Instead, Jesus insisted that the mortals each "come in the name of the Lord."

While Aphrodite did not know a lord, she transfixed on the idea of coming in the name of one. Indeed, her glow was enough to cause Ares offense. He sprung to his feet and then to his tiptoes in declaring war on Yahweh. Aphrodite tried to settle her lover with a reminder one could not wage war with a folk tale. As a diminutive god, Ares was quick to succumb to wine's enchantment. His lover had always carried her wine better than he—even before the pregnancy added to her tolerance.

The War God cast a bellicose fury into the Judaeans, who responded by taking leave of his senses. Jesus ran through the temple's courtyard, overturning the money-exchangers' tables and casting aspersions, admonishing the exchangers for thieving in his father's house. The infidels scurried across the earthen floor, diving through feathers, fowl and blood in grabbing for foreign currencies. The priests, meanwhile, were aghast. Like Jesus' disciples, they hung back—awestruck into inaction. The gods, too, looked to each other wondering who would intervene. Matters of commerce were Hermes' domain, but the Gods' Messenger had long since shied off to take pleasure in Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and whatever other Maenads were not previously engaged.

"That's good irony," came Artemis' voice. "The Yahwehans love money."

Priests and sentries arrived to hold Jesus accountable. Every god assumed Jesus' cause was lost, but the mortal's strategy was astute. He blessed some children—a time-honored political maneuver—then turned the metaphorical tables on the priests, saying, "Truly I tell you, the tax

collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

This sent Mount Olympus in a tizzy:

“Kingdoms are bad!”

“Why does Jesus steal money from his father’s treasury?”

“God, will he be disappointed when he sees Hades.”

“I love this mortal. Did you see those priests’ faces? Golden!”

Athena spake, “Do not lose track of the reason for which we smite Jesus. He alone is not the enemy.” Everygod turned his attention. Continuedeth she, “Recall the mortal pilgrims did not travel to visit Jesus. They came to visit a temple with a Sisyphean number of priests. The Judaeans will come again whether Jesus is here or not, and the enemy of our enemy may well be our friend. Think of it in terms of military strategy: If a legion without reserves is confronted with an army to North and another to the West, does the smart commander divide his legion and attack both camps simultaneously?”

There was a long pause and many a stare before Demeter called forcibly, “No.”

The Grain Goddess had not heard the question. She was responding to a nightmare about her daughter’s abduction. Still, Athena jumped upon the answer, “Of course not! It would throw off their strategy. The legion is designed to work as a cohesive unit. Now: what’s easier than attacking two separate armies?”

Again, no god responded. Athena goaded them, “Come on. Fighting two enemies is hard. What’s less hard than fighting two armies?”

“Fighting one army,” Ares said. The War God got defensive each time Athena preached Strategy. For Ares had no ascription aside from War, whereas Athena was also the Goddess of Reason and Weaving. It pained Ares that his half-sister had such varied and esteemed interests. What’s more, it disgraced him that she effortlessly excelled at each of them.

“Exactly,” spake Athena. “Fighting one army is easier than fighting two armies. So, if there are three armies, and we want to get down to only two armies, what can we force the other armies to do to each other so in the end there will be less of them remaining?”

Demeter launched an unprompted tirade about pomegranates and how little sustenance their seeds provide followed by an addendum of the cruelty of Fate and the fragility of youth. It was among the oldest rants known to Olympus.

Athena regained the gods’ attentions by unsheathing her blade and holding it above her head as to rally them. Other gods grabbed for their weapons’ hilts, but each stopped short upon noticing the other gods’ reluctance. Said Athena, “The answer I was looking for is to make two of the opposing armies battle each other.”

“You sound like Jesus,” Ares said. “There are no armies rearing for battle. There’s not a longsword among them. Just a bunch of priests, a bunch of unwashed Yahwehans, and another bunch of even-less-washed Yahwehans.”

Athena sighed and redressed them, “This is a war of beliefs. We are the soldiers. I’m just saying we’ve got to use teamwork and strategy.” Ares placed his hand upon the broad side of Athena’s blade and pushed it Earthwards. Pan feasted on an Etruscan scroll, and a cherub trailed a stolen parchment through the sky.

The Goddess of Reason continued, “It’s no Battle of Actium, but one cannot pick all of one’s wars. What matters is getting through to the Judaeans. Let us wait and see whether Jesus or the priests prevail. When one has eliminated the other, we will wipe out whoever is left and claim the Temple of Jerusalem for Olympus.” The Senators nodded in likeminded approval, which quickly spread to the demi-gods, servants, and Hestia. There was no arguing against a logic that killed all remnants of opposition. Athena raised her sword again, and then all swords save the War God’s were raised in concordance.

Ares scoffed, “And I suppose you’re going to be our commander?”

“It worked at Troy,” Athena said, and with that the gods let her outline a battle plan. Their first tactic would be employing reconnaissance, with each god assigned to track a different mortal. All of the disciples were to be tracked, as was Jesus’ brother, James, Pontius Pilate, the one called Thomas, Herod Antipas, the Yahwehan high priest, and any number of Marys. Athena charged herself with trailing Jesus. Ares protested—as she knew he would—so she invited the War God to a partnership, which was the surest way to ensure his refusal.

Artemis met this strategy with enthusiasm. Tracking was practically her ascription, and before the plan could be further clarified, the Goddess of the Hunt was changing in baggy cloaks and shawls in keeping with Judaeon fashion. Other gods were far less eager. Watching Earth was for accursed gods and those desperate for honor wherever they could find it. As the gods readied to decamp, Athena cautioned them, “This crucial matter demands our sober attentions. I entreat you to lower your chalices. Once the threat is neutralized, we have all of eternity in which to revel.”

Time dragged like an Odyssey for every god. Most tuned in and out intermittently, and when tuned in, it was most often to voice exasperation at Jesus’ filibustering and gross misunderstanding of Hades’ eponymous underworld. The few gods following their Earthly assignments spent much of the week together, coming and going from Athena’s attention whenever Jesus gave liturgies. Each time, the Olympians used Athena’s proximity as an excuse to shirk their own assignments.

Athena was far more open-minded than her family. Though fallacious and heretical, she found Jesus’ speeches were admirably consistent in their fallaciousness and hereticity. The priests did nothing to hide their attempts to entrap the Yahwehan, but Jesus’ quick-wittedness always kept him just within bounds of both Judaeon culture and Roman law. He dodged charges

of treason against the empire by justifying the Judaeans' payment of imperial taxes. Said he, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's," in reference to the coins bearing the emperor's likeness. It was a clever spin on words that simultaneously honored his Yahweh, the laws of the Roman Empire, and the scripture of the Yahwehan law book. After a week watching mortals, her honor was dull and mind unreasoned. Indeed, her wits betrayed her such that Jesus sometimes seemed to glow as if he were Olympian and able to cultivate the mortals' reverence.

Moments after this masterstroke of subtle ingenuity, Jesus would reveal another nature in threatening to raze the temple so "no two stones are left standing," thus promising to break all three covenants concomitantly. It was as if Jesus was offering Olympus instructions on how to punish them, yet as a result of this prophecy, the gods needed conjure other punishments lest they give credence to the mortal's ramblings.

The day before Passover, the mortals' supper brought most of the gods together. Jesus washed his disciples' feet as Athena was debriefed. The gods reported the disciples to be entirely unexceptional—they were emotional, self-absorbed, skeptical, and prideful—like powerless Olympians whose actions were of no consequence. Though each god admitted to spotty surveillance, no god having seen Yahwehans conspire to stage Jesus' healings, exorcisms, and miracles. Every time he lay hands on a blind man or a leper, Athena looked forward to his failure, thus each success built tension for subsequent efforts in much the same way the stakes raised with each new victory for an undefeated gladiator.

As the humans readied for supper, all eyes were on Jesus. He thanked his Yahweh for a loaf of bread and held it above his head for divine inspection. His disciples watched with eager perplexity, as did all of Olympus. Cupid said, "Here he goes again. He's going to flood the room in baked goods." Only this time the bread did not multiply. Instead, Jesus broke it into morsels, distributed the pieces and bade his disciples eat in the understanding that the bread was his flesh.

Eris snorted, then laughed the uninhibited cackle of the deaf. Cannibalism was a capital offense, and only hubris warranted a speedier smiting. There had been no call to punish cannibalism since Tantalus served his own son as a meal to the Olympic Senate. All but one of the gods had picked up on it quickly, but Demeter had been in the depths of mourning—eating mortal foods with no self-regard—and thought nothing of ingesting one more. It was but a moment before Demeter realized her error, then far less time before Tantalus realized his. All gods remembered Demeter’s betrayed fury. She damned him to Tartarus, stirring within him eternal hunger and thirst. He would forever stand neck-deep in a river of clean water that ebbed and dried whenever he moved to drink it. Likewise, a bough of lush fruit hung just above his head, yet lifted outside his grasp whenever he reached upwards. It was a fine damnation for a goddess with wandering cognition. Even Dionysus had applauded the effort.

