

The Judgement (a short-story by aman mojadidi)

It's never really night in Heaven. One could say its never really day either, but rather a permanent soft, blue-whiteness that floats somewhere between a misty morning and a foggy afternoon. Zur sat at the dinner table, leaning in over His plate of mutton and a green, leafy thing He couldn't recognize, staring out through a window at the other end of the room. In the dull whiteness, through the trees and across the meadows outside, He watched the traffic 10 kilometers away; samsarans (people of illusionary reality), animitsas (animals of illusionary reality), and angels (agents of illusionary reality) as they walked back, forth, and back again going about their lives. There had been an uprising forming; disgruntled angels and samsarans had formed an underground movement in opposition to Zur's policies towards Earth, and the humans who inhabited it. The angels no longer sang, but rather cursed Zur for what He had allowed the world to become. At demonstrations outside His fortress, one could hear the wails and cries directed at Zur, "Their suffering is Your sin!" and "You can't hide behind Your revelations!" as they hurled stars towards the perimeter wall and at the gathered Enforcement Officers, EOs, who responded by firing anti-particle gas canisters into the crowd. Anyone who inhaled the gas collapsed within minutes. Zur had already had to enclose or extinguish many supporters of The Judgment, as the uprising was so annoyingly called. But its leaders and majority of members continued to elude His intelligence forces and so the hunt continued. "Everyone passing by the window looks guilty," He thought to Himself, as He wiped His mouth, pushed the plate of cold, neglected food away from Him, and left the grand, empty dining hall.

Zur walks slowly across a field of broken glass, shiny, multi-colored shards slicing through the soles of His feet. He stumbles, and falls onto His back, the sharp edges cutting into His fleshy torso. Looking up at the sky above, His meditation melts into scattered bits of an emptied mind. A storm's brewing, dark clouds swirling into darker sky, fading into an even darker Heaven from where screams pierce through the blackness, causing His ears to bleed. Zur woke suddenly, sweating, short of breath and feeling disoriented. "Fuck, it was just a dream" He said out loud, still trying to catch His breath. He moved to get a drink of water and some air, walking out to the terrace overlooking the meadows surrounding His house. The security lights, one every 3 meters along the wall around the perimeter of His home, shone brightly out across the fields. Anyone approaching would be seen before they reached within 20 meters of the wall, and if they continued, reaching the 10-meter perimeter line, they would be instantaneously "immobilized" with the same odorless anti-particle gas fired at demonstrators, but which this time shot up from the ground, automatically triggered by the intruder's presence. Zur looked out, beyond the line of light where the brightness blended back into the dull bluish haze. "I'm so tired" He whispered to no one. "What kind of a God gets tired?!" a voice, harsh and scornful, replied from behind Him. Zur quickly turned, startled, and found Himself still alone on the terrace. "Who's there?!" He yelled, moving slowly back towards the interior of the house. It was empty. "I must be more tired than I think," He mumbled as He returned to bed, His sheets still wet with a cold sweat.

Balasa sat quietly in His chair at the front of the room as angels and samsarans began to filter in and take their seats. He was agitated, though he didn't know why. The meetings had become more and more crowded, the gatherings increasingly motivated and productive. But something was eating away at him. Maybe it was the increase in enclosures or extinguishing of movement members. As the movement grew, so did opportunities for its official members to be identified and attacked by the establishment. The meetings had also become riskier as the number of members, and the cells they made up, increased; making them more vulnerable to capture. They had largely eluded the establishment so far, but all official members continued to have a secret tattoo, etched into the inside of their right bicep; a simple design, a circle with a horizontal line through it. It was a measure for limiting the chance of meetings being infiltrated by spies for the establishment, but now it had become a liability, a way for the EOs, to identify "enemies of the state" as they referred to members of The Judgment. After stopping an angel or samsaran, the first act was to check for the tattoo and see if an official member had been chanced upon. If found, they were taken away without question and rarely were they seen again. The meeting was standing room only, and Balasa rose from his seat and gestured to the gathered crowd to settle down, as the meeting was about to begin.

