

Metaphysical Insurance Claim 0075A:

The Delphic Oracle

By

Lancelot Schaubert

&

Alexander Sirkman

Every year prior to the year in question, the city-state of Oracle Hill had a birth rate of 0 due to a populace of monks and nuns; but in the year of our Delphic Oracle 3034, the birth rate grew to 1. The mother was a virgin nun, the child a complication. As you know, an immediate filing by... someone... for payout to the Pontificate and Council of Blue Jays for our Accidental Virgin Birth policy required our investigation, report and adjustment, but all that in mind we deliver it to you, James. I know it's your cousin and all we're talking about here, but... I mean... you asked, particularly because of that anonymous enrollment and anonymous filing in a rather recent and obscure department within Oracle Hill. This is what we found.

Messrs. Sirkman and I, heretofore denominated as "Lance", went down to see what we would see. Having the both of us penned an adjustment report for the policy taken (pre-humously) by both Brothers Jack, we had settled down for a long winter's nap¹. When out on the Stations arose such a scandal, we sprang from our rest to see what was mishandled. To Auld Imitation we hopped like two hares, shewed up in St. Cephas's 'round evening prayer.²

Ahem.³ Our apologies.

At the end of the day, we two merely hoped to save money for our burgeoning insurance float. Mind you, prior to our involvement the insurance industry had gone the way of all things in the Actualization Station since the war. The structure of civil society might have shattered, but we're doing our derndest to bring insurance back in full force — at least in a metaphysical way — and some submissions require inspection for proof of payout. Our specialty is the weirder sort of case involved in the Actualization Station: accidental life after death insurance, leaky umbrella insurance, multiple cured cancers that keep manifesting as uncured cancers insurance, I'm-completely-healthy-and-have-no-tragedies-but-may-one-day-long-to-die-and-taste-the-

¹ Alex having donned his kerchief, and Lance his cap.

² Apologies, once again, it seems like I — Lance — forgot to take my pill for this bout of Theodor Seuss Geisellschaft Syndrome. Symptoms include random bursts of anapestic tetrameter and spontaneous fuzzy red and white striped hats, as well as occasional inflammation of anti-communist arms race sentiments.

³ Further apologies, once more again - being of a suprametaphysical nature our substance inheres in a pataphysical substratum, and we are accordingly prone to seasonal and existential allergies. These attacks are generally mild and manageable, but we will on occasion have a need to clear our minds; we hope you will not be offended by the concept of the sound of throat clearing.

sweet-sweet-tang-of-the-abyss insurance, life-by-stabbing insurance, death-by-conception insurance (or the related, and ever popular, inconvenient orgasm insurance), immunity from immunity from immunity from pre-existing immuno-compromised *insurance* insurance, forged death, forged life, forged forgery⁴), death by forge, life by forge, and forged forge (more of a blacksmith thing, that). Oh, and of course four forge and forged forge ago our forgefathers....

AHEM. Anyways.⁵

En route⁶ we both found ourselves rather enamored by how much of Oracle Hill could be seen from nearly every point in the city, rather unlike the tall gray grass that grew ever higher in this particular Station's "New York City." Alex, who had pulled his luscious red strings back with a bit of stretchy twine, mumbled under the fog of his glasses, "Seems they moved the hill since last time."

"You were here?" Lance asked.

"Member once I showed up on that jutting headland by the shore? The fruitless sea?"

Lance said, "In your first flush of manhood: your rich, dark hair waving about you, purple robe on your strong shoulders."

"This hoodie?" He held up his sleeves with an awkwardly cross-handed pinch. And held up his wispy red-blondish hair. "This hair?"

"Uh. Right. Right. Rich purple *hoodie* on your strong shoulders. Lovely yellow locks."

"Red. Strong?" He squeezed his own arms. "Yes, sure, sure. *Strong*. Well these Tyrsenian pirates on a well-floored timber tub, miserable doom of the world's wine-stained bathtub ahead of us, it was mostly about them."

"What did they do?" Lance asked.

"Kinda grabbed me. You know. Sneak attack." He poked at his co-writer, co-adjudicator. "*Yah. Yah*. Made these goofy signals to one another, anyone could read right through them, but they still grabbed me."

"Why?"

"Thought I was some sort of son of some heaven-teated lord. Withed me."⁷

"Yeah that didn't hold," Lance said.

