

IN THE BEGINNING

God created the universe out of love. Love is the basic, underlying essence of every last bit of Creation, without exception. If we saw Creation from the outside, which is the perspective of eternity we'd see everything in Creation all at once, seeing how everything is connected to everything else from the beginning to the end of time. That's not how humans are looking at it though. Human beings live inside Creation, so see it from the inside only looking at a few parts at a time as history unfolds. It looks different than when seen all at once, and certainly not like love a considerable amount of the time. But what is seen moment- to-moment should not be mistaken for the whole picture. There is a Big Plan. The Big Plan unfolds with time, making some parts of Creation look very dark and evil indeed, especially when seeing them from the inside.

When looking at it from outside, all at once, the Creation looks like love.

Up In Heaven, Before The Fall...

Life up in Heaven before the Fall was full of joy and bliss with busy angels happily at work during the first Five Days of Creation. The cosmic clockwork was running smoothly.

Then, sadly, something happened during the Sixth Day which changed everything...

GOD: Hey, Lucifer.

LUCIFER: What?

GOD: Come here. Check out that ape. LUCIFER: What about it?

GOD: It's pretty smart for an ape.

LUCIFER: What makes you say that?

GOD: It's using its hands more than the others.

LUCIFER: That's because it climbed out of the trees. A lion will eat it soon, just watch.

GOD: No, no, it climbed out of the trees because it was smart, and it's been getting smarter ever since.

LUCIFER: Why isn't it covered in hair? It looks sick. GOD: I'm going to give it a soul.

LUCIFER: <choking on nectar> *What?!* Do you really feel that's a smart idea?

GOD: Why not? What could go wrong? I made the entire universe out of love.

LUCIFER: I foresee several possibilities for grand tragedy. As souls they'll have free will. Actual choice. And you know how that affects the universe.

GOD: I know everything.

LUCIFER: So you know that's a bad idea, right? The most beautiful thing in the universe is destruction. It's the precursor for all change and growth, and allows the liberation of life from form and its return to spirit. They're bound to choose destruction over love, which will get totally out of control.

GOD: Nah, I'll keep them innocent.

LUCIFER: Wanna bet?

GOD: Doesn't everything I do make sense in the end?

LUCIFER: What about the platypus?

GOD: I told you not to bring that up again.

Time passes. Humans live in the Garden of Eden, taking their newly minted souls out for a spin. Things are great. It's a blissful, worry-free life primarily comprising napping, eating,

naked walks through the forest and plenty of sex. It is a life without toil or hardship. Also, because the world is brand-spanking new, a lot of naming things.

ADAM: What's that? EVE: It's a rock.

ADAM: What about that? EVE: That's another rock. ADAM: I like rocks.

EVE: I know you do, honey.

Back up in Heaven, Lucifer is frustrated...

LUCIFER: They don't understand. They're not really making choices. How good can a soul be if it doesn't even have the chance to choose evil? What is right if there is no wrong?

GOD: But look at how cute they are.

LUCIFER: I think you're afraid they'll choose death over life. GOD: There's no such thing as death. Not really.

LUCIFER: Yeah, yeah, you know what I mean. If your brainy apes ever lost their innocence and had to make proper choices between good and evil I'm telling you they'd choose destruction. It will make them feel powerful. You made them a soul in your image and likeness, remember?

GOD: That's why they would choose goodness and life. It may take them some time to realize it about themselves, but it's inevitable. It's who they are.

LUCIFER: No, right now they're obtuse hairless monkeys who live in their dad's backyard. You know, you could speed the whole thing up by letting them have a bite from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

GOD: No.

LUCIFER: But...

GOD: I said no. LUCIFER: Please?

GOD: No, and that's final.

LUCIFER: Yeah. Okay. Whatever you say. GOD: What are you up to, Luce? LUCIFER:

Nothing.

...And thus, the first lie was told, with the Angel of Light taking his first step toward darkness.

INTERLUDE ON EARTH

Standing on the precipice of a mountain, the angel gazed up at the planets moving into position. An Alignment was occurring again. The window of opportunity was opening once again. These cosmic junctures had happened too many times in the past, with too many postponements. Moments like these held the potential for universal change, but they had all been allowed to pass without the prophesied showdown between good and evil. Despite the desperate hope of humanity for an end to evil, Armageddon kept getting delayed.