"Thank you all for coming tonight. I know it is not easy to be here at these gatherings, with the numerous security protocols we must implement in order to remain discreet. And the various establishment obstacles you must overcome in order to attend. I will keep my talk brief, to allow us more time afterwards to get to know our new members, many of whom I

can see in the crowd tonight. I remember when the movement first began, with only Tansa and myself having radically inspired conversations over coffee and cigarettes at our favorite local 24-hr café." Tansa, faintly smiling, nodded her head, with a hint of nostalgia in her recollection of those early days. "And look at us now! We have come a long way since then. But we yet have a long way to go. How many more humans, some of whom are members of your own families left behind on Earth, must suffer from famine, pestilence, and war? How much longer are we willing to live here in a police state so repressive that our younglings are afraid to even play in the parks? While Zur, fat from consumption of the best edibles available and indifferent to the cries of His own children, locks Himself in His fortified palace built in the middle of what were once public meadows. His popularity ratings among the people are at the lowest they've ever been. We are under increasingly forceful attack by the establishment, but be sure that we can win, and finally feel not only safe in our homes and our communities, but extend our victory to Earth where we can actively work to improve the livelihoods of humans across the world. I want to end my speech with a quote from the text of "Rules for Radicals" by the human Saul Alinsky – 'Lest we forget at least an over-the-shoulder acknowledgment to the very first radical: from all our legends, mythology, and history, the first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment and did it so effectively that he at least won his own kingdom – Iblis.' We however will not accept a kingdom in another land, another world beyond here. We will take this kingdom and make it our own! Thank you."

As everyone mingled and chatted, introduced and presented, Tanso approached Balasa who was standing in a corner alone, drinking a cup of lemonade provided for the meeting. “You don’t seem pleased with your speech.” “I don’t feel pleased about a lot of things lately Tanso. It shows?” “A bit,” she said, “but only to someone like me who knows you well enough to notice.” Balasa smiled, “Then you also know as well as I do that I didn’t mention tonight the most controversial part of what’s to come, the absolute necessity to rise up in arms against Zur if we ever want to fully overthrow Him.” Tansa took a sip of her lemonade, letting its sweet sourness flow down her throat. “Are you afraid we’ll lose members if they know the rebellion is going to actually turn violent?” “No, on the contrary, I think we’ll be able to recruit even more members, such is the level of discontent. What I’m afraid of is that we’ll lose a part of ourselves.” Balasa crushed the empty paper cup in his hand, tossed it into the trash bin a meter away, gave Tansa a gentle squeeze of her shoulder, and left.

The next day Balasa was in his bookstore, as he was every day, organizing a new shipment of fiction he had just received. The door swung open and in ran a member, one of the older ones so Balasa recognized him without having to check the tattoo. “Balasa! Balasa!” he yelled, clearly winded and still trying to catch his breath. “Relax Banu, calm down. What is it?” “It’s...it’s...Tansa! The establishment took her! Last night, on her way home from the meeting, the EOs surrounded her and without even checking her arm they shot an electron-charged net over her. She fell to the ground, numbed long enough for them to grab her and throw her into the back of a big, black van.” Balasa felt cold with currents of rage shooting through

him. “Are you sure Banu?! How do you know for sure?!” “I saw it Balasa, I saw it with my own eyes but I was too scared to try and help her so I stayed hidden. I’m so sorry!” and he started crying. “Banu, stop crying and don’t be sorry. There’s nothing you could have done. If you had tried, you wouldn’t be here right now telling me about what happened. “Was anyone with you?” “No.” “Have you told anyone else?” “No.” “Did you notice anyone who may have seen what you saw?” “No, no.” “Okay. Go home, and don’t mention this to anyone. Do you understand me? Now go, I need to visit someone I haven’t spoken to in a long, long time.”