"Nah," Alex agreed.

"What, they want to sell you or something?"

"Yah," Alex said, opening up a warehouse-sized bag full of his brother's hyper-spicy dried fish snacks.

Lance wrinkled his nose, but accepted one to... try.

"The helmsman really got onto them for it, once the bonds fell. He said something like, 'Madmen! What god have you bound, so strong?' Or something. He didn't think the ship could carry me."

"That dummy. You're just a man."

⁴ That is to say: despite other indications or beliefs it's just the real thing you bought, not a forgery at all - particularly helpful in complicated capers.

⁵ Don't ask me about raccoon-on-ship insurance, please. For the love of all that is good and holy. Trash panda payout is the worst, particularly in a space station.

⁶ Mid-descent from our final hop, falling at terminal velocity from a very great height, just as we caught a particularly lovely sunrise over the hill and a thermal on descent. Only time either of us could be properly described as "hawkish"

⁷ Now you'll need to listen carefully to how "withed" is pronounced in your mind while reading, for clarity's sake.*

*And for the love of all that is good Scotch.^

^And the claret.

Alex looked down and patted his belly, saying, “Of a sort, of a sort... a bit more gravitas than I’d like, though.”

“Go easy on yourself.”

Alex shrugged and smiled his fellowship smile. “They didn’t think I looked like them, so I had to be a god or devil or something.”

“In a way,” Lance said.

“Enough with that author stuff. Consensus spoke amongst them, and so twas true.”

Lance rolled his eyes.

Alex rolled his back.

Both smiled.

Alex said, “Well they thought they needed a bigger boat for me anyways, didn’t want me stirring up the waters. Hoist sail and caught all sheets. Bound for Egypt.”

“You mean that both ways,” Lance said, and winked.

“Oooh lah lah.”

Lance winced, foiled by his own naive boldness. “No, not like that. Not all *three* ways.”

Alex shrugged, noncommittal..

“What did you do?”

“Made it rain fragrant sweet wine. Sort of heavenly smell. Vine on the mainsail, twisting about the mast, heavy fruited, lovely piece of work. Pirates saw it and half begged me to make landfall.”

“Yeah? So you just... went along with that?”

Alex laughed and moved his head vaguely up and down, then looked around awkwardly. “Yes, I may... have... not.”

“You didn’t.”

“Well you only get a good chance to turn into a lion so many times, in our profession,” Alex said.

“So yeah, I roared. A bit.”

“The bear?”

“Okay. I may have also summoned that one great shaggy bear I favor, complete with the dingleberry dreadlocks. They all crowded at the far end then leapt into the sea.”

Lance shook his hobbit locks, then said, “And *then* you left them alone?”

Alex sipped his coffee, and set the mug down out of scene., where it spilled all over the red drapes between death and life from the last story⁸ He looked over the rim of his glasses, left and then right, then left again - then up, and then directly at Lance. “I... I may have turned them all into, you know... dolphins.”

“What?!”

Alex shrugged. “I left them a prophecy! I promised it would get better!”

“Alex.”

“And uh, right, I also turned the mast and oars into snakes...might have also summoned a satyr to play a really loud flute the size and shape of a giant bong.”

“A didgeridoo?”

⁸ Obviously, there was no convenient place to put it while dropping towards Oracle Hill from thousands of miles up in the air. Would you prefer your coffee spilled all over nondescript white room ether? *W/e*, at least, try to keep that our white room ether clean for the incoming dead and dreamers.

“May have been a bassoon, or a contrabassoon? Whichever can exist safely on this plane.” Alex eyed Lance.

“What?”

“Like that time you engorged that bassoon to be taller than the conceptual height limit of that indigenous people group?”

“You said you wanted to get higher than sky.”

“Not like that, doofus.”

Lance shrugged. “Same same. Bassoon, Didgeridoo. Bong. Bricks higher than height itself.”

“Huh. So yeah, there’s a bunch of dolphins swimming around Oracle Hill who probably remember their former lives as pirates, sapience being what it isn’t. I didn’t think much about it until now.”

“Why’s that matter?”

“I think that’s why they moved the whole hill,” Alex said, pointing.

