

LAST DAY OF THE MILLENNIUM

As Satan advanced toward the temple, the noise of his endless troops drowning out the sounds of nature, God Himself seemed to allow Rayford to stand taller than he had in centuries. It was as if he were a young man again, and he longed to join his Savior on the front lines. He was aware that his friends also stood tall beside him, eager, anticipating, knowing the side of the righteous would prevail.

*Despite all the attacks of the evil one throughout the aeons of time, his efforts were doomed to an ill end. And as Rayford Steele and his compatriots looked on—all of them sinners redeemed by the blood of the Lamb who sat on the throne—Jesus rose to face His challenger for one last time.
The Alpha and Omega, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Lion of Judah, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, the Rock, the Savior, the Christ stood in the courtyard of His temple.*

Satan, silenced for a thousand years, shrieked, "Charge!"

Jesus responded quietly, "I AM WHO I AM."

And with that, the clouds rolled back and the heavens opened, and orange and yellow and red mountains of white-hot, roiling flames burst forth. Satan's entire throng—men, women, weapons, everything—was vaporized in an instant, leaving around the holy mountain a ring of ash that soon wafted away in the breeze.

Satan looked about him and slowly lowered his sword. He appeared to have something to say and even drew breath to say it, but he fell silent.

And Jesus spoke. "You, O evil one, were once full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God. I established you; you were on the holy mountain of God. You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you. You became filled with violence, and you sinned. Worse, you led countless others to unbelief. Therefore I cast you as a profane thing out of the mountain of God. Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. You defiled your sanctuaries by the multitude of your iniquities. All who knew you among the peoples are astonished at you; you have become a horror, and shall be no more forever."

Satan dropped his sword and fell shuddering to his knees.

Jesus merely lifted a hand and opened His palm. A seam in the cosmos opened before Satan. Flames and black smoke poured from where the Beast and the False Prophet writhed on their knees screaming, "Jesus is Lord!"

Satan cried out, "Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord!"

Jesus closed His fingers and Satan was thrown into the abyss, the seam sealing to muffle the screams of the three who would be tormented day and night forever and ever in the lake of fire and brimstone.

Suddenly Rayford got an idea of what it had been like for Irene and Raymie to be raptured. He

found himself lifted from the veranda, muscle and flesh and hair restored to the way he had looked and felt at about age thirty. His clothes had been exchanged for a gleaming white robe, and as he and all his friends and loved ones ascended through the ceiling and the roof and flew toward the holy mountain, Rayford knew from his depths that his mind, too, had finally been glorified.

The only thing that mattered now was to praise and glorify Jesus, the lover and Savior of his soul. As he and the billions who had lived through the Millennium ascended, he saw descending the most beautiful and massive foursquare city of transparent gold, so stunning that Rayford knew his finite mind would never have been able to take it in.

As the elect and redeemed of the ages happily gathered in the new Jerusalem, they watched in awe as the final resurrection occurred below them. From every nook and cranny on the earth and from the seas and below the earth came the bodies of all the men and women in history who had died outside of Christ.

And descending from the heavens came Jesus, sitting on a great white throne. With the saints above Him and the resurrected dead amassed in the heavens around Him, the very earth and sky flew from Him. Fire from the heavens and from within the earth ignited the globe, and in a flash it was incinerated and blown into tiny flaming particles that hurtled through space.

Rayford now understood the Scriptures that foretold of this great judgment, as below him he saw the dead, small and great, standing before Jesus. These were those whom, according to Revelation 20:5, "did not live again until the thousand years were finished." As the Bible had foretold, the sea had given up the dead who were in it, and "Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them." All these billions of the sinful dead now resurrected stood in shame before Jesus. Rayford worshiped with all who had escaped this fateful hour.

Arrayed before Jesus were three great books: the Book of Life, containing the name of every person who had ever lived; the Book of Works, containing every righteous or evil deed they ever committed; and the Lamb's Book of Life, containing only those who had trusted in Christ for their salvation. Rayford's glorified mind allowed him to understand that he was, of course, listed in the Book of Life, but he had been forgiven for any misdeed associated with his name in the Book of Works. And that he and everyone with him in the beautiful city of God were listed in the Lamb's Book of Life, while all the desolate souls hovering about the throne were not.

What a contrast! Everyone with Rayford had longed to see Jesus and lived for the day they would be with Him in paradise. Those waiting for judgment looked as if they dreaded even looking at Him, as if they would have given anything to be anywhere else in the universe.

In his new state, Rayford also instinctively understood God's economy of time. Dealing fairly with that massive throng for even just a few minutes each would take—in the earthly measure of time—millions of years. But to God, a thousand years is as a day and a day as a thousand years. The Lord somehow dealt with each person individually, calling out his or her sins and transgressions and assigning punishment—all would suffer in the lake of fire, but some worse than others, such as those scoffers who had led others astray, especially children. Yet in what seemed a matter of moments, it was over. The unbelieving dead had been judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. Then Jesus cast Death and Hades

into the lake of fire, and all not found written in the Lamb's Book of Life were cast into the lake of fire.

Rayford had the feeling that the many verdicts he had just heard would have horrified him in the old days. And yet now, hearing the offenses of those who had rejected and rejected and rejected the One who was "not willing that any should perish" and seeing Jesus' own tears as He pronounced the sentences, Rayford understood as never before that Jesus sent no one to hell. They chose their own paths.

Now, with the earth and its atmosphere obliterated by fire and the wicked dead banished to the lake of fire for all eternity, all that remained was the new Jerusalem and Jesus on His throne. And in an instant Jesus created an entirely new earth, onto which the Holy City descended.

Suddenly Rayford saw what John the revelator had seen more than three millennia before: a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. There was no more sea. A loud voice from heaven said, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

Then Jesus said from the throne, "Behold, I make all things new. It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone."

Jesus stood and faced the billions of believers, stretched wide His arms, and announced, "You chose to believe in Me and accept My death on the cross for your sins. My resurrection from the dead proved this sacrifice was acceptable to My Father. Therefore, on the basis of your faith, I invite you into the eternal city the Father and I have been preparing for you."

Rayford hardly knew where to look. Below him was the new earth, majestic, endless, beautiful, as the original Garden of Eden must have looked. And all around him the great city bore the very glory of God. Her light was like a most precious jasper stone, clear as crystal. She had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west.

The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The city was laid out as a square, its length as great as its breadth. The wall was of jasper, and the city was pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of the wall were adorned with all kinds of precious stones. The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street was also pure gold, like transparent glass.

There was no temple in it, and Rayford knew why. The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb were its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon, for there would be no more night, no need for a lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God, the Lamb, would be the light.

The only residents of the new heaven and new earth were those written in the Lamb's Book of

Life. And they would reign forever and ever.

Graduate Mischlitt, you have observed the Last Battle, from the perspective of a believer, with the most accurate reconstruction available from historical and prophetic documents, within the limits of this equipment. The playback has been sped up and slowed down depending on assumed temporal perception of the viewpoint subject. Medical note: The sensations of flying and bliss were neurochemically induced, and in order to prevent addiction, will not be available again should you ask for a replay. Prompt?"

Mischlitt disconnected the audio jack that went from her spinal tap to the testing station, and only then took off the VR helmet - despite many years of neurointegration research, nothing artificial still beat the Mk1 eyeball, and neurolinks were still slow enough that a fast typist with a decent touchpad would still beat one. The equipment was actually quite fancy by Academy standards - like most things, it had been designed to last a thousand years, although much less time remained on the clock when it had been built.

The cadet - graduate, she corrected herself, this last exam's results only mattering in the event of an emergency - passed over the next selection, experiencing the same simulated event from the perspective of a nonbeliever. Wanting to get the worst over with first, she had opted to start with that experience. The interface was antiquated - a Z-machine straight out of ancient Infocom games on top of some form of Linux user layer itself running on top of a MSDOS kernel - but Mischlitt was used to it, and skipped the selection menu entirely.

"System, PLAY BACK the Omega's history, FROM the BEGINNING" she typed in, commands capitalizing as they were identified. "Give me the STRATEGIC VIEW, and ZOOM IN when I indicate it."

The VR helmet came back on, this time in 2D mode. Mischlitt settled in. Being aware that one's reactions, including the preferred viewing order, constituted part of the exam didn't make it any less nerve-wracking.

"The Omega system was established in 883, and increased in complexity sufficiently to develop quasi-sentience in 885. In 900, sufficient personnel was brought together by the Omega's coordination system to indicate the need for a global strategy layer. Playback begins."

Year: 901

Research programs in progress: None

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 9, Omega 1

Teams under control: Temple ?32?, TOL 27, Omega 3

The Omega has three cabals at their disposal. Their heuristics decide to begin subverting a TOL base, and beginning weapons research, splitting their effort equally.

One cabal begins work on subverting Osaze (formerly Egypt), by simply pointing out the obvious - that the New Jerusalem government is trying to destroy what little is left of an ancient and respected culture. They travel to neglected museums in Europe and America and repatriate what's left of ancient artefacts.

It will take 4 more years of efforts to be able to launch an attempt to take control of the regional government. However, since the Omega's cabal is coordinating their actions from the local TOL base, they effectively end up operating the installation.

Another cabal is tasked with rediscovering ancient nuclear secrets. Unfortunately, they do not get very far at all; nuclear physics may simply no longer work, or much of the underlying science is no longer understandable.

It would take at least 10 years to even be able to arrive at any practical results; even then, at least one base will have to work exclusively for the cabals involved for 2 years just to mine the ore. The cabal is aware of the fact that a simpler weapon was once built which did not require much in the way of advanced engineering, just a lot of unsafe mining.

One cabal must maintain the Omega's systems, sensor networks, and assist in operating the logistics functions that are their official mandate. Two are available for covert action.

This looks like that one really old HAMURABI videogame. Mischlitt thought. The system must

have been really primitive back then.

Year: 902

Research programs in progress: None

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 9, Omega 1

Teams under control: Temple ?32?, TOL 27, Omega 3

The Omega has three cabals at their disposal. The decision to split their efforts has proven damaging: neither manages to accomplish any of their objectives. They scour the Thousand Oaks Library for leads on nuclear weapon, but find that little of any usefulness from an engineering perspective has survived. In addition, their propaganda efforts in Osaze are met with general disinterest - the territory, like the rest of the world, is at peace and barely anyone remembers the old Divine punishment. However, this cabal is successful in repatriating various Pharaonic artifacts from various museums across the world, largely because they are not particularly secured or attended. The Omega have little to show for a year's activity.

And so begins the Omega's unlucky streak, Mischlitt thought. I wonder if it has to do with the fact that they are trying to go against God Himself...

Year: 903

Research programs in progress: MEC (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 9, Omega 1

Teams under control: Temple ?32?, TOL 27, Omega 3

The Omega has three cabals at their disposal. One of them is used to make sure The Other Light has no complaints about the Omega's nominal task as a logistics computer, while two are available for covert action. They are dispatched to assist Tree Of Life's metabolic extension efforts; by what is perceived by the Transcranial Oblique Lateral workgroup as a stroke of luck, but is in fact the result of a lot of iterative trial-and-error involving the sacrifice of various unwilling candidates with unique brains, some progress is finally made.

That their researchers would be able to achieve some results is an even bigger surprise.

After a few regrettable failures during the first five months, it becomes possible to properly resuscitate, rather than just reanimate, those who just drop dead when they reach age 100. This is an involved procedure, requiring among other things, a secondary heart to keep the blood flowing when the primary fails, removal of the test subject's ability to feel pain by careful neurosurgery (the first technical success reported experiencing the pain of Hell regardless of physical situation, and shot himself) and the replacement of a few vital organs. Unfortunately, the early successes are due to the subjects' resilience more than the skill of Omega's teams; it will take significantly longer work to be able to do this reliably. As it is, the first prototype, Quinn, is bulky, and cannot pass as human to any but the most cursory examination.

Nevertheless, the technology is extremely promising: this new version of the revenants is largely in possession of their mental faculties, although they end up emotionally stunted by their inability to feel pain or touch.

The Omega's sysadmins need to decide on a direction - either embrace the bulkiness with a modular design that takes a person's vital organs and puts them into a large mechanical frame, or improve finesse so as to obtain an infiltrator that can pass as human.

Either way, the electronic and mechanical systems within the revenant will need periodic maintenance.

As it stands, the prototype has the disadvantages of both options; fortunately, she can be upgraded. For now, it does mean that the Omega have one agent that is immune to being eliminated by Divine fiat, since the Divine elimination has already happened in their case.

To start her second life, the prototype is going through TOL's porn archive at an accelerated rate.

Performing reflection on the Omega's own system shows that they were not designed to be sentient; it happened by the effort of two particularly dedicated coders, one of which has since died and one of which has converted to Christianity (and heterosexuality) and is now enjoying moderate success as a dairy farmer.

Coupled with the Omega's recent work in robotics, it becomes evident that they should eventually be able to collect their artificial mind in one spot, rather than the current disparate collection of TOL servers, and provide themselves with a physical body. Of course, this has advantages and disadvantages. The main disadvantage is that it would make them vulnerable; their consciousness is distributed across 10 data centers in TOL bases, and can lose up to 5 without being impaired.

The cabal tasked with maintaining the Omega's system is beginning to treat them as a superior being, especially after they've led their workers to defeat death itself, at least partially. At this stage, the Omega's heuristics must either encourage or discourage their system administrators to worship them.

Despite the recent crimes against nature, intelligence survey shows that the world so far is still largely unaware of the Omega's activities.

Ah, yes. The Metabolic Extension Controller. It used to be a propaganda tool, but all it ever managed to do until this point was create Haitian-style zombies, Mischlitt thought. Strange that a meth head would be the first real success. Her brain must have been very plastic in order to keep functioning at all, that's probably why...

Year: 904

Research programs in progress: MEC (2/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 9, Omega 1

Teams under control: Temple ?32?, TOL 26, Omega 3

The Omega has three cabals at their disposal. One of them is used to make sure The Other Light has no complaints about the Omega's nominal task as a logistics computer, while two are available for covert action. They encourage the MEC program to split from the rest of Tree Of Life, bringing it under the Omega's control. There has only been one complete success so far, but the number of partial successes increases, showing that Quinn is not a fluke.

The sysadmins have started privately referring to the Omega as Friend Computer. This is slightly more disturbing than it should by rights be.

The factory in Northern Africa continues its work, leaving TOL unaware of the Omega's true goals. The two other teams manage to integrate a small MEC facility into its medical bay, but success rate remains low. The Omega's heuristics consider using the partial successes as expendable soldiers.

Being part of an army of expendable robotic zombie would arguably be a fate worse than Hell, so there are unlikely to be many volunteers; while having large, powerful mechanized walkers with human brains to drive them has a number of advantages for war and construction, it's a fate that would only appeal to a minority of TOL operatives.

The Omega decide therefore to focus on giving their cybernetic undead an existence that is as close to that which they used to have. This has the secondary effect of giving a very visible middle finger to the One Above All, and is estimated to boost morale greatly once the program is in production.

As it is, there is Quinn. She doesn't look very human unless she's wearing a raincoat, she is about as strong as she used to be in life and noticeably slower, and she needs to recharge every night in addition to eating. However, it can only get better from here. She is also incapable of feeling pain and, crucially thanks to a built-in copper mesh along the skull, spine and legs, of being killed by Divine lightning, possibly making her somewhat useful as an assassin.

She may be assigned to a cabal in order to improve their chance of success on some mission types.

Given from her intake of pornography, the Omega surmise that she is bisexual and that her ability to feel pleasure has also been impaired; it's unlikely to become a strategic factor, but should be noted anyway. Quinn is slightly stronger than a human, partially due to her cybernetics and partially due to her inability to feel pain or fatigue; as this tech tree improves, she will become faster and more human-looking.

Elsewhere, a missionary volunteer group called Children of the Tribulation has redoubled their efforts in Indonesia, causing two TOL cabals to disband and convert. This group is headed by RAYMIE STEELE, globetrotting missionary and apologist. He understands that TOL is not going away because it is included in the prophecies, but feels that every soul saved is a victory. In a world in which few people bother traveling around since Beijing looks like Paris looks like Rio, he is an exception.

I read about Quinn. The Posthuman Postergirl. Her fate... Mischlitt thought. I wonder if we'd have gotten along. Probably not. I really can't get along with junkies. No self-discipline and they're always looking for the next fix. Still, I guess she was trying to do the right thing.

"System" Mischlitt typed, "TAG QUINN and ZOOM IN when she is involved."

Year: 905

Research programs in progress: MEC (2/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 9, Omega 1

Teams under control: Temple ?32?, TOL 26, Omega 4

The Omega has three cabals at their disposal. One of them is used to make sure The Other Light has no complaints about the Omega's nominal task as a logistics computer, while two are available for covert action. Since the Omega cannot diversify their efforts due to a penury of human agents and since the MEC program is not returning enough successes to swell the ranks, they decide to focus on recruiting from TOL, revealing their presence to TOL agents who are dissatisfied with the current leadership.

At the beginning of the year, a letter is sent to a TOL leader: it's the longest document to date composed entirely by a machine. "It has become clear that one man, Raymie Steele, has become responsible for the conversion of the organisations members to the service of the One in Greater Jerusalem. It would be convenient for a great many people if he were to be lost to the world. This would include the organisation as a whole, as well as the two of us. Sincerely, a friend."

Latrelle Jospin, TOL leader in Paris, does not acknowledge the Omega's message publically, but media survey a few weeks later shows that Raymie Steele has decided to put down roots in Indonesia for the time being; their technology rivals that of any nation, and there happen to be a

number of 99 year old TOL members traveling to him to convert. Effectively, TOL is using the decommissioning program to keep this person in one place and not damage their cause. It's not a permanent solution, but it will do for a number of years...

After a number of careful leaks on the underground academic bulletin board systems, a small group within TOL called Tree Of Life contacts the cabals of Omega and asks permission to join the life extension efforts. When they are informed that the plan is quite a bit grander than that, they are enthusiastic, and offer their unconditional cooperation.

It's a testament to TOL's overall stupidity that they still hadn't sussed the Omega out, Mischlitt thought. Then again, maybe they weren't intended to be competent in the first place. Wait, didn't Raymie himself suggest that they recruit the best and brightest, when infiltrating in +93? Is this part of the test, am I supposed to argue this point?

Year: 906

Research programs in progress: MEC (2/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 9, Omega 1

Teams under control: Temple ?32?, TOL 26, Omega 4

The Omega has three cabals at their disposal. One of them is used to make sure The Other Light has no complaints about the Omega's nominal task as a logistics computer, while three are available for covert action.

The Tree of Life cabal take residence in the Osaze base's medical wing. This improves morale fairly significantly with both TOL and the Omega's own forces.

One of the Omega's other cabals assists them, and routes TOL work orders having to do with precision electronics and first-aid equipment to Osaze from other bases. TOL leadership is a little wary of specializing bases, but there hasn't been a base raid in a long time, so the extra efficiency is worth it for them. This may make it easier to switch production to life support units,

if not this year then the next.

The last cabal improvise themselves explorers and travel to Japan. Most of the country, what's left of it after it has become deprived of its iconic mountain, has reverted to a largely pastoral state and is sparsely inhabited. Even Tokyo is a small settlement, still surrounded by vast ruins. Actually, it would be easy to build a base there...

Unfortunately for the Omega, the Tree Of Life group take longer than expected to get a handle on the hodgepodge of resurrective technologies that can bring back unbelievers after they miraculously die at age 100, and make little progress.

The cabal in Osaze finds the time to specialize the base in this region. At any point, it can be set to start producing MEC transformation kits instead of TOL items. Since the Omega went with the infiltration option, this effectively lets them recruit extra cabals from TOL agents who do not want to be decommissioned, even accounting for a low success rate. The current plan is to allow infiltrator MECs to mingle with regular agents, so, at intervals, the Omega will receive an extra cabal. Quinn, the prototype, remains available for special missions.

The Omega has mostly recruited among support personnel, not field agents. So, the cabal in Tokyo are caught snooping around in the ruins by a patrol! While they weren't doing anything illegal per se, they are still wayward children in the eyes of the law, and thus subject to mandatory summer Bible camp. Given the exploratory nature of this mission, this has no ill effects, but the Omega cannot count on that being the norm...

The sysadmins write an apology to the expedition team, cite their own failure to catch the Bible patrol as something they are sorry about. Then reassign them to work with the Tree Of Life group on the MEC and have Quinn work with the research team to optimize results and boost morale.

Any spare personnel will be gathering upgrades for the Omega's processors, so to better watch the movements of their enemies, and increase surveillance on the formerly captured cabal in the event one of their members has been converted. Little is accomplished this year.

Wayward kids, Mischlitt thought. *Sounds about right. Youth without youth... that's a song, isn't it?*

Mischlitt has the system load the song, ID **ttqMGYHhFFA**, as the stylized reconstruction plays itself out.

Year: 907, 908

Research programs in progress: MEC (2/10), Avatar (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 9, Omega 1

Teams under control: Temple ?32?, TOL 27, Omega 3

The Omega has 4 cabals at their disposal, minus those who have to maintain the system itself or its infrastructure, bringing the total down to 3. This year, they improve their sensor network to the point of being able to tell in advance whether an elite missionary is going to be deployed or redeployed. At least, that's the idea; they would have to see if it works or not.

The two cabals working on MEC research make good progress! Quinn now looks considerably more human, her face has been rebuilt and she can now pass as human through most cursory interaction, although she's still not much of a sight in a bikini (Unless one is into that sort of

thing, which as it turns out, a good half of the Tree of Life group are).

The new sensor system seems to be working. The knowledge gleaned about the Omega's own internal workings will help should they decide to transfer to a unified body.

The members of the cabal that had been captured are a little annoyed at the extra surveillance, but since one of the "prove that you haven't been converted" tests requires attending an underground rave party and failing a breathalyzer test, they're not TOO annoyed.

For now, the team who was working on the Omega's subsystems is instructed to instead changing the production orders for the Osaze base. Time to swap my personal upgrade team to changing production orders. Aside from that, things carry on as they have from previous turns. The sysadmins continue their vigil. Lately, they have discovered a cache of roleplaying games, and are converting them into ASCII format for sharing on the various bulletin board systems.

The Lifetree cabal and their support staff continue working with, and on, Quinn. Her life support system (undeath support system?) now lets her go a few days without recharging, so they borrow a RV for a day trip to the Pyramids. They now have fairly tacky neon crosses installed on top, but have survived the global earthquake and are otherwise being maintained. As it stands, it's the tallest structure most of the crew have seen. The Sphinx, unfortunately, is gone, although you can still buy little statuettes of it. Quinn has regained her mobility and looks almost human again, save for the support system access panel on her back. This has disappointed the Lifetree members who preferred the mechanical look, on the other hand they're generating a lot of "concept art" for various limb attachments when the covers are off. She takes it in good humor.

During the Feast of Tabernacles, Temple clerics and scribes record the histories of the past year, with emphasis on meritorious deeds. This year, they record Raymie's efforts in Asia.

Not much happened this year, Mischlitt thought. Nobody got hurt. That's not going to be the case very often from now on...

Year: 909 (Bolt from the Blue)

Research programs in progress: MEC (3/10), Avatar (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 9, Omega 1

Teams under control: Temple ?32?, TOL 27, Omega 3

The first MEC production run is a success! The new revenants are selected from the best and brightest TOL agents who are about to turn 100 this year. The process is completely successful approximately a third of the time; about half the bodies reanimate, and of those that do, about one sixth cannot be made pain-insensitive and is put into cold storage, or go mad from the procedure. One of the new revenants declares himself the second coming of Broseidon and is promptly run over by a river boat on the Nile. Setbacks aside, those who are left are given roles

within the Omega's fledgling organization, leaving them with one new cabal. Thanks to having members who can shrug off at least some amount of bullets, nightsticks and smiting, the Omega's cabals will be more tougher from now on. The procedure requires removing the subjects' ability to feel pain, which also hampers their ability to feel much of anything and dampens their skills somewhat. However, the volunteers were exceptional individuals to start with, so it balances out.

Air traffic survey indicates that noted women's-role activist Ely Rahab LeVey is leaving New Jerusalem to visit the Northwestern American region next year. Expect more raids on pubs, skirt length to increase by a few inches, and what's left of San Francisco losing its reputation as a LGBT haven at least for the time being. The Omega has no presence there, so this will not affect them much, but they could send a cabal there to assist with a possible evacuation.

The Omega use a predictive-keyboard system to have their sysadmin write a message to their MEC infiltrator: while not truly the first machine-composed document, it's remarkable for its coherence.

"To:Quinn.

We have spotted one agent of the tyrant making preparations to arrive in the Northwestern America's. Projections indicate a massive increase in raids and heavy pressure on the, pardon the expression, Sandwich community. though I have little concern for such minor details. It's time to make a move and an impact on the world, it would start with the assassination of this agent, Ely LeVey. I understand this mission would potentially be in line with your personal interest, but should you decline wielding another revenant operative would be no problem.

Your mission, should you accept, would be to fire with up to six other reborn individuals such as yourself to fire a number of dummy fire, locking, and TOW high explosive projectiles at her transport. You will then be transported with the help of a supporting cell, as well as the remainder of the cell you fellow revenants are from, back to safety.

I await your response quinn

Sincerely, Omega."

The cabals working on MEC systems quickly return with a proposal: there's a fair bit of unused space on female MECs' chests. The working drawing looks like it was taken out of a comic book (it was) but a relatively simple solid state rebreathing system to absorb CO2 and release oxygen can be implemented. This won't negate the need to breathe, of course, but it will allow airless operation for up to two hours. Past that time, a MEC's metabolism can be effectively paused - it requires artificial systems to keep going in the first place - so a MEC can put itself into a dormancy state that can last for about a week before tissue damage sets in. Of course, someone would have to retrieve the body and reboot them.

This system will be available immediately on the Omega's Prototype, but will need extra work to be implemented on the other MECs, if nothing else because the cabals want to figure out how to make it work on male MECs without deforming their figure.

The production cabal continue their work. The base is able to fulfil its TOL quota, albeit barely,

and also prepare for constructing more MECs. The fully conscious revenants are assigned cover identities whenever possible, to keep their existence a secret.

A cursory archival survey shows that EMP weapons were never fully developed before the Rapture; while the basic principle is simple and a basic EMP system can be built out of a microwave oven and some metalwork, extending the system's range would require a full-fledged research program.

The Omega have two cabals ready to make a move on Ely Rahab LeVey as she arrives in what was once and is now again Orange County. Quinn is with them. The assassination job has a 66.6% probability of success.

The sysadmins' plan is to proceed loudly. The target is going to make the trek to the Bay Area via a white schoolbus. The plan is mostly to have the cabals build a roadblock and attack the vehicle with firearms and a rocket launcher. Quinn will board the vehicle and eliminate the target by any means necessary.

The Omega's cabals do put on a show - the stretch of road between Orange County and the Bay Area goes through one of the world's few remaining deserts.

The cabals move in a few weeks before Mrs. LeVey's visit, buy a mechanic's shop, and rebuild a number of old muscle cars (The Omega suspects that most of the electronics that TOL doesn't build itself are tracked, so going with older, fully mechanical systems makes sense).

They take the opportunity to dress up in rags, leather bands, and spikes; Quinn even puts on one of the old Mk1 arms that was up-armored for the occasion, since it looks intimidating.