Balasa took the long way to Zur’s palace, walking slowly through the forest and across the meadows that lead up to the massive perimeter wall protecting Zur from his enemies, both real and imagined. “Zur has gone too far this time,” he thought. “He must know I’m the leader of the uprising. The enclosure of Tansa is too personal, too deliberate, too direct a challenge to me.” He let his mind wander across nothing and everything at once; the sound of the wind blowing through the higher crowns of trees, the occasional bird singing, the feel of the ground beneath his feet. Reaching within sight of the wall, Balasa began a sweeping arch around to the right towards the road that led up to the front entrance of Zur’s fortress. As he approached the gate, he could hear cameras in the trees on either side of the road whiz and whir as they followed and focused in on him. Zur had long ago dispensed with the use of guards. His paranoia disallowed him from trusting anyone anymore, angel or samsaran, and so He removed the guards and replaced them with cameras which were installed everywhere within a five kilometer radius from the house. These were complimented

with lights and booby traps such as the ground gas. According to one of the last remaining samsaran guards He had fired after setting up His self-managed security system, and who subsequently joined the movement, Zur controlled all of this from within His fortress, inside a massive command-center filled with television monitors, whistles, alarms, microphones, speakers, and switches. Reports of Zur's progressing paranoia had been growing. He lived alone, save for one Cook, one Cleaner, and one Gardener who were never allowed to leave the grounds. All necessary supplies were delivered and left at the front gate where the Cook and Cleaner collected them, checked them for explosives, and then carted them the half kilometer distance back to the house. All food was grown on the property, and a deep well provided fresh drinking water. There was a lake with an endless fish count, chickens provided eggs and poultry, and free grazing livestock provided meat. Zur, once to be found walking along the streets among the angels and samsarans, to be enjoying a sporting event at the stadium, or to be seen eating with friends at His favorite restaurants, had not left the confines of His fortress in almost a year.

Balasa pressed the intercom button and waited. He pressed the buzzer again. And waited, again. "Balasa, what brings you to My humble abode?" he finally heard crackling and slightly garbled from the speaker. "Hello Zur. It's been a long time, and I was hoping we could talk." Balasa could hear mumbling through the speaker, a sort of brief, self-directed, incomprehensible rant as if under the breath, and then a definitive clearing of the throat followed by, "Of course." There was a deep groaning of metal and gears as the gates

unwillingly detached from their rusted center and swung open. The nearby gardens were immaculate, with white-pebble walking paths weaving their way through sculpted bushes and multi-colored flowers. Balasa reached the wide marble steps leading up to an intricately carved wooden door, large enough for giants from childhood stories to pass through without so much as stooping their shoulders. Before he could knock, a loud click caused the door to crack slightly. For its size, the door was surprisingly lightweight, and when pushed swung open smoothly without great effort. The foyer was all beige and equally grand, but sparse with no furniture or decoration save for one painting hanging slightly askew in an alcove on the right; a mediocre still-life of a fruit bowl filled with apples and oranges next to a bluish-grey ceramic pitcher and half-empty glass of water sitting atop a wooden table with peeling cobalt-blue paint. "I'm in here," Zur called out from a room to the left, His voice echoing through the foyer as if coming out of thin air. Balasa walked in to the room where Zur was standing, looking out a window with His hands clasped behind His back. "You're supposed to be everywhere, aren't You?" Balasa replied with a slight sarcasm and slighter smile. "I am closer to you than your jugular vein," said Zur, turning with a wide smile. "I love that line, one of My best I think, though for the life of Me I can't remember which verse it is, or which Book it comes from for that matter." He approached His guest, and grasping him firmly at the shoulders, He said, "Balasa, I wasn't sure how it would feel, but I must now admit how incredibly good it is to see you," and embraced Balasa in a strong but gentle embrace.