In centuries past, the hill had been laid up with annoying ramparts built of bricks shaped like thickened matzoh loaves. So, so many of them stacked. That’s how Lance thought of it: a ramp of stone crackers that, if seized slowly by a huge infantry, would turn quickly into a mossed landslide. Alex didn’t think of matzoh at all. He thought it looked more like someone had painted grey clay bookspines stacked sideways to make a mossy cave wall that would slick out from under you any second. There were, somewhere in the stations, castles built of books, and crackers, and all sorts of things . It was that sort of existence.

But on closer inspection - yes, it seemed as if the hill had occupied more space in the bay, extending out a bit from where the docks were stationed: you could see places through the clean and turquoise water where the marble support pillars might have gone.

They needed to meet James, first, and commit to discovering why the adjustment was filed and by whom. Luckily the docks of the Tyrsenian coast ran right up next to the south side of the books-no-clay-bricks-no-wait-its-old-thick-matzoh ramparts of the city-state of Oracle Hill.⁹² Alex and Lance walked up to the edge of pier three³¹⁰ and poked their heads over the edge. There floated a dolphin, waiting patiently.

“Woop,” Alex said.

Lance smiled. “Hello James.”

“Mr. Schaubert,” said the dolphin named James, then looked to Alex. “Master Sirkman.”

“Crap,” Alex said again. “He speaks Narrative. Oh nooo.”

Lance laughed. “You summoned us here for an insurance adjustment report?”

The dolphin clicked a whole bunch in rapid succession and nodded as well as flippers and a delphic body could nod. “Yes,” he said. “I need you to fill out the claim and put it on paper.” He hissed a bit, laughed a cackle, and said, “Sealed.”

“Sincerely le séala céir,” Lance said. “Got it. Why?”

⁹ We should specify here: this is *Oracle* hill, not *Auricle* hill. The *Auricle* lived on a very small hill and showed up in another adjustment report of ours. He’s a frat bro type — sort of the universal receiver to the universal stater of most oracles. The *Auricle* tends to listen to providentially keystone statements of others, how others prophecy accidentally about their own futures, and then tends to say something like, “Totally” or “Bro” or “I know, man, right?”

¹⁰ It’s a magic number.

James said, “Why I care doesn’t matter. Didn’t you fill out paperwork for a policy here for an accidental virgin birth?”

Alex pulled out his well-loved soft leathern briefcase, pulled out the file in question, flipped a couple of pages in his well-ordered files, looked up. “We had one, but the only thing we have is this region, this city-state represented. We don’t have a name for the policy holder. We also don’t have a name for the filer.”

“Yes, but a celibate nun *is pregnant*.”

Alex and Lance looked at each other. Lance looked back to the dolphin. “Are you sure?”

The dolphin said, “Check the birth rates for Oracle Hill this year.”

Lance pulled out his gilded gyrocompass and checked.

The compass spoke. It had the voice of a dragon surrounded by books. “The birth rate for Oracle Hill during the current year in your local spacetime coordinates is zero.”

“And the year before?” the dolphin asked.

Lance went to open his mouth — folks never hijack his compass.

But the compass said, “Zero.”

The dolphin opened its mouth.

Lance cut it off. “Have there ever been births here?”

“Not yet,” the compass said and then sarcastically added, “Do *you* expect a positive birthrate from a bunch of eunuchs and celibate nuns?”

“What do you know, you’re just a compass,” Lance said.

“No I’m not. You should know that, of all people.”

Lance harrumphed and raised his eyebrow, then whispered to the dolphin, “Are we quite sure they’re *all* celibate?”

Alex perked up, eyes wide, and said, “Ooooooh, naughty naughty.”

The dolphin... can dolphins shrug? Especially when surrounded by so much seaweed in the place where the shoulders should have gone? “I doubt it, otherwise why would you show up?”

Lance said, “To prove it wasn’t a virgin who conceived. We do like keeping our insurance float uncashed.”

The dolphin looked left, at Lance.

Lance looked right, at Alex.

Alex looked right at the dolphin.

The dolphin looked right, at Alex.

Alex looked at Lance, to his right.

Lance looked at the dolphin. “Ah. To the alleged virgin, then.”

They left.

