

THE QUARRY

Ark Up

Roger Leigh

Joshua felt like he had sat under this solitary tree forever. He pulled his ragged shawl around himself and lifted his head to listen to the wind howl through the branches. It was his eighth day on field assignment and, much as he enjoyed watching the humans, he was counting the hours until he could shrug off the facade of an old beggar woman and settle into his preferred image—a junior angel ready for promotion (his appearance for most of the last millennium).

As he had done countless times, Joshua returned to base and submitted a banal field report outlining numerous transgressions of God's law. As no one ever commented on his reports, Joshua hoped they were what management wanted. He put the thought that they never read them out of his mind, as he set off to find Patrick.

'Hail Brother Patrick. Verily, there are curious happenings upon the face of the Earth.' Patrick removed his sunglasses and regarded Joshua for a few moments, before addressing the issue head on.

'Why the fuck are you talking like a knob?'

‘Umm, well, I went to a presentation by the archangel on being the best angel you can be. He said God’s advocates should speak graciously one unto another.’ Joshua paused, his lips moving as he reran Gabriel’s words in his head. ‘Oh, and he said swear words were the artifice of the devil.’

‘Gabriel looks and speaks like he’s got a horn shoved up his—’

‘Shhh,’ Joshua twitched, ‘he could be listening.’

‘That prick listening to the conversation of two low class angels is as likely as Lucifer popping up to borrow a box of matches.’ Joshua cringed. Fortunately, Patrick changed tack. ‘Anyway, what about these curious happenings upon the face of the Earth?’

At the viewing portal, Joshua adjusted the settings until they were looking down on a large scrubby plain. Among a grove of olive trees, two men laboured to cut trees into planks.

Shem stood on a massive trunk pushing a saw. At the bottom of the sawpit, Ham stopped pulling the other end to rest his aching shoulders and to watch a pair of rhinoceros beetles amble up the side of the pit. Shem soon became impatient and stomped on the log, creating an avalanche of sawdust. Wiping the dust from his eyes, Ham roared with anger. As he scrambled out of the pit, his brother was already running. Shem ran past a woman, who led a pair of horses straining against the weight of the cord of wood they were towing towards the main construction area, where an old man was nailing planks to a large wooden structure.

‘You dragged me here for a woodwork lesson?’ Patrick stepped away from the portal, his mind already back on the poker game he was setting up in the archive room. He had a special card deck prepared—angels were so trusting.

‘They’re building a boat.’ Joshua took Patrick’s arm and tugged him back.

‘Wow, that’s completely different, to see guys build a boat. Let me get some popcorn—make a night of it.’

‘They’re on top of a mountain.’ That got Patrick’s attention—more a big hill than a mountain, but still. Weird. ‘The old guy said God told him to do it.’

‘Hmm, all communications with humans are entered in the Divine Orders Register.’ Patrick flicked through a volume from a nearby shelf. ‘Here we are... Tired of people’s evil ways... A flood to wipe out all life.... Noah instructed to build an ark to take two of each animal... Stuff about food... The ark to be three hundred cubits long.’

‘What’s a cubit?’

‘Haven’t the foggiest.’ If forced to guess, Patrick was thinking maybe it was the height of the god of love [bizarrely, this is about right].

‘I wonder what the animals make of the arrangement.’ Joshua said—thinking about all the animals that would be the innocent victims of this plan.

‘Hitch a ride with one.’

‘Mindriding. The last angel caught doing that was reincarnated as a dung beetle.’

‘Don’t get caught.’ Patrick shrugged. The strategy had always worked for him.

There was a warren at the edge of the boat building operation. The peace of the rabbits seemed idyllic to Joshua. It would be a pleasant change from being an angel, never knowing if you are good enough. Joshua entered the mind of one of the large buck rabbits. He was shocked by the rabbit’s feelings—not by how alien they were, but how familiar. There was the sense of desire, the need to prove yourself, and the repressed anger. The rabbit unleashed its feelings. It set upon another buck which was probing the territorial boundaries. The fight was brief, but brutal. Joshua sensed the pain as his rabbit was bitten on the shoulder, but in the heat of battle, it fought on, soon inflicting a fierce bite on its foe’s neck—the other buck ran off to lick its wounds.

Joshua entered the mind of a dragonfly jinking back and forth across the surface of a brook. Its thoughts so simple; little more than a set of instructions—flap wings/seek food/eat mosquito/change direction/survive. It was calming for a while, but Joshua soon grew bored.

In the mind of a wolf, Joshua perceived the world through the wolf’s senses. A pale visual framework with objects given form through smell; like a coloured haze associated with each object. Joshua felt the wolf tense. The wolf had found a trail—pale blue vapour weaving through the leaves on the forest floor. The wolf loped around a tree and came face to face with another wolf. The female wolf bared her teeth, but then relaxed and approached.