The first thing Balasa noticed was the smell, like a baby's breath mixed with sour milk, in the skin of Zur's neck. It was a stale smell, sad and a bit lonely. "I think I felt the same Zur, but yes, it's good to see You too. How long has it been?" Balasa replied over Zur's shoulder. They parted, looking into each other's eyes with less than equal parts affection and suspicion. "How about a drink? For old times sake?" Zur asks. "Sure." At the fully stocked bar in the corner of the room, Zur pulled down a bottle from the top shelf. He began to mumble, the same way Balasa heard over the intercom when he arrived. He could only make out certain words here and there, "Shit. What is that? Ssshhh. They're so useless!" Zur took glasses from beneath the counter, poured two stiff single malts, and returned to Balasa, handing him his drink. "Thanks. 10 years?" "10 years? Are you kidding?! I haven't drunk single malt aged any less than 22 years since the Hiroshima bombing." Balasa sighed, "Yes, it was a turning point wasn't it. How are you feeling Zur? You seem, tired." Half snorting, Zur replied, "What kind of a God gets tired?" Then quickly changed the subject. "And what about you Balasa? How are things at the bookstore? I always wondered how a simple bookseller could be as busy as you always seem to be." There was a clear implication in what He said. "He doesn't want to waste any more time on niceties. He wants to confront me. He knows," Balasa thought. But Balasa wasn't ready. Seeing Zur again had brought it all back. Unburied from beneath years of suppression the memories of a life before all of this. Of a life filled with the innocence of youth. Of a life uncomplicated by grown-up demands. Of a life before Zur ascended to the highest seat in the Heavens and the Universe was reborn. Of a life before He began to neglect Earth and its humans. Of a life

when they were still Brothers. "Do you remember when we were kids, and we'd go wandering off into the forests, these same trees around your fortress, pretending we were kings over all the animitsas?" We made swords out of sticks and defended ourselves against attack from imaginary demons. When we got home, we'd be filthy from rolling around in the dirt, wrestling each other. Do you remember what Mother would tell us? Every time we walked through the door, triumphant from another day defending our forest kingdom, Mother would yell, 'Zur, Balasa, didn't I tell you to stay out of the forest today?! I'm going to tell Father about his disobedient kids! Now get upstairs and wash yourselves before dinner! And don't touch the walls with your filthy fingers!' Everyday it was the same." Balasa laughed softly to himself. "But she never told Father." Zur replied softly, once again staring out the window. "No. No, she didn't," Balasa said sadly. There was a pause that held thick in the air. A pause that fell like a concrete barrier at the end of the short, nostalgic road paved with memories. "Where is she Zur? Where's Tansa? What have You done with our sister?"

Zur turned to face Balasa again. "You always were the one to look after the youngest Balasa. And you're still trying. But she's a traitor. You both are. You're lucky I don't take you down too. I know you're the leader Balasa, the founder of The Judgement. I've known for some time." "Zur, she's our sister." "She's a TRAITOR!!!" Zur roared, His voice shaking, His forehead creased with swollen blue veins. The sound shook the skies, and caused the clouds to thunder. Unimpressed, Balasa asked again with his own raised voice, "Where is she?!" Zur began to laugh, neither a comedic nor a sinister laugh, but

rather a maniacal chuckle that made Zur appear unstable and less than coherent. “She’s here, with Me. Would you like to visit her, our dear little Sister?” Balasa followed Zur through a labyrinthine maze of corridors and passageways before coming to a stairwell leading down to a lower level. They descended into the darkness below, into a drab, exposed brick corridor lit with a single light bulb. At the end of the short corridor was a gray, metal door with a small window and another square hatchway through which one could pass a small bowl. It had a heavy padlock dangling midway down the right side. Despair began to creep through Balasa as he walked towards the door. Zur unlocked it, and stood aside, motioning Balasa with a bow and a sweeping arm, “Entrez.” Balasa pulled the heavy door open and walked into the room. It was dark, lit only by the dim corridor light coming through the open door. The room was small, maybe 2m x 2m, cold and damp, and though he couldn’t see from where, the sound of a slow water leak could be heard coming from his left, the concrete floor submerged in thin coat of water. His eyes focusing, he saw a pair of cut, dirty, and bruised legs on the floor protruding from the shadows. “Tansa?” he called, unintentionally allowing the fear and sadness he felt dominate his tone. He heard a whisper, soft and quivering, from within the shadows, “Balasa? Balasa is that you?” She leaned forward, her face coming into the light for the first time. She had fresh cuts on her cheeks and forehead like her skin had split open from the inside out, her hair was wet and matted, and as Balasa’s eyes further focused, he realized she was naked and similar wounds to the ones on her face and legs could be seen on other parts of her body. She had only been there since the previous evening but she looked thin, her ribs protruding slightly from beneath her skin.