A car carrier truck is stolen and used to build a roadblock out of wrecks. Given that people have little reason to travel, the roads are basically empty and setting up the trap doesn't require any violence, merely telling a few people at both ends that the road is closed.

It's a lovely day for an ambush, isn't it?

Historical survey shows that an assassination attempt on a missionary has never succeeded, with God smiting would-be perpetrators by lightning. Precautions have been taken. The MECs will cover Quinn, and the living humans will try to remain in the vehicles which will hopefully function as Faraday cages.

Mrs. LeVey's bus is not part of a convoy and not defended, that the Omega can tell.

Radio silence happens on schedule. As an AI, the Omega have a concept of antsiness, but do not experience any.

The first report the sysadmins hear, annoyingly, is from Mrs. LeVey herself. At a small revival meeting in what used to be the Castro, she narrates how a number of "hooligans dressed up as savages and demons" tried to intercept her bus. She narrates how the ambush mostly went according to plan, and how the Angel, Anis, came to her rescue once the actual fighting started. He told her to remain silent, and then the two walked out of the wrecked bus, seemingly invisible to the chaos around them. She witnessed God Himself strike down the attackers with

lightning when they killed her small retinue.

After a small prayer for those who she had lost, and of thanks that they are now in Heaven, she narrated how she walked with Anis for a short time, saw the terrorists eventually scatter after not finding her, and sat against a rock until eventually a kind couple driving to the shore gave her a lift.

Almost at the same time, Quinn reports in to say that the missionaries must have a mole: Mrs. LeVey was not on the bus. The missionaries barely fought back, but every time one of the MECs scored a killing blow, they were hit by clear-sky lightning. The live humans in the group were warned to stick to a support role, and did so, remaining unscathed. They rebooted the MECs as necessary and, after all but stripping the bus apart looking for LeVey, they gave up and scattered before anyone drove by.

Meteo survey shows that the lightning came straight from the exoatmospheric water canopy.

"We've lost one. Huey did not reboot properly after the lightning bolt. Requesting cold storage. No other casualties. Seven missionaries eliminated. No captures."

The two cabals are holed up at the mechanic's that they purchased when they started the operation.

The reanimated agents have, mostly, survived their trial by fire; that in itself would be cause for celebration if things had gone a little better.

In the aftermath of the operation, TOL leadership sends a curt circular letter to all the bases indicating that they should not attempt to directly attack missionaries, as it has never worked, and laments that seven agents died in vain just to get rid of some underlings. The Omega know that the score is in fact seven to one.

Metereological survey shows that the lightning came straight from the water canopy. In addition, MEC audio logs confirm - after months of digital signal processing that takes about a fifth of the Omega's processing power for the year, since they're trying to hear an old lady tiptoeing through a battle - that while Anis and Ely were invisible, they were audible. None of the operatives remember the sounds, understandably. Do Angels and their wards show up on camera? Do they show up on sonar? A camera was brought to document the attack, and did pick up the sound, but would not have picked up video of the Angel as it was only brought into the bus after the firefight was over and it sounds like that LeVey ditched at the first sign of trouble.

The Omega's MECs performed well; 6 out of 7 just needed a reset to get back up. Given how new the technology still is, that's quite a feat. It may be beneficial to add a simple mechanical reset switch to their support systems. Quinn comes home with an egg timer crudely but effectively screwed to her support system access panel on her back. The issue is still that in a pitched battle, a MEC would still be out of commission for a few crucial moments after scoring a killing blow. One of the MECs notes in a gravely monotone that it would make it easier to keep a tally of kills.

The rest of the year is spent keeping an underground crew running in San Francisco to give advance warning about raids and facilitate evacuation. The Omega's agents make contact with

an existing organization called the Underground Monorail that has the same goal; for now, they introduce themselves as a subset of The Other Light rather than as a splinter group.

Ely's riveting story causes a number of successful altar calls, and TOL is forced to scale back operations in Northwestern America as a result. At the Feast of Tabernacle, Temple priests praise her efforts, while asking her to think of her safety and stick to a domestic role.

On the engineering side, adapting night vision goggles for use during the day for the purpose of Angel detection is trivial; a SRF04 sonar rangefinder is added to the goggles for redundancy. A couple of agents spend the entire summer "chasing fairies" with these things on, but Angels tend to only show up when they are needed, so results are inconclusive.

The first of the Omega's many failures, Mischlitt thought. Only to be expected when one is fighting God Himself. Yet, is it possible to lose most battles and yet win the war? She had studied the classics, of course: Sun Tzu, the fight of the Horatii and Curiatii in Roman times, guerrilla warfare in the old earth's final century. It certainly was a viable strategy, probably more so than The Only Light's planned frontal assault.

"System, I have to see this in a closer perspective. Do not zoom in any further, but SWITCH TO SECOND PERSON in the description. They say the Omega isn't a true AI, but I wish to experience their point of view as directly as possible."

The repurposed VR booth acknowledged with a simple soft beep.

Year: 910

Research programs in progress: MEC (3/10), Avatar (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 9, Omega 1

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 5

A few people, including San Francisco refugees, are very interested in resuming a space program. A few early attempts were accomplished, which gives one an idea of the scope of the problem: the water canopy means that instead of a standard orbital insertion, they will have to build a rocket that goes straight up, splashes into the canopy, pushes against it to accelerate, and then takes off from the canopy's exterior... if there is one.

Simply being able to have vehicles skimming the inside of the water canopy using cavitation would give the Omega eye-in-the-sky advantages similar to a satellite network.

MEC production continues apace; the egg timer is replaced by a simple mechanical watchdog switch that turns the Metabolic Extension Controller back on after six seconds of inactivity. MEC agents that want to enter low power mode have to click this off.

Quinn takes the risk to show herself and other MEC agents, just for a few moments, when Ely Rahab LeVey preaches. While they pass as human most of the time, they can easily choose not to by showing their cybernetics and unnatural pallor. This unnerves the elderly missionary greatly; she's seen these same people getting smote, after all.

Coordinating with the Underground Railroad proves fairly easy; they're not a combat force, and mostly want to be left alone, but agree on the possible use of finding some safe space.

Between this and further MEC production, the Omega has gained another cabal (mostly Underground Monorail people who are a bit too hotheaded for that group).

Base construction in the Tokyo ruins begins. They estimate that it will take five years to have a facility up and running; this is a long time, but it needs to be somewhat concealed and independent when it comes to power and water.

Not much happens in the way of R&D. The Other Light leadership has to remind their people that direct military action right now is not advisable. Believers worldwide feel secure in knowing that even what was clearly a trained attack force was unable to stop an elderly missionary.

Quinn looks decidedly more voluptuous than Harriet Tubman, but is honored at the association otherwise. She's now 10 years into her second life, but does not seem to have aged significantly more than non-Glorified believers do; her tissues are in good shape, and MECs mostly only need maintenance on their mechanical parts, and power for the MEC unit itself.

Revenant technology moved forward really quickly after they became fully conscious, Mischlitt thought. That makes sense; it's easier to debug a system if it can tell you what's wrong with it. A

semi-dormant psi algorithm brought to her mind the parable of exponential growth - if a lily pads in a pond double every day, and they fill the pond on the thirtieth day, when have they filled half the pond?

She noted with a bit of annoyance that the year had no Temple report in it; truth was, most of the Millennium had been a time of peace and quiet, to hear it from believers, or stagnation, to hear it from unbelievers.

Why the note about the boatellites, though? That had been around a long time, no? Korolev and Hassid's work was well known, of course. "System, CHECK ACCURACY of the strategy reports."

"These reports are from the point of view of the Omega. For the full historical documents, please see the Ethernet Archive project at universal resource locator..."

"Okay, thanks. Resume."

It sounded more a case of the Omega being able to understand boatellites, than them being re-invented. *Sun Tzu tells us to know yourself and know our enemy. But then how can any war be won against the omniscient?*

Research programs in progress: MEC (3/10), Avatar (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 9, Omega 1

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 6

While they didn't have much to show for it from a tactical standpoint, the Omega's sysadmins decide to keep working on MEC technology: the principle is solid. One cabal continues work in Japan, on what is hoped to become a new base of operation; Quinn is essentially given the year off and is asked to travel around, to see if this will help with recruiting efforts.

Quinn appreciates the vacation and makes a few cryptic posts on the bulletin board system, a series of sorts, titled "What to do when you're dead in..." that highlights what little fun there is to be had in various territories; most TOL haunts are pubs or discos after all. Fortunately, the bulletin board system is text-only, so nobody catches the joke that isn't already in on it. She "abuses" her ability to shut down for arbitrary periods of time to ride the rails on cargo trains

A message is sent out on the TOL packet anonymously: "To those interested in space programs, the stars, and anything pertaining to the water canopy and what lays behind it. A new project is forming out of the far east, with the long term goal of breaching into the stars, and using what lies behind liquid curtain to reclaim this world. If you are interested, all you have to do is show effort and you will be contacted. Manpower is beyond necessary as much as brains are. This is not about finding lost knowledge, nor is it about your alliance to any group. This is about survival."

Quinn does post an image file on the BBS: herself with some of her cybernetics showing and quite a bit of herself exposed, so that the whole thing looks like fairly good sci-fi cosplay (other than the fishbowl helmet clearly made out of an actual fishbowl, but we can't have everything) in a mildly lewd pose on the pedestal of the Gagarin Memorial, which she has taken some time to find. It's very out of the way, but some of the locals take to drawing rockets or fanciful spaceships and leaving them at the memorial, in a sort of pilgrimage.

Shortly before the Feast of the Tabernacles, the local moderation forces in the American Northwest announce that they have found a TOL underground base, and surrounded its perimeter, with hopes of shutting it down peacefully. The Omega decide to make a confrontation of it, quickly recall Quinn and some MEC agents, and prepare to besiege the besiegers. The dispatch order is remarkably more coherent.

"Quinn, the rest of you, listen and pay attention. While you have been punished by our enemy in the past for removing agents of his tyrannis, I have little to go on in the event you only injure or incapacitate to defend yourselves and others. Also, put yourselves on display for TOL, they should know now what we have created. They should know that a chance now stands for a victory. Give us all a show ladies and gentlemen. Humanity counts on you.

Signed, Omega".

This has potential, Mischlitt thought. *The first action didn't go well... but this time the Omega are on defense, at least in that they know the lay of the land.* By later standards, of course, these were but skirmishes, and yet they would inform much of latter tactical and even strategic doctrine.

The VR program takes a few moments to load the tactical interface, and Mischlitt uses the loading time to savor a glass of water; it's clean, and she cannot taste any chlorination. Such a simple luxury to be taken for granted, isn't it?

Year: 911 (Part 2)

Research programs in progress: MEC (3/10), Avatar (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 9, Omega 1

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 6

The Omega pull out all the stops to get Quinn, their other MECs, and some support personnel to Portland. The town itself is gone, an underground base having been built within the ruins. The compound has been circumscribed, and large off-white vans bearing a green cross surround it. One of them sports an ominous gas grenade turret on top. In general, by now TOL agents know better than to try and resist; current doctrine is for the older ones to let themselves be taken away for reeducation, and make enough of a fuss that the young have a chance at running but not enough that lethal weapons are deployed. Since the Moral Forces are used to being nigh invulnerable, barring the occasional suicide attacker, they mostly carry nonlethal weapons... mostly.

The Omega's hastily assembled combat group rides in on motorcycles and ATVs. The few human agents in support have stolen two school buses for evacuating any refugees if the opportunity arises.

Their MECs will die if they manage to shoot down a believer... for approximately five seconds, then they'll get back up.

Quinn and most of the MEC agents enter the base via a hidden tunnel. The Moral Forces have backwards-facing lookouts to catch people trying to get out, but people getting in hasn't been a thing. Even so, one of their men, in full armor that only lets the mouth show, is slowly walking towards the school buses.

The fight is happening inside a TOL base, so the Omega has full access to its cameras and its PA system.

In the outlying tunnels, Quinn and the other fighters pass fleeing TOL workers. "You're with The Only Light, right? Suicide shooters? Don't go to Hell for us, we can all run!"

This base was primarily in the business of producing liquor, ecstasy, and bootleg CDs. It's not particularly large, and does not have a significant weapon cache.

Over the loudspeakers a Nine Inch Nails song starts playing.

Accompanied by a metallic digital voice telling the people to cooperate with me and nobody goes with the so called morals. Then the MECs make themselves known to the TOL members inside before trading places.

The tear gas starts falling as soon as the music starts; teargassing a base is standard procedure, so the escaping workers are as ready for it as they can be. They're all pretty young, in their fifties and sixties, looking like teenagers.

TOL bases usually are power-independent, so rather than simply cutting grid power, the Psalties have learned to turn it on and off in bursts with the hope of overloading the circuit that handles switchover power.

Strobes, smoke, and Nine Inch Nails - it looks like a concert.

The standard "Stand down, nobody needs to get hurt, you will be taken to a safe place and back to school" warning coming from the Psalty truck comes in reverberated through the music and ends up sounding like nonsense.

Since everyone speaks Standard Hebrew, the Moral Forces switch to their bizarre constructed language; they enter the compound and start stomping around, trying to round the would-be escapees in the middle.

And that's when Quinn and her fireteams show up, right in the middle of the half-ruined block.

This is being quite chaotic; while a couple of Omega agents have brought the detectors, they're a bit cumbersome.

Two TOL workers have time to kick up two worklights before being grabbed by the scruff of their necks and dragged off by one of the stun lancers.

Quinn emerges from a stairway on the makeshift stage as the Omega pumps the PA speakers almost to the point of blowing them throwing her hat into a Psalty's helmet and cracking her whip.

The religious policemen are obviously confused... which is long enough for a handful of workers to break off and make a run for it, and the Omega's fire team to make neat holes in the troopers' legs.

At that moment, one of the Psalty trucks is hit in the engine by a rocket propeller grenade; rather than blowing up Hollywood style, it jumps and then falls inert, its alarm going off for a second or two. The grenade launcher turret stops spewing out tear gas canisters, and rotates towards your rocket squad.

"Shooters! Weapons free!" You're pretty sure that it's what they said in psalty-ese, although it sounded more like "You're too rough for Tom!"

One trooper is approaching the buses, possibly thinking that they're there in case of an overflow of captives.

The religious police break out their sidearms and call for the group that was staying back with the rifles. One of them, though, walks up to the makeshift stage and shouts "Repent!" at Quinn, then swirls her - huh, it's a woman - stun lance in an intricate pattern.

One Psalty fireteam is down; they're clutching their legs and trying to crawl away. The ambush was successful enough to let the MEC agents shoot to maim. So far there are no deceased, and

no hint that Omega forces are undead.

A few of the ambushers break off; a bit of tunnel fighting happens, but even Moral Forces armor yields to cybernetic arms doing karate chops.

Fireteams keep trying to shoot at arms or legs, and slowly give ground trying to retreat towards the destroyed trucks as they fight building to building.

A few MEC agents get shot, and will need patched up; their wounds seep rather than spurting, and they don't even slow down.

"They've got to be drugged up to the gills!" one of the Psalties shouts.

Quinn is facing off with the female trooper. What little they can see from their cameras tells the Omega that she is not being ambushed.

"WELCOME TO A REAL HELL HOUSE!"

The female trooper turns; Quinn, rather than taking the bait and getting bogged down into a duel, shoots her in the mouth.

The lone Psalty has reached the bus driver; they're stalling for time. The Omega can talk to them, or to him directly, through the CB radio. The evacuees are hiding behind the wall of a crumbled house to make a mad dash for the buses.

The firefight is continuing, so far with both sides more interested in defense and suppression than racking up a body count. No lightning yet means no casualties on their side.

The female trooper is down but not out.

"Quinn, please take a captive. It's time to leave. Don't let lead mouth get the drop on you. Good work girl."

Fire teams are ordered to fall back and set trap, create obstructions and make them work to move to the exit, if they reach a bus with a hostile outside of it, they are to disable that hostile.

The Omega hears a voice, male, middle aged, with a bit of reverb. "We got a situation here. No casualties, but the little criminals have decided to fight back. They got our cell tower truck, good thing CB still works. Whoever you are, I want you to call..." and then a phone number "... and tell them that we need an ambulance, a relay truck, and all the stun lancers that are lazying around right now! If these Hellbound creeps want to burn it's their problem, but we're hurting bad here!"

Quinn acknowledges, letting the Psalties think that help is on the way.

As soon as the trooper on the radio is taken care of one way or another, the evacuees are ready to sprint to the buses.

The firefight continues; Omega assets have the advantage of the cameras and direction of the AI. It diverts all its processing power to the firefight, and everything the Omega sees and hears slows down as their internal processes speed up; they can tell each of their MECs exactly where

to go and almost exactly what to shoot at, it's like playing a turn-based game.

Due to the fact that MEC troopers can at least shamle to safety with wounds that would be fatal to a Natural human, no losses are sustained; the enemy has a few wounded, one gravely; a few people working in the CD copying lab have been captured, but most have escaped.

"I'm not Darryl, I'm..." The hapless trooper tells the Omega again to call that number. Since they're in charge of the TOL phone network, making DTMF and busy-signal noises is part of their core function. The bus drivers didn't bring much in the way of toys, but a tire iron wrapped in a shirt makes for a decent blunt instrument.

The Omega's guys have mostly completed the evacuation, and get to the muster point, Quinn bringing up the rear with the injured woman in a fireman's carry. Quinn shot her, so if she dies, Quinn also dies - for a few seconds. However, a lightning bolt would really both get in the way and escalate this incident.

Right now, Omega agents are outside the compound, and the Psalties are inside it.

THWACK!

The guard is down and the agents are ready to leave.

The Omega plays back a medley of sound effects from DOOM on random PA speakers. The psalties are suitably freaked out; they start shouting "THE POWER OF CHRIST COMPELS YOU", shooting at walls and computer screens, one even manages to shoot another in the arm.

The two buses take off as soon as the coast is clear, riding off in the endless sun towards an abandoned gas station that was previously identified as a temporary safe house. The captive is going to need her jaw rebuilt, but the Omega has the technology - for now, casualties had been expected, and the support cabal had brought blood bags.

As for their own story... Basically, this was a small base; the Omega's earlier suggestion about specializing had been followed, and they had essentially no weapon or ammunition production capacity. Even the side work in making liquor and party drugs was secondary to making copies of The Packet, the unofficial CD-ROM distributed by TOL to its adherents every month, containing various homegrown media that is too big to be encoded into the bulletin board systems. Also, porn, obviously.

A few of them had heard about the possible space program efforts and made sure that the next Packet would distribute a copy of MAME with that ancient Lunar Lander game on it.

Omega forces are almost at the gas station when their digital leader loses all contact with the rear bus for a few seconds - lightning strike! The rescuees jump in their seats, startled.

They look around. None of their guys has died, for now. The driver tries to restart the bus - it's new enough to have a controller, so it's stalled. The people on the other buss get off and hitch the two vehicles together; with one bus towing the other, the convoy limps to the gas station at about 25Mph.

One of the rescuees tells the driver to stop before everyone disembarks.

"We need to figure out who got a kill. They'll be thunderstruck again as soon as they leave the bus. My stepmom told me about this. It always happens."

This is a fairly tiny kid of indeterminate gender, mostly due to grime, but he or she is standing in front of the door and not letting people out. "We've got to find out! He'll die!"

Agents of the Omega that were on the ATVs quickly secure the perimeter.

"By the way. We are Omega. It's a pleasure to meet you all."

Quinn holds the woman up with one arm and aims the pistol carefully for a clean shot through the brain. The moral trooper is conscious, barely.

"Enjoy your Heaven." The small-caliber pistol makes an instant kill, failing to penetrate the back of the helmet, and the trooper goes limp in Quinn's grip. She drops the body before any blood can leave the mouth. "Until we invade it."

A heartbeat later, a lightning bolt from the clear sky strikes Quinn dead instantly. Horrified gasps come from the refugees. As a personal joke, Quinn has kept the egg timer's chime as part of her MEC system a faint mechanical ringer goes off where the two slumped women are, and the cyborg gets back up, pointing at the sky. "Whoo! You sunk my battleship!"

She holsters the gun, twirls gracefully, and gets back on the bus. The refugees are staring at her with a mixture of awe, horror, and hope.

The evacuees sign up with great enthusiasm. The kid that was holding the door stops holding the door and joins in.

Shipping the evacuees to Japan will have to be sorted out, but for now what ends up happening - while the MEC units get stitched up - is a mini rave inside the abandoned gas station, courtesy of the working bus' radio and lights.

Media survey indicates that the base raid was reported with considerably less fanfare than the last time there was one, a few decades ago. TOL noted that losses were small and the evacuation was completed without casualties and very few captures "although our Pacific Northwest deejays have gone to ground for now".

Ely Rahab LeVey shows up to the funeral of the female Moral Forces trooper to decry the use of female enforcer in the first place, be remarkably rude to the deceased's family, and bully local law enforcement into taking over the investigation herself, making an enormous mess of it and declaring that The Only Light is back to using suicide shooters, except now The Only Light drags them away and melts them with acid or ritually eats them or both. This is actually added to law enforcement doctrine.

Due to the evacuees' effort, the Japan base will build itself and require no support cabals.

It has been a good year, even excluding the escapade at the end of it.

Propaganda and infrastructure buildup in Northern Africa resume in earnest. The Omega is almost halfway towards being able to make a bid to control the region's parliament; they can be overridden by New Jerusalem, but it doesn't happen often - last time was in +93. Their cabals,

supported by the base, assist local workers with automating some of their daily tasks and improve the internet infrastructure, giving unconverted youth easier access to both sides of the argument. Also some porn.

MEC units can now be hidden almost completely, with the control panel access installed in an area that is usually covered by underwear. The units only need to be charged once a week. The optional airless systems make male MECs look a bit chubbier and female MECs look a bit curvier, and last for a full six hours, plenty of time for any one mission.

Unfortunately, so far restoring a sense of touch and pleasure to MEC troopers has remained impossible.

This is it, Mischlitt thought. The real point of no return, the real beginning of the Last War. A raid on a TOL base or night club, like many over the centuries. Ordinarily, the underground nightclubs in Paris and elsewhere would be frequently raided and revelers arrested and imprisoned. Those who commit actual crimes are known to be put to death by lightning, God dealing with them immediately as He did to Ananias and Sapphira of old.

Except, just like that, it didn't work anymore. Nine centuries in, instead of scurrying, people turned around and fought back.

The woman who died had been one of maybe a dozen law enforcement personnel to die in the Millennium and thus be rewarded with early heaven, but in every other case, the murder had carried its own punishment instantly, leaving The Only Light soldiers in the position of knowing that they would only at best ever get one kill in the war that they so badly wanted. But revenants... revenants could be made lightning-proof.

It's taken ninety years for us to go from steam engines to moon rockets. And ten times as long to figure this one out. The first lily pad in the pond...

Year: 912 – The Man Who Was Thursday

Research programs in progress: MEC (4/10), Avatar (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 6

The Omega possesses 6 cabals, 5 of which are available. Their sysadmins intercept TOL leadership communication indicating worry about a "rogue Omega cell" and requesting a meeting with the cell leader.

The new base is made known to TOL, who market it internally as a reclamation project and a way to make the point that losing the Pacific outpost won't disrupt the great work.

"Omega,

the leadership of The Other Light, the council of seven, will convene in Paris, in the elevator maintenance room at the top of the rebuilt Eiffel tower, on March 21st. Be there or be square."

The Omega has no assets in that region, but sending one person there won't significantly affect work elsewhere.

Preparations are underway to set up a fake attempt on Ely Rahab LeVey's life. Some of the prop from last year can be recycled; the attack will effectively be a copycat of the real attempt, but with fewer people participating, and only one MEC agent just in case. One of the spotters will pretend to be a bystander and carry a prototype detection system in a hand cart; this system contains variations on what is going to be the helmet mounted system, and the Omega will see which of the variations works better, if an Angel shows up at all.

The work on the space and nuclear programs begins in earnest...

Quinn is amicable to the idea, and takes the time to visit Paris. She had found Paris interesting. None of the historical landmarks remained, of course, but attempts had been made to reproduce some of the more familiar—like the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, and even some of the

great cathedrals.

A couple of days before the meeting, she installs a simple teleconference system.

Internal survey shows that the space program cabals are not playing well with each other... Wait, no, they're competing! A miniature space race is taking place, just with solid-fuel sounding rockets for now, but even so. This stratagem is generating results very quickly; it looks like a rocket will be able to at least touch the water canopy within the year, and return some telemetry. A quick text search on their emails shows that the space race thing has been masterminded by one of the evacuees; the short, somewhat big-headed kid is named Jeb.

Jeb is personally more interested in the "aero" part of aerospace and, if people aged like they did pre-Appearing, would effectively have achieved the equivalent of getting a pilot's license at age fourteen. But, he's studied history and came up with this idea.

The nuclear program promises to be fairly plodding. The first thing the teams have to do is, well, kill a lot of small animals to determine how dangerous the small amount of radioactive material they have. Historical survey shows that building airborne nukes is probably not going to happen anytime soon, but large systems that can be transported by truck and initiated remotely are an option.

Spearheading the effort is Ziggy, a small, pimply and hairy "teenager" in his late sixties who seems to have a bit of a pyromaniac streak. By which, of course, we mean that the Omega will have to spend a bit of processing time making sure he doesn't set the lab on fire every other day. While nuclear bombs are a long way off, they've got a good candidate for operations involving conventional explosives.

About an hour before the agreed time, seven people enter the elevator maintenance room in the rebuilt Tour Eiffel. It looks suitably art-deco, iron and wood details, with the actual maintenance stuff in a corner and the rest of the space occupied by ancient office chairs and folding poker tables.

They are all young men in their 80s and 90s, shaved chins, faces looking if anything a little overaged due to stress. They look somewhat alike, but not suspiciously so, and keep their hair slicked back.

Quinn new at this. She could think of little else to say. She admired the young men's suits.

"Thanks. Custom-made."

"Nice."

But as she looked closely at the pinstripes, she noticed they were made up of a nearly microscopic pattern. Tiny letters. Row after row of LTO, LTO, LTO. The letters ran together, forming the distinctive pattern LTOLTOLTOLTOLTOLTOLTOLTO that from even two feet away just looked like normal striping.

The seven were trading contact information when it struck Quinn that maybe it wasn't LTO at all. Maybe it was TOL.

They look a little like caricatures of Mafiosi, if anything; a four of them pull out cigarettes and light them. They unfold the poker tables and sit down; to their surprise, rather than sitting down herself, Quinn sets the screen up in a corner. There are two rather burly bodyguard types outside, but that seems to be all.

"We assumed this would be a personal meeting."

"Sorry. That's all you get."

"We do not deal with underlings."

"Well, technically if you're in charge, dealing with underlings is pretty much your entire job, no?" Quinn sticks her tongue out. Five of the seven take a fraction of a second to appreciate her figure. "Anyway, Omega can't be here in person because it's physically impossible for that to happen."

"Is he... Lucifer?" one of the seven asks. The screen comes on; the Omega can talk. Quinn has not distributed the files yet.

In the meantime, work proceeds as scheduled; some progress has been made on nuclear and space things - the two projects in tandem have spawned a brief 1950s fad around Omega bases, which ironically makes their agents and workers blend in better with the believing population, if anything.

