

Twenty

Soot rose from the half dozen candles that illuminated the small cave the lizard called home. Pastor Duane sat in a wicker chair that creaked as he crossed his legs and balanced his coffee mug of Texas moonshine on his naked knee. Shadows wiggling in the dark room, he looked at the lizard stretched out on the matching wicker divan.

“How do I write a sermon?” Pastor Duane said with raised eyebrows as he repeated rhetorically the question that the lizard had just asked. “Well, I sit down with pad and pen and a good mug of the Lord’s firewater,” he winked at the lizard as he lifted the mug off his knee an inch, “and I put into words what my bowels have been telling me all week. The outside world attacks my congregation constantly. They’re told to have sex with abandon and then kill their babies. Even old men are encouraged to take pills to give them weekend erections so they too can have sex with abandon. Meanwhile the government uses their money to buy and send condoms all over the world so everyone can have sex with abandon. So you see, they’re under a great deal of pressure.”

The lizard sat up. “Will you write a sermon for my congregation? They’re under giant pressure.”

“To have sex with abandon?”

“No. Giants.”

“Sex with giants?”

Pastor Duane was convinced he was dead, in Hell, and had just been asked by Satan to write a sermon for his stressed out demons. He knew he should be praying and trying to cast Satan out, but it wasn’t like Satan was

possessing a lizard. He was the lizard. Duane had always been a very adaptable guy, even before he'd discovered the Lord in Starke State Prison in Florida. Being a patron of God had always been about Duane's own success rather than his beliefs. So now that he was already in Hell, he thought, what's wrong with switching sides? Sort of like sex in prison, if he closed his eyes he could imagine he was fucking God.

The lizard leaned forward and touched Duane's leg. "The giants have pressured us for generations. There is a great cavern not far from here that we excavated and where we built our cities. But the giants came and pushed us out. They have crowded us out of what is rightfully ours. I need a sermon that tells of the Nephelim giants going to Hell and of my people's vindication."

"The Nephelim?" Duane repeated. He knew the word from the bible, and it translated several different ways depending on what kind of spin you wanted to give it. The one that Duane favored was where the Nephelim were the offspring from fallen angels getting it on with earth women and they were a race of giants. But only fallen angels like Lucifer got it on with earth women. Good angels didn't have sex.

But how could this be if he was sitting across from Satan? Was there a war in Hell? "Let me get this straight. What's your name?"

"My name is Lieder, as I told you before." One eye looked at the ceiling, watching a bug, the other looked at Duane. "But you were probably still too affected by coming out of the life machine to remember."

"So you're not Satan and this isn't Hell?" he asked, knowing any answer he got, if it came from Satan, couldn't be trusted. But this lizard didn't have any horns, and who was Satan without horns?

The lizard hissed, which Duane was realizing was their equivalent to a cheer. "Ha! If I were Satan I'd have no need of you. I'd smite the giants myself. They are greedy by

nature and soon will be after your kind too. I've been informed by rebels who fight them that the giants hold four of your kind as we speak."

This jarred loose the image of the naked helicopter pilot in the window of the glass tower and he was filled with a sense of déjà vu. Could it be? Was what he saw when he was bodiless real? "Is one of them a blond woman with perky..." he moved his hands in and out in front of his chest. Lieder's eyes rotated in different directions. "Nah, you probably wouldn't understand."

"Yes, one is a female with sinful breasts," Lieder said. He learned to speak English from listening to Pastor Duane's sermons and now he was puzzled. "You are different than in your sermons. It seems that many of the acts you preach against fall heavily on you. Like the earth has caves, you are riddled with sin. I couldn't have chosen a better person to show the Nephelim the way to Hell. You must tell me where it is."

"Tell you where hell is?"

"You sermonize on it so much and speak of sin with such experience I assumed you had spent some time there. You must know where it is."

"Oh yes, of course," he said, thinking of Starke Prison. "A dozen hookers, a gallon of Wild Turkey and we're halfway there." He had no idea what he was saying, but saying no had gotten him nowhere, whereas answering yes had gotten him everywhere, even if one of those places was Starke State Prison in Florida. But that was before he found Jesus and didn't count. He could thank the born again ministries at Starke for that. Since he found Jesus, it was only fair that he find Satan too, and all bets would be off when it came to what he believed in then.