And now, in a peasant hovel in Jerusalem, the Olympians were stunned speechless as Jesus made a show of defying the gods’ very natures. It was as if Jesus was purposefully delivering himself unto them. The gravity of Jesus’ crime underscored his ignorance of Olympian protocol. For all of his parables and blasphemy, Jesus was affable in an effected way. Such blatant wrongdoing was out of keeping with Jesus’ character, yet the Yahwehan pushed forward, sharing wine and declaring that all present drank his blood.

The Wine God spat his chianti like a fireburst, shocked into sobriety. He pounced to his feet saying, “This mortal knows not who he’s dealing with.” His attendants jumped to attention, and a satyr made haste in swapping out Dionysus’ weapons—stowing the Chalice of Joviality and handing him the Goblet of Incomprehensible Malevolence.

Ares elbowed Eris and bid her, “Pay attention.” Indeed, everygod was anxious for Dionysus’ performance. Only Zeus’ reputation for discipline preceded the Wine God’s. King Pentheus’ murder was the stuff of legend. The king’s family was made to mistake him for a wild

beast. Only after they'd torn the beast asunder did Dionysus snap them back to a reality in which the queen frolicked among her son's entrails. Though only Dionysus witnessed it firsthand, many had seen the mortals' reenactments, and some had even seen the Parthian performance that used General Crassus' decapitated head as a stage prop.

Though too reasonable to know fear, Athena felt something akin to concern. Dionysus was the least accountable of the gods, and Reason had no foothold on him. She spoke fast and entreatingly, "Half-brother-twice-removed, I know better than to attempt steering your course. But you need to incorporate the priests. Directly link Jesus' fortune to the absence of his Yahweh, so the repercussions are long lasting and unmistakable. We need Jesus to serve as an example. This is bigger than one heretic. We must sway all of Judea."

Dionysus' gaze was distant and unblinking. "There shall be a triumph," he said soberly. The plebeian gods cheered, for a triumph was the apex of spectacle and incomparably the most resplendent of all Olympian celebrations. They were Olympus' highest honor and were reserved for distinguished military victories. The Mountain's populace would line the main thoroughfare as armor, animals, treasury, slaves and other spoils of war were paraded to the Forum. Last in each procession was the caged, captive enemy who was pelted with rotten food and other filth on his way to a public beheading. There would be games, duels, dances, sacrifices, inebriation, and orgies—much like every other day on Olympus, only moreso.

The Roman Empire practiced identical ceremonies on Earth. It was the one day in which a mortal general was forgiven hubris. He would dress as Zeus, holding mock lightening bolts and waving to the populace. A slave was employed to stand behind the general and repeatedly remind him that he was not actually a god. Mortal triumphs made Olympic triumphs more enjoyable, for most prisoners entered the gods' triumph immediately after undergoing a matching ordeal in Rome. Often captives arrived on Olympus expecting death to have released

them from torture only to find themselves entered into a considerably crueler and oftentimes eternal ceremony.

Athena hoped to avoid a triumph because they were lavishly ostentatious by design. Zeus wanted non-Zeusian gods exercising humility, and what Athena wanted was for Zeus to stay away. Said she, “There has been no military victory. Even should there be one, the Senate must vote to award a triumph.” The Senate only convened in the Forum, and even if the gods looked to Earth as they walked, Passover would have concluded before the Senate completed the trek.

Dionysus’ voice replied as if disembodied, “You gods can vote if it so pleases your sense of democracy. Take your time. The mortal’s death will not be quick. Verily I say unto you that by the time you’ve reached the Forum, the decision to triumph will be unanimous and all of Olympus shall rejoice well beyond a common joy.”

Chapter VI

The Book of Golgotha

The River Styx was subOlympian, winding through a cave large enough to house elephanteaters. The trail to this underworld was a corridor of grays growing darker throughout the descent. Jagged shale and granite jutted inwards like the spikes on a stronghold's outermost wall. The cave's ceiling dripped with stalactites that reflected the gods' glow in glistening, golden streaks. That same holy luminescence cast an eerie yellow onto the Styx, illuminating the water just enough to outline human limbs churning in the black, eternal current.

The gods had last visited the River Styx fifteen years prior—for the judgement of Octavian—and on the descent to the riverbed, each quickly remembered why he chose to stay away. Though souls were as odorless as they were uncorporeal, the Earthly gloom of expired mortality seemed to stick in their godly nostrils. Most specters had beheld the gods during Octavian's sentencing those who couldn't pay the ferryman needed wait one-hundred years at the shore. Since then they had been in the dark, viewing each other and their surroundings only when Charon's ferryboat lit the riverbed.

The Styx's shore was a writhing mass of disfigured humanity in the woeful throes of gnashing, wailing, and wanting. They were an unseemly lot: far smaller than the Olympians, transparent in the manner of all specters, largely almond-hued and muttering in guttural, barbaric brogues. They numbered in the millions, and most were gaunt owing to a lifetime of slavery. Perhaps most repellent was the manner in which so many of the mortals' peni had been mutilated. So savage was the punishment that no god asked which god was responsible for fear that the gods' honest truths might prove too unforgettable.

“By the gods,” Ares said, “this place is lousy with humanity,” and with that he threw a

coin into the merciless River Styx. At once, the booming steel drum percussions named for the hero-loving goddess Calpyso was heard in the distance. Shortly after, a neon display of green, blue and yellow lights illuminated the Stygian fog. The lights further illuminated a naturally occurring mezzanine where Olympic lovers had commemorated their knowing each other by carving initials into the rock: A+Z, A+P, A+S, A+G, G+S, Z+A, Z+Ax3. A+M. Z+A+L. Z+E.

The specters fell to their knees, bowing and chanting towards the approaching ferry and its commander. Through the fog emerged Charon's vessel, a multi-level paddlewheel ferryboat. At its helm was the bearded ferryman, who wore a cloak, held a staff, and beamed his signature smile. "By Jove, what brings the Senate to my shores? Is there to be a triumph?"

Ares asked, "Can you rid us of the mortals?"

"Those who can pay my fare." Charon lowered the boat's walkway, turned to the expired mortals and cried, "All aboard." A number of spirits spit coins into their hands and proceeded to board, but the number of souls that gained passage numbered only in the hundreds.

"What about the rest of them?" Ares cried.

Charon continued, "There is little to be done for the coinless. My toll is fair and inflexible—one hundred years for the price of a coin. It need not be silver, or gold, or bear any particular image. It is but a token, and I have even accepted shiny buttons. No mortal had ever crossed the River Styx without first paying my fare. Except that Orpheus once crossed without paying." Charon looked to his boat's hull, as if newly angered by the theft of services. "As did Aeneas, Odysseus, Sisyphus, Psyche, Pirithous, Hercules, and Theseus. But other than them, it is unthinkable, let alone forbidden. But they matter not. Those without a coin lived as either infidels or paupers, both of which valueless. Their purgatory serves as a hundred-year reminder of their inutility. However, on this occasion there is one more coin than soul onboard, thus I give you the honor of selecting which mortal shall be spared."

Ares turned his back with indignation. “I most certainly do not care to save a mortal!”

“As it pleases you,” said Charon, and with that, the Calypsonian drumming started anew and the ferryboat paddled away, churning limbs in its black wake.

The lesser gods busied themselves preparing for a grand triumph. They moved through the mortals, setting up stages and tables through the crowd, as if the specters were invisible and not merely bodiless. The riverbed was divided into a channel that would serve as the triumph’s parade route. Decorative cornucopias overflowed with Demeter’s offerings, ambrosia was readily in abundance, and eternal wine barrels were uncorked to free-flow neverendingly, some down towards the Stygian riverbed and some flowing upwards from the ground. Cask wine dripped from stalactites in a steady purple rain, bothering no god but making it considerably harder for the standard bearers carrying each god’s pennant. There was no commandment limiting the size of anygod’s banner. The Olympians had been constructing progressively larger pennants for millennia, and it had gotten to where even a minor god’s flag demanded hundreds of attendants. The colors clashed in the open cave as slaves huddled in waiting for Jesus’ arrival to begin the procession.

