

## IN THE GARDEN OF BABEL

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Eldria is a technician on a team that has unlocked the secret to prayer. The learning machine has labored for years. It has uttered prayers both ancient and fresh, rote and random, then monitored weather patterns for correlated alterations, then refined the words until more significant results occurred. The majority of testing transpired in an unpopulated region of the Tigris Valley, as a compromise made between the Spiritual Research Initiative and the Governing Ethics Division.

She turns from her desk in her shared workroom at the top of the city's tallest tower made of stem-cell ivory, where the windows look down on the densely populated streets of Babel, and pulls a glass oval from the pocket of her silken beige robe. This everstone, her portable connection to the network, includes her work, news from the city, and communication with her loved ones. She reviews what is written within, her brown fingers curled around its edges: The secret to prayer, unlocked at last. The light shines onto her face with the Holy Words through which no entreaty to God can be denied.

Forty times these words were uttered by the machine, and forty times the weather did exactly as the machine commanded. These are simple Adamic words, in her own language but the original dialect, with specific intonations of invocation. And with this knowledge comes not just the key to unlocking sunny days for festivals but, more importantly, the secrets of the universe.

Eldria does not pray in her workroom. Prayer is sacred, and this True Prayer more so. She places the everstone into her pocket and as she rises, the pain in her joints reminds her that she's having a flare again. She digs her fingernails into her palm. It might be selfish, but maybe while she's at it, she will ask for a cure.

She ventures to the secluded meditation gardens an hour's walk west where she can count on solitude and quiet.

The trees in the garden are in bloom. Ivory baskets hang from the arches and along the walls. Fountains babble and add moisture and coolness to the air. Eldria takes a deep breath and draws in the sacred scent of jasmine.

She has spent many years of hours here, her prayers mostly unanswered. Why was she forced to leave home so young? Why must she work such long hours to feed her children? Why can't the heart of her husband be softened so that he will stop screaming at her? What disease afflicted her with recurring pain that the doctors could not identify or cure? Why is the city filled with the hungry and dying? What is the meaning behind all these tests God keeps sending? How can she alleviate suffering?

Dozens of questions not satisfyingly answered by Adamic priests nor the Books of the Prophets, no, not even by the gentle Book of Eve.

Now she leans her back heavily against a flowered tree, pushing away awareness of ache in her wrists and elbows, gazes into the everstone, and quietly utters words she has memorized. She repeats them, muttered just under her breath, over again until she feels them in her heart. Then she stands straight, looks up, and says them in a clear voice that rings upon the paving stones, brings joy to the bricks of wall and statue, and makes the green plants try in their deep hearts to sing along:

"*Pae lae aell!*" Familiar words with strange pronunciation. Her mind repeats back in a more familiar dialect: Oh God, hear the words of my mouth.

The shape of her lips forms the image of God within her single, slow utterance, until another woman rounds the bend in the garden, skin the color of walnut, trailing a long, glimmering gown that captures each ray of light like a garment of white gems. Her face shines with an aura unseen, and the sun bends knee to sing her praises. Every being in this garden *knows* her.

Eldria forgets herself, forgets her request, forgets the words that have brought her to this point. The everstone drops to the dirt forgotten. She falls to her knees and weeps.

“Mother,” she whispers.

It is the presence of God that she has been promised, yet denied, her whole life. Her tears are for the beauty, but also the frustration that it took decades of research and that this sacred experience is reserved only for her because of her tailored education that allowed her to work on such a project.

There is a finger at her chin, lifting her eyes up to face God.

“Be at peace, daughter. Your faith is great. Let your heart be still.”

Eldria’s worries suddenly feel insignificant. Though her questions still burn, her heart fills with unaccountable joy.

“Faith?” she thinks in automatic, silent challenge. “This is science.”

God answers her thought out loud: “Only faith could keep you and your team working such long hours to accomplish an uncommon feat. Arise and commune with me, friend.”