On his enumerable field assignments, Joshua had seen fornication many times; between people, between animals, and on one occasion between a person and an animal. But he had

never experienced sex. Once the wolf mounted the female, Joshua shared the increasing sense of tension. It felt something like a thunderstorm headache, he thought—there needed to be some release. Then came the release. And then it was over... And Joshua reeled—an angel for centuries and a young wolf could have an experience, a connection, to transcend anything he had felt before.

A little later, a wolf in the distance started the howl. It was taken up by the female wolf. Then Joshua's wolf joined the howl. Joshua felt it become inhabited with a sense of belonging: to its pack; to all the wolves that would join the howl that night; and to those that would join in the future. When Joshua returned to heaven, he didn't know how to feel like an angel anymore.

'He has to be stopped,' he told Patrick as soon as he found him.

'Hello, good to see you too.' Patrick regarded his long-time friend. Joshua was wired. Patrick decided it was best to be calm and humour him. 'Who has to be stopped, mate?'

'God.'

'GOD!' Patrick shouted. 'You mean the, omniscient, omnipresent omnipotent God?'

'Probably also omnivorous.'

'Are you...?' Patrick looked over his shoulder and reduced his volume. 'Are you mad?'

'Are they all evil? All the people? All the children? All the animals? We have to stop this.'

'Jesus! I need a drink,' Patrick said, burying his face in both hands.

'Who's Jesus?'

'I have no idea. It just felt like the right thing to say.'

As Patrick and Joshua set off to find a drink, a group of angels were meeting in secret. Uriel, sculpted and muscular, stood discussing clothes with Raphael, who currently favoured a mature rugged look. He was pleased with the authoritative air his cleft chin gave him. Four

other archangels sat around a large burnished gold table, dissecting last night's intramural football match, while they waited for their final member.

Gabriel strode in, his white robes billowing like the smoke of a forest fire. The members of The Sanctimonium considered themselves a self-managed team. Archangels knew their own mind; they surpassed the need for leadership. Gabriel just surpassed it more than everyone else. He sat at the head of the table.

'I now call the 2,647th meeting of The Sanctimonium to order.'

Alcohol has no effect on angels, so Joshua and Patrick had retired to the mind of one of the Earth's ne'er-do-wells. He was at one of the many bars which were doing a steady trade around the ark's construction site. The locals were mostly farmers and herders. Normally, the highlight of a night's entertainment was taking bets on which goat was going to take a dump next. The construction of the ark was a phenomenon—a once in a lifetime event. See the ark and die.

The angels' host was on his fifth glass of wine. Patrick and Joshua enjoyed the false sense of alcohol-induced wellbeing, while having a place to talk. Their host was dimly aware of their conversation echoing through his mind, but put it down to alcohol-fuelled delusions. In his experience, which was extensive in this area, the hallucinations cleared up after the eighth glass of house red. He focused on reaching this target.

'We must be able to do something that could help us,' said Joshua.

'Well you can talk like a nob.' The angels had no physical form within their host's mind. They couldn't see each other, but Joshua could sense Patrick laughing. Joshua borrowed a small part of their host's mind and imagined a hand, almost clenched into a fist, but for one extended finger.

'You know,' said Patrick, 'I think I preferred the old shy retiring Joshua.' Joshua wondered whether he preferred that Joshua too. That Joshua didn't seem to have quite so much doubt and confusion.

‘The first order of business,’ said Gabriel, once he’d got everyone’s attention, ‘is progress of the Eden II project. An update, Brother Raphael.’ Raphael went to stand up, but Gabriel waved him down. ‘No need for formalities Brother Raphael, we’re all friends here.’ Raphael looked around the unsmiling faces.

‘Thank you, Brother Gabriel, the Eden II project remains on track. The ark is all but complete and we have authorised the mindriding of two of each species, so they can be guided to the ark.’ Raphael paused and shifted in his seat before continuing in a less certain voice. ‘Umm, I was just wondering if we’re sure that God is okay with this?’

‘We’ve been through this.’ Gabriel stared around the rest of the group who avoided his gaze. ‘One more time then. God created Eden—yes?’

‘Yes.’ Raphael voice was little more than a whisper contrasting with Gabriel’s boom.

‘So, God will be happy that we wipe the slate clean and create a new Eden?’

‘Well, I suppose so.’ Gabriel glare could have cut diamond. ‘Yes, of course,’ said Raphael.