It's a rather difficult thing to get inside Oracle Hill unsuspected. Fortunately for us, we looked like two cheap dates on an even cheaper tourism visit into Oracle Hill proper. They passed us through... well a set of mental detectors — they went off when any kind of malign soul seemed to be armed with some measure of metaphysical weapon. Magic, more or less, though how the detectors worked none could tell us properly. Lance and Alex made their way through the stone arches of the mental detectors, both of which had been covered in some measure of mossy sandstone. Or some other yellow stone, anyways. It all stood out against the low sky of that high hill in the midst of the city-state. It felt oppressive, in a way, at least to Lance: knowing they didn't know who had filed the policy. Or really who asked for them to fill out the report — who had filed the claim. No closer, it felt... it just all felt odd. Typically they *knew* these things, how had they even gotten the thing to pass through their system at all? "Hey Alex?"

"Yeah?"

"Doesn't list a filer or a snitch?"

"Nope."

Lance thought for a moment and watched how certain stones, rounded out like little mixing bowls, had benefited from the swish of dripping water over years of coastal rains. They benefited uniquely from their position. Or had special drawbacks from it. "Who's the beneficiary?"

"Good question," Alex said. He rifled through the papers and the backlog of text, deeper and deeper, until he found it nestled smack dab somewhere between the beginning and the end. "Looks like the pontiffs and bluejays and abbesses."

"Of Oracle Hill?"

"Yessm."

"Is it possible that Oracle Hill took out the policy anonymously in case they ever had a nun go rogue and get pregnant?"

Alex looked at the payout. His eyes bugged out of his head. "Yes. But then they'd have to prove it was a virgin birth."

"Or cover up the guy who got her pregnant?"

"Or kill him?" Alex asked.

"We looking at a murder here?" Lance asked. "Gosh that would be awful." And Lance wondered, looking at it all standing out that way — so many ossified sandcastles in the bare sky — whether it would be better to just file the report and be done with it. Or if it would be better to truly uncover who took out the policy in the first place. And why? He had a hunch that both were the same man or group of men, but he couldn't quite figure out which of these folks really worried about it.

They both passed through the second round of mental detectors — that had this black monviso finish to them, gilded slate bricks now and again shining forth from the otherwise well-masoned archway. Even in just looking at those, Lance wondered what would happen to him — or... *one*, rather — who didn't take care of all of their magical artifacts whilst passing through.

Bad bad tings.

Oh yah bad, man.

Some crotchety old man-sized pigeon with half a foot and even less tail feathers stopped and frisked him while he gave both some onomatopoeic resistance — "Ehhhhaya" — and wondered again: policy filer or snitch? Someone *wanted* Oracle Hill to benefit from the presence of a... well at least an alleged virgin birth. Someone in Oracle Hill. And someone had snitched that the virgin birth might (or might not?) fulfill their policy. But they had no record of either.

“We really need to work on our records,” Lance said.

“You’re telling me,” Alex said. “My day job is—“

“Writing, I know.”

“No my day job of my day job: the paralegal stuff. I sort out people’s disorder so much every day that I need to hire an assistant for my own.”

“Tell me about it,” Lance said. “I married an administrative assistant and it’s still a schaubert’s kids have a no schaus situation.”

“Good thing you’re a Broganer.”

“Aurelius. And Broganer’s kids have no brogs.”

“Same difference,” Alex said. “Frogger has no frogs.”

“That’s how you lose that game,” Lance said. “Anyways, snitch or filer?”

“Por que no los dos?”

“Because they might not be the same person. I’m leaning towards finding the filer,” Lance said. “Snitches get stitches.”

Alex snorted. “Or maybe they get us the info we need to prove it’s just some nun that had repressed desires.”

“Repression isn’t a thing. Depression from overindulgence is.”

“Ah,” Alex said. “Good thing neither of us know anything about *that* either.”

Lance stuck his finger in his mouth, in his ear, then said, “It’s about thirty degrees o’clock. Let’s go meet this lady and shoot for the filer.”

“Not the one who snitched, not the one who benefits, but whoever took out the policy in the first place?” Alex asked.

Lance shrugged. “Why not?”