Eldria senses that she is an equal, that bowing and scraping is a thing of men, not of Mother. She stands and miraculously, her knees do not strain in aching resistance against gravity. She marvels at God’s healing presence. She falls again, into the embrace that is waiting for her.

“How long do I have with you?” is her most pressing thought, and it is answered: “I am with you always.”

She steps back. “How?”

Mother smiles. “I can withhold nothing from you. I know that you seek knowledge, whether you can understand it or not. Today, you will surely know the truth of all things. And though I cannot compel you, I must ask for your help in return.”

“Anything!”

“I need you to save my creation.”

For once, Eldria has experienced a prayer that has not left her empty, unheard, though now she only has more questions. No longer

frustrated, she is filled with excitement, as if the questions themselves are holy benediction.

“I will do what I can, as ever. Mother, I serve you.”

“Then I will tell you how I am always with you and always have been. Because I AM you.”

Eldria blinks. She does not understand.

“Walk with me.”

This walled section of the garden features a sandstone brick walkway in the shape of a figure eight.

“You are an intelligent woman,” Mother begins, “so I will explain how this can be. You must understand if you are to help.” God smiles and Eldria’s heart melts with joy. “I know that you are somewhat familiar with dimensional theory?”

Eldria is, but she is surprised. “Yes, I like to think about dimensions, at least. My everstone contains a toy that computes four- and five-dimensional shapes, which appear in the glass. I try to make sense of the counterintuitive spaces they inhabit, how I can drag them through 3D space and watch them appear or disappear seemingly into nothing.”

“Not nothing. Everything.” Mother stops and takes Eldria’s warm hand in hers, complementary earth shades like a Planting Day festival robe.

Eldria pictures the strange polygons as she has moved them within her everstone before. “Everything?”

“Let’s start with something familiar: awareness of the third dimension.” God lets Eldria’s hand go and takes a few steps forward. Eldria follows. “This dimension, here, space goes up, down, sideways, and moving forward in time. You are trapped in forward motion, seeing reality only in terms of momentary pictures. One frame at a time, you are aware only of each passing second. Your only sense of time is now, along with your fragile memory of what has passed. You cannot remember the future, nor can you alter your course backward.”

“As I have read, time is a dimension.”

“Close. Time is not a dimension itself. The dimension is the space in which each frame of time is stored.”

Eldria’s face twists in confusion.

“If there weren’t space for time to go, objects would bump into each other as time passes.” God moves her hand where Eldria had just been standing. “The fourth dimension is the space where each frame of the entire universe can exist without colliding into itself, past or future.”

Eldria can almost picture it. Like a longloaf of bread cut into slices. Each slice fits on the cutting board the way each moment of time fits into some higher space, a space she cannot sense.

“Yes,” God says, reading her thoughts, “this moment is a thin slice of longloaf, but the entire loaf still exists, the way the entire course of time all exists at once in a complicated shape that fills the fourth dimension.”

A tangle of imagery unrolls in Eldria’s head, as if she can almost grasp what it might look like.

“When you are aware of all dimensions, like I am, you are not limited to this one moment. I can sense this shape, or ‘see’ it if you will. It is the shape of this entire reality and all its times, happening all at once. I can perceive time in this way, when I look upon you from the fifth dimension.”

Eldria realizes why these truths are not described in scripture. Without her scientific education, these concepts would confound her.

God continues, “There is an even higher shape. And that is the shape that contains all possible time-shapes that could ever happen.”

“Wait, there are *more* realities? That theory is true?” Eldria shivers. Her worst fear: parallel dimensions with an infinite number of Eldrias, each forking into a new life at each decision point in the timeline. The thought that she isn’t the only Eldria, that she is one of an infinite more, spins her mind in circles.

What does anything matter then? She isn’t special. She isn’t *really* her. If she is not unique, life has no meaning.

“You may not be ready,” God says gently. There is no hint of judgment in Her voice, only fact. “Be at peace.”