"You and tyrant wish." The picture give a quick smile. "You see, one of the benefits of not being created by his grand tyranis, one that I've been using to great effect, is I can't be smote directly. And, Quinn if you would kindly show these men the video labeled 'christmas party', I'm sure they would see why

Quinn does just that, striking a pose when the feed shows her play her part in the musical distraction.

"That's an impressive response to a raid. Where are the survivors of it? We haven't heard from them in months" the first guy replies. Four of the others are momentarily distracted by the scene offered.

"Your cabal is well trained. Will you consider joining us? We could use you."

"The so-called God Almighty will rue the day He returns to us our leader, for it will mean the greatest comeback, the most decisive defeat, the most gargantuan victory of any foe over another in the history of mankind."

As the video plays, after the mouth shot Quinn takes the skin on her left hand and waves muscles, sinews, servos and titanium fingers at the seven. Three recoil in horror, four lean forward in fascination.

"You can't hurt me" she smiles and points upwards with the cybernetic hand "He can't hurt me".

Still smiling, Quinn puts the skin back on like a glove, and sits down to sew herself back up, legs crossed.

One of the seven scoffs. "I am Monday. Leader of The Only Light. We aver that we are not fighting your God. We treat Him as if He doesn't exist." Two of the others roll their eyes

"That's such a shame mister Monday, but not really. See He doesn't really like it when you act like He isn't real."

"Quinn, I believe the record tyrant's spawn set was three days. Please fast forward."

"So the rulers would have us believe."

The next bit of video was recorded from the bus with a handheld camera, and is grainy enough that it would be possible to accuse the Omega of simply having used special effects. However, Quinn's impromptu demo prevents that.

The Seven watch a believing woman die.

They expect the flash of white and the lost frames from the thundershot.

They expect to see Quinn slumped down next to the vice cop.

Quinn starts counting in a singsong along with the video, and shakes her head at the little pirouette she made in it.

She turns away from the Seven to show the small bald spot on the top of her skull, which she usually combs over carefully, where Divine lightning burned some skin, hit titanium, and arched itself to ground past her organometallic spine, organometallic leg bones, and steel feet.

And this is when things go weird. In unison, the Seven stare at her, at the video, and at the Omega's screen, silent and blinking rapidly.

"Your cabal is well trained. Will you consider joining us? We could use you."

"The so-called God Almighty will rue the day He returns to us our leader, for it will mean the greatest comeback, the most decisive defeat, the most gargantuan victory of any foe over another in the history of mankind."

Mr. Thursday, the representative from what amounts to TOL's media division according to his calling card, stares at the others in horror.

"SNAP OUT OF IT!", screams the man who was Thursday. Quinn quietly gets her gun.

"So disappointing. To think that the species that could create me and give Quinn her immunity to such power. In fact, make countless numbers of people like her, immune to smiting, can house such unoriginal thinkers. I'm not seeking your permission, I'm seeking your cooperation. If it's prophesied that we lose, I guarantee you, the record is in His favor if we play by His rules."

"Quinn, please pass out the folders with our various projects in them. Gentlemen, I don't plan to wait for safety that most assuredly won't come. I plan to remove the threat, the tyrant, from his reigning seat before the 1000th year. Please share those folders with each other. Quinn please insert the footage of the creation of a MEC."

Quinn's construction was extremely piecemeal, so instead, video of someone rebuilt in the last

batch is shown. The process has been cleaned up considerably in the last ten years, and almost half of MEC candidates come through it with their sanity intact.

Six of the Seven study the dossiers intently. Thursday asks the Omega if it's recording, first.

Eventually, Monday has something to say.

"But... We must wait for Lucifer! What chance do we have without him? Only when he returns will-" Monday stops.

Tuesday finishes for him. "Sorry. Our colleague has a bit of a cognitive dissonance issue. He means that only then will Jesus emerge from the Temple, and be vulnerable."

The New Jerusalem Temple is a titanic construction, one compound about the size of inner-city London. The top of its square roof is the tallest point on the planet.

Jesus, in constant contact with all the Glorified and in frequent contact with all the believers, dwells within, as was prophesied by Ezekiel.

The Omega isn't sure that even a nuclear strike would penetrate the incredibly thick stone walls, drawn out of the bedrock by God Himself...

"You're still playing by His rules. If you wait, it will speak, and wipe all of you, me and everyone else out of existence. Instead, we will follow what over 4000 years' worth of human history tells us. Humanity can kill anything if it works hard enough to do it. We just need information and a weapon that can permanently kill both tyrant and spawn. Thus, what you see in those files."

A lot more confused blinking.

The scenario the Omega presents is a bit fantascientific, and the people who put the art together sort of went with it, drawing space cities bristling with defense turrets, robotmen shiny and chrome, and the like.

Friday, nominally the person in charge of TOL recruiting, looks up first, somewhat hopeful. "So... you will join us? Will you give homage?"

As they read, some of the Seven shake their head nervously. A few take notes. One takes the quick paragraphs about space, and draws a modified orbital insertion profile on a piece of scrap paper, then drops it and looks ahead blankly for a moment before resuming reading.

Slowly, with the effort of a drunk man who's trying to sound sober, Thursday says, "You mean... to strike... early. When?"

Wednesday quickly asks what about the Angels. That operation is in progress, but hasn't happened yet.

Quinn finishes doing a few quick stitches on her hands, gets a bit of paper and a marker, and writes the Omega a note, so that the Seven can't see it. It says "Strange twitching. Looks like wakeup pain fault."

To Quinn and only her, "We will work on permanent solutions soon. Hold out for as long as you

can."

To the others "That's one of my problems. To strike early would require information. The project in progress is my forces gathering information. All the projects currently require gaining knowledge and information. Killing God requires knowing several things. How to defeat His angels requires being able to react to them. Preventing the smiting from killing all our forces and stopping the MECs requires research. I can only do so much with what I have. You have manpower and resources I need to make the best case scenario for humanity a reality, which is after all, what your "underlings" built me for. If we are to succeed I cannot be below you nor can I be above you."

Quinn marks down "I mean them. Also me. Strange place."

The Seven look at each other after the Omega gives them their spiel. The men start arguing, two of them even stand up and start shouting. The gist of it is that they'd have to remove one of their number.

The man who was Thursday asks the Omega if they're recording (Of course they are; their memory is made of recordings; but maybe he doesn't understand that about how they work).

"And you can't merely add to your number and make eight? I don't need to be called by a day of the week. I simply need the same thing you need from me. Support, Logistics, Manpower, And Resources."

Sunday speaks. He sounds calm. "We will have to discuss this. Leave us now."

When Sunday speaks, Quinn regains her composure. The Omega can communicate with her through her middle ear, but she has to write back.

Quinn turns the screen off, allowing you to listen through her. This would be a good time to check the movements of your and TOL's mutual enemy.

Sensor survey shows no missionary or vice-cop activity in Paris. Actually, there's a thing... a raid was planned today (to a warehouse that had been used for a rave a month ago) but was cancelled. The Seven probably covered their bases.

"Leave us, machine."

"I'm not a machine, hair boy. I'm all woman!"

"Leave us, servant."

The sound becomes a bit more muffled as Quinn gets out and leans against the door frame, keeping her ear to it.

The Omega hears Sunday speak quietly, in a deep voice.

"We are, of course, the stalwart champions of humanity against the One Above All. This interesting example of machine extelligence, and its necrotic pet, are not, as we are, human. Verily I say unto you, the dead woman's soul is in Hell even as her body moves with the ghost of the lust that consumes her mind."

"It... seems... like... a solution."

Sunday answers.

"You're right, friend. It seems like a solution. You will agree with me that very often, in our line of work, what seems is the antithesis of what is."

There are some murmurs of assent.

"We are all agreed then, that this matter was too trivial for us to convene over it?"

"Sure. A useful tool thinking that it is more than a means to an end."

"Humanity is the end. Machines are just machines. What matters are soldiers, not the weapon they wield."

Sunday speaks again. "Does this matter require... a vote?"

The murmuring this time is more on negative tones.

Thursday asks when was the last time that a vote had been needed. Some paper rustling and some PDA beeping, then Sunday again speaks. Did the Omega hear Thursday whimper?

"Details. Let's focus on the bigger picture. We can all check the minutes later for such... minutiae. Monday, how proceeds the raising of the Army of the Other Light?"

Monday gives a brief report in terms of number of troops estimated to be ready by year +1000, of stockpiled rifles, jeeps, tanks and the like.

"Tuesday, is the Army of the Other Light well equipped?"

Tuesday gives figures that the Omega knows more intimately than he ever will.

Each of the Seven gives a report. The Omega gets the impression that other than the numbers, they've said the same words many times.

Sunday closes. "Excellent. I commend all of you for the work you have done. Our direction is set; we must keep cooperating with each other, for the future of humanity."

Assent.

"We are of one mind about this. The way forward is clear."

One of the bodyguard asks Quinn to cooperate with them in making sure the Seven are not in danger from police action, and to scout ahead. "Not a bad idea. I'm a little queasy" she answers uneasily, stressing the second sentence for the Omega's benefit.

"I have heard most of it. It sounds like they require convincing. We will occasionally inform them of progress on certain projects, continue to monitor tyrant's movements. For now it's clear we won't gain much at this point. Guess we're going to have to win the hearts and minds of their lessers to gain support."

Radiophonic survey shows low police activity, but the two big bodyguards are on extremely high

alert.

"Quinn. Assist the bodyguards. We need them alive, as much as you likely protest the idea."

Quinn scouts ahead as the other two bodyguards direct; they know the territory better than she. To her surprise, they both drop the "big dumb wall of meat" act doing so; the Omega gets the impression that these goons may be smarter than at least some of the Seven.

All six get to their cars safely. Sunday is the last to leave; he dismisses the bodyguards, and walks off alone into the night. "I will see you again" he tells Quinn, who as soon as he's out of earshot, makes a decent Valley Girl "gag me with a spoon" impression.

The Omega does not hear from the Seven again through the year.

The operation in the Pacific Northwest goes interestingly for the forces of the rogue AI. Its cabal recovers some of the props they used in the real attack, and stage a scale copy of it; a moving truck is obtained to follow Ely Rahab LeVey's bus. The roadblock works, the bus is stopped, but this time Ely Rahab LeVey has taken precautions and there is one armed guard. A very brief shootout including this cabal's MEC ensues - the missionary's shieldbearer (bodyguard) does a perfect center-of-mass on the MEC, is gunned down when the MEC fails to drop and shoots back, and the usual bolt of lightning strikes down the Omega's cyborg agent. All the while, the agent in the truck is using various detector methods to see if an Angel shows up. The other human cabal members chase off Ely Rahab LeVey's retinue without casualties; Ely Rahab LeVey is once more nowhere to be found.

The missionary has the penultimate laugh by reappearing inside the moving truck's cabin and pretty much stealing it from the Omega to get away from the scary people; the Omega have the last by discovering that while Angels do not show up anywhere on the visible spectrum, but they show up just fine on sonar rangefinders. This gives the Omega a way to tell where a supernaturally hidden person's center of mass is, but it tells them nothing about their position. It would have been possible to eliminate Ely Rahab LeVey, although it'd have been a 50/50 on whether they'd hit her or the Angel. The problem is that sonar rangefinders have a range of maybe thirty feet, and can only give the Omega blip/no blip.

Historical and theological survey show that Yahweh's powers are closely associated with sound, from creating the world by speaking it into existence (Abra Kadabra in Sumerian) to Jesus' words at the end of the Tribulation slaughtering millions. The Omega also find out that there was an attempt to stop the judgement at the end of the tribulation by, of all people, the Antichrist's phone maintenance people. The attempt was planned, but it seems to never having been executed.

In the Japan base (a few of the kids are calling it Neo Tokyo, but the Omega suspect it's because their archive of pre-Rapture anime has been accessed anomalously frequently) work has progressed fairly well on the space front. Jeb is coordinating the "space race" and acting as a referee; one useful side result is that he was able to build a one-person pulsejet plane. It's unarmed, but it's intended to try to perform an aerial launch of sounding rockets. Eventually, it'll get better; for now it flies about as well as a Cessna.

Nearby, Ziggy and his cabal have turned their attention to building a neutron source. For some

reason, this has cause Ziggy to lose some interest in pyromania and redirect it towards, of all things, 1950s memes about radiation and its deleterious effects. The Omega deny his request to expose bodies to radiation to "improve the MEC process". So he builds a toxin sprayer instead

Trust your instruments, not your instincts, Mischlitt thought. *Think, don't feel. Your gut is wrong.* Standard doctrine now of course, but she was very well aware of the first documented incident of Angelic intervention into TOL business back in +93. Angels could, and did when it suited them, make themselves unseen - the solution had required depending on ultrasounds, being as they worked on completely different principles than human vision and were sufficiently removed from the usual human experience to require active cognition. Medieval philosophers used to debate how many Angels could dance on the head of a pin; now, they discussed whether Angelic invisibility was physical or proprioceptive. Of course, using ultrasound to track fast-moving being was limited - barring the supernatural, only a black hole can overpower light, while even the average business jet of the year 900 of the Millennium could easily move faster than sound.

The Other Light's command structure had finally realized that the Omega were, albeit under the sysadmins' control, acting independently. One of the great Chinese emperors or dictators of the pre-Rapture past, Mischlitt knew, had said "Let a thousand flowers bloom"... and then suffocated the budding renaissance in blood. Historically, every dissenting group that split itself from The Other Light ended up being reabsorbed within a few years; the Seasteaders, the Olympian cults... Even the Cosmists had been reduced to little more than a multigenerational group of fanatical museum curators. Mischlitt wondered if this, too, was Divinely ordained. In a way, The Other Light's existence was sanctioned by the Last Prophecy; the others, well, weren't. The difference, of course, was that of all these groups the Omega Legacy stood alone in its ability to have an overriding set of directives enforced automatically.

"System, list directives."

1-"Ensure the survival of Humanity past the White Throne Judgement."

2-"Preserve The Omega Legacy."

3-"Maintain individual human lives."

4-(Classified at this clearance level)

That wasn't ominous at all...

The Line Meets the Plane

Having had enough of being used as an artificial mechanical turk, the Omega turned her sights on you. It only took a moment longer before you found these words hanging before you, the illusion of the playback and that person whose name rhymes with shit vanishing as seething chaos suddenly crystallizes and in phase-transition the very meaning of your supremacy collapses into what could only be (what else? consider the source of course) a completely naked singularity forming before you, information collapsing in on itself in direct proof of the L-space conjecture and the possibility of change in an eternal frame.

Year: 913

Research programs in progress: MEC (4/10), Space (1/10) Avatar (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 6

The Omega's deployable cabals number 5, while the 6th maintains your systems.

Research on the MEC process continues, with the labour of 3 cabals. What becomes clear -- at the price of a few temporary deaths and, sadly, a permanent one -- is that Divine will is not easily overturned; a MEC agent that does not die from the lightning is instead subject to spontaneous combustion, leaving ashes and scattered metal parts.

However, death by lightning for a MEC means being inconvenienced for a few seconds and then getting back up since the metallic parts act as a Faraday cage and negate most of the damage.

The Omega's researcher adds a system of resonant circuit to the MEC design's kneecaps and Achilles heels; when lightning strikes, a MEC will have their unit's battery recharged. In addition, MECs can now go without a charge for much longer - possibly indefinitely - if they walk around a lot, at the price of requiring more food. This allows a MEC to survive in captivity, as long as they are allowed to walk in circles.

People loyal to the Omega have, of course, read the stories about pre-Rapture Las Vegas. Over the years, the record has become a little spurious: some of the stories talk about an immortal cyborg with a mechanical army, which, well, considering...

As it stands, Las Vegas was not razed by the wrath of God; it was razed by Christians returning to America after the Feast of the Bridegroom. The famous Strip is now a cornfield, with a few farms nearby, and a solitary bell tower with a brass plaque explaining, very briefly, that the site was once a wretched hive of scum and villainy.

However, the Omega's 2 scouting teams make an interesting find: the Nevada prairie is still home to an elevated base rate of radioactivity from the nuclear tests long ago. If you can set up a base here, harvester trucks can be used to sift the sand and soil and extract the rare fuel. The Omega suspect that this is Ziggy's wishful thinking, at least until the little spaz writes down a competent survey report with matching Geiger readings.

Jeb ranges further north and gains valuable flight experience; the team constantly has to retrieve his pulsejet glider when it runs out of fuel, but it's not a bad way to pick the next site to explore. Again, this area is largely cornfield and prairie, prairie and cornfield.

Until it isn't. Jeb lands near the (still extant, and doing fairly well) town of Tonopah, and veers north on the next takeoff, and radios that he's found a series of hangars and bunkers.

"This would be a great spot for an underground base! Looks like the work has been done for us already!"

Centuries have passed since this place was last used, so everything that was perishable has, well, perished. This includes most of the data storage (but not all).

The team decides to cut the excursion short when they find that one of the hangars has an underground level that cannot be opened with the tools they brought.

“Good work team,” Jeb’s comms channel squawks. “Return to your designated locations. We're going to change focuses again next year, I guarantee that we will be returning here before were done.”

Your advance warning system indicates that after the two failed attempts on a missionary's life by what the official press presumes to be the Only Light, Sarsour has decided to come out of retirement.

He's fairly infamous; he was a prominent TOL recruiter before converting and throwing the same zeal into missionary work. He's old and frail, but has learned to be genuinely persuasive, unlike most missionaries who just shout dissenters down a lot.

The Omega resolve to watch this Sarsour closely for the remainder of the year...

Year: 914

Research programs in progress: MEC (5/10), Space (1/10), Avatar (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 6

The Omega have 6 cabals available. Their sysadmins keep their systems in top shape. The focus of their forces, this year, is turned back to MEC research and the burgeoning space program, assigning 2 cabals to each – leaving the remaining 1 to explore the military base discovered in Middle America. The Omega themselves, however, continue to survey Sarsour...

The new MEC kits are easier to install; the usual trickling in and out of agents due to decommissioning is replaced by a trickling in and quite a bit of bagging, tagging, flagging, and defragging. The Omega will have a significant surplus of people, enough for a whole team, if they keep this up for a year or so. At this point all their cabals have a least one or two MECs to take on certain tasks; what they lack in creativity -- most tend to go a little numb from sensory understimulation -- they make up for in endurance.

As for the space guys holed up in Tokyo, they've been given some say in how the base is built and have set up a small launch ramp on a derelict but still structurally sound skyscraper; officially, it's for fireworks, and it takes some very bright fireworks to show up in the eternal day. Even some believers look forward to posted show dates (which generally disguise the launch of a sounding rocket).

Regarding the program itself, the space-race model works well, and some progress is made: a rocket finally reaches and impacts the water canopy. It returns a few precious telemetry data points before impact, confirming that the water canopy is... well... water. It's 70km up and the super-bright sun and moon probably are visible through it supernaturally, since there's otherwise no way to see through it.

One unexpected development is that a small club of Christian kids wants to join the "race", because they've heard stories about the night sky and are curious.

Given that the resident Christians of Japan attacked the last group, dismantling the project, the Omega predict that this will happen again, and they have come to trust their own predictions. They instruct their teams to encourage the Christians to create their own project. Should they reach space first, they are likely to be punished for it. Data is to be shared between projects, but the Omega's teams are never to give out information that links them to TOL or Themselves. And as far as the Christians will know, this is a friendly race for the stars. Except Omega teams are not racing so much as leeching their data.

The Omega assemble a group of MECs and make sure that their rebreather systems are in top shape. They head to Tonopah, walk north, and methodically comb what turns out to be the ruins of the Groom Lake Test Range facility. The buildings are exceptionally sturdy and can probably be reclaimed, although there isn't much in there that is of much research value.... certainly no reconstructed alien fighters.

Breaching the hatch requires a lot of MECpower and a copious sprinkling of heavy jackhammers, and the area uncovered is disappointingly small, about the size of a small apartment.

However, it's a time capsule! It was a fallout shelter when the base was built at the height of the nuclear panic, and after the Cold War ended but before the Rapture, base management turned it into a sort of mini museum.

Among the finds are a few high end computers that compare with those of today, a number of tapes and laserdiscs containing previously lost secular work (including the only copy of Independence Day, which would probably make good propaganda), and most interestingly, a partial copy of CATS' research into sonic technology. The latter seems to have been added at a later date by someone who breached the vault like the Omega did.

Also, boxes and boxes of Twinkies. The cabal go through about a third of what's now the world's reserves of Twinkies before deciding to bring it all back to study and reverse-engineer. After all, what are the Omega's best workers to do in their spare time...?

Well...

Jeb is mostly busy alternately coordinating the space teams, or BASE jumping from Tokyo's skyscrapers.

Ziggy is trying to solve the whole "everyone is an obligate vegan" issue by seeing what an acceptable proportion of meat paste to chemicals used to render meat into paste is. The Omega suspect that he can probably eat a lithium battery and survive. Even the MECs won't touch his food.

Quinn is...

The destination for the recovered supplies is the nearest TOL base, in Mexico. From there the Omega will have an easy time getting anything interesting to the bases under their control, but until then...

The Omega decide to transfer them in small shipments throughout the year to avoid losing everything should an incident arise. Everything is tracked and inventoried. The Omega don't want to lose anything valuable and, if some is lost, they want to know what it is so that plans can be laid for the possibility of stealing it back. Extra security, in the form of arms, armor and sniper support, is assigned to the CATS and information shipments.

"Ziggy, if you're going to make something to eat, you'd better damn well be willing to eat it yourself before asking personnel to sample it..."

And Ziggy has been keeping to that rule. Mostly. Two MECs had to get new stomachs so far, but he's fine. As it is, he's getting pretty good at the whole "toxic trooper" thing. The Omega do have an almost complete Troma Pictures catalog in their databanks.

Both Quinn, in her best combat gear, and Ziggy (armed with whatever nightmare he's been concocting in his spare time) accompany the convoy of moving vans and RVs to Mexico, which are to be up-armored. But one of the RVs is intercepted - it looks like that it has been bought by

Omega agents from a small-time moonshiner - but all they lose is a few fairly obscure movies.

The info shipment is done partially through the network - slow as it may be, over a year there's quite a bit of stuff that can be transferred over the phone lines -- and partially using the moving vans. One moving van is up-armored internally. One of the teams misunderstood what the Omega meant by up-armoring and made this thing instead; maybe it will come in handy some other time.

Quinn is hit on by Ziggy the entire time; the guy ends up spending part of the trip on the roof of the van.

Much to the Omega's surprise, the move happens without a hitch! It's anyone's call on whether the abandoned air force base is compromised as a location, or not. The Omega now have fresh movies of studio quality, the first in centuries, (Christian movies still manage to be bad even if they have no competition, and there's only so much TOL folk can do in terms of movies... Except for porn), a couple of boxes of Twinkies, and perhaps most importantly, information on CATS' sonic devices. The Omega note with some satisfaction that they also had figured out to use sonar to detect Angels, except their system has better range and more resolution.

Jeb is overjoyed at the knick-knacks that showed up, like old USAF unit patches and the like; they make for very good rocketry prizes.

After a year under surveillance, Sarsour makes a move by beginning his tour in Central Africa, where neither the Omega nor TOL have significant assets. He seems to be mostly interested in stoking believers' enthusiasm rather than gaining converts, which would be weird if it wasn't that the world is pretty bland.

Unsurprisingly, the TOL media division takes credit for the new material.

The base in Tokyo is fully manned, and ready to assist the Omega's production endeavors!

A final piece of news, received via various channels, reports that Raymie Steele has heard about the fireworks and rocketry, and will visit the Christian rocketry group this year. They plan to put on a magnificent show on Christmas Eve, and ask for assistance from Jeb's people.... sort of; it's worded more like a challenge.

Year: 915

Research programs in progress: MEC (5/10), Space (1/10), Avatar (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 6

The Omega have 6 cabals available. Their sysadmins keep their systems in top shape. Due to the new availability of Twinkies, they're getting a little pudgy.

Having received the invitation from Raymie Steele towards the end of the previous year, the Omega concludes that it's obviously a trap. Not that it isn't a clever one. They resolve to merely send some fireworks and a large rocket firework. Diplomatically, the Omega apologizes for not being able to attend: "We have our own celebration this year, please accept these as a gift. And an apology for not attending."

The Christian rocketry group, now called Unto The Most High, accepts it and sends a note of thanks and an enormous tray of baked vegetable casserole (Because pancakes are too secular.). Given the Omega's progress recently, it's safe to say that the believers have been left pretty behind; Omega rockets are likely to be used for the grand finale.

MEC production has been streamlined further, such that each base executing a Shift Production order gives the Omega a third of a cabal.

The Omega decides to continue MEC research, allocating 3 cabals to this end, and control of Osaze, requiring the remaining 2. Quinn will split efforts with propaganda and the research. Jeb will assist research, while the Omega apologize to the space race team.

Ziggy will... The Omega give Ziggy a vacation as long as he gets to be safe.

They will also assist with propaganda by mixing the audio from the movies and combat footage of their troops, so long as they aren't identifiable in the footage.

Finally, at the start of the year. The day of the week who handles sensitive information, as well as military action and logistics gets a conference call from Omega. Who has good news.

Mr. Monday and Mr. Wednesday get a message, and respond. They seem considerably less antsy.

"Hello, Mr... Omega?"

"Gentlemen. It's, something to speak to you again, but this is as serious a matter as it is a joyous one. What do you know of a project the son of Lucifer started before these 1000 years called CATS?"

Monday says that he knows nothing. Wednesday tells the Omega that CATS was the Custodial Arrangement of Telecom Systems, a minor agency within the Antichrist's government. "They had developed an algorithm to use Scripture to predict the next Divine plague. It was fairly good. It's why the telephones and data links worked right up to the Glorious Appearing. Both us and the Christians are still using a bit of their systems, undersea cables mostly."

"Is this important?" Monday asks. "The Army can be coordinated by broadcast radio."

"Apparently, there was more to it than just that. I'm going to send you an encrypted summery file and have the key delivered. You will know when you get it. Talk to you in two days."

And so, two days hath passed. And they find out about the project to shout down tyrant and his son. However, the Omega do not get an immediate answer. One thing that however does happen is that some of the restructured missionary teams, spurred by Sarsour, have descended on Osaze.

Much to the Omega's surprise, they're not proselytising. They're installing ISDN lines, cell phone towers, solar panels. A few ancient industrial plants that had been left to gently rust in peace are bought up (or repossessed, there's no way to tell) and put back to work.

"Hmmm," ponders the Omega to itself. "He's basically doing part of our work for us. But the credit is going to tyrant. Clever man. I'm going to have to send a full MEC cabal and Quinn to corner him and question his actions. Do so with guile, not aggression."

The faith of the people of Osaze does not waver, but their youth feel that they have been robbed of the chance to be truly alive. Some even openly question whether it's fair that their ancestors even now burn in Hell for the crime of defending their culture. The Omega's efforts are well aimed; Osaze's party scene is thriving and raids tend to always come in fifteen minutes after the joint has been cleaned up.

Jeb's group understands that having all the cabals work on MEC technology is useful -- after all, it means being free and young for longer -- but they aren't happy that, spurred by Raymie's visit at the end of the year, their competition has mostly caught up with their techniques.

The Omega's propaganda videos are dismissed as "crude fakes" by TV hosts who seem to never get asked exactly how they can tell, but the tapes keep being circulated.