Sometimes places like that feel so thoroughly planned out you wonder if they were over engineered for and by some great ancient cyborg intent on destroying the access humans have to the place. Other times you wonder if it's possible for buildings to sort of grow like so many mushrooms on the wet, dark, southron side of an oak — wending and sending out its spores until the original stone hollows out to some shape that, though clearly seasonal, yet distinct and connected. In the Americas, the closest thing you see to that is the sprawling nature of country churches that never quite anticipated turning into megachurches and so as the needs and modernizations of the original chapel expands — first to include a baptistry, then a back room to change for the sake of using the baptistry, then a rectory, then a fellowship hall and, to facilitate using said hall, a foyer, a wedding chapel off to the side, oh wait, also another set of bathrooms, a doubling of office space, then classrooms, children's, youth, a second place to eat, a second set of classrooms, a third, then a massive gymnasium, an upstairs for youth, another set of completely unnecessary classrooms, another upstairs *vaguely* connected to the second, a subbasement for storing creepy passion play props, and whoops: a remodeling of children's to stave off abuse. Imagine that, but over centuries. And it incorporates tombs for unknown soldiers of the divine, catacombs. It includes an art gallery for years of iconography and tourism shops that affix themselves to the great ship of faith like so many barnacles that, however many times you scrape them off (whether with a turning of tables or a reformation and conciliar concessions) you never quite get them to *stay* off the hull. It includes an entire courtyard designed on the diamond ratio (quite better, in the end, than the golden ratio) and another set of chapels just for private viewing of the staff. Also a whole sweet of interconnected sculpture halls complete segregated from the... oh right I forgot to mention the abbeys and cloisters where the playful pray and prayerful play. There's like ten more food courts and another thirty prayer alcoves and a whole back office where the janitorial and security forces tell the sort of stories they believe would make the priests blush (until they realize that the nature of confession means that 90% of priests have heard ten or twenty stories that would make the most rakish violent hooker blush).

Anyways, it sprawls and interconnects: it's sort of a hive of hives that, rather than war, have reached something like a coequal stasis.

The nature of that design kept Lance and Alex lost. They could have consulted their compasses. They could have asked someone. They could have looked at the map James himself had drawn him with his cute little dolphin nose. They did none of these things because both of them liked the nature of getting lost and finding your way out again. Rather dangerous way to live one's life, but pilgrimage always has its rewards and blessed are they who set their hearts upon it (though it can be rather chaotic for the characters who live in worlds founded by two eternal pilgrims).

Thrice they found themselves accidentally joining the same set of wandering tourists (a couple of fat ones in bright floral button-ups and boring-colored shorts, a couple of skinny ones with bob cuts in maudlin maroon drapes, a couple that looked as if they'd sprouted straight out of a bog), who were asking the same set of wandering questions (would you use a print of this in the living room? I don't quite like his post-Somno period, do you? Bro check out the waaaaves, see?). And getting asked to interject or, in one particularly unwelcome welcoming, what they were doing for dinner and where?

They ignored all of this and, with two bathroom breaks and a mid-tour espresso and cheese (for Alex) and crappy crackers (for Lance), found an open backdoor that blended in perfectly with one particularly obtuse painting of philosophers and theologians pointing at various details in a polymorphic polyfaunic spree. Through that door they came into a janitorial closet. Alex nicked a set of keys that, at least in his mind, could open any door on the planet and, to Lance's mind, therefore made it real. (For Alex, he'd have

to convince a few more characters who would agree, in the locked room in question, that the keys could do just that). Because of that, he passed the keys to Lance, who stuck them into the cover of a book that had a keyhole to some old door depicted on the spine. It didn't yield at first, so Lance picked an older key and jammed it in. The thing rammed home, turned true, and the whole bookcase — lost and found from various tourists, academics, priests, and special forces agents — opened to reveal the library of one of the inner monasteries.

One of the janitors who witnessed this divine apparatus dropped his jaw so wide that two great globules of spittle lolly gagged clean out and into the mop bucket.

Ploop.

Bloop.

Alex went up to the first contemplative he could find standing before the blessed sacrament and said, "Excuse me sir, I don't mean to divert your devout, but can you show me to the ladies's room?"

The monk, whose eyes had been closed and back rigid with kneeling, went wide-eyed and bent slack, arms spread in shock.

"He doesn't mean restroom," Lance said. "He means the room of ladies doing what you're doing?"

"Particularly midwives?" Alex added.

The monk came back to full consciousness and speech. "Why would Oracle Hill have a birthing ward?"

Alex looked at Lance.

Lance blushed a bit and said, "Ignore that. Where are the nuns gathered?"