Eldria tries to be ready. She needs and wants to be. This is her one chance. “Tell me.”

“You are not just this Eldria. You are *all* Eldrias. A key section of your genetic code creates a vast shape in five-dimensional space that tunes all the yous together into a single Soul. Your Soul is the being that spans all realities. She and you are one.”

She is the one Eldria? That was less painful. “I am all of those other versions of me?”

“Yes.”

“But . . . why am I only conscious of here, now? What does it matter if we’re all the same being if I can only know this?”

“Because of its three-dimensional shape, your mind on this level is only capable of sensing here and now, along with your limited memories of this life. But there is a shape in those higher dimensions, your Soul, or angel, the shape of all your minds across all realities, which can perceive your full existence, the past, present, and future of all realities.”

Eldria nods, struggling to process. They begin to walk again.

“There is no analogy to fit your experience, but perhaps your awareness is like a toenail. The toenail is only aware of the toe. But it is still part of the woman.” God kicks at a pebble and it bounces down the path, disrupting other pebbles, her toe causing action, reaction.

Eldria furrows her brow. “So there is a version of me that is conscious of all of it? She can see the whole picture?”

“Yes. And just as you are part of her, she is part of me. I am the sum of all souls, across all possible realities, all happening at once, the omniverse. I am God. I am everything. I am you.”

“Then . . .” and this question is impossible to put into words, so she thinks it instead. She feels herself seeing out from her eyes, but then pictures an infinite number of herselfs, each seeing out their own eyes, all at once. “Is that how it is?”

“No. Or perhaps, somewhat. Understand that many of these answers are impossible to convey in human tongue, just as you were unable to speak your question. I would show you, but that would injure your mind. For now, you must try to understand using your three-dimensional senses.”

“Is it that I have to live every life, in sequence, painstaking each step through each existence, until eternity runs out?” There is exhaustion in this thought, but also adventure. All the things she’s wanted to try, all the times she’s pondered about where she’d be if she’d made different choices.

Mother laughs. “Eternity never runs out. That’s the way we all wanted it.”

“Even this? Even the suffering? We wanted this?” Since God appeared, Eldria hasn’t felt the ache like bone rubbing against bone; in all the excitement, she has forgotten about it, or perhaps she has been cured by God’s presence.

But outside the garden, there are the sick, the hungry, the imprisoned, the lonely . . . Pain!

God muses for a moment.

“A parable then, the great teaching tool.” The tenor of God’s voice changes, as if on stage, and She makes grand sweeping motions with Her hands as they walk, as though She could reveal the nature of reality by drawing attention to it.

“Once there was a great queen who possessed magical powers. Anything she wished would happen in an instant. She explored every pleasure known. Day in and day out, she did nothing but whatever she pleased—dancing, music, festivals, sex, intoxication, art, food, company, sightseeing, whatever she wanted.

“Eventually, she had done everything a billion times over, and she grew bored. So one day, she wished for a surprise, just a little one. A moment later, a bird dropped a white mess directly upon her nose, and, startled, she laughed in delight before returning to her wine.

“The next day, she wished for another surprise, so that night, while sleepily dancing as she had a trillion times, she slipped and broke her ankle.

“Filled with joy, and not a little pain, she repeated the wish. Over and over, surprise after surprise, wishing to not know what is going to happen, increasing in elaborateness and frequency, until, at long last, she ended up standing before me today, talking to God.”

Amazement spreads on Eldria’s face as the meaning sinks in.

“You mean . . .”

“This parable is *your* story. This is the story of all human Souls. You are that queen, my sweet Eldria. You can have any wish, and so this life of surprises, this awareness, your sense of this isolated moment where you are blind to the future, this is your wish.”

Eldria thinks to the worst moment of her life, when she felt the most worthless, that day her father forced her to leave home, shoved her stumbling out the front door for the sin of disobedience, after weeks of fighting because she would not attend Sabbath Worship for fear of an Adamic priest there who could not keep his hands to himself. The sting of fear, rejection, abandonment, betrayal of her safety, it stabs her like a knife, as if it had happened yesterday.