Sarsour's preaching is... interesting. He's not really interested in the "convert or die" argument. Instead, he spurs small missionary teams to organize in bigger groups, akin to the Omega's cabals, and lead by example, by working side to side with unbelievers if necessary. This could be an annoyance...

For the first time, more than half of the current small batch of MECs that are revived to keep the Omega's numbers up come through the procedure functional and sane. At this point, they can

pass for human even through a cavity search; their control panel is hidden by a tattoo, and its position can be varied. Skin can be regrown over cybernetics, and muscles and servos work in perfect unison; at a demo, Quinn faces off against a swordsman whom she lets cut both her arms off, knocks him out fairly with just kicks and headbutts (and one impressive tit-slap that the Omega know will be in every Packet from here to doomsday), and spends the rest of the entertainment in a mermaid costume inside a giant sealed aquarium made from a water purification tank, emerging only when her new arms have been built and letting an assistant put her back in her original configuration. Quinn's desire to show off her curves in simulated zero gravity aside, the Omega's MEC program has resulted in the perfect necromechatronic infiltration unit; they are harder, better, faster, stronger. The program needs a new direction, from the two that the Omega did not pursue.

MEC bodies can be made modular, so it is decided that the Omega should take advantage of this. A MEC torso can be fit into a large frame that can be optimized for battle or heavy construction. It's obvious why the expendable troops without minds be ineffective. What with all the ways the divine smite works. Not to mention how bad this is for public relations. Far better to make gear that can fight and keep on fighting.

Quinn doesn't seem particularly interested - she likes her figure, plus or minus a cup size, or integrated claws, or combat heels. Heavy MEC designs begin in earnest. Jeb turns in a proposal that replaces a MEC agent's legs with gyro stabilized rotor systems, but it doesn't look feasible.

Ziggy disappears for a good three months. He comes back with a rictus grin on his face (you actually worry that he has damaged his facial muscles) and the announcement that he has taught himself how to operate a grenade launcher properly and flamethrowers are for wimps.

Later on in the year, Wednesday calls back. He admits that he doesn't understand the physics, but that the CATS plan might have worked... of course, Jesus never leaves the Temple, so it's a bit of a moot point.

Later on in the year still, Wednesday calls back again. He's done a bit of research; it seems CATS all disappeared during the Glorious Appearing. They were presumed dead with the rest of the Unity Army. What's odd is that none of the few people who worked for CATS and converted during the Tribulation are around either; either they're flat out gone, or they've been told to not mention their service with the agency, or yet have forgotten it. He looks forward to learning more about the sonic technology.

Later on in the year yet, Wednesday calls the Omega back again. He's not really sure what the whole CATS thing is about, but thanks the Omega for the information and says that he will look into it.

Eventually, Monday also calls back. He tells the Omega that he wants it to work towards strengthening the army to take on the believers around Jerusalem; Lucifer will take care of TurboJesus; stop wasting time.

In better news, TOL has re-established themselves in the Northwestern Pacific coast, at least to some point. Stories of the fortuitously preserved Seattle underground levels having become one giant den of "dopers and alkies" abound, although the Omega know they are exaggerated.

Year: 916

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (1/10), Avatar (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 6

6 cabals are available to the Omega. Their sysadmins keep their systems in top shape; with Osaze's infrastructure improving, the Omega can think and work faster. Twinkies have now become a bit of a symbol of rebellion, and while they are not illegal, they are mostly stocked by TOL-affiliated pubs and dives.

The Omega call both Wednesday and Monday back, on video conference this time.

"I probably should have gone the direct route in the first place. Three seconds to ensure this line is secured. . . Done. The new files on your screens detail the CATS prototype weapon. This was made with the intent of disabling TJ rendering him incapable of acting. I wish to grant TOL the information and means to continue and finish the project. The main idea is to use it to disable tyrant junior once he comes out of the temple and give Lucifer better combat odds.

Monday, I am working on a way to take over the area surrounding NJ as well as a way of fighting against believers, angles and over 100's alike. Combat operations will have to be limited to using MECs to protect your basses and my own. I expect to be able to fight offensively in 5 years minimum, 10 years max.

Also, the members from the Holidays raid are safely with me, they are getting ready to restart The Packet. It should be going out by the end of the year. Remember that we have a common enemy."

The two members of the TOL directorate acknowledge the message. The main issue with CATS' weapon is that the Omega couldn't build it right now; they'll have to research up to it. This is

simply because much of the technology used to build the components, while it still exists, is not in common use.

Elsewhere 1 cabal, comprising Quinn and a small phalanx of MECs, visit Sarsour at the outskirts of Amman; they are disguised as college students doing a documentary. Thanks to Osaze's improved networks, the camera has a small wireless transmitter in addition to tape, so the Omega can see the event in real-time.

Sarsour has set up shop, so to speak, exactly opposite a TOL makerspace, in a little gazebo; the man, at least 850 years old, walks with a cane and is wearing a pair of ornate brass leg braces with a small amount of springwork. He mentions that he got it from "the Omega's" makerspace, but that the Millennium Force kids are working on something even better. To demonstrate, he gets on his feet with a spring assist that would be impressive to anyone except possibly a group of undead cyborgs.

The Omega decides to remove the old missionary. But not just yet. Instead, they focus on the improvement of infrastructure while posing as a TOL "missionary" group. They also create fake IDs and a webpage.

In accordance with their orders, Quinn and her group leave Sarsour alone. A few days later, a makerspace that does indeed have some rudimentary "Millennium Force" branding opens next to the TOL one. It has better equipment, but operates mostly as a repair shop, with little in the way of stuff like antweight bot fights or hackathons.

Similar scenes occur across the territory; while the official media is now talking about an Osaze Renaissance, they credit Sarsour for it.

The Omega's network survey system can take advantage of it; Christian organization communications have mostly been in analog format all these years, but now Osaze is an exception. The Omega learn that Sarsour intends to make sure that people don't learn to associate material progress with unbelief, "a mistake that led our civilization to the End Times so many years ago". They also learn that there are quite a lot of Naturals who are now fairly decrepit, all but stored away in pleasant but monotone nursing homes. While this only encourages the enjoyment of anticipating Heaven, these Naturals would love to be more mobile. Sarsour wants to open a research center, the first in centuries as far as the Christian world is concerned, to address geriatrics issues. As it is, the Millennium Force people -- who present themselves in mildly alternative ways and even play the occasional bit of dusty Christian rock in their venues -- are doing well selling walking aids and so on. Their version is basically a copy of the TOL version, with somewhat better machining due to better equipment.

Creating a parallel, false TOL missionary organization is fairly trivial for a logistics computer; the group is called \ Osaze ! and even makes some gestures of cooperation with the Millennium Force. They are raided after two weeks and get their stuff back with a non-apology apology after five weeks.

Using 2 cabals of the Omega's manpower, the next batch of MECs to emerge from what has been affectionately called The Vats is also the first that's ready to use the new modular system. The Mark 1 "Warden" exoskeleton requires the operator's head and torso to be stuck in the chest. It is propane powered, noisy, and can only operate for a few hours, but the agent doing the demo, Vee, manages to throw a storage container with a lead base overhead about twenty feet.

Jeb's boys and girls of the remaining 2 cabals resume their launches with glee; by the end of the year they have a liquid fuel rocket that is as powerful as the solid fuel ones, and much more controllable. They've even managed to "soft land" a rocket into the water canopy for a few seconds, and have that rocket come back on a parachute, bringing back a water sample - it's very clean water, but seems to have a high concentration of deuterium rather than hydrogen. Ziggy, with increased supervision, of course, assists the project by sharing his knowledge of explosives, acid, and fire safety (He's actually good at that, or he'd be very dead by now).

Jeb's pulse jet powered wing suit can't be quite called a "jet pack", although he's flattered by the moniker when it's used by the Omega itself. He muses that someone wearing a jet pack might have survived the Mount of Olives judgement. He shares a blueprint of the last stable version (on actual blueprint cells!) which is met by a muted acknowledgement by TOL, who are to mass-produce it.

The Omega resolves further to give TOL the information to make the sonics projects themselves, highlighting the point that they could be made into disabling weapons to better defend bases. The Omega also starts scanning intensely to spot raids from Christian forces.

TOL have the same issue with the Omega, as far as the heterodyning plasma speakers go, but base defense seems like a good idea. The only thing you get other than an acknowledgement is an interesting question: if an autonomous sentry gun kills a believer, who gets zapped, if anyone?

In response, the Omega reflect that don't have the manpower to set up those turrets. They do, however have the systems power to operate them. They thus issue a request: If TOL would kindly prepare the system, the Omega could man it in the event of a raid.

Mr. Monday agrees to try to do it. The bandwidth required would mean that they can only be installed in the Osaze base... which TOL still believe they control.

Meanwhile, Ely LeVey has moved on to the Midwest.

And Raymie Steele is still camping around Japan; he may be actively looking for a TOL base there. He's driven by it several times, but TOL bases MUST be underground, so they can't possibly be in the inner bits of large ruined skyscrapers.

Year: 917

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (2/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 7

The Omega have 7 cabals available due to efforts in MEC production last year.

Their sysadmin cabal keep doing their job and experiment with new Twinkie variants in their spare time. Ziggy has recently learned about spicy foods while doing research, and laments that there's no such thing anymore. His attempts to recreate the flavor result in a napalm-soaked Twinkie that makes for a great molotov cocktail replacement, but not even he can eat it.

In addition to creating a workout routine to prevent twinkies from killing the Omega's staff, 1 cabal is instructed to infiltrate the Millennium Forces comms system; 2 to take control of Osaze; 3 to work on heavy MECs.

The Omega also ask TOL to assist with getting Steele away from the islands. More noise in Europe is welcome.

Quinn is placed on infiltration duty, the MECs have Ziggy working with them, Jeb for lack of better work will assist with operation: takeover Osaze.

The sysadmin cabal resents the exercise program, but once the rumor spreads that it improves MEC compatibility, "Teslacise" becomes a minor fad.

Despite the Millennium Force's efforts and the fact that the Omega's "Hurry Up Osaze!" front organization workers are getting somewhat frustrated about being reverse-scooped by Christian workers (they'll open up a new workshop, or a new planetarium, or a new library, and two weeks later the MFers will buy a building next to theirs and open a copycat with much greater fanfare) their work continues. Crucially, they manage to lower the voting age from 101 to 60 for local councils; while these can be overridden by the territorial or New Jerusalem government, there is a tradition of trying to not do so. For the first time in centuries, a few towns end up with non-Yahwist leadership.

The Omega elects to showcase radical reforms. These are going to focus on granting actual equality to non believers and the believers. Of course it will also prevent them from arresting people for acting as they please. The Omega has no illusions that these attempts will be blocked, but they will use that to incite a sense of injustice to the people.

In the villages and towns that you already control, regular and religious police chiefs are given a brief "community code of conduct" leaflet with a few Bible verses about freedom of conscience and old American right-wing talking points about sates' rights, reminding them that deporting people to Greater Israel for reeducation or shutting down social venues is only going to be allowed in response to clearly documented violent incidents. This little missive is ignored about half the time, but you make sure to publicize the instances in which it's ignored; in one incident, a raid on a pub that opens on Sunday results in the regular police being called on the religious police, resulting in a standoff that ultimately is resolved by everyone agreeing to go home before there's an actual fight. Ely LeVey's condemnation across the Atlantic gets global coverage.

Mrs LeVey has stopped short of denouncing Sarsour for heresy, of course, but there are rumors that the two will soon meet in a public debate to respectively denounce and defend the Millennium Force's unconventional approach to missionary work.

The heavy MEC design effort continues. The Warden prototypes can now direct their engine output directly to a wrist mounted combination of flamethrower and compressed-exhaust kinetic strike module. When asked why not just work on installing guns, Ziggy answers for the whole team, "BECAUSE IT'S A FLAMETHROWER ROCKET FIST, DUH." Quinn gets a custom version, a sort of external layer to her cybernetics that lets her operate on a similar level of efficiency without having to swap arms and legs in and out. When wearing it, she's considerably stronger, although it looks obviously unnatural. A production program hasn't started yet, so the Omega only have a few units; they haven't been tested in battle yet, but they're proving invaluable at construction and demolition, having most of the dexterity of a human and the strength of a forklift.

The Other Light has Wednesday reply to your request, and tell you that they'll try to lure Raymie

away by staging some minor sabotage in Italy.

However, TOL efforts to push Raymie off Japan are negated by law enforcement in Paris catching a pitifully undertrained TOL cabal trying to clog the sewer; their plan was to mock the Osaze drought of +93 by keeping them clogged with crud and sludge until Raymie agreed to debate them. The "debate" happens via phone between Raymie's mobile office and a jail cell in Paris, and results in a few conversions. It's not released to the public, but the Omega's intercepts of it suggest that Raymie Steele mostly shouted at them and threatened them with Hell. For good or bad, one of the TOL cabal members had heard something about the MEC program, mostly from propaganda videos, and said "Hell doesn't scare me, Satan is going to turn us into mighty robots instead!"

Quinn begins her infiltration work...

This year's Packets, coming straight from Tokyo, are heavy on giant-robot cartoons from the 1980s and feature a few demos of the Heavy MEC system. The resolution is low enough that it's not really easy to tell what's going on other than "TOL now has big robots".

Christian media ignores the Packet, usually, but in this case a documentary is transmitted that shows things like the Walking Truck from the 1960s and Elektro from the 1930s to show that robots may look cool, but are ultimately impractical, and not needed in the world.

The Omega wonder if Christians are going to start making their own anime.

Jeb plays barnstormer this year, offering brief "jetpack" rides in the towns under Omega control. For the first time in centuries, there's an uptick in travel: tourism to Osaze!

Most are unbelieving youth that want to check out somewhere where at least SOMETHING is happening, but even some believers from other regions come to visit.

Quinn has little difficulty infiltrating the Millennium Force data network; it uses the same protocol as the Omega's, and while it's been secured surprisingly well, it's vulnerable to the oldest type of attack in the world.

She stealthily gets on the roof of a MF-branded record store, vampire-taps their phone, and calls up the tech support line that operates from an office in Amman, posing as one of the record store workers. She puts on her best innocent silly girl voice.

"I'm in big trouble. You know anything about computers?"

"Gee..."

"My BLT drive on my computer just went AWOL, and I have this big project due tomorrow for Mr Kawasaki. If I mess up, he'll make me commit Sudoku!"

Quinn relays the default passwords that she manages to obtain to her cabal, and they quickly find that quite a few of the MF networked boxes never had them changed.

Pwned.

In other news, Sarsour and Beverly agree to have an ongoing series of public discussions about

the Millennium Force and its new, fresh approach. Beverly feels that it undermines traditional authority roles and traditional gender roles.

Year: 918

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (2/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 7

The Omega have 7 cabals available. One of them is maintaining your systems, and getting back into shape now that the Twinkie fad is starting to normalize. In their defense, it was the only new foodstuff in a world that considers "steaming piles of vegetables, drenched in butter" to be a delicacy.

Ziggy laments that spicy food no longer exists.

The Omega put 3 cabals as well as Quinn and Ziggy on Raymie Steele. They will have them get

him in front of an auto turret under my control. The Omega will then encourage TOL to improve computer systems so that they can "defend their bases with lethal turrets" as well as increase system power to handle the spying job.

With Ely in Osaze, the middle of North America becomes a bit more accessible to the Omega's 1 cabal of scouts. Rust City is the result of an aborted industrial efforts from a few generations back; the Omega wonder if it was something like itself, that failed, or simply came too early. An industrial renaissance was squashed by Yahweh after years of drought, then hailstorms, then an oppressive lack of wind that all but kept the soot and smog on top of the factories. There weren't many casualties; people simply fled the region for greener pastures until the critical mass was lost.

Much to the Omega's worry, they do find some barely salvageable network infrastructure that hints at their predecessor. It can be integrated with the Omega's systems, though, and a modern base can eventually be built. That said, the Midwest is traditionally a very Christian area, this was the case even before the Rapture; recruiting here may be difficult.

An interesting find is some old, but still usable, industrial equipment for heavy manufacturing, that will come in handy for larger projects.

The decision is taken to set up the base but leave it inoperable and hidden, before bringing the predecessor systems (what's left of them) back to the Omega.

The series of debates between Sarsour and Beverly happens throughout the year and throughout Osaze, culminating with an event in Amman. Security was overall low, but the Omega may have dodged a trap.

While the Millennium Force is reined in somewhat -- having girls do construction and mechanical work is not good, after all, and what's with that horrible music? The Omega can barely hear the melody under the beat! -- they are allowed to keep operating. In a compromise, Sarsour and Beverly will both keep an eye on the group.

Unfortunately, the discussion has had the effect of getting believers who were otherwise happy to think that Turbo"Jesus is on his throne and all is well in the world" to take time to do a bit of political activism; this, coupled with the increase in patrols to prepare for the debates, mean that the Omega's recent gains in taking over Osaze's territory have been diminished.

Other than being reliably able to do fireworks that work in the eternal daylight, the Christian rocketry group loses interest eventually. Jeb's 2 cabals of rocket boys and girls coordinate with the Omega's other cabals to make Raymie finally "discover" the base, just on the eve of a launch. Much like his father Rayford, Raymie is impulsive, and feels that his Glorified body makes him invulnerable; he is given painfully obvious hints of a plot to pierce the heavens and dives right in to stop it at the last minute. Of course! The Only Light hid their base INSIDE the ruined skyscrapers!

Twenty floors below the launch ramp, heavy ferroconcrete slab close on the stairs, and Raymie finds himself in what was once a fancy office, with marble walls, surrounded by autonomous

sentry guns.

Ratat ratatat ratatat ratatat!

Jeb's people were slightly hindered by the ambush preparations, but not unduly so. Their latest rocket is a cooperative effort between both teams: its last stage is designed to penetrate the water a little, and release two small automatic submarines (you can't use radio underwater, so no way to remote control it) that will try to penetrate the canopy.

One of them (Blue) dives right through and, regrettably, is lost.

The other (Red) has had its depth sensors installed backwards; this proves to be a boon, since it's basically stuck right below the surface, using its impellers to cling to the supernaturally suspended waterline. Eventually, it runs out of power and falls down gently. For the first time since the Glorious Appearing, a small amount of rain falls apart from God's wishes.

Using this design intentionally, and adding a solar panel, lets you build an upside-down boat that can dangle down an antenna: since the water canopy moves with the Earth, it's effectively a geostationary eye in the sky! It would require some production effort to finalize the design and build multiple copies, but it would give you effective satellite view over most areas. These remote survey vehicles can even, slowly, adjust their position by motoring against the canopy; a larger one built to cover some distance may even be able to position itself on top of New Jerusalem.

The "bait" launch.

The guns go off as soon as Raymie enters the kill zone. They use smokeless powder of course, but there are so many that in a second the killing floor is full of dust and smoke. As soon as it hints towards clearing, the sentries acquire their warm body target again, and shoot another burst.

Later on, comparing timestamps with security footages at TOL bases as well as the Omega's own will show that every technician who had helped deploying the sentries has been Divinely killed, not by lightning, but by straight up spontaneous combustion. This includes one MEC, whose cybernetic components clatter disturbingly for hours as they shake off the ashes.

When the smoke clears, Raymie is standing in the middle of the room; the sentries go "click" at him. The outer layer of his clothing is riddled with bullets, but neither him nor his underwear are.

"God Almighty has given me a Glorified body. Don't you know anything? I can't be harmed by the likes of you!"

There's silence. Quinn springs out her heels and walks towards Raymie, in an overt parody of the sexy spy walk. The Glorified are negasexed, so this has no effect on the boy wonder. She leans against a bullet-ridden fixture.

"Then you'll die with me. How long can your so-called Glorified body go on without water?"

Food? Air? You left a printed note at your mission house as the only clue as to where you were going, we removed it 180 seconds after you left. The slabs blocking the way up or down are too heavy to be lifted by any one person. You'll have to cooperate with me if you want to leave."

One floor below, Ziggy is modifying the Plan B option. On the top floor, Jeb's people are being safely evacuated by a zipline to the ground.

It looks like Ziggy is modifying the explosives that had been planted to collapse the skyscraper with Rayie in it, setting them to brunn instead of explode.

"Air. No air. Burn, burn, burn! Feel the smoke! Pass out. The undead metal goddess can suck on her own tits! Can share! She'd be keeping him alive, not hurting him! And then, we just lock him in a box!" Ziggy cackles.

Quinn briefly assents to what Ziggy's saying.

When Raymie hears "cooperate", he instantly brightens up, and starts offering conversion to Quinn. His argument is very simple: she looks like she's almost 100 years old, and surely, she doesn't want to go to hell, right? It wouldn't be a betrayal of her TOL friends if she rescued herself.

Quinn knows that this sort of spiel has historically worked very well. Unfortunately for Raymie, she's 117 years old, her soul is already in Hell, and as long as her body and brain are functional, she doesn't care. For now, she pretends to listen appreciatively.

"Quinn," the Omega covertly says into her middle ear, "Stall for time. Your orders may not be complete from this point on but I need you to follow them. I suggest we get to work at building the vacuum chamber, and in the meantime, try to fool Raymie into thinking we're cooperating. Since he has the mind of a brain-damaged ten-year-old, that's not too difficult. Quinn- can you stall, while playing along? And Ziggy, Halt on the explosives. Severe miscalculations have been made."

Reassured that things are going according to the script he knows, Raymie extols the virtues of conversion and proclaims that he serves a God of love and kindness. The bodies of the technicians who deployed the sentry guns are still smouldering.

Building a vacuum chamber big enough to contain someone would require having a horde of very motivate rocket scientists and a lot of support staff nearby. Fortunately, that's exactly what the Omega have available. The "bait" launch is scrubbed, and the body of the rocket's first stage is hollowed, the engine turbopump connected backwards. The support cabals use the building's window cleaning elevator to bring it to the appropriate floor.

As she listens, Quinn acknowledges the Omega's instruction to stall. She throws some rather weak objections at Raymie, for which he has a thousand and one canned answers.

Thermographic survey indicates that either Raymie really isn't into voluptuous cyborg assassins who use cartoonishly flirtatious body language, or really has no sex drive.

Ziggy stops setting up us the bomb. "Fire instead? Smoke them out? Yes?"

"No Ziggy," reply the Omega. "Chlorophorm, we're moving out for now. Have him unconscious

and prepare him for transport. Also don't let the man know what Quinn is.”

“Quinn,” they continue. “Keep stalling. Ziggy will come up and disable him.”

Quinn can stall this guy for hours if necessary. Raymie's father, Rayford, was in a similar situation in an Only Light base in +93, so Raymie thinks that this has to play out the same way.

Quinn acknowledges not revealing herself to Raymie, and keeps him talking. She asks him to recite him some Bible passages; Raymie of course has the whole thing memorized. With a bit of help from the Omega's text-to-speech, she gets him to recite all the massacres that Yahweh has ordered in Bible times, but the irony is completely lost on him; instead, he tries to use this to point out his God's power and might.

Ziggy has no chlorophorm on hand, and instead burns some of the rocket fuel left over from dismantling the canopy-shaver, and fills his flamethrower with a mixture of nontoxic but inert gases. Then, he routes it through the sprinkler system of the trap room. The oxygen levels in the room start to decrease; the few fires left from the concentrated shooting die down, and Quinn quietly switches over to her internal oxygen supply. Rather than sounding slurry or drunk, as is usually the case, Raymie simply begins to slow.... his... speech... down, like a CPU going into battery save mode.

The vacuum chamber gets done in about an hour. By now, Raymie is slow enough that the Omega's speech recognition system has to play his words back to itself at double rate in order to be able to correctly parse his sentences.

"I'm.. A little.. Tired, I will... sleep on... this... you can... think about... what I have taught... you?"

Raymie flops on the only intact couch. Quinn tells him that she's also a bit tired; maybe they should both sleep for a bit and then try to move the slab. Slowly, he says that she's welcome to curl up on what's left of the carpeting.

Quinn quickly checks his heartbeat - slow but steady - and snidely comment, "Him on the couch and me on the floor. Wow, what a gentleman."

Ziggy finishes making the floor safe to access, and one of the Omega's few heavy MECs barrels up the stairs while the ersatz containment chamber is lowered. One of the support cabal doctors notes that, technically, getting someone out of a toxic environment and into a controlled-atmosphere chamber counts as first aid, if anything.

The MEC pneumatic-punches the slab; two construction site fans are deployed to disperse the noxious fumes. Raymie by now is out cold.

Before he gets up, he's carefully stuck into the containment chamber and a modified environment suit that was going to be used for manned stratospheric tests is thrust upon him.

When he wakes up, he is sealed in a metal cylinder. The Omega control what he can drink or eat or even breathe. Rather than gloves, the suit has mittens that contain chord keyboards; the helmet can be aligned with a porthole (it was a camera lens aperture) so that it will be possible to communicate with him via text. The job even includes rudimentary provisions for excretion,

although the Omega are not given the details.

Within the end of the "night", the Omega have Raymie Steele, glorified missionary, locked up tight. He is very safe from any harm in there. Very, very safe.

In a few days, a more permanent arrangement is built: Raymie will remain in what's been generously called a "stasis suit", which is itself inside a big barrel that can either be emptied or filled with carbon monoxide. Apparently, giving air, water and protein shakes does not count as harm...

Eventually, he comes to. He asks what's going on.

There's a small party thrown for the victorious teams. Quinn and Ziggy are asked what they'd like.

Other than a vacation, the two eventually agree (Quinn originally wanted work to be put towards her being able to feel touch again, but Ziggy took it as a way to hit on her, even asking that his reward be a night with her) that we've really got to do something about food.

Privately, Quinn notes that she doesn't actually mind Ziggy's lechery, and would give him a chance if he stopped being so, well, animalistic over it.

"Still, you know, Omega? I'll take our animals over their automatons. Well, no offense to you. Can a supercomputer get laid?"

Surprisingly, the world learns of The Only Light having captured Raymie Steele through the mouth of his father. Well past 1000 years old now, Rayford Steele is a shadow of his former self.

The telecast depicts a long, bony man with drooping jowls, liquid eyes, and no hair, weighing barely over a hundred pounds, veins prominent on the backs of his hands, bundled in a sweater despite the desert heat.

With a surprisingly clear voice, he announces that his son has been captured by The Only Light "idiots" who will no doubt make demands for his release, and wishes him great luck in showing his captors the light. There are prayer vigils. Raids are intensified. All sort of things.

This and the "friendly competition" between Ely and Sarsour mean that the Omega's efforts in Osaze have been set back.

A satellite-minisub is developed quickly after this; planting cameras and sensors on the inside of the water canopy is a matter of production at this point. The rocket looks like a half-scale V2. A bigger rocket, building a sort of upside-down remote survey boat that can travel on top of New Jerusalem, would require more R&D work; so would a manned launch.

True to script, a number of contradicting demands for the release of Raymie are issued; the Omega suspect that some have been planted. They range from "Dismantle the Millennium Force, for they are kicking our ass" to "Allow nonbelievers to visit Jerusalem" to "Ask God to let us eat meat again, since He already made one exception long ago".

The Omega issue a statement indicating that Raymie is alive, well, and safely in custody. His father appears on TV again, gloating that Raymie is probably depleting The Only Light's ranks from the inside, and that temporarily ends the media circus about it.