As the Olympians prepared the Stygian parade route, it came to pass on Earth that Jesus’ company occupied a garden where the Yahwehan often consorted with his disciples. Lo, Dionysus called upon a great band of imperial troops and Judaeen priests, who arrived bearing swords, clubs, lanterns, and torches. What no god had planned was that one of Jesus’ disciples would side with Dionysus’ makeshift militia. The mortal’s pocket was heavy with silver as he leaned in to kiss Jesus’ cheek, yet Jesus’ entourage turned not on the traitorous disciple, but on the guards they knew to be employed against their teacher.

Athena turned to the Olympians and asked, “How is this? Which of you was responsible for surveilling that disciple?” The gods shook their heads and shrugged, each looking to the

others. “Do you know what this means?” No god knew, and so Athena Reasoned for them: “It means the mortals have a scapegoat.”

Demeter responded, “I see no goat.”

“I mean they will blame the traitor rather than realizing there is no Yahweh.”

Said Apollo, “Be Reasonable. If there was a Yahweh, why would he not kill off the guards?”

Athena dropped her weaponry and rinsed her face in her naked hands. “Logic has no bearing on how these mortals worship. They’re masterful at spinning events to suit their religious template. They’re also big on blame, so they might put it all on this one disciple, and say his failure to cooperate ruined salvation for all of Judea.”

Poseidon nodded, saying, “I’ve killed far more people with far less cause.”

Back on Earth, Jesus instructed his disciples to lay down their swords. The previous day he had commanded they acquire swords even if they needed sell their robes to afford the steel. The disciple that came to be known as James the Lesser had taken Jesus' parable at face value and wore only a loincloth when surrendering his sword at the feet of Jesus’ captors. In a further departure of rationality, Jesus used his peculiar sorcery to repair the amputated ear of his assailant.

The gods were sharing a moment of perplexity and wonderment when Artemis approached wearing nothing but Earth-toned body paints intricately flecked with sand-hued pebbles and sagebrush. The camouflage perfectly clashed with the Stygian greytone. A number of specters beheld her naked splendor. Artemis revealed her godly nature in a flash, thereby sparing those specters their purgatory by instantly dematerializing them.

“Where have you been?” Athena asked.

“Hunting, of course.” The goddess reached into a camouflage satchel and pulled from it

the gory frontward half of an ibex. Spake she, "His name is Jonah. Isn't he magnificent?" No god replied, and Artemis continued, Jonah wasn't particularly clever when I trapped him, so I gave him reason and the power of speech. From there, I took the form of a sabertooth turtle and told him exactly what to expect for his remaining days, then I delivered on my promise." She was beaming with honor. "I stalked him at all hours and always within earshot—talking about how he'd do well not to sleep. You gods should have heard him beg for his life. It was laugh-a-minute."

Athena said, "You were supposed to watch the mortal Judas."

Said she, "I did. Right up until I stopped. It doesn't take twelve gods to watch twelve mortals, so I went after bigger game." The Hunting Goddess used a scythe to remove the creature's horns, then cast the carcass over her shoulder, where it passed through the pagan masses.

Athena was uncharacteristically animated. "The disciples didn't stay together. Your Judas struck out on his own and conspired with the high priests."

"*My Judas?* Listen to you. I did not adopt the mortal."

"Your pursuit of personal glory has undone a week of surveillance by twenty different Olympians."

"There is no point in arguing the past," Artemis said. "It will be a cold day in Egypt before I take interest in this mortal or any other. If you long to vent, you'd do well to direct it at whichever god was watching the priest."

Athena had failed to realize there was dual culpability. In fury, she bellowed, "Who was watching the priest?" Yet again, the gods were agnostic. A quick census revealed that Aphrodite was missing. No god could answer to her whereabouts, and what's more, Athena surmised that she was the only god bothered by the oversight. She resolved that if the gods would not

cooperate, she would punish them using the Zeusian Tactic of giving them exactly what they wanted. “I give up,” said she, seating herself on the petrified, rocky corpse of a twice-cursed Titan. “You gods do as you please.” No god raised a protest, nor appeared likely to do so. Thus Athena moved to the River Styx, ran her hands under the water’s surface, and stood with great ceremony, saying, “I wash my hands of this persecution.”

Mortals’ histories did well to chronicle the masterpiece of irony that was Jesus’ final day. Like most persecutions, Jesus’ started with the vain hope of deliverance. The Judaeans were given the option of pardoning him over a mass-murderer and were nearly unanimous in liberating the killer. The killer, called Barabbas, fled Jerusalem at once to celebrate his newfound freedom by forcibly sacrificing a virginity. Jesus, meanwhile, was publicly beaten by a centurion into whom Dionysus had cast a fury as mortals there to bear witness ate crust-removed cucumber sandwiches. The gods fed on each other’s enthusiasm, acting of one mind in exposing the mortals’ humanity. Wine had dulled the gods’ discretion, and each wanted to leave his fingerprints on the Judaeans’ history:

Jesus was adorned in purple—the all-powerful color of the Senate. He was spit upon repeatedly in a succession of mock baptisms. A wreath of thorns was fashioned to resemble a crown befitting the king of the Judaeans. Each new affliction gave the mortals a chance to turn from Yahweh, thus each time they failed to, the gods assumed they were being too subtle and what started as a strategic persecution quickly devolved into torture.

Jesus was further beaten, paraded through the streets, nailed to a crucifix beneath a sign proclaiming his Kingship, and offered sour wine by soldiers who were wholly unaware of the offering’s cannibalistic irony. Perhaps most cruelly, the disciple who’d betrayed him for silver returned the coins.

The only mortals on Jesus’ side were women who were powerless to better his

circumstance. They put on a big show of individual wailing, tearing of clothes and gnashing of teeth, and to these women Jesus spake, “Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.” Finally, nailed and bloody and dripping and god-damned, the Yahwehan forgave his persecutors. He forgave the priests who sought his blood just as he forgave the disciples who had denied knowing him at the persecution's offset. It seemed the mortal was unflappable. Hanging alongside common bandits, Jesus assured them they would be reunited with him in paradise before closing his eyes and surrendering to his body's weight.

It was indeed an Olympically stoic performance.

Somegod asked, “How do we know if he's dead?”

Dionysus did not look to Earth before replying, “Oh, he's dead.”

“He's wailing about being forsaken,” said Pan.

Dionysus snapped his fingers and Jesus' head fell into his chest. And so it came to pass that the firstborn child of Yahweh was killed on Passover, the day in which the Yahweh was celebrated for sparing firstborn children.

Fauns, centaurs and ithyphallic satyrs immediately set about performing staged reenactments of Jesus' final days. Minstrels struck up a chorus, and picket signs were drawn up to read, “Save Barabbas.” Untold eons of practicing improvisation made for well-executed performances, but not everygod watched. The performances rarely did battles a fair turn, and the senators were keenly aware that each was little more than a shallow means for lesser gods to reap trickle-down honor. Incense smoke cast a dim fog that hung in clouds around each god, glowing as if sharing in their honor, and any number of orchestras dueled for attention amongst the racket.

Dionysus called, “Hermes! Run your Earthly appointments and retrieve our prize.”

Such uninspired theater offended Dionysus, and he was not a god to suffer silently. He

stood, and turned to the spirited masses, addressing them thusly: “Yahwehans, I grant you comprehension so you may hear these words: You shall soon see a mortal who has been whipped, adorned in a crown of thorns, tortured before his family, friends, and priests and left alive as he begged your Yahweh for death. His torture was but a gauge I shall use to ensure that subsequent Yahwehans suffer more greatly.” Dionysus was blubberingly loaded with honor. He turned to Artemis and asked, “What’s the most severely this tribe has ever been persecuted?”

“It might be their law book,” Eris said. The goddess cracked her finger’s knuckles methodically, as if keeping a slow time.

Said Athena, “They were once sieged so thoroughly that mothers ate their own dead babies.”

Dionysus said, “That’s disgusting.” Athena nodded, and Dionysus clarified by redressing Eris, “Is the popping sound coming from your hand? How vulgar.”

Eris bowed and gave thanks.

The Judaeans now mumbled amongst themselves. Many recoiled from the Wine God, and their shuffling dominoed through the crowd, bumping multiple distant Judaeans into the Styx. Dionysus again spoke at the Judaeans, “So too shall it be for every Yahwehan you have ever known. You shall witness the slow, excruciating torture of your children to centurions and wild beasts. Upon their deaths, they shall join you at this riverbed so together you can watch the persecution of their children and their children’s children and so forth for all of eternity. Verily I say, you shall witness atrocities beyond description. So numerous shall the executions be that pilgrims will walk from Judea to Rome in the shade of crucifixes without once seeing the sun.”