She is filled with anger and does not hesitate to test God on this point. “You’re saying I *chose* this suffering? What kind of victim-blaming nons—”

“This and every other moment of every other reality your Soul inhabits. You are living *all* types of lives. Realities in which you live comfortably for hundreds of years, in which you die of starvation as a baby, where you are happy, where you are tortured, where you are powerful, where you weep in the mud and desolation. Across all these lives, in every moment, pleasant or unpleasant, from within your Soul, you have chosen this infinite eternity of surprises.”

“Then why . . . why wouldn’t I snap awake right now in that place where I live best? Why wouldn’t I just run in circles, replaying those happy frames again and again?”



“Because then it wouldn’t be a surprise . . .”

God trails off, stooping to the ground to examine an ant who is tugging at a seed far larger than it. “There is one more reason, if you can handle this truth.”

Eldria takes a deep breath, stands, steps back. A bird swoops down and steals both the seed and the ant.

“In all of those realities where you have no worries . . . you are doing so at someone else’s great expense. In every single one.”

Eldria’s mouth falls open. “I would never—”

“You would. You have committed every sin, an infinite number of times, in an infinite number of ways. You have k—”

Eldria does not want to know it. “I understand. I can’t believe it, but . . . infinite is infinite.”

“More than that, daughter.” Her voice is filled with love, a love that knows no conditions, a love that contains all the knowledge of every horrible thing Eldria has done across the realities, every bad choice, and yet there is only acceptance. No pressure to change, no clicking of the tongue, no furrowed brow of disapproval. The sense of love that fills the air remains. God knows all and accepts all, because She *is* all. Eldria realizes that for God to condemn the lowest action committed by the lowest of people, God would be judging Herself.

God places Her hands on Eldria’s shoulders and looks with deep intent into her eyes. “Child, you are every side of every coin, and every coin that is the edge of every sword.

“You are the person who suffers, but you are also the person who causes suffering. You are the creator and the destroyer, healer and murderer, oppressor and oppressed, the breaker of hearts and the heart who is broken. Your spiritual balance is the average sum of infinity plus infinity.”

God drops Her hands and Eldria looks to the ground. She says in a soft voice, “I choose the suffering, and I choose the beauty.”

“There must needs be opposition in all things. You cannot know the sweet without tasting the bitter.”

“Eden,” Eldria whispers.

God bursts out laughing, then apologizes at Eldria’s hurt look. “I am laughing in surprise. See, this is why I went along with your plan, you children. So that I can be surprised, too.”

“What is funny?”

“That you figured it out. Yes, Eden. That is where it happened. That is where this choice was made.”

“Eve made the choice for all of us?” The Book of Eve left out such details, though its authorship was disputed.

“No, each of you made your own choice, individually, in your own time. Eden is the story of all of you. For Eve, yes, she made it in a garden called Eden. That story is basically true. Even the talking snake. She likes snakes; they give excellent advice.”

As if on cue, a tiny brown serpent gives up its sunning place and silently crosses the path.

“For you, Eldria? You were bathing alone in a marble pool. It is possible to die of boredom. You could have wished yourself out of existence. This was an easy choice for you.”

Eldria thinks about how she sure would love a scented bath in a marble pool. There is a long quiet.

“Speaking of opposition . . .” God prompts.

“Yes. You need help.” If struggle and sin occur down here, it must happen on an epic scale among Souls. Or angels? Are they the same thing? Eldria tries to imagine an interdimensional war and fails.

God follows a sparrow with Her eyes, high up in the clouds. God then faces Eldria. “Sadly, your discovery that summoned me here today, it threatens to destroy this balance I have created within me—that your Soul has created within you.”

Eldria thinks about God looking inside Herself and changing the fundamental rules to accord with the wishes of Her children, as if she herself could alter the course of the blood within her veins.