The angel turned to look down at the crime and sin occurring everywhere across the city below. It didn't matter which city it was, since it was the same in every city, in every country. So much pain. So much suffering.

Enough is enough, thought the angel. *This Alignment has got to be different.*

A breeze picked up the stench of sulfur announcing the arrival of one of Hell's servants.

"You're late," said the angel.

"I apologize, but it is harder for me to get away unnoticed than for you," said the demon.

"Do you know what it's like trying to get across Diarrhea River not only unseen, but getting none of it on you? I saw the biggest..."

The angel held its palm up, forestalling the demon from sharing any more. “I don’t want to know the details.”

“I didn’t either,” said the demon. “Why do you think we’re talking? So do we have a deal or not?”

They discussed their terms, every compromise as distasteful for each of them in its own way as it was to the other. Finally...

“Sounds like a match made in...” said the angel.

“Don’t say it,” said the demon.

“When will we know?”

“The Alignment only lasts three days. We shall know by the end.”

“Here you go,” said the angel, handing a long object wrapped in an exquisite gossamer cloth. “Use it when the time comes.”

“How did you get...?” said the demon, taking the object, looking at it with awe.

“With difficulty,” said the angel.

“I’m surprised at your commitment,” said the demon.

“Enough is enough,” said the angel. There was finality in its voice.

“I quite agree,” said the demon, stowing the object beneath its robe. It turned and walked away, vanishing in a puff of fire and smoke.

II.

FINAL PREPARATIONS

Hell was on the move.

Satan, the Lord of all Evil and Other Bad Stuff, stood along the battlements at the top of

the walls surrounding Pandemonium Palace, his private residence and stronghold in the center of Hell. The Devil's bright red skin showed off his massive musculature, clawed hands gripping a parapet in front of him tightly as he leaned forward to peer out, surveying his realm and the readiness of his forces.

Today is the Big Day, thought Satan, his long, forked tail swinging with excitement.

The Devil was every bit the image of evil most people would expect. His a face contorted with hatred and rage under his long, curved, ram-like horns as his enormous, partly-singed dragon wings slowly wafted behind him.

From all appearances, Satan thought the Apocalypse had every appearance that it was really going to happen this time. He had given every department of Hell orders to gather their troops and initiate the final protocols, issuing the command himself and declaring that *this* time everything would unfold according to plan.

Of course, everything appeared just as ready to go the last Alignment too.

Satan looked over the burning plain below him at the Army of the Damned in their countless¹ battalions of condemned berserkers and warrior demons wearing their lion-shaped helmets, stretching out to the horizon. As they moved into position, winged demons of all shapes and sizes flew hither and thither filling the sky with their activity on whatever last-minute business they were tasked during the short time they had remaining. Endless clouds of swarming scorpion-tailed locusts caused an unholy buzzing that rose and fell like the roar of the sea as they passed, mixing with the thundering of demonic legions on the Plain of Malebolge bellowing in

¹ The Bible says there will be 200 million units in the Army of the Damned, but neither God nor Satan feels like counting them all, giving the term "countless" an apathetic rather than a metaphorical connotation.

their millions. No mortal ear could have endured such a sound without going utterly insane. The Condemned had already been driven mad, their wails absorbed by the discord.

Satan enjoyed the sound as if it were music, proud of the power and evil amassed before him, feeling ready to take on both Earth and Heaven.

Everything looks good so far, he thought, though with less certainty. One could hope, or do whatever the equivalent thing is for the Devil to do since he doesn't enjoy using the "H"-word.

Scanning the preparations, his vision took in the expansiveness of his wrecked and shattered land. The dark fogs and miasmas of Ignorance marked the borders, patrolled by the hellhounds of Gog and Magog. Here and there in the pitted, burning landscape of Hell were areas with structures, or some other collection of constructions that were distinguishable from the natural "volcano-chic" aesthetic of the Infernal Realm. Most buildings weren't much more than small fortifications with extensive storage areas.