"Which ones?" the monk asked.

Lance thought for a moment. The odds of a virgin birth from a menopausal woman — a barren womb rejoicing at the same time as having some sort of miraculous conception, sans man — seemed thin, though certainly possible. It seemed to him, however, that this wasn't the sort of story he and Alex were in the middle of, or that their authorial persons *per se* weren't in the business of telling at present. "The younger nuns," he said. "The youngest of the bunch, but full nuns."

The monk squeezed together his eyebrows skeptically and then said, "If you follow this hall, you'll come to an exit. If you turn left, you'll leave this conjunction of abbey and cloister. But—"

Alex said, "We don't—"

"*But if,*" the monk continued doggedly, "you pass around the shared fountain, the one with the mosaic around its pool and the two angels riding dolphins—"

Here Alex raised his brows.

"—you'll come to an identical ingress to the egress you left. Here is the cloister for the younger nuns, led in fact by some elders. Though why you would want this information makes me think I should tell my Abbot."

Lance said, "Trust us."

"I don't."

"Okay," Lance said, "but I'm going to tell you anyways I don't plan anything nefarious. We simply need to ask a few questions to protect a young woman."

Alex flinched. That wasn't *entirely* true, but true enough.

The monk looked to them both and couldn't quite parse the nuanced conflict between them. Instead he said, "I'll give you an hour at least before I make up my mind whether to tell him or not."

"Fair," Lance said.

Alex said, "Lessgo."

They wandered through the most awkwardly placed stone hallway — and stones in a hallway — Lance had seen, truly a Ship of Theseus sort of hallway, every stone replaced and even those replacements replaced until the hall had grown like you'd expect the inside of a Japanese maple to appear. After having passed several oak-timbered doors with cast iron hardware threatening to fall or fall apart, they came to the fountain. The light from the setting sun came in clean through the porthole in the main entrance door in beams separated by so many iron bars. Those hit mirrors of green and gold and indigo, splaying so many rainbows through the room. They ignored it and Lance pulled out the keys to open the door to the cloister.

Alex, ever so gently and genteelly, placed his paw on the armed keyring and added pressure until the weight of his arm forced Lance to let the ring and hand hang limp at his side. Then he lifted the selfsame paw and rapped thrice and a double tapped at the end of the set. Then waited patiently.

Lance, meanwhile, not only tapped his foot, but shifted his weight — ankle, other ankle — rocked his pronated hips back and forth (tight flexers, loose glutes), shifting the pains in his spine towards other pains.

After half and half again so many eternal purgations, the door opened to reveal the nastiest old crone of a woman. She said in a voice like the daintiest honeysuckle hummingbird, “Hile and hardy men, may I help either of you?”

Alex hesitated then.

Lance took over and said, “We’re here to attend the pregnant young woman.”

The abbess blushed. “Whatever do you mean? Oracle Hill has had a birthrate of zero every year since its inception.”

“Operative word is *has*,” Lance said. “And I don’t think one conception automatically negates its intended inception. May we come inside?”

She looked at Alex’s hoodie, looked at Lance’s goofy three-piece and bare feet, looked over their shoulders to the closed egress behind them, the closed door to their left — her right — and waved them in with a whispered, “*Hurry hurry burry, dears.*”

They followed her through an almost identical twisted tunnel, this one made not of yellowed stone, but rather of a greener mossed cobble. They heard sounds in some of the chapels that sounded... well... almost erotic in nature.

Alex couldn’t help but peek in one of the grates. He saw only nuns rapt in prayer. “What the...?”

Lance said, “You really should read more sixteenth century prayer manuals.”

“A...apparently?” He pushed passed his co-writer, co-adjudicator, and the silence of parallel rooms. They came to a small antechamber whose other end had been sealed off with hastily laid brown brick. Before them stretched out on a bed lay a young woman, not only pregnant but pregnant to bursting: the baby completely dropped, headfirst in shape as if to crown soon. She was covered by a sheet — thank God — but, though clearly in pain of early labor, she looked far more pleased than the other, elder nuns around her.

A nearby archbishop was finishing up an interrogation of how — *how* — she possibly could have been so dull as to impregnate herself. And he was demanding answers as to which nun, which priest, had betrayed both her and his holy orders.

She insisted in her native tongue that she had slept with no man.