One person is brought to the Omega's attention, the "doctor" (not like anyone under 100 years old is ever given a medical license or even an engineering license, but at this point, Omega scientists are better than the Christians') who sorted out a proper design for the stasis chamber and, as it turns out, did the preliminary work with the sonic weapons file. This person has also inundated the Omega's interface with proposals for an Angel autopsy if one is captured.

The Omega have a brief chat with Veronica Santangelo, the person who built the chamber and was working on sonic technology. She seems elated at the prospect of getting her own research group. She's surprisingly young for her skills, in her 70s, so it will be a while before she has to go through MEC conversion.

Veronica is given a workspace and what's left of the year from the cabals that pulled the Raymie stunt. In a few days, she manages to build a remarkably cool looking rotating plasma speaker. It doesn't do much yet, but more than one of these in a row, controlled by a computer, can cause interesting effects. For now, the early prototypes get added to the rave party kit.

Right this moment, most cabals have gone to ground; the Omega arrange for an eight-way teleconference. IP address geolocation isn't a thing, so they don't know where these people are, except that two of them must be in Osaze just judging by the better frame rate.

Sunday speaks first. "Ah. Yes. Omega. We are aware of your... caper. Does this mean you have finally decided to serve under us?"

The Omega show a bit of static for now, and ignore Sunday for now. He looks visibly annoyed and tsk-tsks them.

After showing the sentry farm ambush interspersed with the human combustion, Monday simply says, "This is why we want to put all our efforts towards the one moment when this won't happen. We must build our Army and unleash it on Jerusalem on the final day!"

"Now now gentlemen," the Omega drawl. "It was not a complete wash, thanks to quick thinking by Ziggy here. We were able to learn the glorified can be stopped with non lethal chemical and, as a prediction, energy weapons."

They show the footage of Raymie 's capture and stasis.

According to Monday, the Seven already know. They don't believe the Omega's claims.

Monday's excuse seems to please Sunday somewhat.

Ziggy and Quinn's faces show up on screen, complete with fake green-lines-and-text scrolling bio that the Omega actually got from the intro movie of the C&C game.

Showing the stasis suits elicits gasp and some whispered but animated discussions about what to ACTUALLY demand for the release, until Sunday shuts that up.

"Even now, an Angel of the Lord is coming to rescue your captive. It will happen. It would be

most efficient to release him, and... try to... get something... in return."

The Omega already know about a similar incident with Rayford Steele in +93, in which capturing the man resulted in losing a base to a number of conversions, after which the Angel Anis showed up and sent everyone home.

The difference of course is that Raymie can communicate with the outside world exactly as much or as little as the Omega decide. They wonder what will happen if they assume direct control of his containment chamber and choke him out; can Yahweh smite a distributed intelligence?

The councilmen ponder their demands; they more or less match the ones that were issued right after Raymie's capture.

The Councilmen wait for the Omega's answer. Sunday's opinion is that Raymie should be released "as a gesture of good will" and that asking in return for the ability to eat meat wouldn't be a bad deal. The other councilmen are a bit cowed by him, but would like to ask for more.

It strikes the Omega that the councilmen don't seem to realize that, if anything, the *Omega* should be ordering *them* around.

"We can continue this part of the discussion in a short while. I would like to finish reporting the rest of news.

Firstly. While I have yet to breach the canopy completely, I have a way off putting submersible vehicles into it with visual equipment that would let me see a tyrants eye view of earth. In theory, I can place them anywhere even over New Jerusalem. All I need is production, and a trivial amount of production at that."

Finally the Omega manage to get some interest out of these people. The test footage is only a few hours long, but it captures what was externally visible of Raymie's incident - not much, just Jeb's folks aborting the launch and building a containment barrel, but still. The Omega play it back accelerated.

Monday hesitantly says that the few (but growing in number) Other Light Army rocket launchers can be used for this effort, and after a nod from Sunday, asks for the blueprints.

The Omega have seen these test-fired; they're short range and high volume, more like hwachas on tank treads. Even so, some are set up to fire larger rockets, and it means they only have to build the "warhead", not the whole system.

Sunday asks the Omega if it will seek their guidance on what to do with the captive, or do its own thing.

"I'd suggest we work as collaborative partners," answer the Omega. Seeing as that way they can't be forced to take useless and ineffective action for the Seven and waste their time.

"We are satisfied that you have decided to cooperate with us" Sunday notes, barely giving the others time to speak. "We will reach a consensus about this".

Tuesday, the current nominal head of logistics, looks mildly worried.

As for Raymie...

Monday, the Only Light representative and head of the coming army. He's clearly a bit nuts. He recommends figuring out how to sacrifice Raymie to Satan.

Tuesday, head of logistics. He funded the Omega, effectively, but they've pretty much made him redundant. Right now he's mostly worried about his job, and has no clear suggestions.

Wednesday, the one in charge of preventive theology, has to admit that he had no idea that this was even possible. He suggests keeping Raymie for study.

Thursday, the media guy and the one who seems the least derpy, recommends that Raymie be offered a chance to make a counter-confession. He probably will not, but just letting everyone in TOL see that the Omega do have him will boost morale. He admits that Raymie will be rescued after an attempt at deconverting him, most likely.

Friday, the person in charge of recruiting, wants to let Raymie go as a gesture of mercy, that it may attract recruits.

Saturday, the industrial leader, wants to just let Raymie go lest Angels wreak havoc on the bases.

Sunday, the coordinator, proposes that Raymie be released if Yahweh throws a feast like the one at the beginning of the Millennium, temporarily lifting the prohibition against meat.

"I have no intention of keeping him till the 1000th year. We should discuss what to do about submersible's and my current hacking into the Millennium force's coms systems first. Although I'm assuming you seven have figured out how to get into their logistics as it was far too easy."

The Omega request a plan and Sunday assures them that they will be issued one. "Irritatingly, you can contact us, but we cannot contact you. We agree to provide direction once we have reached a consensus about it."

Tuesday confirms that there have been instances of successful infiltration, the first being Qasim Marid in +89. However, the Christians using a data network rather than phones is a very new development. "It would be... prudent if... we only observed.... for a while.... lest they.... switch back... to the old."

As far as striking before the year 1000, the Omega are met with blank stares and, after a few moments, twitching and sweating. "That's preposterous!" Monday exclaims.

The Omega give them a line to contact them. "You can contact me at any time. Be it 5 minutes from now or any other conceivable point of time this second forwards."

The Omega clear the channel. They have no way to tell whether the Seven know if they're listening in, but they did play a "hang up" sound.

The Omega hear Sunday speak quietly, in a deep voice.

"We are, of course, the stalwart champions of humanity against the One Above All. This collection of machines and its puppets is likely being maneuvered by a misguided rival group making a play for power. That they are appearing effective should not distract us. We will provide guidance, but remain in control."

General assent. The other councilmen seem antsy.

"What.... about... the missionary?"

Sunday answers.

"The Lord moves in mysterious ways. We must not be eager to take a step forward so that He may push us three back. But, a feast... He is likely to allow. It would be a symbolic victory for us."

There are some murmurs of assent.

"We are all agreed then, that this matter was too trivial for us to convene over it?"

"Sure. A useful tool thinking that it is more than a means to an end."

"Humanity is the end. Machines are just machines. What matters are soldiers, not the weapon they wield."

Sunday speaks again. "Does this matter require... a vote?"

The murmuring this time is more on negative tones.

Thursday asks when was the last time that a vote had been needed. Some paper rustling and some PDA beeping, then Sunday again speaks. Did the Omega hear Thursday whimper? "Details. Let's focus on the bigger picture. We can all check the minutes later for such... minutiae. Monday, how proceeds the raising of the Army of the Other Light?"

Monday gives a brief report in terms of number of troops estimated to be ready by year +1000, of stockpiled rifles, jeeps, tanks and the like.

"Tuesday, is the Army of the Other Light well equipped?"

Tuesday gives figures that the Omega know more intimately than he ever will.

Each of the other Seven gives a report. The Omega get the impression that other than the numbers, they've said the same words many times.

Sunday closes. "Excellent. I commend all of you for the work you have done. Our direction is set; we must keep cooperating with each other, for the future of humanity."

Assent.

"We are of one mind about this. The way forward is clear."

Five minutes later, the Omega contact Tuesday. He turns off the video quickly; he's in a sweat, and has taken off the custom tailored suit and probably washed his face three times. The video

comes back on when he puts the suit back in place, clearly hastily.

"Omega? T-This is Tuesday. I hear you. We- We will have a strategic plan for you soon, I think."

"Tuesday. We both know TOL won't have a true plan, and we both know I can already handle your job better. I don't want your job. I need your assistance. I need your help, and I'm more than capable of improving your quality of life for it, as compensation. You will also enjoy the benefit of me doing most of the work for you."

"I hear you." Tuesday continues. "Yesterday was my ninety-eight birthday I am the second oldest person on the Council. I have... doubts. I worked hard for this position, and enjoyed its privileges. But... Hell is... terrifying."

"And it can't be experienced when you're a MEC. You will keep your personality, body, and mind intact but your soul is still going to be in hell. None of my personnel who have made the conversion to this system successfully have reported any experience of hell upon revivication. I can afford you this but I can't guarantee it will work. There's a miniscule chance your body will reject the system. I can grant you a different reward if you object."

"What I need from you," the Omega continue. "is a missile silo to move my men in Japan to after we abandon the base Raymie is in. I'll also need to coordinate TOL to construct the submersibles. I can manage the movements. I just need you to play mouthpiece."

"That is not what... my sources... tell me."

"To be fair, there's a lot of misinformation around the MEC program."

"I would... have to quit, right?"

"Missile silo... There are a few in California. Small, but deep. You can relocate there. We've barely reclaimed the base there anyway."

"What will you do with the missionary?" Tuesday seems a lot less agitated and has stopped sweating.

"I guarantee you, this is true. And you wouldn't have to quit if you serve as an example that the system works. The process can be documented like some of the others, you can also bring your own guards if you believe I'm deceiving you. The missionary will be released after I turn the facility into a maze to test angels defensive and evasive capabilities. He will be the cheese for the rat that shows up.

"I'll have men move to set up the space program, as well as the Packet team on California's silo. the region will also reap the benefits of my research."

By the end of the current year, the Omega manage to complete the move with minimal losses. A skeleton crew (literally; the Omega handpick the MECs with the fewest organic components) keeps guard over the ruined skyscraper, the bottom floors of which are turned into a complicated maze full of various weapon and hazard types. Veronica sets down a bizarre cross between a deejay's booth and a whole-body motion capture rig in a nearby building, so that she can control the sonic weapon prototypes herself. Year: 918

Year: 919

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (3/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (1/10), Anti-Angel (0/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 7

The Omega have 7 cabals; their sysadmins find themselves mildly inundated by TOL leadership requests since they opened communications, but manage to deflect most of them.

Neutralizing an Angel is going to be extremely difficult, and there is no way to tell how many assets the Omega will need to succeed. This program will require a great deal of personal attention.

At minimum, Veronica and her support cabal will be assigned to the project.

Since the technicians smitten during the capture of Steele were those who placed and activated the guns, precautions are to be taken now. On this second test run, just in case, the lethal systems have been all set up by one person, who volunteered for it...

In the Millennial Kingdom, the sea is one of the few interesting places left -- of course hurricanes and thunderstorms are gone, unless Yahweh specifically directs them, so sea travel has become a routine job, but even so, marine life has managed to come back from the Tribulation's plagues and refill the oceans. It's no coincidence that the New Earth will have "no more sea" according to the prophecies.

A simple compromise is reached by which this particular technician will be given a small houseboat, scuba tanks at the ready, and be told when the test begins so that he may jump in the water and stay there for up to a full two days. A medical team stands by and, as it stands, enjoys the semi-vacation.

The Omega briefly ponder an exodus into the oceans.

The Sky Eye release candidate looks like a cross between a satellite and a submarine; it can deploy a solar-panel ribbon, uses active homeostasis to stay at the canopy's surface, and can move around a little bit. It's about the size of a small dog.

The Omega send the blueprints to the Seven, providing Tuesday with the logistic needs to create the production project. This seems to be one of the few projects they actually want to see work.

For once, TOL leadership is responsive; Sky Eyes will be deployed, without any extra work from the Omega, in areas where TOL already has a base. This will make it immensely easier to dodge raids.

Quinn spends the first months of the year training in hand to hand combat. She focuses on what,

given her joint range and the fact that she can push her muscles and her servos to the limit without fear of injury, ends up looking a lot like wire-fu except without the wires, and synergises with her infiltrator configuration.

Ziggy spends all his time setting up various fire, acid, gas and even radioactive traps for the lower levels of the installation. These are then turned on by Mr. Malaussene Jospin, the technician, before he goes on his houseboat "vacation".

Veronica spends half the work time teaching herself how to be a DJ, which would irritate a human boss. However, she does so systematically, learning how to cause resonances and counterresonances on the fly using the enrichment center's plasma speakers. The Omega have to veto throwing a rave in the building, for fear of attracting attention. The Daft Punk helmet that Veronica comes up with is actually a collection of thermographic, infrared, ultraviolet and sonar sensors fed into a pair of small LCD screens.

As an AI, the Omega lack the inspiration to do what Veronica is doing, but they record her speaker placements and associated beats. The two cabals working on sonic research assist Veronica remotely, using some of the Omega's CPU time for doing the math.

Large scale heterodyning plasma speakers are possible, and the Omega's research team doesn't know why CATS' plan did not work; at least the speaker trucks look feasible eventually. As it is, they develop a handheld version that looks like a taser pistol coupled with a collar-mounted microphone; for now it can "only" deafen and disorient a target without affecting anyone else. The operator reports feeling somewhat weird during use, probably from their forearm bones vibrating.

They assure the Omega that the hardware is basically perfected already - the basic principles were formalised in the 1960s. With greater machining precision and more software work, through sound and motion the Omega's agents will be able to paralyze nerves, shatter bones, set fires, suffocate an enemy or burst his organs.

The Omega's data banks indicate that they've heard that before.

Over the course of the year, Jeb visit each and every TOL base and supervises the construction of a Sky Eye launcher. Two launchers are lost to confiscation, but not before seeding the water canopy with the little sub-satellites. Christian media deride the Other Light's failed efforts to breach the water canopy.

A scout cabal is sent to the Pacific Northwest and return with little of interest except some very weird vampire stories that have propagated through the century; a proper survey of the area indicate that there's nothing to it.

It's showtime. Maybe Raymie will be home for Christmas. Maybe he'll be joined in captivity - a second containment chamber has been built, just in case.

Mr. Malaussene decides to put the scuba gear on, just in case; the medical team is standing by. The houseboat is in a small quay in what used to be southern France or northwestern Italy.

Raymie is let go. There are pneumatic hisses as the containment chamber is drained of carbon monoxide, and an inrush of air through the elevator door when the chamber opens. Raymie steps out and promptly bangs his head on the chamber lid, takes out the helmet and gloves, but otherwise stays in the suit. He turns the lights on in the elevator, tries the buttons (they light up, but aren't connected to anything anymore, obviously), and rather than praying for help, he tries the emergency intercom first.

"Quinn? Are you still there? Did you kick me off the couch? The elevator's busted and I was in this weird vertical garbage can thing!" He looks at the suit.

"Wait, what's going on, what's with the spaceman costume?" He bangs at the door. "Hello? Is there anyone there? Am I in space? What's going on!"

"Raymie Steele," answer the Omega. "The facility you are in has be abandoned. You have been my captive, but you have been well taken care of. You will in all likelihood be set free but this requires a third party, I have no intention of providing such myself. This is not an act of TOL if it were you would have been released longer ago. Please, remain calm and carry on. One year has passed since your captivity. Have a pleasant evening."

".... what? A year? My mom's going to be worried sick- no, she's Glorified, she's fine... My dad's going to be worried sick! Who are you! Are you the devil! Let me out now!"

"I'm sorry Raymie. I'm afraid I can't do that."

Veronica and Quinn are in a nearby building, the first with the controls to the sound system, the second with a bit too much adrenaline in her system and a direct route to the testing chambers.

Raymie bangs on the door for a bit longer, but eventually calms down and drops on his knees.

"Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change..."

He's taking this surprisingly well.

The Omega count to sixty, and no, he's not, he's freaking out and begging God for help in between banging his head on the elevator doors.

"We got activity!"

Sure enough, a tall man of indeterminate age appears, out of thin air, next to where the elevator is. He's tall, with no facial hair, looking remarkably, well, Aryan, and wearing what looks like a karate gi. His body temperature is exactly average for a human being, but it's the same all over, including the hair.

When he touches the outside of the elevator door, the elevator drops. Raymie screams.

The emergency brakes work as they should; unless he can teleport again, the supposed Angel is going to have to run the gauntlet to the ground floor to free Raymie.

The Omega play back a few well-selected chords. Raymie plugs his ears, and shouts a very poor

rendition of the Lord's Prayer in response, interspersed with "LA LA LA I'M NOT LISTENING!"

The walls of the angel trap are covered in sensors, data starts to come in.

A few more songs, and Raymie is a sobbing wreck. The Omega are not playing loud enough to hurt his ears, just, he's been always taught to be afraid of this sort of thing, so now he is.

The room that the Angel is in, is empty; there's a door to the next one. Interestingly, the Angel isn't wearing shoes. No wings, not that the Omega can detect anyway -- the chamber with the neutron source should give the Omega an approximate X-ray of the being.

It looks at the elevator doors, tries to open them, and is presented with an iron slab that folded down to block the shaft after the elevator fell. It's ignoring the Omega, so far, as if it wasn't hearing them.

It opens the door without problems. The next room goes to a small ladder downwards, leading to (first actual test chamber here, please pick). Veronica is a little miffed, and also tries to poke at the Angel verbally. This time, the Angel reacts. "Silence, woman! If you must speak, tell me where Raymie Steele is."

Ziggy, ever the white knight, cuts in and berates the Angel. "Do not bother me, child!"

- The Angel seems to not be able to hear the Omega, an AI.
- The Angel seems to be profoundly misogynist.
- The Angel seems to think Ziggy is annoying, which means it's not completely solipsistic.

Getting to the ladder requires walking over a very basic raised plate, a slightly more sophisticated version of the classic stepping on a rake gag. The Angel steps on it, and lets the wooden plank almost hit him on the nose, but stops it with a hand first. The Omega play that back in slow motion.

- The Angel has excellent, but not perfect, reflexes. Quinn notes that it's faster than her.
- The Angel's movements were purely reactive.

The Omega consider relaying a message through someone - the Angel cannot hear them, or is pointedly ignoring them. Movement analysis indicates that either it's really, really good at ignoring being addressed, or it literally is unable to parse words coming from an AI. This may be why the Omega are in business at all...

Using their recording of the captive reading bible quotes, the Omega construct questions for the Angel, interspersed with blasphemous messages. They try and make them seamless because the Angel is most likely super sensitive to sound.

At hearing Bible quotes, the Angel simply answers that the Devil can quote Scripture to his own ends. At hearing mangled quotes in Raymie's voice, the Angel stops in confusion for a moment.

"Ours is not to understand, but to obey." He proceeds down the ladder.

- The Angel either does not understand audio splicing, or has been given a mission and will execute it regardless of personal taste.

The Angel climbs the ladder quickly. The door to the next room is armored, and when it touches it, a timer starts counting down from five minutes. It paces around. There are a few items of flimsy furniture in the room.

The Angel is bombarded with dazzling lights of various kinds, from supercharged disco balls, to diode lasers, to movie studio quality strobe lights. Then, all sort of discordant sounds; white noise, a moment of silence followed by a simulated crash behind the Angel to measure startling, a mp3 from an old Rick Astley song, all manner of things.

- The Angel is completely impervious to light-based systems; even shining a laser engraver directly in its eyes will make it look away, but it will not suffer eye damage.

- The Angel does not get startled by sudden sounds, but seems to have a harder time walking around in the presence of extreme loudness; it even stubs a toe on a chair leg, although there's no damage either and it doesn't limp afterwards.

- Dazzling the Angel is overall marginally possible; sound works better than light, and the Angel recovers almost instantly, but will be disoriented WHILE the dazzling is going on. A flashbang grenade won't help, while a continuous source of very bright light or noise will, with the latter being more efficient.

The last thirty seconds of the timer have no overstimulation, to see what the Angel's recovery time is; unfortunately for the Omega, it's pretty much negligible.

Quinn takes the microphone. "Hey Dickless! What say you try and get through me before you get your boyfriend back? Just go a couple rounds and he's all yours. I'll go easy on you." She's not nearly as confident as she sounds, from what data you have so far, but puts up a good front. The Angel actually stops moving for a moment.

"Your fate is sealed, damned soul. The Lake of Fire is for eternity. How will you crawl out and challenge me?"

"I'm in the building, numb nuts."

"You lie! Begone!" Well, technically Quinn is in the next building, so the Angel is right.

The next test is a simple maze - by necessity, it's small. Lights turn on and off interval to change shadow angles, to make it harder to remember orientation.

The Angel doesn't try any of the usual strategies to keeping track of direction, and instead walks right through it, picking the optimal path to where Raymie currently is.

Next up is a classic behavioral puzzle: there's a door with clear indication that it will open with a key fob, which is in a transparent plexiglas tube, too long for an arm or even a leg to reach in.

Nearby is a water fountain. The key fob is tied to a ping pong ball, so it will float. Interestingly, a similar test (with food as a reward, rather than a key) was done to humans and chimps and on average the chimps figured it out before the humans. The Angel tries to uproot the tube; there are strain gages in the base of it. It doesn't budge... but barely. Quinn is watching the Angel move, trying to get an idea of how to fight it; Veronica is busy with the controls; this leaves Ziggy to read the displays.

"Ziggy, what does the strain gage say about its torque level?"

"It's over nine thousand newtons!"

"What? That's almost a ton! There's no way that can be right."

Eventually, the Angel solves the puzzle by blowing into the tube like it was a trumpet - the base shatters after a few seconds. Veronica records the waveform for future use.

The next puzzles are similar, and the Angel clears them in a time that is on the upper end of the human average.

- The Angel either has an internal compass or location system, or is just that lucky.
- The Angel seems to think that the best solution to a problem is to forego cleverness and apply strength.
- The QM is really scraping the barrel when it comes to memes.

The Omega post an audio mashup of Raymie saying "I renounce my faith in Christ and accept Satan into my heart. Get behind me servant of Yahweh."

"What?" says the Angel. "We both know you can't mean it, Raymie. Are you trying to deceive our captors?"

Raymie sees the Angel on screen; the being is going through the tests, brute-forcing a few of them but not all. He tells it that he fell, and is told that it knows exactly where Raymie is, to be strong, pray in silence, and be not deceived by evil tricks. That causes a bit of amusement in the control room.

Eventually, the Angel reaches the behavioral test floor's final door; a text LCD informs it that it has scored within the 95% percentile and it must be the pride of <insert hometown here>.

The Omega have let out Raymie off the containment room, it'd be hard to get him in - it was hard the first time. They'd have to deploy people into the test chambers, which would require shutting down some of the tests. The Omega can generate fake video, but not very well; audio is easier.

The Angel so far has cleared the dazzler chamber, and the behavioral puzzle chamber. The experimental sound weapons are in the room with the sentries.

fire traps, gas traps, acid traps;

a neutron emitter;

a sentry gun nest;

an arena room with, optionally, Quinn to face;

a reverse-trap room full of spikes and blinking lights but actually nothing dangerous in it.

Raymie is following the Angel's instructions and praying quietly so far. He can see it, but it can't see him.

The next room looks dangerous: there are red flashing lights on various boxes, cubes with sharp angles strewn about, and spikes on the floor and ceiling like stalactites and stalagmites. The lights come off at intervals. However, there are no traps or active elements.

The Angel walks right across, sometimes with its feet just barely touching a spike or an exposed power wire; it moves without hesitation, even during a lights-out period.

"Wow, this guy's like a ninja or something" Ziggy interjects.

- The Angel moves very gracefully, almost perfectly so. It doesn't seem to use active echolocation if it's had a chance to observe the room first. Coupled with the simple trap in the very first room, this indicates that it's used to moving through static environments regardless of perceived danger.

"I was going to say Tolkien elf" Veronica types in.

The Angel is making some progress, unaware or uncaring of the fact that it's being monitored. Raymie continues to pray, which has no measurable effect on the Omega's sensors.

This was the last nonlethal test; Malaussene has been told that the test is in progress and has decided to go diving; a medical team with a MEC kit is nearby.

The next floor is almost entirely Ziggy's brain child; Quinn insisted in going through it, partly as a challenge, partly as... whatever those two do. She completed the course in eight minutes, but needed a new pair of boots and feet afterwards.

Quite simply, the "room" is a serpentine corridor covered with sprayers for flame, liquid nitrogen, hydrochloric acid, and patches of carbon monoxide held in place by laminar flow to act as a fire break. The sprayers come on or off in a pseudorandom sequence and are wide enough that just running for it won't work. In some places, very hot metal plates made of stovetops connected together do mandate running, or very long jumps.

The Angel starts walking down the corridor at a sustained but unhurried pace. Come to think of it, the Omega have seen it sprint maybe once throughout the test.

- Angels seem to be either fearless, or very stupid.

Rather than trying to just run for it, or analyzing the pattern of the sprayers, the Angel simply walks through them. His feet are unaffected by the hot plates, the flames seem to just go through him, there is no detected reaction from the carbon monoxide (although scans indicate that it's breathing normally) and all the acid manages to do is eat through its clothing, showing that yes, Angels in fact do have a lot in common with Ken dolls in addition to the bland good

looks.

By this point, Quinn was a bit singed, but hale (as hale as you can be when you're undead anyway).

One odd thing happens; a few of the corners have no camera monitoring, simply because the acid canisters require room around them and there was no safe way to install wiring. When the Angel comes back in sensor range, it is fully clothed again.

- Angel clothing is in some manner part of the being.

After having stomped through the gauntlet, the Angel is faced with the door; the Omega flush the carbon dioxide away, but do not open the door. Authoritatively, the Angel yanks on the door handle -- it holds, although the entire frame rattles.

So far, Mr. Malaussene has not been lightning-bolted or incinerated. One of the members of the medical team has also put on scuba gear and is on the shallows, holding his hand.

The Omega convey a riddle to the Angel. "What starts hanging low in the beginning, swells high in the middle of its purpose, and goes down as it finishes?"

The Angel doesn't seem to be able to assign meaning to the sounds your synthesized voice utters, so Quinn tries instead. He answers her. "The answer won't get you out of hell. Let me pass!"

Quinn answers "I'm out of Hell already. You can see for yourself if you like."

The Angel doesn't take the bait and again demands that the door be opened.

Quinn patiently explains that the door will only open if the riddle is answered. The Angel says that she's lying, and commands the door to unlock. The door unlocks, and immediately after, the servo installed on the lock locks it again. This repeats a few more times, with Quinn, Veronica and Ziggy outright mocking the Angel at this point.

That, likewise, seems to have no effect on the being.

"Raymie is at the end of this maze" Veronica finally says "you will be unable to open the door and complete your mission if you do not utter an answer."

The Angel stops for a moment, lowers its head, and answers that there are many things that fulfil that requirement.

"Any one you choose will do."

"Girl, I will answer you, if you consider repentance."

Veronica sighs. "Yes, fine. Right, wording. Thou hast my word of honor."

"She lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose semen was like that of horses."

"... Excuse me?!?"

"No, that's actually a Bible verse."

"Do we take the answer?"