Trailing off into the distance was a thousand-mile long traffic jam weaving in and around the entire fiery expanse. The bureaucrat who originally conceived the idea of the speed-bump spends eternity as one on this roadway, along with other bureaucrats who voted for their installment.² Everywhere else was the slag and carrion of burning evil souls in numbers utterly beyond count.

² Speed bumps are evil. Bureaucrats take note.

In the center of Hell loomed the massive City of the Damned, named Dis³ in ancient sources, stretching out to beyond where the eye could see, broken only by the gigantic chthonic, tentacled form of the mountain-sized Leviathan sitting far off in the distance behind the City. Leviathan's single eye could be seen clearly for miles as it scanned the ground, every now and then causing a mountain to crack or fissure in the ground with its colossal tentacles.

Towering behind Satan and dominating everything else in his vision was the monumental Palace of Pandemonium, a proper residence for the Ruler of Hell. Unlike the surrounding environment of destruction and nastiness, the palace of the Devil is more luxurious than anything the Damned had ever seen or even imagined while alive. Made of exotic and precious materials, Pandemonium was the most beautiful, intricately detailed, artistically extravagant, awe-inspiring structure in all of existence.

Above Pandemonium a drama was being depicted by arcane and diabolical energies. A complex pattern of red, luminous force glowed as an illustrated astrological chart with magnified holographic images of the planets clicking into alignment. Rays of energy connected the aligned planets in a pentagram with the center positioned over the middle of the tallest tower of the palace. Energy from each point of the pentagram streamed down onto a red and black horn-shaped antenna at the pinnacle of the tower, flowing from there down into a room glowing with power. Giving one last glance around his realm, satisfied that all was prepared, Satan turned and walked inside, heading directly towards the glowing room.

³ Dis refers to the ancient Roman god of the underworld known as Dis Pater, whose identity later gets conflated with Pluto/Hades. He was known as the "father of riches." The modern meaning of "ya got dissed" is also used in Hell, though in a more hyper-violent context.

Across the cracked and tortured districts in the City of Dis, standing at the precipice of his own stronghold was Belial, the Prince of Envy, looking at much the same scene as his powerful overlord, though with far less confidence that the Invasion would go off without a hitch.

How many Alignments have I been forced to wait on the Devil's permission? Belial thought, scowling.

The ever-howling winds of Hell roared in his ears as he deliberated over the Alignment unfolding above, considering the patterns of energy moving into position and the opportunities it presented for him.

On the surface of each of the planets there were slow-moving likenesses of the Roman gods rendered with exquisite detail in evil energy, each of whom had visages expressing either pain, anger, or madness. Jupiter, the 'bringer of joy,' was bound arm and leg with a gag in his mouth. Mars, in contrast, was breaking chains while raising a sword-filled hand in wrath. The outermost circle showed Saturn with a skull-like visage slowly reaping with his great scythe, leaving behind a trail of energy that took the shape of a clock marking the passage of time. Yet these were only images projected from the Devil's subconscious, not the mythological entities themselves, yet they were impressive nonetheless.

"They look mad," said the demon Stultus enthusiastically, pointing to the images of the Olympians. He was Belial's current head of staff, but like most not likely to last long. "Doesn't that mean everything is ready?"

"How many times have we been here before?" growled Belial, flexing his wings and frowning.

“M-my Lord?” said Stultus.

“I am summoned to the throne room once again for the Launch Ceremony.”

“At last,” said Stultus. Belial snorted.

“Look out there,” said Belial, pointing to the Army of the Damned. “It seems like we’re going to invade the Earth this time, doesn’t it?”

Stultus surveyed the multitude of both demons and condemned souls below them. The Invasion certainly appeared as if it were about to launch.

“Yes, my Lord,” said Stultus. “I cannot see how...”

“It always looks this way at the beginning of an Alignment!” he snapped. “He has all of us stand around up in that over-decorated room just to kiss his ass only to cancel it at the last moment!”

“Every time?” asked Stultus.

“Look around, fool,” said Belial. “Does it look like the Apocalypse has happened yet? How long must we stay in Hell?”

He bellowed this last up at the patterns of energy pulsating in Hell’s sky.

“What do you think is taking so long?” asked Stultus.

Belial let out a humorless laugh.