This gospel was poorly received by the Judaeans, and Dionysus quickly withdrew their understanding of Greek, relegating them to easily ignored bar-bar-bars from whence the term barbarian took its name. The specters lacked the corporeality needed to gnash their teeth or

shield their eyes, let alone embrace each other, and as they floundered through attempting each a trumpet blast announced Hermes' ascent.

The servants straightened their files, lifting the banners triumphantly. The gods swiveled their attentions, causing the mortal specters to do likewise, and the Gods' Messenger glowed with their Olympic attentions. He carried his snake-entwined caduceus and wore his signature winged traveler's cap and shoes, leading an unseemly crop of newly-deceased souls who did little to hide their apprehension.

Dionysus held his arms high and ordered, "Bring forth Jesus of Judea!"

Apollo wailed on his lyre, and the banners waved triumphantly. The animals were readied, and the lesser gods tittered with excitement. As the head smiter, Dionysus was to lead the procession. He raised and lowered his chalice to his chest to keep pace for the lesser gods. The specters' quivering only added to the excitement. Even cherubim stopped to watch, and it seemed revelry was inevitable until Hermes made the announcement that the newly-deceased Jesus was not in possession of a mortal soul.

Ares was the first to speak their communal mind, "What does he mean?"

All knew the question was meant for Athena, and she duly replied, "I am agnostic." The admission was not easy for the Goddess of Reason. She had a hundred-mile stare which afforded her a vision of crucified traitors to Olympus—Ephialtes, who had betrayed the famed Spartan 300; Alcibiades, who aided Sparta in betraying the Athenians; and Julius Caesar, whose ambition dissolved the Roman Republic. All three were hung from crosses in the darkness of the Stygian thereafter.

"Agnostic? What does that mean?" Dionysus asked again.

Ares delighted in saying, "It means she doesn't know." He stepped onto a boulder to get a better view of Earth's Golgotha.

Athena bade a centurion pick a spear from the dirt and use it to pierce Jesus' side. The suspended corpse did not flinch, and for a long moment neither did the gods. "Well, I'm agnostic, too," said Dionysus.

The gods turned the attentions from Earth, thus giving Time a chance to solve their problems. "Which of you gods is responsible?" Athena charged. Her face was twisted towards war, and the air around her was as still as the specters. "There is no honor in hiding your ignoble actions—which of you is protecting Jesus?" The gods had no way of discerning when one told the truth, and it was decidedly beneath Athena to beg her siblings for honesty. She turned ask of Hermes, "Did you look at his body?"

"Why would it be in his body?"

"I ask again: Did you look to Jesus' body?"

Hermes spun away from his sister and spoke coarsely. "Of course I didn't."

"The simplest explanation is usually the right one, which means Jesus is not yet dead."

Spake Hermes, "Your Reason betrays your logic. The mortal's side was pierced." He pointed, saying, "Look presently. Some bearded mortal places Jesus in a tomb."

"Who is that man?" No god knew. "It makes no sense they should remove the body. That defeats the whole point of a crucifixion." Lo, it came to pass that Jesus was placed in a cave and soldiers blocked its entrance with a boulder the size of a small moon.

Athena reasoned, "If you haven't seen the body then you cannot say with certainty that his spirit isn't there. It could be they're entombing him because he will not die."

Hermes drove the butt of his caduceus into the ground, thereby putting to sleep a circle of specters within the weapon's radius. "Listen, goddess: would it pain you so much to admit that maybe—just maybe—it is possible that there is one field in which my reason trumps yours? I have been collecting souls since the golden age. The rest of you gods never have to visit Earth.

But I'm there six times a day. The only reason there's enough time to run my chores is because half of my day is spent amongst the mortals whereby time slows to a most unOlympic crawl. One might think I was cursed for all the time I endure, and here I'm supposed to be favored by Zeus." The gods cringed at His Name, which further prompted Hermes, "I'm not afraid to say it. Zeus. Zeus. Zeus. Jupiter. Jove. Zeusy-Zeus. Zeus. All I do is visit Earth while you gods sit up here, taking turns with the Maenads and persecuting whoever you want. I want to persecute. I want to know the pleasures of Saturday and Sunday at the same time."

Athena nodded, then rested a hand on the Messenger's shoulder, saying, "Feel better now?"

"Indeed. I appreciate your audience. I've been wanting to say that since the Dark Ages."

"Good. Now go fulfill your cosmic duty." And with that, the gods watched in mortal-time as Hermes descended to Earth.

There were no mortals attending Jesus' tomb—neither Yahwehans, Marys, disciples, nor imperial guards. No witnesses meant there was no need for discretion. Hermes rolled the boulder from the tomb's mouth with the wave of his hand. He stood a long looking to the cave in silent protest while with his arms on his hips. It was beneath a god to interview a mortal corpse, yet here he was—a Senator and Zeus' Right-Hand God. He pitied his ascription and the mortal depths he needed stoop to in order to honor it.

Lo, Hermes entered the tomb, and doubly-lo after a brief moment he exited alongside Jesus. Next to The Gods' Messenger, Jesus' brown-hued glow was unmistakable. It bounced off the white linen he wore, outshining the dirt and dried blood caking his person.

On Olympus, the gods were struck mute. They paid Earth rapt attention as Jesus addressed Hermes saying, "Gabriel--tis improper to be moving tomb stones on the sabbath.

"My name is not Gabriel," replied Hermes. "It is Hermes. I am the Gods' Messenger."

“I, too, am god’s messenger,” said the Judaeen.

“We should ascend. There are many gods who will be anxious to meet you.” A fluffy bunny sat outside the cave, twitching its small, pink nose.

Spake Jesus, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. For one day is to the lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as one day.”

Hermes looked to Olympus and said, "Don't I know it." Jesus joined him in elevating his attention, only Jesus knew not where to look. He gazed not to the gods’ perch, but to Orion’s constellation, as if anygod could get to Olympus by traveling indiscriminately upwards. Hermes returned his attention and asked in earnestness, “Shall we ascend?”

“The time to rise is not yet upon us.”

“How do you figure?”

“My father guides my path. He gives me signs that lets me know when he is with me.”

Hermes snapped his fingers, instantly cleansing Jesus’ skin and garments. Jesus was taken aback, yet further prattled, thrashing his arms in unmeditated gestures. “There is a specific time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to pull out what was planted.”

Hermes could not force Jesus' ascent, so he retreated into the cave, trailed by the Yahwehan who continued his soliloquy, “...a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing...”

Once out of sight, the Olympians could no longer follow their conversation, which most figured to be just as well. All eyes moved to Athena, who was one of many gods to synchronously say, “I am agnostic.”

Back on Earth, two Marys in black mourning clothes approached the tomb’s opening.

They stood at a distance, barbarously questioning the stone's placement.

“That’s Jesus’ mother,” Eris said. “And the other Mary is the prostitute disciple.”

“She is no prostitute,” Demeter said. “I watched her for days.”

“Once a prostitute, always a prostitute,” spake Eris.

Athena started saying, “Generalizations like that lead to—” but the goddess cut herself off upon realizing the admonishment only fed Eris’ discord.

No sooner had the Marys entered the open cave than a bright brown light emitted from within. They stayed inside for Olympic hours, then made haste in departing. When they were gone from sight, Jesus emerged glowingly luminescent.

Said Athena, “This is not good.” Apollo avowed that Jesus’ glowing was not foreseen by the prophecies, and as Hermes and Jesus ascended, all of Olympus was acutely certain that Jesus was an Olympic god.

Chapter VII

The Book of Jesus

The craggy rocks and colorless walls of the underworld's riverbank were far bleaker than Jesus' expectations of the afterlife. The ground was black, shale silt, and there were no streets, much less streets paved in gold. If not for the festive crucifixes, transparent humans, winged babies, glowing giants, and mix-breed animal monsters, the afterworld was every bit as cheerless as the cave in which he had been entombed. Even the nearby river was black except for the body parts kneaded into its waters, and Jesus was fairly certain that the disheveled god wearing a wreath of grapes was holding his cousin John's decapitated head.

The tall, glowing, opaque people in varied non-Judaeen garments appeared to be waiting for his liturgy, so Jesus held his palms upwards and greeted them, "Shalom, heavenly hosts. I have come to be united with my father." The newborn god jerked his head back as if the breathy vowels had taken shape before his face. "Oy gevalt" he next said, forcing familiar words. He then followed, in perfect Greek, "Whence cometh this diction."

Athena said, "You speak the exalted language of the gods. Barbaric tongues exist only to help mortals determine who should be persecuted."

Hermes said, "The Mary mistook him for a gardener. Can you imagine? Right there in his tomb with the boulder rolled away. What kind of gardeners do they have in Jerusalem?" but now that Jesus was delivered, the Gods' Messenger could not retain their Olympic interests.