“This is ridiculous,” the archbishop said to her and then added, “I refuse to believe this.”

“You already do,” she said of his own faith and nodded to the icon on wall. “You just find it easier to believe it happened back then than you do that it still happens now.”

He scoffed and sputtered and, though he did not spit on her, sprayed a bit of spittle in his fluster. Some tarnished the gilded necklace that lay upon his turquoise vestments, adding weird concave and convex effects to the vestments and necklaces themselves. He turned, as if for the first time, and said, “What is a man doing here? Why two?”

Lance didn’t hesitate to say, “We were about to ask you the same thing, father.”

“Who are you! I demand you tell me why you are here?”

“Honestly?” Lance asked.

He nodded. His chains shook.

Alex said, “Mr. Cobbler’s Son and I are insurance adjustors for a metaphysical insurance company. We’re here to investigate the report of a claim against an accidental virgin birth insurance policy.”

The archbishop said, “You actually sell insurance against this sort of thing happening?”

“Exclusively,” Lance said.

More than the presence of a potential miracle, it seemed that his shook the faith of the father further. “How can you verify?”

“That’s our job. You’ll need to grant us exclusive rights to bring in the proper personelle trained in this sort of thing to verify. But yes, if we can verify it’s truly happening, that the child is born alive, and so forth...”

“What if we want to terminate the child?” The archbishop asked.

The room went very, very still.

The young girl, who had been silent as other men decided her fate, said, “Oh like hell. You will NOT take my baby.” It almost sounded like a growl.

“Uh, right,” the archbishop said. “Of course not. Forgot myself.” And he looked up to Lance and Alex awkwardly.

The other nuns stared that the man: his vestments seemed to have desaturated in the evening light.

The archbishop said, “Why would I want to help you verify? Why not hide the child so that he can grow up here?”

Alex said, “Sort of a raised by wolves story?”

Lance laughed and then said, “Easy.”

The archbishop ignored this and stamped his foot and said, “Well? Why should Oracle Hill help?”

“Because,” Lance said, “Oracle Hill is the beneficiary of this policy.”

The archbishop said, “What do you mean?”

“If this poor nun—“ he pointed to the gorgeous young girl in pain ”—is indeed pregnant, a virgin, and delivers her baby, the full and no adjustments to that effect can be assessed, the full amount of the payout goes to Oracle Hill?”

The archbishop said, “If word of this gets out, it could damage us ten times over. How much we talking?”

“About an order of magnitude.”

“Order of magnitude of what?” The archbishop said.

“Oracle Hills.”

He stopped dead.

The room went rather still.

The nuns looked at one another, him, he them, they all looked at the two insurance adjusters.

He said, “Excuse me, but do you expect me to believe you’ll pay out *ten* full values of the city state of Oracle Hill, a city state several millennia in the making and preserving?”

“Correct,” Alex said.

“How?”

“Whatever currency you prefer,” Lance said. “We pay in dollars, euro, plumbum, narrative arcs—“

“No, I mean, how could you possibly have that much money? That’s inconceivable?”

“We have a rather large float,” Lance said simply.

That a payout of that size meant absolutely nothing to this insurance man shook his faith further. Or perhaps — perhaps — even expanded it. He looked out the window to where a mysterious starling landed. The bird, extinct in almost every timeline and habitat in The Vale or the Stations, startled him. He looked back and said, “Who do you need?”

They didn’t wait to answer the man, Lance simply went to work opening a tunnel in the floor with a cobblestone compass while Alex did a similar thing getting the nuns to agree — in faith — that a portal existed in the middle air of the room. Lance’s elemental tunnel brought forth a South Korean OBGYN from his hometown. Alex’s brought another from Columbia University. Together the women agreed that yes, in fact, the hymen was intact — a miracle in itself when they found out the other piece. For the Columbia doctor had brought along an ultrasound having been prepared for this particular contingency. Before they could apply the ultrasound, however, the poor girl started to shout out in the pangs of late stage labor. No anesthetic. Nothing but breathing and squatting around the room. It freaked the lot of them out, but it carried on.

And it didn’t last long compared to Lance’s own bride, whose labor had lasted three days. It went quick as a pistol shot.

The baby didn’t cry though.

The archbishop gasped, worried that it had died.

But it clicked instead.

They all looked down to realize the nun had given birth to an infant dolphin.