“He’s having fun with his ‘distractions’ down here,” he said, sneering. “If I had access to the same kinds of ‘distractions’ that he does I might put off the Invasion too.”

“When will we know if it happens this time?”

The powerful dark lord had a red gleam in his eyes. “This time we’re going to make it happen.”

“Isn’t that up to Lord Satan?” asked Stultus.

“We’ll see,” answered Belial, as he turned and left for the Ceremony in the throne room.

Down on the plain below, various groups of demons were being gathered and sorted into divisions and grades, and then into various classes and categories in preparation for the Invasion. Each group had a different purpose and each purpose called for a different subspecies of demon.

“Alright, maggots!” said a demon sergeant getting its contingent together. “Line up!”

A group of hellish maggots squirmed into line. They were larger than most maggots on Earth; about three feet long with mouthfuls of razor-sharp teeth and bodies covered in a rancid slime.

The legions being assembled included the four categories the Horsemen of the Apocalypse were going to need to fulfill the end-of-the-world prophecies. Some, like the maggots, were going Topside⁴ to spread different strains of diseases as they belonged for the Department of Pestilence. Others, like those preparing piteous souls like Dax for the Army of the Damned were drafted into the Department of War.

Back during the Middle Ages, Hell had been structured according to feudal norms with fiefdoms, manors and estates distributed much along the same lines as they were in Europe, which speaks volumes about the lack of pleasantness and fairness found in a feudalistic system. The feudal structure remains in place, although once Hell’s rulers noticed the growth of a market-based economy taking root on Earth they recognized the potential for increased

⁴ The Material Plane. “Plane” as in a dimension of existence, not an airplane.

inefficiency and greater exploitation of their workers. The inherent greed in Capitalist theory is why Hell chose it as a model over Communism, which purports to distribute resources fairly. This was largely due to the fact Hell's elite does not distribute any resources they might accumulate, fairly or otherwise.⁵

In response, they developed their own bureaucracy divided into thirteen main Departments that overlay the feudal substructure with each Department being ruled by one of the thirteen Princes of Hell. It allows Hell to work like a huge, dysfunctional corporation. The various Departments are all half- competing, with no one communicating or cooperating with anyone, seeing such efficiency as part of Heaven's jurisdiction. Department Heads meet regularly like a Board of Directors, all of whom hate each other with a virulence mortals really can't appreciate. Today the nobility of Hell, including the dukes, barons and other members of the aristocracy function like shareholders, all of whom are solely out for themselves.⁶ It creates bureaucratic frustration on a cosmic level. Satan appreciates things like that.

There are four departments headed by the Four Horsemen. These are the Departments of War, Disease, Famine and Death. The Horsemen are constantly preparing for the Apocalypse using their activities up on Earth as training exercises for the Big Day.

Then there are the seven Departments of Sin, one for each of the seven deadly sins. These are the Departments of Wrath, Greed, Gluttony, Sloth, Envy, Lust and Pride. While these departments are all definitely involved with preparing the world for the End of Days they did so

⁵ As highly problematic as Communism as been in practice, it is the ideology's motivation for sharing that offends Hell so much, despite the unworkability of its tenets, which would be a feature for Hell, not a flaw.

⁶ So like normal shareholders.

indirectly, focusing instead on the general corruption of humanity.

Finally, there were the Departments of Hate and Ignorance, led respectively by Gog and Magog, the latter of whom bred hellhounds as a side hobby, feeding them with the souls of sinners who'd eaten dog during their lifetimes.⁷ Unlike the other department heads who are all fallen angels, these two are both fallen titans⁸ whose principal task is the maintenance of the Great Illusion.

There are also many minor departments and sub-departments headed by the Dukes and Barons of Hell, all of whom were eager to wreak as much havoc on Earth as possible, though the vast majority of them had to wait for Satan to say the Word of Doom. One lucky group was going up sooner. These were the demons responsible for giving the omens, oracles and pronouncements about the Edict of Doom regarding the End of Days, commonly known down in Hell as The Announcement. No major destruction from these demons, just mischief and fear, and a few murders if they could manage it. They had been gathering already and were about to embark on their mission after getting a few last-minute instructions from their leader, an archdemon named Orobas.

