

God's Middle Managers

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(Cover art by Gary L.M. Martin too!)

PROLOGUE

The fog was especially thick 20 miles east of Lawrence, Kansas.

Hepatitis smiled. People thought of angels, or servants of the Lord, as capable of performing great miracles, parting seas and smiting enemies. But the Lord's mid-level servants, or shepherds, or *middle managers*, as they were sometimes endearingly called, acted in more *subtle* ways. They left the big splashy miracles to senior management. *Very* senior.

Hepatitis admired his handiwork as he looked at the cars piled up in the middle of the highway. One, two three, four... twenty three. There were twenty three cars crashed together, with at least two dozen inhabitants in various states of living, or dying. *Not bad for thirty seconds of work.*

Of course, this was nothing but a morsel for Hepatitis. That was the problem with perpetuating the greatest genocides in history. It became increasingly harder and harder to top oneself. Hepatitis had helped cause the death of six million Jews in the Holocaust, the death of more than fifty million people in Mao's Great Leap Forward (how Hepatitis loved that name! How he so ruefully wished he had thought of it himself!), and another fifty million deaths (or so) in the Black Plague (which, if it happened today, certainly could never be called *black!*).

Hepatitis hadn't actually murdered the Jews himself; nor had he actually starved the peasants of China, nor caused the rats to breed during the Black Plague. But he had whispered in Hitler's ear about how Jews would make the perfect scapegoats for the newly empowered Reich; and he had whispered in Mao's ears how socialist paradises didn't come on the cheap and you couldn't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs; and he had encouraged merchant ships to trade far and wide, spreading their wares all over the world... as well as the Black Plague.

But those days of easily committing mass murder were behind him. Society had become more civilized, less outwardly aggressive, and yet... the fundamental nature of man (and woman!) had not changed. It never did. Humanity dressed itself up and made itself look more presentable, but it never fundamentally changed. And so Hepatitis was able to find other means to achieve his ends.

Hepatitis looked at the scene of the massive car crash and noticed one woman who had been half thrown through the windshield of her car. She was a slender blonde, in her mid thirties, with small but shapely titties. Quite attractive, really. Her face was bruised and bloody. *Dead, surely dead.*

The woman moaned.

Not dead.

She opened her eyes painfully.

"Help... help me," she murmured, groaning again.

Hepatitis smiled at her.

"Win... Winston," she gasped, and closed her eyes and lay still.

Hepatitis touched her neck. She really was dead this time.

Winston. That must have been her husband. The dying often spoke of the ones they loved. Love seemed to be the last thing they grasped before they tumbled over the edge.

Hepatitis casually kicked one of the car doors, making a dent in it, which was not a surprise, since cars were now made of paperite.

An expert panel of climate scientists in the World Government Science Directorate had determined that the mini-fusion reactors in grav cars were contributing to man-made Temperature Change. Man-made Temperature Change, an idea which had not been created by Hepatitis but which *had* been fostered and nurtured by him, was the theory that industrialization was causing the temperature to change. Naturally, this was utter foolishness. The waxing and waning of the ice ages had produced much more radical temperature changes than anything the Earth had experienced since industrialization began.

The first step, then, was to rewrite history. Hepatitis whispered in the ear of influential educators, politicians, and media figures. Before long the climate history of the planet was rewritten. It became an accepted fact that before industrialization, the temperature on the planet was a near constant 72 degrees. Anyone who challenged that was labeled a "temperature denier".

The next step was to create a more sinister explanation for the natural variations in weather. Attention needed to be diverted from the most logical explanation for variations in the temperature, perfectly natural variations in the heat that emanated from the Sun. In fact until the population was reeducated it was a widely accepted fact that variations in the Sun's caloric output was the cause of all temperature variations on the Earth. But the truth would not do, not for what Hepatitis had in mind.

And so, in an astonishingly short period of time, history and climatology were completely rewritten, and it became an established fact that industrialization was the major cause of temperature change. No coherent theory was ever established to explain this connection, and in fact none was needed. All people needed to know was that "99%" of "climate experts" all agreed that industrialization was the cause of Temperature Change, and that radical action was needed to fix it-- taxes, regulations, and restrictions of freedoms, all of which served Hepatitis's ends.