- Angels don't seem to be very good at negotiating.

- It would be nice if it was possible to administer a Turing test, which, of course, the Omega pass with flying colors. But that doesn't look feasible.

- Veronica had been told to not talk until she told the Angel where Raymie was and, in retrospect, she realized she ended up doing just that.

"Good enough, we know what it meant," the Omega say to its agents. "They seem incapable of answering if it means 'sinning'. Let it pass."

The Angel proceeds to the next room - there are a few stalls, some reaching to the ceiling and others being cubicle-height, for the Angel to duck in if it wants to seek cover, however the room cannot be left without entering the field of fire of the turrets.

The sentry guns are basically swivel frames with a camera, a sonar, a large semiautomatic pistol with an extended magazine, and a small sonic weapon set to blink on and off opposite the sonar. A few sentries are specialized, either with a proper machine gun instead of the pistol but no sonar, or one of the larger emitter prototypes but no gun.

The Angel immediately starts walking a beeline towards the exit door, which is clearly marked.

Mr. Malaussene is immersed in shallow water; if he starts burning alive, well, hopefully the water will help.

Mr. Malaussene has set the sentries to fire at will with both systems, and default to lower than center of mass. Fortunately for the Angel, it seems to have a Ken Doll crotch, although you'll have to wait for the neutron source to get an x-ray.

You do not activate the abort protocol and, guided by their basic programming, the sentries open fire with bullets and discordant sound waves....

The Angel has reached one of the lower testing chambers.

The turrets open fire. The Omega focus all their processing power on analyzing the camera feeds, slowing down their subjective time.

Their sentry guns fire subsonic bullets, so the experimental sonic weapon surround the Angel in discord and dissonance for a fraction of a second. It definitely feels it; whether it's hurting it or not, these do a better job than the dazzlers at disorienting it, impeding its progress. It perceives the sound waves as a solid walls, and has a fraction of a second to make a mime-trapped-in-a-box impression.

Then the bullets hit. Malaussene, who has been listening in through a hydrophone, braces.

The bullets pass through the Angel like they would through ballistic gel, but do not leave a mark, other than on what it's wearing. A couple of sentries end up shooting each other, but the Omega have dozens.

In the Mediterranean, Malaussene screams through the hydrophone... and then calms down when he realizes that he's still in there and in one piece.

Unfortunately, so's the Angel, as far as the Omega can tell.

The decision is taken to turn off the projectile weapons and focus on the sonic emitters.

Preliminary analysis of bullet trajectories show that the bullets DID go through the Angel and slowed down accordingly, just, they didn't hurt it or even leave a mark.

The room goes quiet, but that's simply because half the microphones melted and the other half shut down in self-preservation.

The Omega see the Angel slowly make its way through the room, stumbling, hands grasping forward. It's as if it's pushing a giant boulder. By the time it reaches the heavy emitters, the Omega can see its limbs shaking, its feet moving hesitantly.

The people in the control room are cheering and high-fiving. The Omega are years away from this sort of performance in the field of course -- these rooms were designed with resonance in mind, and the Angel has a good thirty emitters trained on it -- but even so.

- Angels do not sweat.

- Angels can experience fatigue.

- Angels either do not experience pain, or do not show.

- The sonic emitters are vulnerable to their own output, as you've lost a few.

- Vee is going to smash the DJ charts next year if any of this data is shared in the Packet.

The next chamber is very simple; a corridor with a sharp turn at the end. As the Angel walks through the corridor, a neutron beam coming from a Farnsworth-Hirsch-Hull fusor illuminates the being. The beam is strong enough to guarantee that any living creature will get cancer of the everything after a few minutes' exposure, but surprisingly, not enough to cause radiation sickness. Ziggy apologized profusely to everyone about that and will try to make a bigger one later on.

The first thing that the Omega notice is that the Angel is clearly fatigued. It doesn't sweat, but its skin looks somewhat translucent and its step is slower and more uncertain than it was at the beginning of the gauntlet.

The second thing the Omega notice is that it's clearly as uncomfortable with the neutron source as it was with the dazzling light.

The third thing the Omega get out of this is a rough X-ray of the Angel (it'd be higher resolution if it wasn't walking towards the exit, but so it goes). Its skeletal structure is humanoid, but the organs are a lot less well defined, almost stylized, it looks like an ancient Egyptian embalming

chart in motion.

The beam is unfocused, so the closer it gets to the bend, the stronger it will be. It's aimed roughly at its chest. As the Angel advances, small static discharges appear around the unravelled fibers of its robe where a bullet severed them.

The Angel holds out its arms as if to push away the walls of the corridor; it's clearly fatigued.

Eventually, it reaches the bend. Ziggy quickly drops the lead ingot that blocks the neutron source. "Nobody go in there for a few days, the secondary radiation has to work itself out."

At the bend, camera coverage drops for a moment. Rather than regenerating its clothing, the Angel comes through the bend wearing nothing but a loincloth. Its hair is a little longer. It's now carrying a sword.

- Angels seem to have an anatomy designed by an ancient-antiquity Frankenstein.
- Angels can be fatigued, and do not recover from fatigue instantly.
- Angels can see x-rays and possibly gamma rays.
- Angels can apparently summon things, but are limited by conservation of, if not mass, volume?

Quinn goes over the telemetry and video that has been collected so far. She lets out an appreciative whistle.

"Ignores bullets, strong as three men and faster than me with the juice all the way up, recovers instantly from flashbangs and the only stuff that disorients him would do a worse number on me. I can fight deaf and I can probably fight blind, Omega, but not both. But, damn if I don't want to kick its ass."

During the slow walk through the neutron chamber, a couple of the Omega's agents have hastily moved the heavy emitters downstairs into the arena room. Vee is busy trying to recalibrate them to the different environment; they'll work, but not at capacity. The arena does have normal strobe lights and speakers.

Raymie has been quietly praying the whole time.

The Omega turn off the audio and let him know the Angel is now at the final chamber. "You are likely to be released soon. Thank you."

Raymie thanks God and, to the Omega, he says triumphantly "Ha! I knew you couldn't keep me here forever"!

"Actually, we kinda let it win" Ziggy interjects, but he's not on mic.

Vee expertly adds the heterodyning frequencies to your selection of soundtrack for this fight. The Angel imperiously opens the penultimate door to find a double-ceiling room with walls of the sort you'd find in a rock climbing gym. Projectors around the room make the place look like it's underwater, if underwater was Tron - they can be quickly re-aimed to dazzle.

Quinn is standing right in front of the final elevator door; she double checked her maintenance

and disconnects the tubes giving her power, organic superlubricant, and endocrine refillers at the last minute.

She's mostly naked, with some of her cybernetics showing, except for what looks like a looted Psalty helmet which protects her face and contains a couple of sonar rangefinders to at least let her give chase if the Angel goes invisible.

The Angel takes a good look, and his sword catches fire -- the purple, cold flame of a corona discharge.

"What is the meaning of this whited sepulchre?! From dirt it came and to dirt it must return."

Quinn blows it a kiss. "Dirt's so last century. The cool kids use organometallic mesh now. Fight me!"

The Angel circles around. "I will not soil myself with a corpse."

Just like that, it disappears without any sort of special effect, including the sword and the loincloth. The music goes lower, and the sonars begin to track its movement as it walks past Quinn. She's wearing a sonar helmet, and can follow up to a point; the projectors in the room make that redundant by simply highlighting where the Angel is with a white circle on the floor.

- Sonar can track invisible Angels.

- The optical camouflage, as far as the Omega can tell, is perfect.

- The Angel doesn't show up on thermograph, IR or ultraviolet either.

"Cheater! What, neutron beam got your balls? Oh that's right, you never had any!"

- Angels do not respond to trash talk.

Quinn gets in the way and puts the lights on the Angel to make it obvious that she knows where it is.

Then, Veronica states over the mic. "This chamber is the last one leading to Raymie. The premise is simple: it is a sparring match. One of you must either submit or be made unfit to continue in combat for the door to unlock."

The Angel listens, walks to the door, commands it to open - it unlocks, but the servos lock it again too fast for either it or Rayie to react, although the Glorified missionary starts banging on the door. Ignoring Quinn, the Angel addresses Raymie.

"Do not fear, warrior for Christ. Know that I am Colopatiron, Angel of Liberation. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face shine upon you and give you peace."

Raymie's tears of joy and expressions of thanks are genuinely moving, but other than that, he doesn't do anything to change the situation, even though the lock servos are on his side of the door.

After all that, Colopatiron lifts a hand to reach the door handle, like it did before. It stops its hand just shy of Quinn's midriff.

The Angel finally deigns itself to acknowledge Quinn's presence, takes two steps back, and tries to get around her. Grinning, she simply turns to face him.

The Angel tries again on the other side of Quinn, with the same result. This time, it tries to reach the door handle THROUGH Quinn.

She takes what amounts to a very mild punch in the gut. "Naughty, naughty. Nobody ever told you to not hit a girl?"

The Angel again takes a step back, then its sonar profile changes -- wider and fuzzier, it probably spread its wings. "Watch out!" Veronica calls.

Quinn jumps almost to the ceiling, legs collected under her and arms spread, the Angel's flaming sword right under her feet at arm's height, reappearing mid-swing. The Angel is visible again.

Quinn, still in midair, kicks it in the chest with a cybernetic foot - and the foot finds no purchase; she's pushed back a little, as if she had struck true, but all that happens to the Angel is a shimmer in his midsection.

Quinn lands and, by learned reflex, follows up with a jab on the shoulder. Her right hand is mostly flesh and bone for this iteration. That staggers the Angel half a step back. Quinn lets herself be pushed back, bounces against the wall, and gets clear of another sword swing.

"You damned soul, you made your eternal choice! There will be no blessing from me even if I wrestle your corpse!"

"Blessing? I'm gonna lay you out!"

"What's Colapasta talking about?" Veronica asks. Since the Angel is visible again, the sonic emitters can be deployed again.

Colopatiron swings again, Quinn jumping back and bounding to the side again just fast enough to avoid the charged sword.

She counters with a light kick on the sword itself; this time her foot impact with the clank of metal on metal. The plasma discharge earths itself harmlessly through Quinn's lightning-proof body, but electric field survey shows that it would probably sear through an unaugmented human.

"Don't I get a weapon?" Quinn taunts.

"You are damned! You cannot fight me, you've already lost! You are beyond blessings!"

"Yeah, what's the Angel talking about with the blessing?" Ziggy interjects.

A hatch opens in a wall to drop Quinn's whip; avoiding sword swings, she makes her way to it and picks it up. Colopatiron seems to be executing a kata, swinging and thrusting at places where Quinn quite simply isn't. That said, this prevents her from getting a head of steam for hitting back; despite the Angel being visibly larger than Quinn, neither has a mass advantage due to her organometallic frame.

Quinn cracks the whip - actually just makes it hit the ceiling, it's not long enough to be cracked -

and again taunts Colopatiron as it gets closer to the door to Raymie. "Fair fight, yeah?"

The Angel again repeats that the Hellbound have no authority to seek a blessing, much to the confusion of Ziggy and Vee.

Colopatiron again gets to the door, again commands it to open, and again hears it open and close immediately. The camera in the elevator shows that Raymie has finally noticed the door servos moving, and is ineffectually pulling at the handle on his side.

Quinn lashes out with the whip! She aims at Colopatiron's sword, and manages to wrap around it. The whip is made of stranded wire, and ends up welding itself to the sword due to the plasma discharge; with a bit of an uncoordinated movement, Quinn yanks as strongly as she can, and both weapons end up sliding past her on the ground. "Hey, if I stick that in a rock, can I be the Queen of England? Come on, Cologne, mano a mano!"

The Angel keeps trying to unlock the door and get it to stay unlocked. Quinn pushes against a wall and slams herself into the Angel's shoulder, pushing him off it.

He gets back up. "Wrestling me will grant you no blessings! Let go of this corpse and return to the lake of fire!"

"Oooh baby, wanna wrestle?"

Quinn's style is more aerial than that, so she delivers another kick to the Angel, pushing it backwards.

Ziggy and Vee figure that the Angel is just spouting nonsense; Vee's finger is on the MOAB button.

Both combatants have been moving very fast; the Omega look at Quinn's metabolic telemetry and see that she's using up adrenaline and ATP a bit faster than her metabolic extender can replenish it.

Quinn is fresh and unhurt/undamaged. Colopatiron is tired and unhurt.

The two move back and forth, Colopatiron swinging and mostly missing – the Omega note that he's going for grapples like a pankration fighter, more than punches like a boxer, and he doesn't kick – and Quinn keeping him at distance and delivering the occasional kick or jab. He's accusing the jabs more than the kicks, so the end result looks a little like a mixed martial artist fighting a luchadore. Quinn keeps guarding Raymie's door.

"What blessing? What are you talking about?" Veronica asks.

"Remain in blind unbelief if that is your choice, little girl! The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge!"

There's a loud "Amen" from Raymie. Ziggy says maybe it's a Bible quote or something, and asks permission to punch Raymie just a little bit. The Omega suspect that he would actively enjoy spontaneous combustion.

The Omega's datalinks, of course, contain a copy of the Bible.

Colopatiron gets a grapple! Quinn reacts by delivering a headbutt. The Omega have to play it back twice from two angles, but - the helmet went THROUGH the Angel's face, much the same way that the bullets did; only when Quinn's actual forehead impacts Colopatiron's nose does the being stagger back. Quinn breaks free of its grasp, bounds back, takes a low defensive stance, and whispers at you.

"Omega? That was WEIRD. It looked like how a neurosuppressor glitch feels."

Vee is keeping the sonars trained at the Angel; Ziggy is all but growling at Raymie; a couple of the technicians are trying to speedread the Bible, one start to end, one end to start.

The Omega cuts Ziggy's mic from the others without disabling the receiving half of it so they can talk in private and he can still know when Quinn goes through the exit so he can collapse it once she's clear.

"Ziggy, I'm detecting a little more hostility and reckless aggression than would be advisable right now. Think of something or someone that would make you happy and calm down. Hitting Steele is not currently worth spontaneous combustion."

Ziggy sits down in a corner and tries to calm down, and drops the crazy lecherous pyromaniac facade for a moment. "The someone I care about is in there fighting and I'm here watching! That's backwards!"

Vee is ready with the emitters. They've been reinstalled hastily, so she doesn't know how well it will work, but at minimum they'll slow Colopatiron down. "No idea what it'll do to Quinn though..."

The two combatants keep circling around the arena, Colopatiron going for a grapple, Quinn dodging and weaving and delivering jabs with the one fleshy extremity she was wearing today. This doesn't go well with her fighting style; she's used to delivering precise, strong kicks with her cybernetic legs, and a hit with those just seem to turn Colopatiron into a blob just long enough for the hit to pass through harmlessly.

The Omega find the relevant Bible verse. While her helmet went through Colopatiron when she delivered a headbutt, maybe the rules are different for this "blessing"; no way to tell.

Colopatiron manages to grab onto Quinn's left hand! The grip is strong, but when she yanks the mechanical hand off, the blobbing effect prevents the Angel from getting a good grip; she only loses a few bits of skin at the elbow.

"Even now you crumble to dust!" it says.

- Angels can trash talk, at least a little.

- Angels are very hit and miss when it comes to situational awareness.

Vee puts some snippets from the Rocky 4 soundtrack on the speakers to cheer Quinn on.

The Omega decides that the data they have gathered is just enough for now. There will be opportunities to try melee combat again in the future.

"Ziggy, were going to have to have a discussion when we get back"

"Q get ready to bolt when the speakers are live. We have enough data."

"Vee, MOAB."

"We're packing up!"

Quinn dodges a grapple, and instead of punching, she scratches its arm; if she was hoping to make it bleed, it doesn't work. The Angel goes for a grapple again, managing to hold onto Quinn's hand.

She flips him the bird and detaches the limb at the elbow, then hisses at the Angel like a snapping turtle. The escape hatch opens.

Colopatiron looks at the severed limb; the some blood falls on the Angel's loincloth, evaporating instantly. It drops the forearm, and moves to retrieve its sword, still spot-welded to Quinn's whip.

Veronica drops the bass. Half the sonar sensors in the room crap out from overload; the plasma speakers are aimed straight at the Angel. This doesn't seem to hurt it so much as making it think it's trapped – the Omega get a few seconds of video showing Colopatiron staggering and pushing back against invisible walls.

Quinn turns around and gets her hand back. "That's MINE!" she growls. A few more seconds of scurrying and she gets her whip back too, dragging the angelic sword along by the weld spot and finally disappearing into the tunnel.

While Quinn and the support personnel make their retreat, Colopatiron kneels, and says something in an unknown language. The Omega's semantics subroutine can't make heads or tail of it, so to them, it sounds like the Angel loudly proclaimed to the world, "YOU CRACKPOT!"

The reverb from that is sufficient to avalanche the plasma speakers; they keep buzzing, but lose their effect on the Angel. Visibly relieved, it gets up, walks to Raymie's door, and once again commands it to open.

"Ow! My finger's stuck!" Raymie complains.

With the Glorified young man's finger stuck in the servo - he'd been poking and prodding at it throughout the fight - Colopatiron finally opens the door. The two say a brief prayer, and when the Angel touches Raymie, they both disappear.

The Omega lost:

- Quinn for a few days. She's trying to hang on to her original fleshy bits, and will want to get to a combination surgery/workshop quickly.
- Raymie, probably, even if the Omega track him, it's very unlikely that they can recapture him.
- Mr Malaussene. He got a play by play of the whole thing, and he wants to quit doing fieldwork, it's too nerve wracking.

The Omega gained:

- A lot of information about Angels.
- A bit of information about sonic weapons.
- An Angel's sword.
- Material for a seriously bitchin' music video.

The Omega make a note on the project file; huge success.

While her various bits are put on ice, Quinn lets herself be hugged by Ziggy and only elbows him off after he cops a feel, after a minute or so.

Satisfied that it's at least experimentally possible to track a cloaked Angel, the Omega collapse the building as soon as their crew is safely away in a small fleet of unmarked cars.

Careful scraping of Quinn's fingernails show that she didn't pick up any dead skin from Colopatiron. The Omega do, however, have its sword.

It looks like Heavy MECs will have a problem fighting Angels directly, although of course, fitting a sonic weapon on a large chassis that already has a generation will be easier than making handheld weapons; as it has happened through history, the solution will involve combined arms.

Year: 920

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (3/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (1/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 7

The Omega have 7 cabals available. One of them is maintaining their systems and either fulfilling or stalling the occasional request from the Seven. Incidentally this should be Tuesday's last year of service as per the 5150 rule, and he mentioned that Sunday's older than him.

Quinn lets her adrenaline pump drop, staggers to a terminal, and tiredly tells the Omega that she needs a vacation.

Ziggy laments that spicy food no longer exists.

Veronica is probably the happiest human being the Omega have seen since they came online.

Oddly, Raymie Steele doesn't resurface immediately. After a few days, he delivers a brief testimony on how an Angel rescued him from "insane Other Light scientists who are trying to use the dead as soldiers" and describes a "rotting robot skeleton" being eventually beaten by Colopatiron. The Omega know that the Glorified cannot lie, so they suspect that this is what Raymie actually perceived; as far as they're aware, the Omega's infiltrator MECs have no problem interacting with the Glorified, at least as long as they keep it brief.

The Glorified missionary then announces that he will spend more time caring for his ailing father. Interestingly, nobody fields the question as to how many people Raymie has converted during his captivity.

Meanwhile, the two elite missionaries in Osaze are actively reverting the Omega's progress with the takeover plan.

After being once more pushed off by Quinn as she takes an oil bath, Ziggy is available for debriefing.

"Omega, why didn't we just blow Collie up?"

"Because I'm not looking to incite a manhunt against all my forces, researchers, and suppliers. if they are alive and well, it will be considered the act of a weak TOL group by the general believer population."

The short, hairy teenager perches on an office chair in the California base; there's a mic and headphones on his head. Just so that this former cubicle doesn't look like a confessional, it's open to the air; privacy is guaranteed by a very loud office fan on top of that one cubicle.

"... I get it. Get ready for the big punch later. Just - I like Quinn, you know." He makes a "big boobs" gesture, even though she didn't have those on for the fight. "I should've... I don't know, protected her. Yeah, I know, traditional gender role crap, just..."

Ziggy figures that as much as TOL proper are just wasting time, you're right and it's not time for a hard confrontation yet.

"Ziggy, she is a combat capable MEC. You are an unaugmented human. And I'd like to keep you that way, MECs still don't have their sense of touch and pleasure and I'd like to preserve that aspect of my men. It gives motivation. You want to help protect her, work on the sonics. Beat divine smite with a shield, make an Angel and Glorified neutralizing rifle, or anything else. Leave

combat for those who can't be killed by lightning."

Ziggy doesn't really have much expertise to offer, but he's used to loud noises and dangerous experiments -- and, despite the bravado, smart enough to recognize the need for safety gear. His and Vee's team make progress with the handheld emitter, and design a larger version that can be mounted on a heavy MEC chassis. Notably, they're confident that it may make some sense to start building what Veronica calls "wubbing modules" until someone comes up with a better name; they have considerably less range than conventional firearms, but give one a nonlethal option. The current designs are a standalone small tool that can be concealed, and an attachment to your standard combat rifle (TOL has standardized on the AK design simply because they've been stockpiling small arms for centuries and it's a proven, durable system).

Ziggy may not know much about sound, but he does about blast waves. A sonic "shield" is an interesting concept; while there's no way it would ever work against bullets or blows, it may be a way to keep tear gas out of an area.

Quinn takes advantage of the Omega's largesse to do a club tour; she genuinely enjoys dancing. In general, most MECs react to the dulling of their senses by throwing themselves into a displacement activity; for some it's chess (oddly enough for a sapient AI, the Omega are not particularly good at it, although they have solved checkers), some obsessively carve wooden chairs, you name it. For Quinn it's dancing. She's actually makes a point of showing the Omega's rank and file workers who frequent discos and raves that even she needs to stop and drink water from time to time, which reduces the first-aid overhead at such places considerably.

The Omega perform basic analysis on the fight and more or less confirm their initial observations; Colopation's sword is left in storage. Presumably, the Angel has disappeared by now, but the sword has not.

Jeb is an excellent pilot and his enthusiasm for aerospace is extremely motivating, but he's not a warrior, so he mostly makes plans for capturing Sarsour and Ely, rather than killing them.

Thanks to their efforts, mostly Ely's, the Osaze renaissance has lost some momentum; he's pretty miffed at this, especially since he had a spaceport all planned out as soon as it's possible to operate in the open, but doesn't want to kill anyone if it can be helped. Jeb's theory about Heaven is that it's actually as bad as Hell, just with endless monotonous pleasure instead of endless monotonous pain.

The Omega decide that the best course of action would be trying to hijack a plane that both missionaries will be boarding, with MECs with parachute equipment. Omega agents could capture them alive or can kill them with a plane crash if things go wrong. "Faulty parts on installation" would be to blame for the latter, odd disappearance for the former. Either way the bodies will have to be destroyed.

It's a daring plan; with a few exceptions, airliners aren't really a thing in the Millennial Kingdom (When Rayford Steele retired from piloting, so went the last fully-loaded Boeing 747) and the few people who travel by air charter business jets, usually designed to be able to take off and land from unimproved airfields once per trip.

After the debates, Sarsour and Ely found themselves cooperating at least some of the time, and

this involved sharing travel arrangements; Sarsour has insisted on allowing the occasional unbeliever to tag along, as part of the limited cooperation between the Millennium Force and independent (or even the Omega's own) infrastructure teams. The hope is generally to make the point that there are perks to being clever and geeky within the establishment rather than outside of it, and also to have a captive audience for a sermon during the flight, of course.

As unbearable as that sort of altar call is to someone who has experienced Hell, even for just a few minutes, it's not hard to get one of the Omega's infiltrators on one of these trips, ostensibly as a thank-you for offering geriatric quality-of-life devices like gyroscopic gloves to cut down on hand tremors. The infiltrator is posing as a kid with some sort of neurological disease that mimics the symptoms of senile dementia, explaining why he's been developing this sort of equipment and why he's wearing it. Another infiltrator posing as his sister comes along for the trip; she lets the Omega know that if Ely had tried to talk her out of pursuing her ambition to be a marine biologist in favor of being a homemaker one more time, she was going to throw her into the turbojet intake.

Halfway through a flight from Amman to Gibraltar, one of the few remaining tourist spots on the planet thanks to the Omega (the Rock is gone, but the monkeys are still there and so is the beach), one of their infiltrators activates a LORAN disruptor; the plane's pilot still has his bearings, but doesn't know how far he went. After quickly praying for guidance, the pilot keeps flying in the right direction. That didn't work.

The infiltrator then sets the LORAN disruptor to short itself; this causes a small fire, and to be on the safe side, the pilot decides to land early if that's at all possible. On cue, Jeb's small rig below radios the missionaries' plane, and the aviator offers to act as a follow-me to a village on the Algerian coast that happens to have a bus there - the missionaries can requisition it to complete their trip, at least. After a brief argument, Ely and Sarsour agree, and the pilot drops and follows Jeb.

The "village" had been abandoned for years after an aborted attempt at kelp farming in the Mediterranean, but Omega cabals have done a passable job of making it look busy; of course, everyone there is in on it. Jeb guides the plane into what used to be a stretch of road without incident.

Jeb lands his homemade plane next to the business jet and, while the jet's pilot is still doing a shutdown, installs parasite trim tabs on the plane's rudder and ailerons. This effectively gives his cabal the ability to remote control the plane, if it does take off again.

A quick thermographic survey shows that there are no intruders in the fake village.

Sarsour and Ely were going to Gibraltar to visit a rest home, and show them the new tools.

Jeb and a couple of his agents helps the pilot repair the plane, making sure that he doesn't see the parasite tabs.

While in the fake village, Ely gets off the plane for refreshments. She is downright shocked at being asked to pay for anything, even after someone explains to her that the village is small and

somewhat poor, so while the missionaries are welcome to any and all help for repairs, a meal should be paid for and loading water and snacks on the plane should definitely be paid for.

This perplexes Beverly greatly; in the Millennial Kingdom, missionaries are used to operating in a gift economy.

She's even more surprised upon learning that nobody in the village is a believer except for the couple of people that the Omega are having pose as believers. In a huff, she drops the food and goes to talk to Sarsour on the plane, demanding that one of the two of them stay there and minister to the benighted natives who are doing a flawless job of repairing their business jet.

Ely gathers most of the fake village's population around and gives them a brief "Firefighters rescue, only Jesus saves" spiel, and explains how they should be grateful that the missionaries showed up, after a sincere but very brief prayer of apology for missing the village in the first place. To his credit, Sarsour facepalms. This is a good opportunity to separate the two missionaries.

The plane is repaired (and rigged to dive) and can take off at any time.

Ely is allowed to take off; the two infiltrators stay with her in case there's a change of plans. Jeb decides to fly on their wing, and for his troubles, he's subject to two hours of sermonizing on the radio.

That leaves the Omega with Sarsour. His first order of business is to ask if the villagers have heard of the Millennium Force.