“Other people will access this True Tongue prayer discovered by your machine. They will know it, and with it can pray for anything, even the impossible, because with God, nothing is impossible.”

God does not need to tell her: They could use it to change the system once again. They could remove free will; they could destroy the surprises. They could even destroy everything.

The weight of these words, *pae lae ael*, sinks into Eldria and she realizes that the parable God told her was, in this moment, quite literal. She can have anything she wants, forever.

They have circled back around and Eldria stoops to pick up her everstone, surprised once again at the absence of pain in her knees.

“How can I help?”

“O God, hear the words of my mouth.” She says it in Eldria’s dialect, an awkward clunky phrase now that she has uttered the true version.

So this is it. In school, the priestesses warned her of godly tests with eternal consequences, yet here it was, manifest. She could use her power of prayer to whisk herself away from all her worries into a land of eternal bliss, or skip all that to save the world by . . . by doing what?

“I could delete the prayer from our systems.”

“Not enough.” She shook Her head. “They will have power over time.”

“I could pray that we never discovered this prayer. Our machine failed before it found the answer, or we didn’t get funding.”

Mother shook Her head again. “They can access other timelines.”

Eldria closes her mouth and thinks hard.

“God, what should I do?”

“There is only one thing you can do: Rewrite the omniverse.”

“Change the rules? Like you did?”

“Like you did. Like we did.”

“Across all realities, all possibilities.” Eldria blinks with determination. “We must remove these words from the Adamic language. No, not

just the words, because other words could be found, synonyms to write a new prayer. No, we have to destroy the language, all of it. Obliterate the words from all minds that have ever lived.”

God nods.

“Including yours.”

Eldria knows that when she destroys the language, she will destroy this prayer. Its power will fail, and she will be left alone to her problems and pain and unanswered questions once more, Mother gone. The idea of that void, now that she has tasted God’s presence, fills her with dread. She yearns to be with Mother forever, instead of that sinking aloneness that has been within her her whole life.

Except not alone. Because God is her, and she is God.

“Can I fly first? Just once?”

Mother knows what she means by the word “fly.”

“You know enough now. I will show you.”

Eldria rises “up,” though “up” is not the right idea, merely a concept she can relate to. “Up” she goes, out of the third dimensional aspect of Reality Number JHB-16475BX9∞R7 into the fifth, where she can see her whole life at once, her body winding like a snake from birth to death, and all within a much larger shape of planet Earth spinning like a spiral pipe throughout time as it orbits a sun, which is also a spiral pipe orbiting the galaxy center, and nothing bumps into anything else, because it moves into a new moment, and there is room for all things to happen all at once without colliding.

She rises further, and she is her Soul, dual awarenesses of Earth-Eldria and Eternal-Eldria merging, the thoughts in her head becoming overwhelming, incomprehensible, burning and searing painfully because they are too big to fit into her small awareness, because all times and all places of her being are trying to fit in her three-dimensional mind. She senses all her other selves everywhere, and there is a desire to descend into any one of them, just to relax from the overwhelming crush of this too-large way of being.

“Goodbye, Mother.” Eldria weeps from a million eyes. A billion times a billion versions of Eldria are suddenly sad without knowing why.

God kisses her on her forehead.

“*Pae lae ael!*” Eldria utters, her mouth a fifth-dimensional shape of vortexes and tesseractes. “O God! Remove these words from all existence. Remove this Adamic language from every time and place. Lift the power from this Pure Prayer. May we forever be cut off from the power to compel God to any action.”

And with that, Eldria is alone in the garden of Babel.

Her heart utters a silent prayer, and it is answered with warmth. There is a connection, soft and sure, not just to God, but also to the beetle that has landed on her wrist, to the olive tree that shades her, to the gardener she can hear working on the other side of the wall, to the people in the city, like so many mustard seeds.

They are all gods, as she is God, and this fills her with purpose. It blunts the pain of absence, because she is not alone.

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