Ares stabbed his spear into the ground. Spake he, "Great. Another god, and there's already not enough honor to go around."

Jesus said again, "I have come to be reunited with my father."

Poseidon asked, "And who would that be, pray tell?"

“Yahweh, the creator of all that is seen and unseen.”

Athena was the only god not amused by Jesus’ conviction, and all the other gods fell about themselves with laughter. Said Dionysus, “We don’t have one of them.”

Then, Athena, “Dionysus is right. You are a son of a god, but not the son of the god.”

“Hark! Lo, my mother was immaculately begotten by the Holy Spirit. Not made—that is an important distinction.”

The mass of deceased humanity rippled strangely, and the mortal murmurs grew steadily in number and volume.

Athena said, “A god can beget a child without women, but never has a woman borne a child without thoroughly knowing a god.”

The head of John the Bather blinked to life and spoke in Dionysus’ voice, “Have you ever thought maybe your mom lied?”

Spake Jesus, “Tis an impossibility. Her guilt would never allow it.”

Athena said, “Would her guilt not be less traumatic than being disowned by her parents, branded a harlot by the temple’s priests, ostracized by her god and community, and forced to raise a child alone in a foreign land as a newly-converted pagan?”

Jesus gave the matter due consideration, then said, “It is hard to say. She is a Jew.”

Apollo asked, “What is a jew?” He held the hand of a female that no god knew, yet whom Apollo had already known many times.

And was answered, “My people.”

“I get it. Short for Judaeans.”

At this, a great clamor swept the river’s edge and grew in volume as Yahwehan souls recognized Jesus and pleaded for salvation. Largely speaking Aramaic, they called themselves forsaken, damned, pious, meek and lamentable. Some accused Jesus of false prophecy. Others

hung back, wary of Jesus' size and physicality, for on Olympus, the gods were Titanic, the Titans were cyclopean, and the cyclopes were rarely used as a reference for comparison. A number of deceased Yahwehans fell through their messiah in trying to wash his feet, including the two bandits with whom Jesus had been crucified.

They cried and wailed as barbarians will, and Jesus was gracious in receiving them with assurances such as, "Children of Isreal, be not afraid." Those who were not children of Israel promptly panicked. Jesus' skin glowed ever brighter as more spirits bade him to bless them. He was encircled and wholly unsure of how to answer questions about an underground afterlife he'd only momentarily witnessed.

When a voice cried, "Teacher!" Jesus turned and beheld his former disciple. The specter looked as he had at the moment of his death, with a well-coiffed goatee, protruding eyes and a thoroughly bruised neckline.

"Judas!" They moved to hug, only to pass through each other.

Turning back, Judas begged forgiveness. "I was not of my right mind," said he. His face registered great torment. "The devil made me do it."

Jesus was quick to say, "Verily I say, all of your sins are forgiven."

Though Olympians never wept, Jesus' face was streamed dry tears. Athena tried to summon Jesus, but she could not be heard over thousands of souls' worth of varied human emotions. Said Jesus, "Let us form a minyan and recite the thirteen attributes of mercy." At this, a quorum gathered and knelt alongside Jesus, letting him guide their incantation of Yahweh.

Athena did not take kindly to the blasphemy. She appealed to her uncle Poseidon for intervention. "We must make an example of the Judaeans."

Said the Sea God, "This again?"

"If Jesus is an Olympian, he must learn to behave like one."

“What do you have—”

“I want you to part the River Styx.”

Poseidon turned away. “It is forbidden.”

“Highly forbidden. What’s more, it is unnatural. I didn’t think you would do it.” She turned her back and continued, “I understand if you are afraid to command the ire of both of your brothers.”

The Sea God’s smirk quickly spread into a smile, then open-mouthed joy. “Indeed, my brothers would disapprove mightily,” said he. “I shall part the River Styx.” He turned, raising his Trident, and stretched out his hand over the relentless waters, causing the river to go back by a strong east wind, thus making a path of dry land through the waters. The Stygian walls looked tenuous, like giant waves poised to break towards the center. Amidst the tumult, a number of souls fell from the water and stood dazed and daunted in the partition’s dry corridor. They looked to the riverbank, then into the chasm stretching beyond light into the Styx’s pitch-dark boundlessness, unanimously choosing to make haste towards the former.

Those already on land stepped away from the river’s opening, for the winds were loud, and the black tide folded over itself most threateningly. Athena commanded, “Infidels, get thee to the opposite shore and be fleet of foot.” Much like the Stygian sea walls, the mass of humanity churned over itself, as those nearest the Styx retreated into the human ranks, cycling through others in their efforts to stay grounded.

Athena prodded Poseidon, who again waved his trident, spurring Boreas and Zephyr to send sterner winds. Resist though they tried, the apparitions were cast toward the Styx as if fired from catapults, flying through the gods’ standards and likewise through each other. Judas tried clinging to Jesus only to pass through his outstretched hand, reaching for him while being cast backwards not through Poseidon’s Stygian corridor, but into the towering aquatic mesas to

forever become a part of them.

As loud as the winds were, the sounds of woe were louder still, punctuated by the cracking of flagpoles and the rumbling of boulders that had never known movement. The gale was such that Dionysus' unending casks flowed in tubular tunnels into the depths of Hades' chasm. Further casualties included the gods' standards, the Stygian fog, and all traces of incense. Hephaestus' pennant was the most sternly constructed, and when it caught sail, it brought with it a hundred cyclopes, who were too dim to release their charge.

Then the winds subsided, the waters settled, and all that remained of the abandoned triumph were a handful of "WWZD" banners, plus the gods, demigods, and some godly attendants holding stripped and broken flag posts. So numerous were the Styx-fed souls that the River's tide had risen appreciably.

"Good show," said Eris. "That was the most discordant end to a festival I've seen since centaurs gang-raped Pirithous' bride during their wedding banquet."

Jesus was on his knees, reaching to the water and weeping beyond consolation. Athena said, "Weep not. It is unbecoming of an Olympian."

Jesus rose and spoke with the authority of one accustomed to rapt attention. "Where is my father?"

Athena said, "Your hue makes it impossible to know your lineage without first knowing your ascription."

The plebian gods wasted no time filing up the long ramp in a mass exodus to Mount Olympus. The annual festival held in Demeter's honor, Cerealia, was about to begin. It was the lengthiest festival of the calendar year, featuring horse races, spilt bovine entrails, and the cosmically-crucial ceremony of igniting the tails of varied live foxes. So joyous was the occasion that no mortal wore dark colored garments on these days. Indeed, so lavish was the Cerealia that

it alone cemented Demeter's Seat on the Senate. There were months the Harvest Goddess spent overweight simply because she'd not thought to render herself slender. Such frivolity was the privilege of having an ascription of vital importance to humanity. Other gods attended for the spectacle and whatever spillover honor could be reaped in the wake of such revelry.

Said Jesus, "I know nothing of ascriptions." As an educated Judaeen, the newborn was familiar with many of the Olympic gods, or at the very least some of their signature props. Jesus had never known a mortal to carry a trident, much less known a mortal to command a river. He sat on a black rock and put his head in his hands. "Am I the false prophet I have been warning against," spake he. The gods were quick to nod. "I know my father is real, for I have felt his presence." Jesus stood. "I must clarify this reality to my people with the same conviction I insisted they repent their sins to Yahweh."

"That is not reasonable," Athena said.

"What am I to do? Tell the Marys that Heaven is just as I described it? That Yahweh greeted me with open arms? That my people are not blown from a sea of bodies into one of water?"

Ares said, "Let the Judaeen set his people straight. They will flood our temples, and we shall all glow as he does."

Athena replied, "We cannot undermine Jesus' honor. He is an Olympian." Then, redirecting, "Jesus, feel not obliged to mortals. Your honor proves you have done well by them, however false the pretenses may be."

"I cannot live a lie," Jesus said.

"There is no lie," Athena said. "You are an Olympian, and since the Yahwehans honor you, they are not guilty of blasphemy. The Judaeans worship you at no gods' expense. It is your good fortune that no Senator engages the meek. Rome's wealthy mortals build temples and

statues, and make offerings that greatly please us, be they libraries for the philosophers or cavalries for their generals' armies. Charon is honored one coin at a time. Hermes has a statue of his likeness outside every noble house in Rome. So too have you found a niche that garners honor where other gods don't look to harvest. We can't know your ascription until we've identified your father. But in the meantime, should you reveal yourself to the Judaeans, they will lose your protection, and their persecution will be swift."