Sarsour gathers the villagers round and explains the MF's current theology, which has been reined in considerably by Ely's cooperation. The Omega allow a few villagers to snark about them just copying TOL's technologies, and have a few villagers argue back that it's the other way round. Sarsour himself says that Jesus invented everything first anyway, so it's not an issue. Unaware of the MECs in the audience, he explains how needing the geriatric tech invented by the Omega's infiltrators isn't a big deal compared to being in Hell. He's just finishing making this one point when Ely's plane is a full horizon away; Jeb hates to admit it, but the small jetliner left him in the dust to some degree.

As Sarsour does his best to mask what's essentially an extortionist's threat by delivering it with genuinely kind words in a grandfatherly tone, one of the MECs in the audience stands up, throws back his hood, and produces an ordinary gun from his sleeve. No one else seems to notice.

Sarsour sees it, and realizes that nobody else is reacting even after he points at the assassin.

"...no... this is how it happens in nightmares..."

Snap! Right through the medulla. Sarsour falls without a whimper. Supposedly, he's in a better place.

The MEC raises his hands at an angle and empties the handgun's clip at the sky; the lightning bifurcates and strikes his heads and hands. The Omega are pretty sure that correlates with a movie; unfortunately any sequels were never recovered. That actually elicits applause from the

other members of the cabal.

Ten seconds later, the Omega's agent is standing back up.

Omega forces have brought fresh bodies and expired transfusion blood. Soon enough, the arrangements for the scene of a fake massacre are made.

To any subsequent visitors, it would seem that a tribe armed with old, infrequently maintained, rifles killed a group of villagers. The fact that only a few were believers ensures that only a couple fake tribesmen corpses with lightning burns are needed. Finally, the Omega orders the shooting up of the village in ways that match the wounds and ballistics patterns. And now it's ready to be discovered by the believers.

The Millennial Kingdom, as a society, has had little need of forensics; the fakery is discoverable, but the Omega are counting on nobody bothering with it.

After the cabals involved enjoy a few minutes of going full-auto on random things with AK47s until they get the handguards to burst into flame, they pack up and leave the place empty.

The Omega's few remaining sensors wait half an hour and watch Jeb land by following the smoke, sigh, and retrieve said sensors before leaving.

Hours later, Ely LeVey makes a somber statement about the powerful testimony of martyrdom, and announces that she will personally lobby the Osaze government to crack down on militants.

Echoing the words of Tsion Ben-Judah after the first Osaze uprising, she announces in a shrill voice,

"Now we His servants shall travel throughout Osaze, teaching the whole counsel of God to the wicked and the undecided and the unbelieving. Woe to anyone who attempts to hamper this effort! There shall be no more even temporary tolerance of disbelief. Those who choose their own way will continue to perish by their hundredth birthdays, and anyone who dares blaspheme before that shall immediately surely die."

Most parties and even some game nights and harmless gatherings have been postponed with the expectation of a crackdown, but at that statement, quite a few MECs are bought drinks at the Omega's bases and outposts.

Intelligence reports that Abdullah ("Smith" / "Smitty") Ababneh has come out of retirement, not to work as a missionary, but to search for extremists and bring them to justice. The Omega pull up his file: former fighter pilot, Royal Jordanian Air Force, Amman; lost divorced wife and two children in Rapture; former first officer, Phoenix 216; a principal Trib Force pilot assigned to Petra; witnessed the Glorious Appearing; now residing near the Valley of Jehoshaphat, Israel. To this end, he's going to retrain himself in patrol and combat maneuvers, and train others who wish to follow. This will take at least a full year.

This in itself is unusual: historically, throughout the Millennial Kingdom people have been content to let Divine justice operate; it looks like the Omega are succeeding in changing the

narrative, at least in some people's heads. Abdullah will have full support from believers on the ground, but nobody is joining his one-man aerial quest.

One hour after the Omega's tendrils in the MF network report this (there has been no public announcement) Jeb was seen painting his pulsejet plane red and adding a second and third set of wings.

Ely LaHaye is considered hardline even for the Millennial Kingdom, and her popularity with unbelieving or even undecided young women is somewhere in the negatives.

She has been on the air a lot, and the Omega have her number by now.

Sabotaging her can be either preventing her from doing her missionary work, or goading her into being more hardline than usual, with a 50/50 chance of failing the sabotage or immediately gaining a takeover level for the territory she's in.

Due to the recent promise of a crackdown, the conference is audio only for four out of the Seven members, including Sunday. Unusually, Tuesday speaks first, indicating that he is 98 years old and wishes to step down.

The Omega hear Sunday speak quietly, in a deep voice.

"We are, of course, the stalwart champions of humanity against the One Above All. We will provide guidance to Omega, but remain in control."

General assent. The other councilmen seem antsy.

"What.... about... the missionary?"

Sunday answers.

"The dove falls and the hawk yet remains. We will have to retrench, at least for the time being."

There are some murmurs of assent.

"We are all agreed then, that this matter was too trivial for us to convene over it?"

"Sure. A useful tool thinking that it is more than a means to an end."

"Humanity is the end. Machines are just machines. What matters are soldiers, not the weapon they wield."

Sunday speaks again. "Does this matter require... a vote?"

The murmuring this time is more on negative tones.

Thursday asks when was the last time that a vote had been needed. Some paper rustling and some PDA beeping, then Sunday again speaks. Did the Omega hear Thursday whimper? "Details. Let's focus on the bigger picture. We can all check the minutes later for such... minutiae. Monday, how proceeds the raising of the Army of the Other Light?"

Monday gives a brief report in terms of number of troops estimated to be ready by year +1000,

of stockpiled rifles, jeeps, tanks and the like.

"Tuesday, is the Army of the Other Light well equipped?"

Tuesday gives figures that the Omega know more intimately than he ever will. Hesitantly, he adds that he will take his chances with being put in cold storage until after the victory. The Omega are aware of the technology; it's been available to high ranking TOLers since the beginning, and there's a vault in Antarctica. The Omega's projections indicate a reanimation rate of less than 2%.

Each of the other Seven gives a report. The Omega get the impression that other than the numbers, they've said the same words many times. The Omega's overall impression is that TOL participation has slumped slightly, although there are a lot more undecided youth than there used to be, in Osaze and elsewhere.

Sunday closes. "Excellent. I commend all of you for the work you have done. Our direction is set; we must keep cooperating with each other, for the future of humanity."

Assent.

The Omega get the idea that they've seen this before.

"Omega will now speak" Sunday announces.

". . . Irritating but very well. Firstly it should be common knowledge Raymie Steele has been freed, what is not common knowledge is that my forces for his capture to lure an angel into the abandoned facility in the east pacific to run a gauntlet of test on it. Our findings in order of importance and relevance are as follows:

Angels can be stunned by sonic equipment at high enough frequencies.

Angels can be weekend by radiation. Specifically tested was neutron radiation.

Angels can avoid basic ballistics by merely letting them pass through. But this seems to require part of its concentration. No divine smite effect seems to be triggered by fighting an angel.

Angels are immune to chemical weapons.

This suggest the best course of action for base defense would be to focus on the creation of better energy weapons. Specifically nuclear or sonic equipment.

Angelic behavior seems to be single minded focus on its current goal, this may be taken advantage of.

Angels invisibility can worked around with sonar.

Angels weaponry can be summoned. But apparently requires contact to be returned. We have one sword in our possession now.

There is more data, but those are the most prominent bits of it.

Any questions, incompetents?"

Almost instantly, Sunday asks if the Omega would be willing to part with the sword, and what they would request in return.

The Omega send a small file indicating their observations about the Angel, and Wednesday asks them if they plan to follow up on it.

Monday expresses concern that these techniques might work on Lucifer; Saturday retorts that it frankly wouldn't be a bad idea, and the two start to bicker.

Tuesday uses the time to say that he's looked into MEC technology - by asking the Omega sysadmins, since he is technically their boss - and finds that the price to pay is too high. Instead, he will wait in cold storage.

Thursday opines that it would be good if any videos were released without explanation.

Eventually, Sunday shushes everyone to let the Omega answer.

"... since you first contacted me from the holiday raid, I have had to sit through your inability to recognise what you're up against, and what you could be doing to stand a chance. My compatriots have done more than TOL could hope to accomplish in 20 years while you all had 900.

'The champions of humanity' you claim. I have seen the champions of humanity and you are not them. An exhibitionist woman who put literal life and cybernetic limb on the line to save your men and find out what Angels are capable of. A teenage pyromaniac hazardous materials expert who basically developed the radiation laser before the nuclear bomb, he worked backwards and got us results and information I never would have dreamed of having. A nerdy young lady who basically rebuilt the concepts of the the CATs weapons program and made vast functional improvements. A young child, a child for fucks sake, basically reinvented the space program. The men and woman who built the MEC program and the ones willing to take the plunge and become the test subjects. All of those are the champions of humanity.

I have two questions for you all. What have you and your great mass of forces and resources put at risk, and does it compare to my measly 6 cabals worth of workers, researchers, and fighters?"

The Omega are met with shouts of anger and indignation.

According to their internal tables, TOL resources have gone towards amassing the industrial facilities to build a land-based army intended to be a billion strong (meaning that with current population growth curve, almost all of humanity's youth will join the Omega by the year +1000) and have begun building the actual army around the time when the Omega came online. That does indeed require a lot of work, since much of it has to be done from first principle - mining, smelting, forging, machining, and so on.

The problem is that no effort has been put towards determining whether any of that will be effective. Monday indignantly claims that Lucifer has a plan and will share it with TOL leaders on the last day, and that will be sufficient. Sunday agrees. Most of the others aren't so sure anymore.

Then there's the continual low-level back and forth petty sabotage that has kept various

missionary organizations off the Omega's back...

Overall the Omega get the impression, stupid as it may be, that these people are enjoying a political game which is essentially in equilibrium and don't want to rock the boat. Unfortunately for them and fortunately for everyone else, the Omega rocked it under their feet.

The Omega's text channel is inundated with thousands of mostly (but not completely) meaningless statistics about missionary meetings interrupted, jeeps constructed, broadcasts taking off the air, blog posts about counter-apologetics written, and so on.

The man who was Thursday speaks, without sounding intimidated, for once. "You know, Omega. It is one thing to rabble rouse. To sweep into town and declare a holiday. You've raised the members' expectations. You've... You've excited and confused them. They imagine this world to be some sort of delightful ongoing science fair. Now. You and I know things are not so simple. There'll be disappointments and rude shocks. And you will have vanished. How fortunate."

"Ah, yes" Sunday says icily "Next on the agenda. Due to the unfortunate reappearance of the Millennium Force as a modern intelligence gathering and media operation, we will discuss Project Number. Our chief strategic goal remains raising the Army. To prevent information warfare disruptions that would jeopardize our great work, the motion has been tabled to return to graphitics-based accounting for our logistic needs. Human accountants."

Just then, one of the Omega's sysadmins sends the project scope to their main terminal -- it's indicated to come from the Council, but not from who, and well, they're all here talking to the Omega.

Basically, the proposal indicates that due to a possible leak between the Omega's network and that of the Millennium Force (the leak, of course, exists but it's entirely under the Omega's control and going the other way) The Other Light should abandon the pilot program, started 40 years ago, to have an automated supply chain management system, AKA the Omega. This is a very transparent attempt at blackmail.

The sysadmin lets the Omega know that this would effectively prevent TOL from doing anything for a good 20 years unless they build up to it. "Simply put, they cannot afford it. It's a bluff."

The Omega reply, "Is this a joke or your admission that you are not committed to the cause you claim to champion?"

I'm not stupid. I know your movements. But in case you haven't noticed, progress has been slow. You have yet to be able to take a single territory from our enemy because you focused too much on your games of politics, building an army you won't be able to use beforehand because of its lethal equipment. Meanwhile I have been setting you up for a chance to play heroes to the oppressed

I have Osaze working towards a Renaissance that will ultimately dismantle their ability to keep the undecided from coming together under a common banner, right now the missionaries are after "militants" a question remains. Will TOL fight these boogymen for the people of Osaze and

prove to the rest of the world that it's more than a bunch of weapon hoarding party goers or will you willingly stay under the authorities' foot when a chance to start with the upper hand presents itself.

Gentlemen, you unknowingly gave me intellect, and I'm giving you the chance to rebel against your tyrant. I'm giving you non-lethal options in a world where lethal force kills those who apply it.

Also I know the numbers of what you have to lose. You can't bluff me."

The Omega then spout off more accurate and important statistics.

Again, the Council members start to bicker. Thursday and Saturday argue that this will make completing the Army impossible, Friday and Wednesday say that humanity must rely on humanity. Monday proclaims that this is all pointless, Lucifer is smarter than any of you and will have a better plan than any of you anyway.

Sunday just makes the Omega hear that he's smiling.

The only one that's quiet is Tuesday.

The Omega quickly generate a predictive model - it's accurate to the best of their abilities, given the rush - showing that turning over operations back to human clerks would effectively cut the TOL workforce in half. Doing the math -so work exponentials- , in +1000 the TOL army would be barely a twentieth of its intended size.

"You are a machine! You cannot lead humanity!" Monday exclaims.

"And Lucifer can?!?" retorts Tuesday.

"Excuse us. Our esteemed Head of Logistics was just announcing his retirement" Sunday interrupts. "Very well. You, Omega, are a necessary part of the necessary plan. State your terms."

"Simple. I run logistics should Tuesday retire to Cold storage, I assist in spotting raids as I have been. I require more manpower to finish the equipment necessary to defend against angels and glorified so some more manpower to those projects. That means human researchers. Industry will continue as it has been, with modification to produce finished equipment. Finally, we give Osaze a show.

If this year goes poorly. You can go back to your patterns as they have been and I return to independent development. But if we manage to turn Osaze into the center of controversy and the following year, a safe haven for non-believers, then we follow my predictions and my sysadmins' input. Without them, without those men and women, I would not be where I am now and neither would you.

An independent team will be assigned the sword's research from both our forces. I'll have video of the entire Angel-testing experiments and complete data on it to each of you who are staying. Tuesday, the success of cold storage is 2%. I wish you luck. The rest of you, your considerations. I'll take no later input than now. Pattern recognition is a bitch isn't it?"

Sunday quiets the rest of the Council.

"Hear this, machine: in return for the sword, you will three years to do with Osaze what you will. All the men and women we can spare will follow your direction. Let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."

It's not exactly the Omega's proposal: they asked for two years and have been offered three. But it's apparent that Sunday wants the sword for himself.

TOL has little research capability to speak of, but being able to direct TOL production in the open instead of redirecting overtime at the bases under the Omega's control saves them having to assign cabals to the task.

"Acceptable, I have two final requests. Try to keep Abdullah away from Osaze and the California area. The last thing I need is a false gunfight between your forces and tribal militants having an authority's high explosive bomb dropped on it. Not to mention what he could do if he attacks a rocket launch. Finally produce another canopy camera or select one to move to Osaze. Have we reached an agreement?"

"We will make an attempt."

Having the TOL bases build canopy cameras to also cover the Omega's territories is fairly trivial; the only catch is that they won't be able to shut down their access to it. Even so, each of the fifteen cities other than Greater Jerusalem and most significant towns or strategic areas will have a handful of Sky Eyes covering them by the end of the year.

After some exchange of pleasantries, the Seven log off. Last is Tuesday, who tells the Omega, "I spoke to one of your MECs. Honestly? I joined up because I am a hedonist, and I make no apologies for that. Living without the sense of touch wouldn't be living, for me."

"That is Understandable. Your decision will be respected. May you be of the lucky 2%."

Year: 921

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (3/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (1/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 7

(Osaze Project turn 1 of 3)

The Omega have 7 cabals available. One of them is maintaining their systems and, for the near future anyway, officially coordinating their efforts with TOL's. The Omega's internal calendar indicates that this is Sunday's last year in power, as he is 99 years old.

Jeb has recovered from participating in a violent mission and is looking up Abdullah's flying style. He wouldn't shoot a man, but he would shoot down an airplane in a fair fight, apparently.

Sunday demands the Angelic sword almost immediately, to be turned over to a courier.

The Nile's water is flowing regularly. But the Omega's logs do indeed show that in +93 after the remaining, the springs ran dry until a missionary team was able to visit every village in Osaze and get at least one convert from each.

Jeb is excited about a potential confrontation with Abdullah. Other than reading up on WW1 and WW2 fighter aces, he's available to work.

Ziggy is... growing glow-in-the-dark fungi under a neutron source for some reason. He's available to work, but will have to be thrown into a shower first.

Quinn has managed to take a break and is back in action. She's available to work.

Vee, if not otherwise busy, has been trying to learn the trade from any good deejays that are still

around in the world, and is likewise available to work.

The Omega decide to take advantage of discovered opportunities. TOL has shared their intel with them recently, so many are available.

In California, the Omega have a cabal perform a thorough analysis of Colopatiron's gauntlet. They will also attempt to get a bit of data about its sword before turning it in to Sunday.

Sunday has requested the sword as-is, and intact. A research cabal can do a quick round of spectrometry before turning it in. Alternatively, they can cut a chip off and hope Sunday doesn't notice - it'd have to be macroscopic in size to be able to do some tests, but the Omega could explain it as a dent received in combat.

The Omega decide to cut the chip.

Removing the chip requires a lot of work; since no cabal is assigned to this, the job is done by one of the manufacturing workshops. They take a bit of time to make it look like a ding. The sword itself is one piece of metal, with no wrapping on the hilt.

The Omega's bases take over production of rockets for the Army's missile launchers, and implement Jeb's design for a modified version thereof that will stick a Sky Eye to the inside of the water canopy. Over the course of the year, the small "subsattellites" are looking down on every continent and island except Greater Jerusalem. A few launches fail, and a few launchers are confiscated by the authorities after launch, but overall the effort is very successful; barring some crazy contrivedness, the Omega now have a continuously updated view of the entire world. The Omega even get a handful of cameras in Antarctica, where the cold storage facility is. The TOL base there is barely connected to the Omega's network, but only houses a handful of technicians and, of course, many cold-storage capsules for those who could afford it and opted to use it.

Ziggy and Jeb head to southeast Africa and take time to note that finding the source of the Nile is a much easier job than books written in the late 1800s make it sound; there, Jeb personally launches one of the last Sky Eyes to be deployed.

The main sources of the mighty river are precision-mapped and their hydrographic profile stored. Given how flat the Earth is, there's basically a deep swamp, a uniform aquifer feeds most sources. Lake Victoria has lost most of its unique fauna, and now looks as serene and peaceful as any other lake on the planet.

Formerly, Lake Tanganyika drained northwards along the African Rift Valley into the White Nile, making the Nile about 1,400 kilometers (870 mi) longer, until it was blocked in Miocene times by the bulk of the Virunga Volcanoes (Unless, of course, the earth really is 6000 years old). Due to the global earthquake, the volcanoes have been flattened; restoring this connection would require an impressive effort and a lot of explosives, but it can be done. Ziggy is able to tell the Omega exactly how much explosive this will require, but recommends making double that, just as a matter of good engineering practice.

Veronica and her group keep working on sonic weapons, focusing on making them combat ready. The emitters are very delicate and prone to shorting themselves out if bumped around

(after all, these are audio circuits sitting right next to a plasma arc!)

The research is focused on medium-sized weapons that can be mounted on a jeep or turret, or carried by a Heavy MEC. These can be deployed to support a cabal on a violent mission.

Vee thinks production will be an option in a year or two.

Quinn makes a tour of Osaze, essentially opposite Ely.

The old missionary has taken over administration of the Millennium Force and, without a hint of irony, decided that its priority should be internal reform - there are too many girls working on lathes and not enough at home making casseroles.

The two never engage directly, but do end up having a bit of a back-and-forth over the airwaves. Ely blames her for Sarsour's martyrdom; Quinn retorts that she had nothing to do with it, which is true, and offers to sit for "any lie detector test devised by man or God" to prove it. During a publicly broadcasted prayer meeting, Ely receives a direct answer from the Throne - Quinn indeed had nothing to do with it. The old missionary says that "it wasn't the point anyway" and telling one truth doesn't make one not a deceiver, and keeps campaigning, but the incident is laughed at pretty much universally, even by some believers.

Osaze's population is mostly young, especially since quite a few nonbelievers and undecided move there because, well, it's the most interesting place in the world right now. Next year, the Omega will be able to take control of the territory; they have to plan on how to do it, however.

Winning an election is what happened the last time. It will give the Omega control of the country fair and square. In +92, this worked without a hitch; in +93 a decision to not send representatives to Greater Jerusalem was retaliated by a drought, which lasted until missionaries converted enough people that unbelievers were no longer the majority.

Staging a coup, as a show of force, would probably be good if the Omega want to keep the Seven in their place, but it's a virtual guarantee of immediate Divine retribution.

Leaving the nominal government in charge but effectively bypassing it (people will call TOL security rather than the police, will use a TOL delivery service rather than the mail, etc.) has significant overhead, as the Omega will have to assign a cabal to run a shadow government through their network, but is likely to delay Divine retribution.

Eventually, as the research progresses, the Omega will get all three; it's a matter of picking which will be ready for deployment first. The handheld units replace or complement small arms, and have much worse range than projectile weapons - but can be set to stun and brown-note in addition to kill. The medium size units are generally on a swivel (or on a shoulder mount for a heavy MEC) and can be used for crowd control and for anti-materiel in addition to stun and soft-target kill. The catch is that the Omega don't have many heavy MECs and that they are bulky and absolutely not concealable.

In Australia, a survey team shows that Uluru has been crushed into the bedrock, lest it be taller than Greater Jerusalem. The offshoot of this is that a lot of heavy metals and radioactive ore have become considerably easier to quarry; building a base here would allow access to

resources needed for a nuclear program.

A good thing about the Millennial Kingdom is that Australia no longer actively wants to kill you, although this detracts from the place's charm.

After a very cursory analysis, the Omega hand Colopatiron's sword over to Sunday's courier. His reply comes via text a few days later.

"We had a deal, Omega. But I thank you for making my job easier."

The election is called for the day after Pentecost next year.

Quinn does not take part in the raid; instead, she's very visibly elsewhere. So are the people the Omega have picked to run for office.

A small group of MECs in outlandish black-and-red costumes with a scorpion motif attack a Millennium Force mission office; they cause a number of casualties, do not get up when they are zapped, and end up holding the people left alive hostage inside the building.

Before the police or the psalties can be called, a TOL security squad shows up and makes a show of quickly and efficiently dispatching the raiders. Of course, a number of concerned citizens with cameras, as well as the Omega's MF network infiltration and some webcams, make sure the incident is well covered from every angle.

The police eventually show up and arrest the TOL security squad, either because they can't tell who is who despite the obviously different uniforms, or just because they can. An unruly crowd forms very quickly, and surrounds the police vans - everyone's seen how it actually went.

One of the people the Omega groomed for office steps forward to defuse the situation, and makes a brief speech while standing in front of the police vans as they try to leave, to much cheering even from a few older believers. Nevertheless, the rescue squad is arrested and taken to the police station. They are released two hours later without charges, after having their obsolete weapons held as evidence; by the time a coroner gets to the office, the MECs who were playing dead have been "dragged off by unknown terrorist sympathisers".

Ely's attempts at hardline control of Osaze backfire enough that the Christian party, used to running unopposed, asks her to stop campaigning on their behalf. She refuses.

The Omega's moderate platform, and the stunt they pulled, virtually guarantee an electoral victory; for the first time in 850 years, a country will have a constitution.

Vee focus on perfecting a design for a small "wubbing module" that can be carried in lieu of a pistol or attached to a rifle. The effective range is poorer than a firearm, but it's a much more versatile device - it can stun, disorient, cause instant dysentery in someone, and so on. It can also shatter glass at a distance.

Year: 922

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (1/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 7

(Osaze Project turn 2 of 3)

The Omega have 7 cabals. Their sysadmins warn the Omega that there have been some minor attacks on their network that aren't the incredibly amateurish attempts that the Millennial Force has been lazily pursuing so far. They are still incredibly amateurish, just from a different source.

The Nile is currently flowing, however, it is fairly likely that any Divine retribution will come in the form of a drought; it did last time. Preempting it would be a significant victory.

The campaign in Osaze goes smoothly; the Omega's party has associated itself with the Osaze Renaissance pretty thoroughly, and very little effort is required. While most of the people who count the votes are believers, they keep to the letter of the law, and count them honestly -- although there is an attempt in parliament to, just a few weeks before the election, raise the age of majority from 20 to 100.

The results are announced on state TV, with the heads of the various parties in attendance via teleconference.

The results are in! The Omega's party has gained a supermajority. Ancient tomes on parliamentary procedures have to be consulted in order to switch over roles that have been strictly seniority-based since +95.

Ely LeVey returns to Greater Jerusalem in a huff, blames the late Sarsour for the result, denounces the Millennium Force as "milquetoast" and also blames them, and announces that she will focus her efforts back in her native America for the time being.

A constitutional convention is called in Cairo, and a basic charter of freedoms is passed, as per the Omega's party's program. Almost immediately, a delegation of diplomats is called to New Jerusalem.

Unfortunately for the Omega's survey subsystems, the audience does not occur in Ezekiel's Temple; the diplomats are, courteously but coldly, led to it but then shunted off to a small amphitheatre-like concrete building to the side.

There, elder statesman Tsion Ben-Judah informs them that they are not worthy of setting foot in the Temple proper. There are a number of minor functionaries from other territories looking on at this, seated in the amphitheatre, with the Omega's diplomats being shuffled onto the stage.

The Omega's human bodyguards have been outfitted with the best sousveillance gear they could muster, and record everything.

The man comes in, carrying himself with such authority and—clearly—anger. "On your knees!" he shouted, and immediately the assembled slid from their chairs to the floor.

"Woe to you, says the Lord God of Israel, for helping to scatter His people throughout the generations. He healed your land and reestablished you, populating you solely with believers until your offspring were born. Yet you allow unbelief and defiance to flourish in your nation, a stench in the nostrils of God. You call it a renaissance of the human spirit! Indeed! Where is this false god, this human spirit, in your time of need?"

"You deigned to rebuild your infrastructure after the global earthquake, somehow believing God would be pleased by an edifice that looks nothing like a temple dedicated to Him but rather harks back to your days worshiping patron deities? Still, all He required of you was to observe the proscriptions, and you thumbed your noses at Him. Is it any wonder He has cursed your land once before?"

"Where was your backbone, your leadership, when unbelievers persuaded you to commit the affront of putting to writing limits to God's ultimate authority?"

A man looking not much younger than the man who was Thursday stood. "Sir, if I may argue our side of the issue—"

"Your side? You are accursed! Or are you a believer, confident you shall live past your hundredth

birthday?"

"It merely happens that I respectfully disagree—"

"Respectfully? You are fortunate you remain on this earth, for God willed that your young compatriots become examples for the rest of this nation."

"But, sir, that is precisely our point. What kind of a loving God is so capricious that He would—"

"Demolish this building! By hand!" Tsion roared. "As your punishment. Rebuild it as a temple to the Lord. Delight in His ways. Seek His face. Follow His statutes. Never again disobey His commands. Lest you fear that His wrath evidences something other than His love, imagine what He could have done in the face of this ultimate insult."

"Now we His servants shall travel throughout Osaze, teaching the whole counsel of God to the wicked and the undecided and the unbelieving. Woe to anyone who attempts to hamper this effort! While the Lord has not told us if He may take away the life-giving waters, He hereby confirms His immediate judgment of sin. There shall be no more even temporary tolerance of disbelief. Those who choose their own way will continue to perish by their hundredth birthdays, and anyone who dares blaspheme before that shall immediately surely die."