‘And The Sanctimonium exists to handle all the trivial details which are beneath God.’ Gabriel spread both arms to embrace all those around the table. The Sanctimonium had, in fact, been created by the archangels following the fall of Eden. The archangels, of course, accepted that God was all-knowing. It was just, well, perhaps he had a blind spot when it came to what made people tick. What with the whole ‘whatever you do, don’t eat the delicious juicy red apple’ debacle.

Over the following centuries, The Sanctimonium had gradually taken over the running of pretty much everything. The only thing which spoiled their absolute control was the way people just kept doing as they pleased, without any regard for the nuisance they caused.

Joshua couldn’t remember whether he or Patrick came up with the idea to enter Noah’s mind. When he did, Joshua looked out through Noah’s eyes at Ham stacking baskets. Noah had put

Ham in charge of beetles, which Ham initially thought would be an easy gig (Shem was mucking out the ruminants). As different beetle species arrived, he put fifty pairs into a basket. He'd admired the iridescent colours of the many species of jewel beetle. When he had fifteen baskets full, he was in awe of their unending variety. Jewel beetles kept coming and soon there were one hundred baskets. Ham despaired of their unending variety.

'Noah! Noah, this is God.' Joshua was shocked by the voice filling Noah's head. But Noah took it in his stride.

'Yes Lord,' Noah said. Ham looked up from the basket he was now filling with blister beetles.

'Is there someone there with you Noah?' said the voice in Noah's head. Joshua kept quiet—something was bothering him about the voice.

'Just my son, Lord.' Noah patted Ham on the shoulder causing him to mishandle one of the blister beetles. It squirted its trademark caustic liquid. He pulled his hand away, dropping the basket and sending coloured ovals across the floor of the ark. As he scabbled to retrieve them, he stepped back turning a yellow and black beetle into a smear across the floor.

'Oh, fuck!' said Ham.

'Who was that?' said the voice. 'Swear words are the artifice of the devil.' And Joshua knew where he had heard the voice before.

'Sorry Lord, it won't happen again,' said Noah. He kicked Ham, then put a finger to his lips.

'Very well,' said the voice of Gabriel. 'It is time to seal up the ark and prepare for the flood.'

Later that evening, Patrick and Joshua watched Ham through the eyes of a stag beetle. Ham had collapsed on his bunk. Baskets of beetles were stacked up against every wall and arrayed around his bed. He tossed and turned; occasionally he moaned. Patrick went to have a look in Ham's mind. He came back quickly.

'His mind's full of beetles—even with his eyes closed, he sees beetles; endless rows of beetles. It's like some sort of psychosis.'

'Beetlemania?' suggested Joshua.

Standing in front of Gabriel's office door, Joshua had played out a hundred different versions of their confrontation—none came close to what followed. Joshua knocked and as soon as he heard an answer, threw the door back on its hinges. He pointed at Gabriel's desk and shouted.

'I know what you've been doing.' The effect was spoiled somewhat when Gabriel responded from an easy chair, way off to Joshua's left.

'You know about The Sanctimonium?' said Gabriel as he stood up.

'The sancti-what?' Joshua paused in the doorway and turned to face Gabriel.

'Don't say you know I've been embezzling from the fallen angels' fund?'

'What... No.' Joshua lowered his outstretched arm.

'Oh God, surely, you haven't found out about the choir boys.'

'Umm...' Joshua felt he should try and take back the initiative. 'I know you've been impersonating God.'

'Oh, that. What of it?'

Joshua made his demand that the plan to wipe out all life on earth must be stopped. Gabriel listened quietly and said he would consider the request. As the door closed against Joshua's back, he wondered if he should have made clear it wasn't really supposed to be a request.

Beneath the Mediterranean, the African tectonic plate drives under its Eurasian cousin as it has for millennia. But now, a massive fault in its surface causes it to stick. Huge stresses build up as Africa continues to move north as inexorably as an HSC student during schoolies week.

The stuck plate snaps free, displacing a volume of water impossible to enumerate in this time before the invention of the Olympic swimming pool. A massive tsunami sweeps outward from the underwater earthquake. As it approaches land, water piles on water forming

a wave one thousand cubits high from horizon to horizon. Where it makes landfall, it smashes all before it, until... It rolls up a large hill, where the ark bobs afloat.

Two angels watch through a portal.

‘Gabriel didn’t change his mind then,’ says Joshua, his face as depressing as a nearly full coffee card for a long defunct café. Patrick adjusts a setting; zooming further out. The wave spreads, eventually devastating an area the size of the Mediterranean.

‘But look, most of the world is untouched. Maybe he did change his mind.’

Joshua is no longer there.

The last of the day’s light leaks from the sky as the wolf lopes up a hill surrounded by the receding floodwater. Under a solitary tree, the wolf sits on its haunches and lifts its head to start the howl. It hears an echo inside its head.

There is always room for one more in the howl.