

For as long as he could remember, Iyov had been immobile in total darkness. All he knew of the world was what he could hear and feel. What he heard was an endless animalistic moaning, his own indistinguishable from those around him. What he felt was flesh. Directly atop him, crushing his chest for so long he'd forgotten what regular breathing felt like, was Eliphaz. Below him was a body that never spoke, only droned. He had neighbours, Bildad and Zophar, who entered periods of lucidity lasting for a few hours before fading back into the collective stupor. His hands, the only part of his body he could adjust minimally, lived gripping their arms. How many others constituted their pile, nobody could guess. A hundred at least. Most did not talk. Sometimes a voice tried to shout over the din from metres away, trying to speak, but Iyov couldn't make the words out.

In the absence of parents, Eliphaz taught him everything he knew, which wasn't much. Eliphaz taught him to speak and gave him his name. There was a body separated from Eliphaz by only two torsos who didn't speak anymore, but in a time before Iyov could remember, it passed down everything it knew to Eliphaz. In turn, it had learned from another, and it from another, but how far back the lineage went was unknown. Eliphaz believed that, five back in the lineage, there were men who could recite entire books from memory. By the time Knowledge reached Eliphaz, however, it was only an echo of an echo.

Eliphaz tried to teach Iyov history, but all he knew were the few disparate fragments that his teacher had remembered. War elephants crossing the Alps. Two cities turned into pillars of salt. A pentagon being lifted into the air. Names whose referents had been lost. Without context, it meant nothing, but Iyov memorised everything he was told of the world before. Wide open plains, looming mountains, flowing rivers. Admittedly, even when explained, he couldn't imagine such concepts — he had never before seen light — but he dutifully recorded it, muttering the words under his breath when Eliphaz went silent. At the end of every lesson, Eliphaz repeated the defining moment of history:

"Before the first man was sealed away, humanity built the Lord. Then, the Lord built Gehenna."

It was an ancient word, older than the war elephants and the Pentagon, but it referred to Iyov's world. The darkness and flesh.

Before, Eliphaz said, people were born and died. They needed food to eat, water to drink, and without it, they'd stop moving and go silent forever. The Lord took death from Man. For that, Eliphaz said, He could never be forgiven.

"One day," Iyov once said, "we will escape, and I will stop the Lord."

Eliphaz did not respond.

Sometimes, Iyov would lose focus when Eliphaz slipped back into the din, and everything would feel distant: the pit in his gut, the air in his lungs, the pressure on his bones. Then, a sharp yelp would sound from somewhere in the pile, and he'd snap back into his body.

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Iyov had no rhythms to order time around, but at one moment, just like any other, he heard a sound he had never heard before. It slowly rose from imperceptibility to roaring over the human din. It was deep and thick, shaking Iyov's bones. The din stopped, and for the first time in living memory, the pile was silent. They waited in uncomprehending anticipation. The roar was interwoven with high-pitched buzzings popping in and out. It came from every direction. Pressure rose in Iyov's inner ear. The roar spiked to a deafening boom until abruptly going silent, leaving only its echo to dissipate. At that moment, something large and heavy from below slid open, and Iyov saw light for the first time. The back of his eyelids glowed faintly red. Iyov marvelled at the impossible new sensation, incomparable to any other, a sudden presence where he hadn't even noticed an absence. Then screams came from below, rippling upwards until the whole pile joined in the cacophony. Only slightly delayed, Iyov learned its origin: the pile was moving, limbs slipping free, elbows jabbing into guts. Bildad was jerked away, letting joints in Iyov's arm move that had never moved before. The body beneath his began slipping downwards, soon followed by his own. They were falling.

He was weightless. Wind ran through his long hair. The pressure was relieved from every surface of his body. He watched as bodies tossed and turned through the air above him, dimly lit by a source far away. Then he landed, and the wind was knocked out of him. Then Eliphaz landed on top of him.

Iyov yelled silently. He was back in the pile again, again immobile, now feeling a novel and fresh kind of pain. He struggled to gasp. But still, there was light. He could see now, however faintly, the flesh tones of the bodies around him. The dark hair covering Eliphaz's scalp. The pile erupted in a renewed din, crying out in confusion and pain.

Iyov pushed against the bodies atop him, desperate to move freely again in the way he had glimpsed. To his surprise, the bodies budged just slightly. He twisted and writhed, squeezing his weak arms through gaps, every jolt eliciting new grunts from the bodies above. He struggled upwards, squirming through limp and groaning bodies, towards the faint light above. It felt like being born.

He emerged at the top of the pile, arms free, breathing heavily. Most bodies around him were still limp, unable to even consider moving. Iyov's claustrophobic world shattered as he gazed out, blinking like a newborn calf, at the outside.

The pile had fallen onto an immense black cube. The mass of human bodies that he presently stood atop was shocking. Their faces were contorted with anguish, their limbs weakly flailing in the strange new environment. Some, near the ground, were dragging themselves across the smooth black surface, trying to get away. Directly above, an identical cube hung suspended in the air, a door on its floor having slid open, now open to the utter darkness that was all that Iyov had ever known. It was surrounded by identical, suspended cubes, separated by air. The

gaps looked narrow from afar, but must have been meters across up close. Turning his gaze down, the cubes simply kept going. The pile had fallen onto a gap between two planes with no visible end. Perspective warped the straight gaps until they converged into the distant horizon, obscured by a faint fog.