One of those regulations had been a requirement that gravcar minifusion reactors emit less and less heat in the generation of energy used to propel them. In order for the minifusion reactors to generate less heat, they had to generate less energy. In order to generate less energy, cars had to weigh less and less. Metal came to be replaced by plastic and then plastizine; and as the restrictions by the World Government Climate Commissars became ever more stringent, plastizine was replaced by paperite.

Paperite. A remarkably lightweight substance, and ideal for reducing the weight of gravcars. Unfortunately, when gravcars crashed into something solid, like a tree or a truck, they tended to crumble. In fact, they were so pliable that they could crumble just by pushing on them, which pleased auto body repair workers to no end. But that also meant that the number of deaths on the road quadrupled within the first three years after the new mileage standards were put into place.

Hepatitis smiled. But it was all for a good cause. Creating a healthier and cleaner environment. *Among other things.*

Hepatitis was still admiring his handiwork when two people appeared out of thin air. One of them was a voluptuous redhead with large breasts. She was wearing a sheer white body suit which revealed all. The other was a young man with dark hair, wearing a brown shirt and pants.

The woman got down on bended knee in front of Hepatitis and bowed her head, followed a second later by the young man. "My Lord," she said.

"Rise, Tish," said Hepatitis.

The young woman stood up, followed by the man. "Your apprentice?" Hepatitis inquired.

"Yes," said Tish, smiling nervously. "His name is Crosis."

"It's an honor to meet you, sir," said the young man.

"My Lord," said Tish, her eyes narrowing.

"My Lord," Crosis repeated.

Hepatitis looked from one to the other without expression. "What news do you have for me?"

"One of the upper level supervisors is Moving On," said Tish, barely restraining the enthusiasm in her voice.

"Wilfred?" said Hepatitis. It was about time.

"Abigail Franks."

"Abigail," said Hepatitis, looking distant.

"My Lord, you have been nominated to take her place!" said Tish.

"Have I?" said Hepatitis.

"Yes!" said Tish. "My Lord," she quickly added.

Hepatitis looked back at the car crashes, and the bodies. He sensed something. He turned to Crosis. "What do you think of my handiwork?"

Crosis swallowed heavily. "It... it is impressive... My Lord."

"Impressive," said Hepatitis. He stared at Crosis coldly. "No. That's not what you're thinking. You're appalled, aren't you?"

"I... I just don't understand why people have to die to achieve progress," said Crosis nervously. He risked a glance at Tish, but she was carefully looking away.

Hepatitis put a friendly arm around Crosis. "People are always dying and progress, my friend, always requires sacrifices. Without it, there can be no progress." He started walking with Crosis, and suddenly the environment changed. They were walking in the air among dark, swirling clouds. In the distance they could see stars, galaxies. And in the center of it was a swirling black hole. It could only be made out by the various shades of blackness, and the lights just beyond the event horizon. The black hole was oh so very far away, but even at this distance, it looked awesomely majestic.

But blocking their view of the center of the black hole was a door. A plain wooden door.

Crosis panicked as Hepatitis walked him to it. "I did everything she said!"

"You did everything she said," Hepatitis repeated, as he kept walking with his arm around him.

"I completed my training!"

"You completed your training," Hepatitis agreed, opening the door. They were briefly buffeted by a cold wind. And then, beyond it, they could see the eye of the black hole. Dark, malevolent, cold and waiting.

"Please, show mercy!" said Crosis.

"Mercy... of course, said Hepatitis. There was a cold pause, and then Hepatitis leaned forward and kissed Crosis on the lips. Crosis struggled for a moment before giving into it. When Hepatitis pulled back, Crosis seemed more relaxed.

"Better?" Hepatitis asked.

Crosis nodded.

"Good," said Hepatitis, kicking Crosis in the ass and sending him sprawling through the doorway. Crosis screamed, and his body rapidly became a diminishing dot, and he was gone.

Crosis turned to Tish, who made sure to stand absolutely still, her arms at her sides. "You'll have to train another."

"Of course, My Lord."

"Choose more wisely, next time."

"Y-yes, My Lord."

Hepatitis closed the door with a slam, and Tish breathed a sigh of relief.

"Tell me," said Hepatitis, putting an arm around Tish's shoulder. "Are there any other candidates for the supervisorship?"

"One," said Tish. "Someone named Miles Collins."

"Miles Collins?" Hepatitis stopped and looked at her. "I don't believe I know that name."

"You wouldn't. He isn't dead," said Tish.

"Not yet," Hepatitis smiled.