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With the sixth finger of his left hand, the Nephelim scientist, Lugash, picked the remains of his lunch of a rather tasty goat bird from his second row of teeth as he watched the hairless apes investigate the water buckets, soap and towels left in their holding cell. The female broke off a corner of the bar of soap and climbed into one of the buckets. A bucket to Lugash was a tub to her. Oh good, he thought and got comfortable, she knows how to bathe.

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Veronica finished lathering her soapy hair and submerged herself in the tub to rinse. When she finished she swam to the side to check on Arturo who was still hovering over the unconscious form of Jake Stone, international male model.

“I tell ya, Artie--”

“Don’t call me that,” he grumbled, not looking up.

“--if you wake him now, he’ll only be pissed off. Let him sleep off whatever they gave him to knock him out. Either way he’ll have a headache, but at least if you wait, it won’t be so bad. You don’t see me rushing to wake up Bird.”

“That’s different.”

How anyone could have a crush on someone so narcissistic, she couldn’t understand, but she sympathized that the heart led us places that weren’t always in our best interest. “Besides, don’t you want to look your best for him? It may be unrequited love, but being stinky and dirty isn’t going to help.”

He looked up at her. “That’s true,” he said as she tossed him the soap.

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“What selfish animals. Who would want them even as pets?” the matron said as she returned to the laboratory from delivering the water buckets and watched the two conscious hairless apes through the clear wall bathing without waking the others. “I figured the female to only think of herself, but not the ugly small one, too?”

Lugash took his finger out of his mouth. “I think she talked him out of waking them. They’re smarter than we give them credit. Remember that they have quite a bit of our DNA in them.”

“Yes, but they’re more ape than Nephelim.”

“Maybe not. This is over my head. I should probably tell father.”

The matron scrunched up her face at the mention of their father and the Nephelim leader. “That old goat? When was the last time he was of any help?”

“Don’t worry, you don’t have to go. I’ll take it to him.”

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When Jake Stone awoke, he woke from a dead, dreamless sleep. He opened his eyes and was surprised to find himself in a room instead of another cave, and then was even more surprised that someone had taken his clothes and he lay on the warm floor naked. He played possum, not moving, investigating his new surroundings only as far as his eyes could turn in their sockets. He heard water splashing behind him and decided to risk moving his head.

Staring down at him from the rim of a giant bucket was Arturo. The sight of the little coward frolicking in water eased Jake’s fear, only to be replaced by his anger. He stood up, palms pressing against his pounding temples. “Is this some kind of joke, Arturo?” he shouted. “Stealing my clothes so you can get your jollies?”

“It’s nice to see you, too, Jake. So glad you’re safe and alive,” Arturo said, his personal mix of petulance and

arrogance returning with his happiness at being reunited with his friend. Somehow the sight of his cleft chin made him feel that everything would be right once again and they'd be back in New York in no time at all.

Jake squeezed his eyes shut and waved his words away. "Where are my clothes?"

"The giants took them," Arturo answered.

"You see, boy toy," Veronica said as she appeared over the rim of the other giant bucket and swung herself over the side. "Lab bunnies don't need clothes," she said when she landed. "But one of these towels will do." She snatched one off the floor, wrapped it around herself and walked over to Jake. She gave his naked body an up and down look, then sniffed the air. "You better wash while you can. Bathing time around here is a little arbitrary. You never know when that bitch will be back to take the tubs away. It may be any moment, or she may leave them for us to bathe in our own filth for the next several weeks. We have a fourth grader taking care of us."

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With all the data he'd accumulated on the hairless apes stored on a card he held in his hand, Lugash stood at the entrance to his father's chambers. They were high atop the glass needle in its very top. Lugash was rarely unsettled, but an audience with his father was making his upper lip perspire. He wiped it off with his fingertip and waited.

His father was a recluse. It was said that he was so old that he had already had every conversation there was to have and became bored of repeating himself, so he retired to his chambers and hadn't come out since. This was eons ago, and all Lugash knew was that the food that was delivered was eaten, if sparsely, and the serving dishes were left where they were delivered to be taken away.