Balasa turned to Zur, “What have you done to her?!” he roared. “I simply needed her to promise not to support you anymore. But she was stubborn. So it took several injections of anti-particle solution to convince her that what I was asking was for her own good; that I was only trying to protect her. The bruises and skin splitting are a result of the injections and are minor. You know as well as I do that although painful, our wounds are always superficial at best. By tomorrow, she won’t have a mark on her.” Balasa, unable to contain himself any longer, turned and rushed at Zur, grabbing Him at the neck and lifting Him against the wall. Zur began to laugh again, and then by merely touching Balasa’s hand sent a sharp pain through his entire arm, forcing him to let go. “How could You do this Zur?!” Balasa yelled as he returned to Tansa, helping her to her feet, and wrapping her in the long shawl he had been wearing. “I’m taking her with me.” “But of course you are Brother, I expected as much. But what you should expect is for The Judgement to be crushed. You will not win Brother. And if you continue trying, I’ll be forced to extinguish every member and supporter, including the both of you, once and for all” As they walked by Zur, Tansa turned to look at Him, and spit in His face. “Fuck you!” she screamed, crying, “I hate you!” As Balasa and Tansa exited the dungeon, Zur softly ran His fingers across His face, licking their wet tips as He chuckled to Himself quietly repeating, “I know. I know.” That night, Zur sat in the salon, flames from the fireplace crackling with warmth, looking through old photo albums. Family photos from when Father and Mother were alive and He, Iblis, Balasa, and Tansa were young; images from a past that no longer seemed a part of His life. And then one by one He flicked the

photos into the fire, watching the only evidence of that life, save for the memories that still haunted Him, melt away and disappear.

Balasa had returned with Tansa to his apartment above the bookstore. He was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a cup of tea when she finished her bath and joined him. "Have all of your girlfriends left you *and* their clothes behind?" Tansa teasingly asked, wearing a pair of loose, dark brown cotton pants and a red hoodie with a caricature of George Bush's face morphed into a chimpanzee in yellow. Not humored, Balasa said, "It's not always the girl who leaves. Tea?" Tansa laughed, "Of course it isn't. Yeah, thanks." Balasa handed her the cup, the smell of rosehips and cardamom strong in the steam, and sat back down with her at the table. "You know Balasa, Zur has lost His mind. And I'm not just referring to the fact that He could torture His own sister without regret or remorse, which is fucked up enough I know. In between the, well, you know, the sessions, I could hear Him upstairs talking and yelling as if He was arguing or having a fight with someone. But all I could hear was His voice, saying something, asking something, and then after a pause, yelling back an answer as if someone had asked Him a question. Even when He was with me in the dungeon, it was as if He was half-present, mumbling under His breath, like He was having a conversation with Himself." Balasa gave out a long, exasperated sigh, "I know, I noticed it when I was there yesterday. The paranoia, the isolation over the past year, has finally caused His mind to crack. You know, this may seem crazy, but I think the reason Zur responds so brutally to The Judgement's criticisms is that deep inside He knows it's true. He knows He's neglected the humans, and not