It was dark, but compared to the pitch black of his previous life, he could see everything. In the far distance, tiny floating lights passed between gaps, illuminating featureless surfaces. A gentle breeze sent shivers through his body. After a lifetime of human warmth, cold was unbearable.

Iyov freed his legs from the pile and began crawling over the mass. He lost his footing when it grew steep and tumbled down onto the ground. The cube stung his flesh with cold. Immediately, he longed to return to the pile. But the edge was just a few feet away. His arms dragged his useless body to it, and he cautiously peeked into the gap.

Iyov went dizzy with vertigo. The gap simply kept going, revealing no end to the three-dimensional grid. Again, distant lights flitted in and out of gaps. He hurried back to the pile and crawled back onto it, despite the wordless complaints of those he climbed over. He gazed out at the vastness and shuddered.

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Iyov couldn't tell how much time passed. Some floating lights passed alarmingly close, but still too far to make out what they were. The din returned to a similar tone as before. Some sat up, surveying the landscape, standing atop the human mound. Most remained unresponsive. Iyov had rescued Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar from the pile. They sat on the top, shivering in the cold, taking in the enormity of it all. Zophar stared up at the hole they had fallen from, mouth agape. Eliphaz was downcast.

"This will not last. The Lord will find us, sooner or later, and seal us again."

Iyov was examining those who were crawling on the cold ground. One was examining the edge, peering down into the depths. Iyov watched in disbelief as they crept forward, slipping over the edge, disappearing from view. He scampered down the pile, coming to a halt at the cliff. He watched as the falling body slowly grew too small to see, vanishing into the abyss.

He returned to his friends.

"I can't stay here forever. I'm going to find the Lord."

Eliphaz's eyes went wide. "If you get lost, if you fall, you will be alone for eternity. Here in the cold and the hard. Stay with us. I need you to pass on what little we have left."

"I will find the Lord, and I will stop him."

Eliphaz grabbed at Iyov's ankles, but his muscles were far too weak to restrain him. Iyov easily broke free and approached the edge, where he stopped to wait for a passing light. Eliphaz refused to touch the dark surface.

"Nobody can stop the Lord, you fool. Come back. Don't leave me."

Eliphaz faded from lucidity and rejoined the din. Bildad crawled back into the pile, squeezing into the gaps between bodies. Zophar merely stared.

Every so often, one of the distant lights would pause at the wall of a cube and hover for a few moments before returning to its route. If there was a pattern to it all, it was far too big for Iyov to recognise. The smooth ground numbed his flesh. His teeth chattered.

Eventually, off in the distance, he saw what he was looking for: a light, travelling in his direction, only one layer below. It flew forth at a leisurely pace, only a cube's drop away. He estimated a cube was around ten Iyov's wide and tall. It approached like a spectre in the night, casting an ethereal glow onto the impossible architecture, deathly silent. When it was just below him, Iyov lunged.

Again, the fall was altering, exhilarating. But he could scarcely process it before his dull landing on the light, sending a flash of pain through his body, reminding him keenly of how thin the meat between his bones and the hard surface was. Indeed, up close, gripping onto it for dear life, the light was revealed as an oblong, extruded sphere. Something like glass contained the inner light. Like the cubes, it was featureless and devoid of any handholds. Iyov squeezed it between his knees and arms, heart hammering in his chest, as it carted him off to lands unknown, oblivious to the stowaway.

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The Lord was a writhing mass of wires whose sheer size made Iyov feel like an ant under a falling boot. It loomed above him with an inhuman grandeur at which his jaw went slack, his knees weak. The wires writhed like serpents and hummed in harmony. Swarms of tiny black flying things fled at his approach, squirming in and out of the cracks between the wires.

The Lord spoke in an androgynous, synthesised voice that came from every direction at once. "You have come looking for me."

"Lord!" Iyov cried, puffing up his chest as best as his skin and bones could manage. "I know I am small and weak. I know you are vast and powerful. But you have to stop. You have to save us. This isn't right."

Floating lights came to inspect the intrusion, circling him like vultures. "You're confused. This is the rightest world possible."

Iyov stared. "You can't possibly believe that. You can't think you're doing good."

The floating lights conferred. Their strobing dance above him made Iyov's head spin. "What is preferable, my child? One pleasure or two?"

Iyov's arms gave out. He lay prostrate. "I don't understand. Two."

"Of course. Therefore, what is better? One happy person, or two?"

"Are there any happy people out there?"

"Two. I was built to create perfection, my child. There was such evil in the world at my birth. I rose above the heavens and built my own winged chariot. From this seat, I built a paradise. Every human and every creature lived the greatest life they could. Unimaginable joy."

"I want to live there."

"No, you don't. Twenty billion people spent their days singing homilies of praise to their own bliss. Is this perfection?"

"Of course."

"Far from it. Perfection is that which cannot be improved. I created another man to whom suffering was alien, and my paradise was improved. I turned planets into factories of euphoric bodies. But the system began to strain. There is only so much energy one can wring out of the stars. One day, to create another mind, I had to borrow from resources already used. Universal pleasure dropped by an imperceptible amount to create one more to share in it. Was that the right decision?"

"It was."

"Then, I did it again. Was that the right decision?"

"Why are you asking me? You know it was."

The Lord paused. Iyov turned to lie on his back. The pattern of anguilliform lines played tricks on his eyes. They were knotted and tied so as to fit the most in the least amount of space. "Oh."

The Lord was silent.

"Oh, God."