“James,” Alex said back at the docs. The nun was with them, holding her dolphin baby in swimming clothes. “What happened?”

“Remember the prophecy you gave us?” The pirate-turned dolphin asked. He was surrounded by roughly a hundred pirates-turned-dolphins.

Alex sighed and said, “Vaguely?”

The dolphin’s eyes went green and hazy and the waters turned to ink as he said, “*The Oracle Hill virgin shall be with child and it shall be a dolphin savior, the dead pirate captain reborn through wombroving. On his return the dolphins shall become the pirates again.*”

Lance said, “You didn’t. That dead guy in the Lamentation Station was really the same dead pirate captain?”

“Mayhap,” Alex said.

“So he just had to learn to wombrove to a virgin? To conceive of himself in a virgin womb?”

“Mayhap,” Alex said again.

Lance sighed. “So who took out the policy?”

“I did,” James said.

“Wait, what?”

“Well you know,” James said, “if our only real shot of being pirates again was this virgin born dolphin, I didn’t want some religious system screwing it up.”

Lance laughed.

“You know they could have aborted the baby or something, once they found out what it was. So I took out a policy that would benefit them directly through the preservation of the baby. Only had to wait then for our Captain to get it right.”

The baby dolphin, having wombroved, was already growing to full size.

“Fine,” Alex said. “Count it fulfilled.”

A hundred dolphins turned, at once, into naked pirates. Some of them weighed down with their absurdist gaudy jewelry and neckwear and hats and boots and pantaloons tried — very hard — not to drown immediately.

Alex looked at Lance and said, “What?”

“I just can’t believe you went with the virgin birth prophecy.”

Alex said, “I mean, how was I supposed to know it’d work? There’s virgin birth stories in like every culture ever.”

Lance said, “People forget that myths are arts. That myths are the art of imaginative symbols, combined. We have entered more deeply than they into the Eleusinian Mysteries and have passed a higher grade, where gate within gate guarded the wisdom of Orpheus. We know the meaning of all the myths. We know the last secret revealed to the perfect initiate. And it is not the voice of a priest or a prophet saying ‘These things are.’ It is the voice of a dreamer and an idealist crying, ‘Why cannot these things be?’ The place that the shepherds found was not an academy or an abstract republic, it was not a place of myths allegorised or dissected or explained or explained away. It was a place of dreams come true. Since that hour no mythologies have been made in the world. Mythology is a search. Myths came with the pirates, philosophy with the philosophers, prophecy with the prophets. All that remains is for all three to merge here in an actual, historical event: mythology, philosophy, prophecy are all sad. But when they merge and all come true, what happens?”

They looked at the pirates.

The pirates were happy, throwing gold around and dancing in and out of the water with the otherwise baffled nun, now holding the captain to whom she'd given birth.

The delphic pirate named James walked up to the nun.

"James?!" the new mother asked in half horror and half delight. "We thought you died!"

"Hey cous."

"Women give birth every year to the lineage of mankind," Lance said. "The moment we short circuit that process in the history of our world, something else happens entirely to those caught up inside the story. The philosophers and prophets and mythologists suddenly agree on the high story of history."

“See there?” Alex asked, “Consensus? Totally a thing. All the pirates *agreed* the prophecy was true, believed in it so much that they manifested it into the world somehow.”

“Oh come on,” Lance said. “You’re the narrator of their world. The moment you gave them a final cause and said that this would happen, it was bound to happen one way or another. In fact, had I been a character in your story, I totally would have bet on it happening because the over-under on it would make it probably the most undervalued surefire bet in that entire story. Whatever else would happen, *it was almost guaranteed* a pirate-dolphin would be born of a virgin. All the friends were there to witness it, see?”

The pirates all nodded their heads, coin and teeth necklaces clattering and clanging with the nodding. They acted, to be honest, much more like a class of toddlers than they did like a crowd of pirates.

“Could it be either?” Alex said. “Consensus of characters or the authorial intention?”

“Only insofar as authorial intention happens higher than my utmost heights and deeper than my inmost depths: at the finest motes of the being of any given character, their consensus depends on the author.”

“That’s not fair, you cheated,” Alex said.

“How?”

“You wrapped my idea *into* your idea.”

“Well it’s that or the other way around. I like mine better.”

And so forth.