Orobas was one of the twenty-three Dukes of Hell, and had been in charge of the Department of Omens, Oracles, and Infernal Utterances through trance psychics of every variety⁹ since the Fall from Heaven. He had a powerfully built human torso with a horse's head and hind-

⁷ *Don't eat dog.* They're cute and loving creatures, and if you eat them you'll go to Hell and end your existence as a pile of hellhound feces.

⁸ Called "pillars of Heaven" in Biblical sources.

⁹ Including but not limited to: psychics, clairvoyants, channels, astral projectionists, scryers, conjurers, sorcerers, mediums, pre-cognitives, ouija boards and the Magic 8-Ball.

quarters, though instead of where his horse's tail should be he has a poisonous snake, which prevents anyone from sneaking up on him from behind. He was one of the few archdemons that didn't have wings, a convenient excuse that made certain he never has to go on the Announcement himself.

The horde quieted down as the Duke of Oracles approached his troops.

Ostensibly, this should be an awesome moment for Orobas; he was sending his legions up to the world of humans to announce the oracles of Armageddon. His problem was he had already been through this part too many times before, way too many to be excited on this occasion. If he were being honest with himself, the whole process had become an aggravating, fruitless exercise. To make matters worse, his legions were cobbled together from the dregs and rejects of other departments.

Orobas looked over his troops with disappointment. Past near-Apocalypses had so drained his forces that hardly one in a hundred were members of his original horde. These new demons weren't even warriors. They were the weak, incompetent fiends other departments could either spare losing or wanted punished.

He tried to make the best of the situation.

"Thou shouldst feel the evil pride of this moment of triumph," Orobas said to the multitude, struggling to add enthusiasm to his voice. Because he was in charge of infernal announcements he was used to speaking in a stylized manner. It also annoyed the crap out of the other demons.

“Many of thee hast never been to the realm of mortals,” he continued, “so thou shouldst feel great recognition for being chosen to go on this mission so indispensable to our victory!”

There were a few weak cheers and yelps from the horde, mixed with a bit of grumbling. Back during the Middle Ages, the Announcement was held much more seriously, by demons, yes, but especially by humans. Most people were far more religious, and could be trusted to freak out when hearing demonic pronouncements. As secularism increased and religion decreased, demons have had a harder job convincing people that their declarations are genuine, rather than the ravings of lunatics. Hollywood films haven’t helped, showing possessed people walking around on ceilings or capable of other fantastic supernatural phenomena. The time was you could convince the village elders to throw a witch into a lake, and regardless of whether she’d drown you’d at least get to kill someone.¹⁰ Now you had to give them a proper show, which took a lot more effort.

Orobas stretched his arms out towards his troops, raising them over his head.

“Thou art to be heralds of Lord Satan’s subjugation of humanity!” he yelled. “So...yeah!”

That was it.

During the first few centuries, his send-off speech was hours long. Now, this was the best he could do.

Mumbling among the rank-and-file of the legion was quickly followed by a scattering of laughter. Not quite the enthusiasm Orobas had wanted.

¹⁰ Back in the day, the belief was if she drowned, she wasn’t a witch, allowing her terrorized family and friends to mourn her as a good person, though dead. If she survived, the well-minded villagers concluded she must have had the help of Satan. The bright side was she avoided being drowned. The downside was she was then burned at the stake.

He tried to make them feel inspired.

“If thou fuckest up, thou shan’t see daylight for the next ten thousand years!”

That’s how a demon inspires his horde. Work incentives just aren’t the way they do things down in Hell. It was effective, shown by the murmuring quieting down. No one wanted to lose their privileges of being allowed Topside every now and again, their only chance of respite during an eternity of damnation.

Privileges in Hell are a funny thing. They don’t work based on merit since that would involve giving other demons credit for good behavior, and that goes against their basic nature. The more powerful a demon is, the more privileges they accumulate.¹¹ In fact, if there were a basic characteristic all demons share with each other it’s that they are “into rebellion,” and don’t particularly like following anyone’s orders, even when commanded by the Devil.