only that, has actually initiated and allowed for such a waste of life that not even Zur, God Himself, nor any of the religions He sent forth, could ever justify it. The wars, the drought, the poverty, the pestilence, the death, the hate, and the murder; He knows we're right to challenge Him for what He's allowed life on earth to become." "You still give Him too much credit, thinking He's even capable of such self-reflection." Tansa replies. "I know you don't forget what He did to our Iblis, our dear Brother. Shit, the whole Judgement is founded on Iblis' simple act of revolution and he's still a hero to all of us. He cast out His own Brother and tortured His sister Balasa! He's nothing but a monster! And He needs to be extinguished!" She lit a cigarette, her hands slightly shaking, drawing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her fingers around the teacup. The room wasn't cold, but it was as if she was trying to keep warm from an inner chill, a chill Balasa understood and that he now permanently felt. But Balasa knew Tansa was right. Even Zur's ascension was widely believed to have been coerced from Father God when He fell ill. Iblis was the eldest, and so the ascension was his right. But Zur told lies to Father about Iblis, and convinced Him that Iblis was not fit to recreate the Universe and govern over it. Afterwards, when Zur was God and had begun recreating the Worlds, Iblis challenged His hasty approach. Balasa remembered the day, as they all sat, all the Children, having breakfast at their favorite diner. It must have been 3am, and they had just left an incredible concert of flute and tablas. Iblis had said, "Seven days Zur? Do You really think that's possible? And Man in a day? C'mon Brother, there's no way that You can create humans so quickly without them having serious defects. If You follow through with this plan, I'm sure that the humans will turn against each

other. They will always be savages unless You allow more creation time to provide them with full knowledge about their place in the Universe.” But Zur had a different reasoning. He was less concerned about whether humans turned against each other. He felt that with the knowledge, humans wouldn’t feel the need for Him, and so would turn against Him. But if they constantly searched for that understanding of their place in the Universe, then His revelations, His religions passed down would be where humans would look for their answers. And they would then always need Him. They would then always bow to Him.

The next day, Balasa sent word through the network that there would be a meeting of cell leaders, and leaders only, that night. He spent the entire day in the bookstore, organizing the shelves and rummaging through various boxes, looking for nothing in particular. In one of the boxes he came across an old photo, a picture of him, Zur, and Iblis when they were young, only children really. They were facing the camera, standing with their arms across each other’s shoulders and dressed in identical musketeer outfits they made themselves. They loved The 3 Musketeers, having read all of their stories, and were often seen running through the streets with their cardboard swords, chasing imaginary villains in the name of honor and brotherhood. They each wore huge smiles as they faced the camera, and looking at the photo it seemed as if a happiness and camaraderie like that could never be broken. With tears in his eyes, Balasa put the picture into his pocket and closed the box. He had to prepare for the meeting, and so he put the ‘Closed’ sign in the front window of the shop, pulled down the blinds, and retreated upstairs. He was anxious about the

meeting, about actually beginning plans for an attack against Zur to finally free the Universe from His tyranny. He knew the cell leaders would support his plan, and he knew that within a couple months they could amass an army of nearly 5,000 to march upon the fortress if they needed. What he didn’t know was how mad Zur had actually become, and whether that madness would drive Him to be particularly vicious and brutal in His defense. Balasa thought, “He will certainly extinguish many before He falls. But He will fall. He was wrong when He said that The Judgement couldn’t win, though I know what He meant. He meant that I couldn’t win, for He knew that if I extinguished Him it would change me. That a part of me would be extinguished with Him, and that finally, after all was said and done, He would be free, and I would be left here to suffer with what I had done. No matter what, I would never win.”