There was commotion on the footpath, and the exiting Olympians parted like the Styx to make room for Aphrodite. The Goddess of Sex no longer bore signs of her pregnancy. As the most attractive woman ever given form, she was far and away the most attractive Jesus had ever seen—nude, pale, and slightly rounded with pink nipples and a generously coiffed pubic triangle. She bade Jesus, "Who made you a god?"

Jesus was overcome with yearning and was powerless to fight his body's response to her perfection. He put his hands over his face as to protect against her image. Only those hands still bore puncture wounds from his crucifixion, thus he found himself beholding Aphrodite's sexuality through his palms. Jesus gasped again, then pulled back his hands and drove his fingers into his eye sockets, plucking out both eyeballs.

The Olympians were nonplussed. Such theatrics were out-datedly Dionysian. Only Aphrodite commented, saying, "Oh my, god! Is this a Judaeian rite?"

"My eyes have offended me." Some gods snickered. Aphrodite begged his pardon, and Jesus continued, "In all my days of wandering, never have I beheld such a beautiful Mary."

At that, Aphrodite's skin flared with honor, which brought both Hephaestus and Ares to their feet. Ares was the first to action. He grabbed the sinewy eyeballs from Jesus' hands, cast them on the ground and squashed them under the heel of his war boot.

Aphrodite said, "The name is Aphrodite. And, lo, be of good cheer. Have compassion for

him who knows not our ways.” Having thus spoken, she spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle. She anointed the eyes of the blind god with the clay, thus restoring Jesus’ vision unto him.

Tears streamed from Jesus’ face—as they will with newly conjured eyes. He fell before her, clutching her calf so the tears washed over her feet, then used the hem of his robe to cleanse them. No god had ever flattered another so selflessly.

Ares said, “Bowling is unbecoming of an Olympian,” but Aphrodite positively shuddered with honor and was overcome with her namesake passion. As strange as the foot-bathing was, stranger still was that Jesus glowed from the very act of his own subservience.

Aphrodite said, “I decree that I shall give you a tour of Olympus, starting with my Boudoir. We shall leave at once. The walk is long, but the reward is great.” She held out her hand, bidding him take it. “Come with me now, Jesus, so that in due course we should come together.”

Chapter VIII

The Gospel of Aphrodite

Aphrodite led Jesus up the ramp toward the mouth of the Stygian cave. Said she, “I cannot help but gush—it is wholly admirable the way your labyrinthian prose makes mortals realize their lives are meaningless. Most mortals resist hearing that news, even a godless tribe like the Judaeans.” She pranced a few steps ahead, and spun, walking backwards, twirling her fingers through her hair with wide elbows as to employ the most pert weapons in her sexual arsenal.

“The Judaeans are far from godless. They are pious people. I shall find my father and through him usher all of his followers to paradise where there is neither toil, disease nor pain.”

“There you go again. Wooing me with your humor.” Jesus tried to avoid staring at her godly assets, but Aphrodite was making it hard for him. “Getting mortals to heed you is a fruitless chore.” The goddess was adept at walking backwards. She took no care to protect her exposed feet from the jagged ground. “I once commanded that Corinth build me a temple that was 12 cubits long and 18 cubits wide, and I ended up having to raze the whole city. I later learned that they’d built it correctly, and I was just wrong about how big a cubit is. Since then, I stick to curses. You know blue balls? I invented that.”

“I am not familiar,” Jesus said.

Aphrodite stopped walking and decreed with all solemnity, “Nor shall you be.”

The ever-youthful Cupid swooped towards the couple and mirrored his mother in suspended, backwards flight. He was anxious to speak and did so thusly, “So you’ve been a god this whole time? Incredible. So did you know? You had to know. Of course you knew. Imagine showing them your true nature and just incinerating all of Golgotha. I mean it’s not too late. It’s never too late to punish mortals, but still. What a chance! It’d almost be worth spending thirty

years living in Judea just to build to that one moment when they say, *He saved others, yet he cannot save himself. Let him come off the cross.* And then you turn to fire and say, *You asked for it* and walk off the cross just unleashing all three furies. God, talk about extracting honor the old-fashioned way!”

“Cupid!” Aphrodite said, trying to bring back the mood she’d been erecting.

“Cupid?” Jesus said. “You use your Latin name?”

Aphrodite took Jesus’ hand and said, “Nevermind my son.”

“I had to,” Cupid replied with his signature exuberance. “The Goddess of Discord made her name nearly identical to mine. Eros. Eris. She could give a priest a lisp and suddenly a bull sacrificed in my temple would go towards honoring Discord. Once we moved the Empire to Rome, they called me Cupid. A number of them think I’m a winged baby, but what am I going to do, persecute my devotees? Reverence is reverence even if it’s delivered in an ill-fated language.”

The cave’s exit was in sight when Cupid flew ahead and pointed to the Stygian wall, where a large fissure split the black rock as if two stones had been pushed together. He bade Jesus, “Do you see anything in that gap there?” Jesus did not, so Cupid further bade, “Look closer.”

Jesus pressed his eye against the slot, whereupon Cupid emitted a soulful, monotone bellow higher in the same cleft. There was a low rumble, then the cave wall sprang to life as a swarm of bats erupted from the crevice, washing over Jesus like a tide. Trapped between his body and the cave wall, the creatures began rotating in an ever-expanding cyclone as ever more spilled from the rock and joined the whirling frenzy. Instinct brought Jesus’ arms up, and a particularly large specimen locked its wings over the god’s forearms so their faces were just inches off. The beast had short, burnt hairs and a compacted, pygmy face with piercing eyes, exposed teeth, and a smaller set of ears resting within a larger set that made up most of its face.

Its scream was shrill and penetrating, as if in tune with Jesus' psyche and striving for its most dissonant chords.

Jesus released the creature, and turned to Cupid and Aphrodite with his arms up, as if bats were his patron animal and it was he who had summoned them. Aphrodite and Cupid had braced for hilarity, and their faces wore the moment's disappointment. Jesus was collected in asking, "What are those monsters? I pray for them."

Said Aphrodite, "There is no such thing as monsters. Those are just birds."

"Verily I say unto you: they had teeth." Jesus stood and shook a persistent bat from his robe's pleats.

The Sex Goddess was endeared to Jesus' ingenuousness. Though not known for her patience, she was gracious in explaining, "Bats were once the most resplendent bird on all of Olympus. Their silken plumage was patterned with colors spanning three times the spectrum of humanity's visible range. They woke each day before the sun, emitting a chorus so beautiful it was said they rivaled the Muses." The goddess stared off, as if listening for a distant song. Not hearing one, she continued, "Indeed, many suspected the Muses for their disappearance. So the legend goes, they awoke Dionysus early the day after a bacchanal. As punishment, he transformed their feathers into coarse hairs. He relegated them to the moonlight's hours, banished them to caves and replaced their melody with a shrill screech that can only be translated by the extremely intoxicated as an apology for having woken The God of Wine."

Jesus said, "So what you mean to say is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder?"

Aphrodite was struck by the comment's peculiarity. "Not at all. I mean Dionysus cursed bats. There endeth the lesson."

A bat was trapped within Jesus' garment, attempting to exit his tunic's cloth in varied directions. Jesus pulled his collar over his head and spake, "I cast thee demon out." At once, the

bird returned to its original form—a form far too large to share Jesus’ tunic. Two green, three-toed claws appeared Jesus’ where face would otherwise have been. A purple and orange wing shot out alongside Jesus’ right arm, and a blue-flecked yellow neck and head exited alongside Jesus’ feet and quickly set about pecking its captor. Jesus’ commotion accented the bird’s beautiful song most unharmoniously. The newborn god managed only two steps before both fell over. Cupid and Aphrodite were so overcome with hilarity that the bat had liberated itself and taken flight before either could offer assistance.

Once recomposed, Aphrodite said, “That may have been the most wondrous spectacle I have ever beheld.”

Presently they exited the sub terrain and found themselves standing before a grassy plain flecked with trees and shrubberies, with no two identical species. Shadows scurried between these floras. Further unearthly was the Olympic fauna. Jesus was unable to identify the majority of the creatures, and those he did recognize were endowed with gifts he’d not known them to have. A lioness lay in the shade of a weeping willow, nursing three cubs, a lamb, and a yellow-bellied tortoise. Jesus knew horseflies as oversized, biting insects, yet the Olympic equivalent was a herd of horses fitted with eagles’ wings.

Aphrodite pointed across the Palisade of Parsimonious Pleasures, drawing Jesus’ attention to a gleaming eyesore in the distant distance, stretching as tall as they could see in the cloudless sky like Apollo’s sun reflecting off still water. “Can you see it?” Aphrodite asked.

“Almost as if I were already inside.”