Constant threat of torture and eternal imprisonment in Hell go a long way in compelling demonic obedience, but as can be imagined, only goes so far. Weaker demons are easily controlled, but the more powerful remain unruly and an ongoing nuisance for Management. The result is organization through pain and force against the masses, while they bribe the powerful with offices and positions of status and influence, if possible.

A rustle to the rear of the horde got Orobas’ attention. The demons in the back were peering upwards at something approaching, chattering and making a commotion. They began spreading out to form a wide opening into which landed Athaq, one of the mightiest demons in all of Hell. Nine feet tall and muscular, he looked more like the Devil with his red, smooth skin

¹¹ Read: “stealing, intimidating and hoarding from others.”

rather than another misshapen, toxic-looking demon covered in scabs, pus and burns. He moved casually through the lines of the horde, strolling as if he were in a crowd gathered for a show at a park or shopping at a farmer's market rather than moving through the ranks of a military mobilization.

Of all the mavericks that challenge Hell's authority none are as ungoverned or as feared by the top leadership as much as Athaq, by far the largest, most formidable demon without official rank or station, and unique among the residents of the Inferno as he is unaffiliated with any of Hell's departments, at least at present. He is mighty enough to be a Prince but didn't want the responsibility. No one tells Athaq what to do, since there is no way he was going to follow anyone's orders, and no one is strong enough to force him to do anything against his will. He took his rebellion seriously and was admired accordingly by lesser demons.

A channel to walk opened up before him as he stretched his large wings behind him. He had been one of the most powerful demons in the Department of Pride¹² before deciding to do his own thing, at least according to the stories. No one knew why Satan allowed him to be unaffiliated with any department or lord. But independent he was, causing its fair share of jealousy especially among Hell's nobility, none of whom enjoyed such freedom themselves, not even the Department Heads or Princes. Athaq had no duties and owed no vassalage to any of the Princes of Hell.

The mere fact he has gotten away with doing his own thing gave him a reputation unmatched among demons who, always influenced by power, kowtowed to him like the

¹² Satan's own personal dominion. It was why Athaq shared Satan's smooth, red-skinned appearance. All senior demons in that department look similar. The main difference between them and the Devil is that they're smaller, and they have goat-like horns, while Satan's are massive ram-like horns, representing his greater power.

sycophantic rabble they are. Chattering broke out among the other demons as he made his way up to the front of the horde to where Orobas stood glaring at him with intense dislike.

Following along in Athaq's wake, as always, was the demon Sterculus. He was one of the few demons who didn't fawn all over him, which ironically was one of the main reasons Athaq permitted him to be around, thinking of him like a king's fool. Pride needs challenging to be felt. It's not that he was brave, far from it, he was just too stupid to know when he was in danger, even from Athaq. Plus, Sterculus could take a good beating. Repeated beatings at the hands of Athaq¹³ didn't seem to teach him any better than had damnation to Hell, consistently proving the persistence of idiocy.

However, it was Sterculus's chief talent of causing aggravation that Athaq appreciated so much.

Whenever Sterculus drove other demons over the edge, an all-too common occurrence, Athaq would step in and prevent them from pulling his wings off. Quite simply, Athaq liked a reason to get into a fight tagging along with him annoying others. As the two of them reached the front of the horde they moved to the head of the first battalion.

Orobas cleared his throat, neighing loudly enough to get their attention.

"Oh hey, Orobas, I didn't see you there!" said Sterculus, jumping back in fake surprise.

"Is that a snake coming out of your ass or are you just happy to see us?"

Laughter broke out among the horde assembled close enough to hear. Athaq eyed Orobas for a reaction, but it didn't come.

¹³ Pronounced "Aw-thawk". There are times Sterculus screams it at him pretending to be a bird, thus the beatings.

“Reporting for duty, your Horsey-ness!” Sterculus continued, giving a ridiculously comical salute to Orobas, who pretended to ignore him. Normally he’d tear Sterculus apart for insubordination, but not with Athaq right next to him. The Duke of Hell was well- acquainted with Athaq’s power and penchant for violence.

“What art thou doing here, Athaq?” asked Orobas, trying to keep his voice calm and confident though taken aback by such a dangerous demon. No commander likes to feel challenged or insulted, especially in front of his own troops.

To be continued....