The meeting that night went effortlessly, with each cell leader providing their full support for organizing their cells and working together to prepare the necessary equipment and weapons. A date was set, for 6 weeks from the date of the meeting. With all the cells combined, there would be approximately 700 militants. There were thousands more supporters of The Judgement who would have volunteered without thinking twice, but after long deliberation it was decided to utilize only those who already made up the informal soldiers of the cell-based militias. Balasa had found strong leaders, and he received regular updates from each cell, trouble-shooting any problems that presented themselves. He felt a sense of relief that it would soon all be over, but nervous about what was yet to come. He knew that he and Tansa would have to fill the void left by Zur. It was already decided that she

would be God, and he would merely serve as an Advisor whenever she needed him. He had confidence in Tansa, and was proud of her more than she knew. Although she was the youngest, she had always been the most responsible. She was strong-willed and compassionate beyond belief. He knew she would deal with the Earth and humans carefully and deliberately, making decisions that would be in the best interest of all humanity and the world they inhabited. But even with Zur extinguished, there were bound to be Zur loyalists who might try to create problems for her later. They wouldn't really care whether God was Zur or Tansa, but they would expect to maintain the wealth and status they had been provided under Zur. If Tansa distanced herself from them, and she certainly would, they would react badly. They couldn't do enough to permanently hurt her or her position, but they could be like the terrorists and suicide-bombers one sees on Earth, enemies that will never defeat the Nation Armies, if that is even their goal, but will be able to consistently nag and remain an unpredictable threat to them without end. But Balasa knew they would deal with all of that together, if and when the time came for it.

In the weeks that led to the insurrection, attacks against members had increased dramatically, and people were disappearing almost daily. At one point there was a rumour that Zur had learned of the plan, and was preparing an indestructible defense that He would then turn into a final reckoning upon The Judgement and its supporters. But the leaders and their cells were more careful than that, and once the rumor was investigated it was found to be just that, a rumor. Still, wanting one last confirmation that Zur had not gotten

wind of the plan, Balasa decided to pay Zur a final visit in order to get a sense of what Zur did or didn't know. He hadn't seen Him since he was there to retrieve Tansa, and although the EOs had increased their attacks, no one had seen or heard anything from Zur himself for nearly a month. No statements, no proclamations, no speeches welcoming new samsarans, nothing. When Balasa arrived at the entrance gate, he found it slightly ajar. Nevertheless he used the intercom to buzz the house, "Zur? It's Balasa, can I come up?" A minute passed without an answer. Balasa went through the gate and proceeded up to the house, noticing the gardens had begun to grow wild, the pebbles in the footpaths run through with long grasses. The massive front door was likewise ajar, and swung open with a loud creak that echoed through the foyer. "Hello?! Zur, are you here?!" Balasa called out several times with no reply. He checked the salon, but it was empty. He called out for the staff, but again silence was the only response. He went to Zur's chamber and found an unmade bed and a stronger, more pungent version of the smell he had noticed on Zur's skin the last time he was there, but no Zur. He continued walking through the unkempt house, finding the kitchen a mess, dirty dishes piled up in the sink and smelling of rotten food. It was as if all three staff had parted long ago, leaving Zur and the house to their own devices. Balasa returned to the salon before exploring the rest of the house. It truly was a mansion, and would take him some time to check every wing, and every room within them. He found the bottle of single-malt, the one Zur had offered him, dusty and still half full. He grabbed a whiskey glass, poured himself a solid four fingers, and sat down on the couch near the fireplace. Looking into the pile of ashes, he noticed the melted remains of the photos Zur had

burned. He picked through the ash and pulled out a corner here, a face there, and realized they were family photos. He found one that had survived better than the rest, so that he could make out the overall picture. It was another one of The 3 Musketeers, from the same day as the one he had found in the bookstore, but this time with the three of them holding their cardboard swords towards the camera, as if ready to charge, and with the meanest looks they could muster on their faces. Balasa pulled out his photo and held them together, side by side, before putting them both into his pocket. He gulped down the last of his whiskey, feeling it warm his chest, and left the salon, carrying the bottle of single-malt with him.