“Indeed, you speak in prophecy, for inside is precisely where you shall find yourself. That’s my Boudoir, where we shall soon know each other. It is a full day’s pilgrimage away.”

Every facet of the Mountain held intrigue for the fledgling immortal, and like a pubescent tanning apprentice re-imagining the potential of sunflower oil and folded goat hides, Jesus was

eager to expand his understanding. He asked from whence sprang the graffiti and why trees' leaves took on varied colorations. He beheld each discrepancy from Judea with wonderment, inadvertently relaying to Aphrodite how drab his Earthly accommodations had been. She had figured Judea's rocks would not take the shape of giants' faces. Aphrodite put names to landmarks, creatures, floras and hexed lands as they walked across deserts, through forests and over rivers. She rather enjoyed being the go-to authority on all matters Olympian. She had never been regarded for her mental resourcefulness, yet in matters of Olympus, compared to Jesus, Aphrodite was Athena. She was describing the Orion's Runnel of Ruination when Jesus cut her off with a vociferous round of earthly lamentation.

"Oh, god," he cried, dropping to his knees and bitterly weeping dry tears into a shallow pond from whence sprang the exposed legs of six young children who had drowned in the mire. "Suffer not the little children."

"Your emotions are unOlympian," said Aphrodite.

"Have you no compassion?"

"Compassion? For centaurs? No. I definitely have none of that. Better to weep for my honor. I have not been adored nearly enough today."

Centaurs were not native to Judea at the time of Jesus' death. Said he, "Do not mock my sorrow."

Aphrodite said, "We must be going, for the walk is long," but Jesus was inconsolable—talking about baptism and insisting they bow and perform a pagan rite on the spot. Neither of the storied Olympians would bow, so Jesus asked they remain silent as he incanted Yahweh time and again. Upon the fifth incantation, the Sex Goddess summoned a Zephyr and pushed back the seaboard to reveal the carcasses. Just above their mortal buttocks, the centaurs morphed into colts, with hairy chests, hooved arms, and bloated horse heads.

Jesus asked, “What is this sorcery?”

“They are centaurs,” Aphrodite said. “It is their fortune to be human-half down, ergo it is their fortune to drown.”

“Drowning passes for fortune in this realm?”

“Fortune is neither bad nor good. It merely is. But, yes—release from life is indeed good fortune.” Said she, “It is their fortune that hooves cannot cup water, neither can their mortal legs support their torsos. Fortune drives them ever-closer to the water’s edge, and once they tip, it’s all over but the thrashing.”

“It is a wonder this atrocity is permitted.”

Cupid said, “The bigger wonder is which god keeps sleeping with the horses.”

After a brief moment, Aphrodite said, “I think it’s Dionysus.”

“It’s almost surely Dionysus,” Cupid said. “In fact, I’d be willing to bet the undying love of a virginal sea nymph...” his voice trailed off as his attention reached across the plain. The winged god’s elevation afforded a clear vantage of a horse-drawn charioteer making haste towards them across the Brisk-Walking Fields of Interminable Anticipation. “Ares moves as if to intercept us.”

“The War God?” asked Jesus.

“Indeed. He is one of my lovers.”

“I look forward to making his acquaintance.”

“That’s what you think,” said the Goddess. “Come. We must—just come.”

Onward trekked the troupe, and by the time they approached Aphrodite’s Boudoir, Jesus was keenly aware of his new surrounding’s godliness. It was an architectural triumph of transparency, masterfully constructed to conceal its infrastructure, as if glass joists and buttresses held the sheet glass panes together. Glass was a precious commodity in Judea, and many who’d

not visited the capital would die having never known of its existence.

The Boudoir was constructed around a centerpiece grotto from which a waterfall fell skywards, and oddly-shaped furniture was splayed about as if the living space was a grounded climbing wall. Fetters were affixed at varied heights and angles, and the entirety of the structure was lit so impeccably that not a single shadow was cast. Canopies and trifold standing screens divided the grounds, and the floor and ceiling were fashioned from mirrors such that staring in lateral directions quickly induced vertigo in the visiting Judaeen.

“You can see all of Olympus from here,” Aphrodite said, admiring the view between her toes. She waved an arm, putting the mountain on display. “More importantly, all of Olympus can see in.” Indeed, all of Olympus stretched out before him. From Zeus’ Magnificence, Dionysus’ Grapevine, Demeter’s Greenhouse, and the Bogs of Indescribable Indescribability. Jesus gawked in slack-jawed amazement. Had he been a mortal, the sight’s spectacularness would have killed him.

“Cupid,” called his mother. “It is time you take your leave. There are things a mother’s child is not meant to see, and verily we are going to engage in seventy times seven of them.”

“Say no more,” Cupid said. He then left without another backward glance, barely missing Ares, who entered just as the Lust God flitted away.

Ares’ gait was stilted and gangly. He walked with light feet, as if casing the couple and taking pains to avoid standing between them. A dark cloak draped over the War God’s short frame, and his face was obscured under the cloak’s hood. Aphrodite thought it best not to address her lover. He seemed to be in a foul mood, which was just as well, for when in good spirits, Ares waged War.

Aphrodite walked with purposeful steps, completing a near pirouette in spinning toward her favored canopied love seat and turning down its zebra-skin sheets. She planted her feet and

fell backwards with practiced grace, leaving her heels on the ground—her knees, akimbo. In this manner, the Aphrodisian mysteries were revealed to Jesus, and though they had their own Charybdisian gravity, the fledgling god was adept at overcoming temptation and kept his attention on the fantastical view of Olympus.

Ares' attention was torn. His eyes kept returning to Aphrodite, yet his body kept inching closer to the newborn Olympian until he stood a raven feather's width from Jesus' face as if drawing strength from the Judaeans' brown irises. Thrice Jesus moved to shake the War God's glower, but each time Ares corrected the distance until Jesus could no longer avoid inquiring, "Verily I entreat, what is the nature of your proximity?"

Ares decried, "Tis an omen of sorcery most foul!" The War God removed his cloak and continued, "Behold! This god can see me even when shrouded in the Cloak of Invisibility. Truly I say he is accursed and he must be banished!"

Aphrodite said, "That cloak doesn't make you invisible."

Ares looked to the cloak, then back to the goddess. "What are you saying?" He returned the cloak to his shoulders, ran to the far side of the room, turned to the gods and asked, "Can you see me now?"

"Would that we couldn't," said Aphrodite.

Ares cast his eyes downwards and spoke aloud to himself, "I'm going to kill her." He then balled up the cloak and threw it into the waterfall so it rose through the mirror-obscured ceiling.

"I am called Jesus," said he by way of introduction. Now knowing that he could be seen, Ares no longer cared to be. He turned away from Jesus, whereupon Jesus noticed that Ares' side bore an identical scar to his. Jesus dropped to his knee straightaway, calling, "Father!"

Ares' response shook Earthly mountains: "You are too feeble to be my progeny!"

Aphrodite was less assured. "Jesus, this is my lover, Ares, son of Zeus, God of War and

Bloodshed, Enemy of Reason, and Scourge of Humanity,” said Aphrodite. “Ares, this is Jesus from Judea.”

“You are Ares, the son of Zeus” repeated Jesus. Then, “You shall be called Matthew.”

Ares released a fierce war cry while drawing his sword. With both hands gripping the handle, he swung a well-aimed strike for Jesus’ clavicle. Jesus’ face contorted such that he looked to be wearing both halves of the Greek theater masks. He closed his eyes and raised his arms as if brandishing an invisible Hoplite shield—only there was no impact. When he opened his eyes, a purple senatorial sash was draped across his body, leading into the two-fisted grip of his assailant. Ares’ sword was nowhere in sight. Said Jesus, “I pity you.”

The War God threw the sash to the ground and turned quickly to his lover. “Do you protect him because he washes your feet?”

Aphrodite responded, “Oh, lover. It’s not about the washing. It’s the sentiment behind the deed to which I respond. The thought’s all that counts. Moreover, he makes me laugh. One moment he has me giggling over his terror-stricken grimace, then the very next minute he has me laughing at his horror-afflicted scowl.”

“I feel like Pyrrhus,” Ares pouted. “In a battle that cannot be won.” The god sat on a mirrored stool, resting above and below countless images of his likeness.

The day’s conversation had Aphrodite fanciful with rationality. “How have you not learned that apathy is stronger than enmity?”

“Because,” he said, looking up. “I am the God of War.” Then, “Damn it, Aphrodite. I greatly preferred that sword.” It was uncouth for a god to curse, thus his doing so punctuated his mourning.

“You are coarse and dull. Not to mention vulgar and boorish. Though I shall mention them anyway: you are vulgar and boorish.” Aphrodite moved to Jesus and lay hands on his cheeks.