Another forty-five minutes later Balasa found himself in the last wing left to check. He opened every room but noticed that even Zur had not found a need for these, as each one was undecorated and unfurnished with plain white walls, a white floor, and white ceiling. Suddenly, coming from further down the corridor, Balasa could hear a low thumping noise. “Zur?” he called out and moved toward the sound’s source. Opening the last door in the house, Balasa found Zur. He was alone, sitting naked in a bare, windowless, white room, rocking back and forth against the wall. Balasa approached Him, and sat down next to Him. Zur’s eyes were vacant, as He sat mumbling senseless premonitions to himself and spitting into the corner. Balasa pulled out his mobile and called Tansa, “Call the leaders and tell them the mission is aborted. There’s no need to attack the fortress.” “What happened?” asked Tansa, “Are you okay?” “I’m fine. After you make the calls, could you join me up here? I’m in the wing protruding East, in the last room at the end of the last corridor.” “You’re worrying me Balasa, what’s

going on?” “Don’t worry Tansa, really. Just come, okay?” “I’ll be there soon.” He hung up the phone and tried to speak with Zur. “Zur? Can you hear me Zur? It’s your Brother, it’s Balasa.” Zur turned to face him, “And the ants shall rise up against you. The ants. You might think they’re too small, and have nothing to rise up against. But they will rise up, believe Me.” After hearing other, equally incomprehensible premonitions Balasa realized that Zur had finally gone completely mad. He tried to help Him to His feet, but when he touched Him Zur shrieked and crawled away with fear in his eyes. When Balasa tried to approach Him again, He crawled away from him once more. He now sat in the opposite corner of the room, knees pulled up to His chest, hands held up to His mouth where He nibbled away at the tips of His fingers. Balasa sat back down, leaning against the wall, took a long, slow swig from the bottle, and waited for Tansa.

It wasn’t an hour before Balasa could hear Tansa calling out his name. “Down here!” he yelled, glancing over at Zur who still had not made any other indication that he was even aware of Balasa’s presence since he tried to touch Him. Balasa’s head was warm by now on the whiskey, and so when Tansa entered the room he didn’t make an effort to stand and greet her. She noticed Balasa first, and came over to kneel next to him. “That was fast,” he said. “I left right after I hung up the phone, and called the leaders on my way over here. What’s going on Balasa? Are you okay?” Balasa held up the bottle like a rifle, looking down its length as if peering through a scope, and pointed it towards the other end of the room. Tansa followed its aim, and then noticed Zur for the first time. Her eyes wide, and raising one hand over her mouth, she gasped and looked back

to Balasa with surprise and confusion in her eyes. “Yep,” Balasa replied, “He’s officially gone Tansa. He’s off his rocker. He’s a few bricks short of a load. His elevator has stopped short of the top floor. He’s a few fries short of a Happy Meal. He’s...” “Okay Balasa, I get it,” Tansa says, grabbing the bottle from his hands, sitting next to him, and taking a smooth, sure gulp. “I guess he was more cuckoo than we realized, huh?” she said, wiping a trickle of whiskey from the corner of her mouth with the back of her free hand. “Yup,” replied Balasa, taking the bottle back and drawing another sip. “So what do we do now?” Tansa asked, watching her eldest Brother across the room, God of the entire Universe, acting like a scared, pathetic child. If she didn’t hate Him so much, she thought she might actually pity Him. “Well, the room has its own bathroom, though He might be too far-gone to even use it. And we can feed Him, though He might be too far-gone to eat. But I say, we leave Him here. There are no windows He could escape through, and we lock the door from the outside. It’s in the furthest corner of the house, so well out of the way. And we don’t have to extinguish Him, His mind has already taken care of that for us.” “I like it, I like it a lot,” Tansa said smiling, putting her arm around Balasa and giving him a strong, sisterly squeeze. They sat in silence for a couple minutes, passing the bottle between them and staring at Zur across the room, drooling in His own little world. Balasa finally turned to his Sister, “You hungry?” “Starved!” she replied. “I think I have the number to that new little Korean joint that delivers.” “Order me a Bi Bim Bop, a Tofu Stew Pot, and Vegetable Pancakes, and tell them not to forget the Kim Chi this time. I’m going to go get us another bottle.”

FINIS