Ares turned his back on the couple, saying, “This again?”

Said Jesus, “She wants only that you listen to her, Matthew.”

Ares stood on tiptoes to put himself on Jesus’ level. Said he, “There is no Matthew. You call me Ares—the name I’ve been using since the turn of the century.”

“Which century?”

“The century in which Hermes stole women’s capacity to grow beards.”

“And how long ago was that?”

“Two-thirds of an eon before the War of Grecian Hostility.” Then, “Never mind. You have a mortal’s concept of time.”

“It would be prudent to create a universal system of time.”

Ares said, “I suppose you think that it should start with yourself?”

“I would never presume! Rather, I thought the honor should go to Aphrodite.” She blushed, shined, and spun away in feigned modesty. Jesus asked, “When did you first bless Olympus with your presence?”

Aphrodite’s smile left as quickly as it had arrived. “Obviously, I am sworn not to say.”

“Then maybe we should base the new year on Athena?”

Jesus did poorly in picking up on the Sex Goddess’ displeasure. Said Aphrodite, “Why would you ask about her? Were your claims about my beauty put on? Is it my figure?” She turned and ran her hands down her body, showcasing the most idyllic profile ever put to form. “My figure cannot be helped, for I just had a baby.”

Jesus ran to Aphrodite and clutched her hand in both of his. “Mazeltov! When was your child born?”

“Just some Olympic hours ago.”

“We must perform the rites. Is it a boy or a girl?”

“I didn’t look.”

“We shall discover together, then! Bring forth the babe so I might baptize it.”

“I cannot bring it forth. I exposed the baby in the woods.”

“You left your babe in the woods?”

“Of course she did,” said Ares. “It’s far better to give it a chance. That way it may be reared by she-wolves and grow up to lead a great nation. The alternative is giving the child a weakness, like Achilles’ heel or Julius Caesar’s jugular, but then they have no chance, for there has never been a fatal flaw that the fates have not exploited.” Judea was unaccustomed to the practice of exposing unwanted children, and Jesus did poorly to hide his perplexed horror.

Aphrodite said, “There’s been too much talk already. I need honor. Come, Jesus. Join me in bed.”

Jesus walked past her with new purpose, saying, “I see now that your seduction is a test from my father, Yahweh.” It was the first time any god had ever resisted Aphrodite, which only strengthened the Sex Goddess’ resolve. She took a seat and caressed her silken thighs. Jesus continued, “Your parable of fatal flaws is like of the Holy Scripture of Samson, one of the judges. He was a strong leader of men who incited a war that would last well over a thousand years.”

“Tell me more,” said Ares, “And spare no detail.”

“So it came to pass that Samson was wedded to a Philistine. Samson was out meting justice, and when he returned home, his wife’s father said, *I verily thought that thou hadst utterly hated her; therefore I gave her to thy companion.* Thus Samson sought to do them a displeasure. He caught three hundred foxes, and took firebrands, and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails. And when he had set the brands on fire, he let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines, and burnt up both the shocks, and also the standing corn, with

the vineyards and olives.”

Aphrodite took to her bed, grabbing one foot and giving it a practiced stretch. Said she, “You describe the Cerealia, which is presently being celebrated for Demeter.”

“Get to the part about warring for a thousand years.”

“Then the Philistines said, *Who hath done this?* And they answered--”

Ares interrupted, “Samson. I get that part. What about the thousand year war?”

The Sex Goddess now lay on her back, kicking her legs in the air, beholding her reflection and the reflection of her reflection beholding their joint reflections.

“And so Samson loved a woman named Delilah. And the lords of the Philistines said unto her, *Entice him, and see wherein his great strength lieth, and by what means we may prevail against him, that we may bind him to afflict him.* So it came to pass that Delilah said to Samson, *Tell me, I pray thee, wherein thy great strength lieth, and wherewith thou mightest be bound to afflict thee.* And Samson said unto her, *If they bind me with seven green withs that were never dried, then shall I be as another man.*”

Spake Ares, “So this Samson wasn’t very bright.”

“He had lied unto her, for his strength lay in his hair. And so the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven green withs which had not been dried, and she bound him with them. Now there were men lying in wait, abiding with her in the chamber. And she said unto him, *The Philistines be upon thee, Samson.* And he brake the withs, as a thread of tow is broken when it toucheth the fire. And Delilah said unto Samson, *Behold, thou hast mocked me, and told me lies: now tell me, I pray thee, wherewith thou mightest be bound.* Verily, he said unto her, *If they bind me fast with new ropes that never were occupied, then shall I be weak, and be as another man.*”

“Bondage is honorable,” said Aphrodite. “Let’s hear more about these ropes.”

Said Ares, “For all of your words, there’s very little on how he defeated the Philistines.”

“Between his lying to his wife and battling the Philistines wasn’t there ravaging of any kind? Laying with his wife, or knowing her, begetting something or consummating the privileges of a husband?”

Jesus was not accustomed to interruption. He thought a moment and said, “No. The Philistines came and Samson brake them from off his arms like a thread. And Delilah said unto him, *Hitherto thou hast mocked me, and told me lies: tell me wherewith thou mightest be bound.* And he said unto her, *If thou weavest the seven locks of my head with the web.*”

Ares said, “Jesus, it would be easier to watch you lay with Aphrodite than endure this tale. Just because we are immortal, does not give you call to test the very limits of time’s infinite vastness.”

“So, that did not work either, but verily she said unto him, *Thou hast mocked me these three times, and hast not told me wherein thy great strength lieth.* And it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death that he told her all his heart, and said unto her, *There hath not come a razor upon mine head; if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man.*”

“Some leader,” Ares said, shaking his head. Aphrodite, glistening pink-white perfection, paid rapt attention.

“And when Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called for the lords of the Philistines who came offering money. And she made Samson sleep and caused him to shave off the seven locks of his head; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went from him. And she said, *The Philistines be upon thee, Samson.* And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, *I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself.* And he knew not that the Lord was departed from him. But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house.”

“About time someone was persecuted,” Ares said. “It’s like one of those parables the Fates are so crazy about. Only better, because I can decipher this story, and I must say that I agree that blindness and slavery are blessings compared to an eternity with a nagging woman. ”

“That is not the story’s moral,” said Aphrodite. “It is tale of sexual fortitude, for he was the strongest man in all the land, and she, armed only with her womanly assets, was able to topple an empire. What Jesus is trying to say is that since I seek the honor of prolonged coitus, the way to that honor is perseverance and deceptive trickery.”

“That is not my intention,” Jesus assured her. He had never had such trouble communicating. The Olympians seemed to hear whatever they hoped to. Jesus meant only to share the scripture and as a result of his failing to do so, he felt not the divine grace Yahweh bestowed upon him whenever he adhered to his father’s will.

Aphrodite now paced the Boudoir. “As a matter of nature, civilized men are controlled by women. Too often, women use the wrong metrics when gauging which suitor should sate their carnal lusts. They look to a man’s teeth, his lineage, political stature, wealth, and even sense of humor—none of which can be used to induce orgasm.” She moved to a marble sculpture of Ares, dancing around it as if in serenade, then ran her hands down the statue’s gold-plated spear’s shaft. “Women in mortal tribes that value celibacy might not behold their husbands’ manhoods until in their connubial chambers, by which time she is committed to its service. Thus the powerful women—those women whom men most desire—are curtailed in their ability to honor me. To reap more honor, I must shift this dynamic and ensure that men and women cohabit the same naked space whereby women they can be better judges—”

“No, no, no,” protested Jesus. “That wasn’t a parable. My story was one of objective history.”

“—If women were let into the bathhouses, they could select better equipped lovers and use

their newfound skills to ensnare those with keys to the imperial treasury whereby they might erect a brothel with five times the majesty of the Palladium.”

Jesus said, “That has nothing to do with Samson.”

But Aphrodite was already glowing from the prospect, “I hereby decree that all bathhouses shall be unisex.”

Jesus sat and rested his head in his hands. “What have I done?”

“You have shown me the light, Teacher!” Aphrodite called.

Jesus bade her, “Rise, my child, for your confusion is contagious.”

The Sex Goddess took a knee at Jesus’ feet. “You are powerful among gods. A new messiah, here to usher in a new dawn. Let me be your disciple!”

At this, Jesus felt the halcyonic flush of honor, and thus knew his father was well pleased. He stood, newly dedicated to his charge. “There is much to be done to pave the way for Yahweh.”

“Whatever you ask of me, so shall it be done.” And so it came to pass that Aphrodite was the first amongst Jesus’ disciples.

“You mentioned a celebration stemming from Samson’s foxes. Let us start there.”