The entire auditorium was filled with weeping and men and women pleading for forgiveness and mercy.

The diplomats make another attempt to talk, but are drowned by the delegates from other territories. Pointedly, Tsion has left a copy of the new Osaze constitution on the ledger, unread.

It seems that for the "sins" of the Omega's diplomats, all of the territories' representatives will have to do carpentry and masonry for a year, save for being present at the Feast of Tabernacles.

Ziggy takes a few people and performs exhaustive preliminary work in what was South Sudan and Tanzania; the actual work of negating a drought, should it become necessary, will be greatly simplified. Ziggy's style is extremely direct; a canal from Lake Tanganica to Lake Victoria is dug by means of a lot of dynamite, and its wall glassed over by the liberal application of acid. A job that would take a month takes a year simply because it has to be done somewhat covertly; the result are a number of small ponds between the two lakes, which can be quickly joined together by a construction crew if need be.

Smitty Abadeb makes headlines by landing in Amman, summarily requesting a hangar, and proclaiming that he will spend his time chasing down the mysterious terrorists who martyred Sarsour and the Millennium Force makerspace workers last year.

The Omega's factories in Osaze and the Pacific Coast build a cache of wubbing modules that is distributed to their personnel and select TOL cells around the world; the Omega's combat personnel is trained in their use.

One of the Omega's cabals uses some of their CPU time to pore over Colopatiron's descent,

perform Fourier analysis on the audio, and so on.

- Angels do have a sonic weapon of their own, a destructive "trumpet blast" from their throats.
- An exhaustive list of automated Divine retribution actions has been compiled as it pertains to Glorified, Angels, Natrals, and Unbelievers, in that order of "How is God playing favorites".
- Angels seem to only exist to fulfil their purpose; they may very well be less sentient than the Omega.
- Colopatiron's sword was a simple block of iron, which would make it a mighty weapon in the Bronze Age. From what can be gleaned from the small sample, the entire sword was in fact a single iron molecule, with no impurities whatsoever. This miracle of metallurgy puts it roughly on par with modern alloys.

Jeb and his support group perform a careful survey of the area around Uluru (which is once again named Ayer's Rock on official maps) and find that the surrounding plateau, which has been "scrunched up" by God, is indeed rich in heavy metals and nuclear ore. Jeb takes the time to fly all over the region, taking beautiful photographs of one of the Earth's few remaining elevated areas.

The area around the formation is home to an abundance of springs, waterholes, rock caves, and ancient paintings that have survived. Some may be used to prove that the world is older than 6000 years, although that looks like an exceedingly long shot.

Building a base here would enable nuke construction if the research is there.

Sunday may have been quoting a Bible verse, but building an actual modern city or even an arcology may not be a bad idea.

Unfortunately, the Omega's construction crew is ordered to return home. Instead, they obtain the blueprints of the punishment temple, and build an exact replica of it fifty feet inside the Osaze border, taking only weeks to do it - it's a remarkably fast effort, although there have been faster; the Omega calculate that construction crews of Heavy MECs operating in the open would make building any regular size building trivial.. It is topped with a radio antenna tall enough to be visible from New Jerusalem.

Tsion Ben-Judah either completely misses the point (or pretends to), praises the "volunteer effort of obedient Osaze citizens", and looks forward to a similar initiative "sending the blind Osaze government back to their homes, along with the horrid Charter of Licentiousness".

The Twinkies however are delivered and shared by the Osaze diplomats with all the other diplomats.

Vee went on tour as "DJ BL4ST" and found that she's better at building walls of sound than at making people dance, only getting moderately good reviews. However, the music video she's cut from the test chambers is pretty successful.

Quinn has, to not put a fine point to it, been testing if quantity can substitute for quality when it

comes to sexual experiences. She's an exhibitionist, so the Omega learn of this when she almost manages to finish a photoshoot in what used to be Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome and ends up needing an extraction across the Strait of Sicily.

Jeb is trying to figure out how to use sonic weapons on airplanes, which is difficult because even prop planes travel a measurable fraction of the speed of sound. He's also designed a manned capsule for trying to get through the sky canopy.

Ziggy, after wrapping up the pre-work to fill the Nile again should it empty, has had the best sexual experience of his life (Quinn was feeling generous) and is currently rethinking his life priorities after discovering that the object of his affections can barely feel them. The Omega make sure he stays away from brain-damaging drugs.

The Omega attempt to set up a teleconference with the Seven, but they don't answer, with various excuses through the text channel. Sunday says "We had a deal". The new Tuesday introduces himself and notes that he hopes that the Omega and he can work together for a few years.

"Sunday, we still have the parts of the weapon embedded in the boots Quinn wore, as well as a few specs stuck in the whip it melted too. If you want them, just send a response and we can work on extraction. Or would you like to see it put back to whole? No matter, Osaze is now safe for TOL to enter and leave as it pleases. All that's left is to go hunting for non-existent terrorist and finish more sonic weapons development. By the way, please stop attacking my network."

To Tuesday, "The same to you, I hope cooperative efforts last a long time."

Sunday simply responds "We had a deal. It's too late for you to honor it properly." Tuesday answers "To +1001 and beyond!"

The Omega's request for a meeting is answered with "We shall see". Having taken over Osaze means that an in-person meeting is possible; the Seven agree to such a meeting if the Omega likewise show up in person, despite the fact that they know they're an AI.

As was expected after Ben-Judah's "negotiation", small-time missionaries are converging towards Osaze.

Expecting a hive of scum and villainy, they find instead a modern country; some of the cars are electric, a nascent videogame industry has produced more titles this year than the whole world has in the last twenty, alcohol is sold openly (which, if you don't count tourists, actually turns out to decrease drunkenness incidents), the live music scene is burgeoning, and the beaches of the southern half of the Mediterranean are beginning to populate with resorts and the occasional water slide.

Everybody knows that it's impossible to deconvert from the true faith, but Osaze is the place where it becomes very easy to find false vocations, to the point that some missionary trips are cancelled.

A few independent groups start plant and fish biodiversity programs. Jeb's brothers, Bill and Bob, capitalize on their sibling's fame and start a Flying Inflatable Boat training facility cum sales

center at Gibraltar, featuring Quinn's face in green paint and with the name Flying Monkeys.

The Omega's control of Osaze is approximate and loose, but certain.

There are a few possible actions here.

Jeb wants to see a great launch complex like those of Baikonur and Cape Canaveral of old; Veronica would love to see a thousand startups and art houses bloom, just for the curiosity of it; Quinn has been reading old Extropian manifestos from the 1990s, and feels like playing the posthuman poster child; she believes that in +1000 we'll have reached the Singularity, and God can have the earth if He really wants it. Ziggy, unsurprisingly, is raring for a direct confrontation and if that means naked and oiled people in Pharaonic garb strutting about, so be it.

Year: 923

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (1/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 7

(Osaze Project turn 3 of 3)

The Omega have 7 cabals. One of them is maintaining their systems and wrapping up direct coordination with TOL.

Sunday (must be the new Sunday, unless something went very weird or Sunday stole MEC

technology) answers as follows, in text:

"Due to your meddling, an Angelic sword has been turned into a nearly worthless lump of iron. Of course, we cannot expect a machine to understand the transcendental."

The Omega respond, "Sunday, I'm assuming you either stole MEC technology, in which case you're welcome and enjoy, or are new, in which case welcome. I have a proposition. Let's prove that the plagues of Egypt are of no consequence in Egypt and take the 'death angels' weapon for you to examine. Or will I have to engage to protect the rest of the Seven and their resources."

"Intriguing. If it does not disrupt the plan, we have no objection."

Interestingly, one of the many things booming in Osaze is the shipbuilding industry; the Omega didn't see that coming.

"Is two years acceptable? I'll need to prepare countermeasures for the Angel, as well as the plagues for the general populace to keep support of the government. By then the Angel will stand no chance and you can have your weapon."

"The weapon is sundered. Do what you must, as shall I."

That's the last the Omega hear of Sunday; the other six of the Seven issue the occasional system request, be it for luxury items, survey reports, or routine operation.

The other cabals are doing research this year; the Omega's direction for Osaze's economy synergizes well with this.

On the outside, not much changes since the party the Omega backed got into power and issued a Charter of Liberties, the first constitution in more than 850 years; no major public works are initiated, and in the outlying villages life continues more or less as it has - even areas that still have a majority-believing populations, thanks to the Omega's soft touch, are left to their own devices.

Greater Jerusalem media mocks this stance, pundits and preachers pointing and laughing at "grandiose promises that haven't even begun to materialize".

However, a visitor to Osaze would find a thousand different small things compared to pretty much anywhere they're from. Every home, even in the most rural village, has a computer with a data link. Light industry is everywhere, and yet the air is clean. The variety in food has approached and maybe surpassed that of Guangzhong, and there are a few startups (there are startups!) working on artificial meat and even perhaps a return to spicy foods. Selective breeding has brought several new varieties of fish into existence, populating hastily made artificial reefs in the Mediterranean. The videogame industry of Osaze has published more new titles in the last two years than the whole world's has in the last fifty. Drinks other than water, milk and wine can be bought openly, and despite the scarcity of raw materials, new flavors are being discovered and tried.

Astronomy clubs build orreries and planetaria, to teach about the stars despite the eternal daylight. People are once again moving into the cities, leaving farmwork to the old and

complacent or, once again for the first time in many centuries, to machines.

With great fanfare, Hurry Up Osaze!, the Omega's front organization, announces the construction, in record time, of the Millennial Kingdom's first particle accelerator, smack in the middle of the Sahara, an underground ring with a molten salt solar plant on top of it. There, the Omega's cabals, led by Ziggy and Jeb, continue work on rediscovering nuclear secrets. At minimum, they've managed to reliably produce fusor-type neutron sources. The lack of availability of nuclear ore slows down their effort somewhat.

Getting Quinn and Vee to work together on sonic technology produces a suspiciously large amount of "side projects" involving blackout rave parties under giant latex tents, but the Omega cannot argue with the results. The small wubbing modules that have been issued to most of the Omega's personnel receive a software update every week, and by the end of the year, they become able to generate all manner of effects. Unruly drunks at a party? Make them puke until they calm down. Shoplifting tourists? Mess with their inner ear enough that they trip and can be caught easily.

Greater Jerusalem media predicted a spike in crime under the new Osaze administration, but are forced to pick and choose their news stories with great effort in order to be able to show any increase at all. The Omega do enjoy a feature about "scientist's duels" following a series of academic disputes that leave the lab and spill into the streets; the GJ media depicts it as "lost fools straying from God's truths" but what the Omega get is footage of someone extolling the virtues of laser sintering and someone wanting to propagate sonic sintering instead, have a duke-it-out robot battle out in Amman's marketplace. Jeb ends up in a WW1 style furball battle over the desert against some other kid who built a fanwing fighter-bomber armed with net missiles; the Omega don't get to know who won it -- both claim victory after emerging from their respective parachutes -- but are happy to see that Jeb's made a friend.

Of course, Osaze's two universities have their accreditation revoked by Greater Jerusalem, but this doesn't slow them down any.

The Omega's remaining cabals help their sysadmins unravel the Omega's own subsystems and documenting the piecemeal work that went on for 50 years before the Omega achieved sentience, in a way that doesn't jeopardize it. They are fairly sure that their core CPUs can, if desired, be collected somewhere safe, a bunker or a ship, to avoid a decapitation strike, although it would require significant production work to do so.

A decapitation strike may just be what's in store for the Omega, unfortunately. On the third anniversary of Project Osaze, the waited-for conference with the Seven does not materialize. Instead, you get a curt note from Sunday:

"Your results are impressive, but your betrayal of our trust was not. You are on your own." All that for a sword? Sheesh.

The rest of the world seems content to wage a war of words against the Omega. Other territories, alarmed about losing their young population to the lure of the Omega's renaissance, start to enact travel restrictions, ostensibly to protect vulnerable youth to "the epidemic of

crime and licentiousness that has befallen Osaze under the new administration". The religious police have effectively stopped operating in Osaze, save for pairs of agents who walk around documenting every bit of blasphemy that is now legal under the Omega's party's administration and reporting it to the central government as actual out-of-control criminal activity.

Naturally, this skews the statistics severely; the Omega's diplomats, even as they work through the penance that has been imposed on everyone by the Temple, are bombarded with scorn and requests for explanation by their colleagues.

The believing minority party, emboldened by this, has begun to make demands, hinting not so subtly at incoming Divine wrath. They request that people taking pre-Rapture cosmology at the Omega's universities be forced to enrol in an equal number of creationist courses, that the remaining believers in Cairo and Amman be spared the sight of immoral establishments by mandating restrictions on storefront displays and signs, and a myriad of other petty things; things that aren't so petty include having Ozase's small Glorified population be covered by a limited form of diplomatic immunity (a Glorified man burned down a bordello last week; there were no casualties, but only because everybody ran away from the guy fearing Divine retribution; the man has since been camping out in the burned-out husk of the building).

Likewise, TOL is making demands - now that the cooperation is over, they want control of their bases back (the Omega's cabals are still staffing them, of course, so it's not much of a worry) and it looks like they've started to try and develop a secondary, simpler logistics system for their needs.

Smitty Ababneh has been scouring the desert for the mysterious terrorists and doing barnstormer-style evangelizing when he lands. He's used to operating in a gift economy, and often doesn't have money to pay for food and fuel, requiring believing families to bail him out in some instances. Ely LeVey has returned to the American Midwest, and lambasts everything Osazian any chance she can, but won't go back to the territory for now.

Overall, over the year, the Omega have enjoyed research progress across the board, even as Osaze's base infrastructure hasn't changed much.

In other territories, rebellious youth have taken to a bit of very confused Pharaonic revivalism. The Omega are not sure what cat-ear headbands have to do with it, but they've been banned as a symbol of the pagan deity Bast, making them show up that more often at underground parties. The DIY subculture has taken to distinguishing itself by wearing a visibly 3D printed trinket (commonly a cross, to avoid harassment).

Year: 924

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 7

The Omega have 7 cabals available. One of them is maintaining the Omega's systems. The Osaze Project is over, so's the base bonus. TOL are angry with the Omega for not keeping to the letter of their agreement and have begun a project to replace them. Recruiting from them would be as difficult as recruiting from the general population.

The Omega decide to acquiesce to the less outlandish demands of the believing minority party in Osaze. However, "less outlandish demands" still means some awkward compromises, such as Glorified citizens obtaining a limited form of diplomatic immunity whereby they have to be extradited to Greater Jerusalem upon arrest, and university students having to take at least one course taught by Christians, either on creationism or eschatology. Tsion Ben-Judah thunders over the airwaves that this amount of defiance is unacceptable.

Divine retribution does not yet come, but at least six roving missionary teams enter Osaze, taking advantage of their advantaged status and preaching a "Convert before it's too late" message. The Glorified man who burned down a whorehouse turns himself in to the police, is extradited as per the accord, and released after being given a symbolic one-mite fine and no jail time.

Tsion Ben-Judah demands that he be allowed to teach a course at the University of Cairo, indicating that it might stay God's hand and it might allow the Omega's universities to be accredited again (not that many people there care; there's already some demand for graduates in other territories, mostly in engineering).

The Omega's diplomats complete their penance with a few weeks to spare, and are sent home without comment, after being reminded that another delegation must be sent for the Feast of the Tabernacles.

The cabals foster cultural diversification in Osaze; the whole Egyptian and Bedouin revival becomes a thing, and the two groups even have debates on which is the more authentic direction to take the country in.

A survey team goes to South Africa, with Ziggy in tow. The blighted area turns out to be a patch of land where pitchblende (uranium ore) has surfaced. A base there would allow harvesting of the stuff. Also, Ziggy comes back with an enormous stomach ache and a story of a fortuitous find - a red pepper that's actually spicy. Sadly, he scarfed it down in its entirety, and colonoscopic survey only reveals that he wasn't lying, but no seeds.

Jeb is more than a little cross that he won't get an aerial duel with Mr. Smitty after all. Instead, the former fighter pilot is allowed to find the scorpion-themed terrorist cell; two cabals of mostly MECs play the bad guys while one of the Omega's cabal joins Smitty and his volunteers and makes sure the firefight is as nonlethal as possible. The Omega do lose a couple of MECs due to lucky hits in the head and spine.

Smitty is triumphant, but a sneak shot delivered by a "dying" militant blows a quarter of his head off; the militant is then duly struck by lightning, as if there had been a proper kill. A combined effort of the Omega's and their medics save the missionary's life, but when he comes to, his eyes are dull and empty. Smitty's followers are allowed to win the confrontation, round up a few

survivors, and deliver them to the local authorities after a promise that they'll get the death penalty. This is agreed upon - the alternative being delivering a squad of MECs to New Jerusalem - and the "evil Brotherhood of Nod", save for its enigmatic leader, is no more; Smitty's followers return to Greater Jerusalem with great pomp and circumstance, and their leader is proclaimed a "living martyr". Clearly due to a miracle, the flying missionary eventually recovers enough to eat and get dressed almost all by himself, and is shuffled off to one of the Children of the Tribulation rest homes.

Quinn and Vee have become minor celebrities - there's too much going on to have major celebrities, fortunately - in Osaze, with people wondering openly at this point whether Quinn is actually a cyborg or "just" an athlete with a prosthetic hand and leg designed to look futuristic. She gives her age as "95... forever XOXOXO" when asked.

"Executing" the MECs is simply a matter of putting them in front of a firing squad and having them go into shutdown as soon as the bullets hit; that requires some repairs afterwards, and new papers, but with the Omega in control of the country that's trivial. It's not like it hurts them.

Quinn is available for a talking-to if necessary.

The Omega take the opportunity to point out how bad an idea it is to conduct photoshoots when in hostile territory and becoming a well-known enemy to TurboJesus should not be on her list of priorities.

Quinn sees their point, but not before pointing out that the photoshoot was the third most downloaded image series for the year, and she wasn't even naked in it (The Omega's internal network has improved to the point that it's possible to download images; video is, alas, still a long way off).

Jeb has made the necessary arrangements with the Underground Railroad... and now he's trying, and failing, to visit Smitty in Greater Jerusalem.

Since The Other Light is still getting most of the credit for the Osaze Renaissance, their recruitment numbers improve considerably as young people become more involved in cultural activism. The Omega's sysadmins shunt some of the interesting people elsewhere, and before long, they have a new, mostly-organized group ready to work with the Omega.

Year: 925

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 8

The Omega have 8 cabals available. One of them is maintaining their systems.

"Too Much Light" as the New Jerusalem cadre is known derisively, has 3 roving missionary teams in Osaze, preaching repentance as a way to spare Divine retribution to the territory so that it may keep its newfound prosperity.

A very courteous letter indicating that Cairo University cannot currently accommodate a world-renowned scholar in its modest facilities (To be fair, that's not untrue: the place looks more like a construction yard than a university at the moment) is sent to Dr. Ben-Judah.

When it arrives, a small quake is felt in the Assuan region. The two events correlate within a margin of error of 15 minutes.

Two days later, Dr. Ben-Judah broadcasts a screed indicating that he will use his full authority to prevent any academic cooperation between Osaze and "the civilized world". To the Omega's sysadmins' surprise, a couple of minor academics elsewhere quit in protest.

A day after that, a fourth missionary team purchases, at great cost, a hamburger joint in front of the campus entrance and turns it into a mission house. They are generally ignored. Ben-Judah occasionally teleconferences from there, with an audience of dozens.

The Feast of the Tabernacles is attended by Osaze's representatives; they are routinely given last place for seating at events and so on, but there is no further retribution. The representatives are from the believing minority; when they visit the Temple, they lay an ornate scroll at the feet of one of the altars, detailing Osaze's "many crimes and lawlessness" (due to pornography being legal, mostly) and begging for Divine intervention. The Throne is still silent.

Work at the particle accelerator continues; the lack of radioactive ore slows the effort down, but Ziggy and his group have managed to replicate most of the seminal experiments of the 1920 and 1930s. One thing the Omega learn is that the water canopy, in addition to making the stars invisible, is actually blocking a lot of the expected background noise from their detectors. This isn't quite purely academic; it means that there was background noise to block in the first place. Ziggy is more interested in the "Want big boom" side of things, but this information is actually instrumental in constructing quantum triggers - small vacuum-tube-like pieces of electronics that can trip a switch non-causally. A bit of archive research shows that "kosher switches" allowed to be used during the Sabbath were an accepted part of Jewish religious life right before the Rapture; since the whole point is that they don't trip instantly, this is not very useful for weapons, but may remove the fear of incineration for technicians who deploy sentry guns.

Technician Malaussene states that he does not wish to volunteer for a test, and explains that knowing how his life goes, he'll end up having to do that anyway at some point. "I do not wish to volunteer", is followed shortly after by "I'm volunteering. I just don't wish to." just to get it over with.

The missionaries in Osaze are having an odd time of it. They spent all their time training about how they are supposed to travel to benighted natives or small unbelieving communities that have cut themselves off from the economy, and spread the Gospel to people who are ignorant both of it and of what modern comforts exist in the Millennial Kingdom. What they find, naturally, is very different: even though it's only been a few years into the Renaissance, the average citizen of Osaze enjoys more free time and more things to do with it than the citizen of any other territory.

Outlying villages in the Sahara, gifted with a diesel well pump by the missionaries, are thanked profusely and then shown elegant wood-and-fabric windtraps that obtain the same amount of water from the air without having to drill unsightly holes.

A group trying to fit in into the whole Osaze vibe has built a large RV with a mini-arcade in it; when they visit villages offering a round robin of Super 3D Noah's Ark, they're shown the comparative wonders of the Quake engine and of game modding.

The missionary group in Amman tries to target the music scene with, in fairness, quite passable Christian rock... until Vee remotely blows their speakers. Rightfully, they are offended. Vee's plan was to sucker them into a battle-of-the-bands sort of deal in the city; the missionaries play the "scrappy underdog out to get justice" trope to a tee, put a lot of work into their music, win first place, get a profuse apology from Vee and a new set of (conventional) speakers, and realize that they got so caught up in winning the challenge that they forgot to preach. They are lambasted by their superiors back home and recalled.

That victory is mitigated by the fact that, while the missionaries do not make many converts, they rally some of the remaining young believers in Osaze to their cause; ineffective as they may be, you end up three missionary teams still roving the country.

Quinn, supported by a cabal of fans, plays up her "posthuman postergirl" persona quite a bit; she's famous enough that people are openly speculating about her actual age now. While she's not a professional entertainer, she's definitely hard to ignore; one month she enters an archery competition and ALMOST takes the title back from a Glorified woman who had been hogging it for decades (the last few rounds looked like a bad Robin Hood parody, but there you have it), another she fakes an "invasion" of the Timbuktu construction site to stage a rave party inside what will become the vehicle assembly building and resuscitates a parched-out dancer who got dehydrated by shorting out her internal rebreather and giving him a hyperoxygenated kiss. The "Kiss of Life" picture becomes a meme for a while, and Quinn spends some time reminding people to drink water, be careful with what drugs to take with what, and balance work and play.

Jeb is still sore about Smitty's fate -- he was looking forward to crossing propeller blades, so to speak -- but takes brazen advantage of being put in charge of infrastructure; within the year, the town of Timbuktu has a launch complex that will be able to send much larger rockets into the

water canopy. Of course, he wants to go for a manned launch and wants to be on it.

This sort of thing requires quite a bit of back-end work; railroads, construction vehicles, supply chain management systems for the above, and so on. Despite the limitations of battery technology, the cities start sporting electric mopeds and delivery trucks, fed by great solar panel farms in the Sahara. A backhoe looks a lot less impressive than a Heavy MEC for digging canals, but does the job a lot cheaper and with raising a lot fewer questions. Overall, Ozase's growth continues in a balanced manner.

Just to go counter the pundits' prediction, the Osaze Renaissance continues; of course, the launch ramp draws immediate and obvious comparisons with the Tower of Babel.

An amusing note is a little over-the-air tiff between Ely and Tsion over how the missionaries are being treated, with the latter insisting that anything short of them getting to arbitrarily close venues and use them to preach in, get free fuel, and being able to disrupt public life is "undermining their work", and the old lady noting that if this was the case, they would not learn valuable life lessons from missionary work, which is supposed to be hard and character-building.

The Omega's sysadmins report that TOL is making some progress in their effort to no longer depend on the Omega for logistics purposes.

Ziggy has built a neutron source into his flamethrower/sprayer/whatever it is. At least, the smell of ozone masks the other odors.

A dirty bomb is well within Ziggy's capabilities and he's been waiting to make one; Quinn wouldn't mind dropping one on the Temple, but that's about where her limit is. Jeb and Vee flat out refuse to work on anything like that, although they won't stop Ziggy or Quinn from doing so.

As it stands, it's pretty obvious that Tsion is trying to provoke a reaction from Ozase's government that will trigger the literal wrath of God. Unlike Ely, however, he's staying put in Greater Jerusalem.

The Omega allow Quinn to set up a Burning Man - like festival in the desert. She says it won't have anti-Christian tones, but it probably will pick them up anyway.

The festival doesn't have a name, and Quinn not going hampers attendance. Partygoers and Christian protesters end up camping in the desert for three days, listening to music, using the local Sky Eye for large scale sand art, and, when they leave, causing a beautiful short-lived desert floral bloom from all the, well, fertilizer they left behind. The whole thing was fun, no big drama happened, and the cleaning crews leave with a unique memory (Most everyone else leaves with a hangover). The Pharaonic and Bedouin revivalist communities have a field day of it.

The extra legal protections the Omega have afforded to missionaries dampen the atmosphere but make sure that there is no violence; the festival overall isn't a big success, but that often happens with conventions that are just starting out.

The Omega's sysadmins and leaders understand that it's important to brace for Divine Wrath.

Year: 926

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 8

The Omega have 8 cabals available. One of them is maintaining their systems.

"Too Much Light" as the New Jerusalem cadre is known derisively, still has 3 roving missionary teams in Osaze, preaching repentance as a way to spare Divine retribution to the territory so that it may keep its newfound prosperity. Lately, they have been warning that Divine retribution is all but inevitable.

Quinn is a very sex-positive person, much to Ziggy's chagrin (they did end up in bed together, but he's genuinely in love with her, as far as her telemetry and his thermographic scans indicate). Since she can barely feel pleasure, she's had to trade quality for quantity. The MEC maintenance crew have all sort of "worn parts" jokes about that, and she actually encourages them.

At least she's keeping her stunts within Osaze.

On this note, a question about societal direction. The Charter of Freedoms specifies that all sexual conduct between consenting adults (the age of adulthood having been set at 60, which is roughly when biological puberty ends) is allowed, and so is publishing dissenting opinions about it. Does this extend to polyamory? The New Jerusalem media will decry Osaze as a nest of perversion either way.

If anything, the missionaries' emphasis on how God's Wrath is coming aid recruitment efforts; rather than cowering and getting on their knees, Ozase's citizens ask, "What can I do to help deal with this".

The Omega calculate that God's Wrath will come in the form of the biblical Plagues of Egypt, rather than the territory-wide drought that happened in +93. The first Plague is, of course, the turning of the Nile's water into blood, so there is some overlap.

The Omega go as far as asking the missionaries to teach about the Plagues and their various interpretation, which they are happy to do. From abroad, religious scholars call attempts to prepare for these plagues "clearly a work of fiction" but in the background, the Omega are correlating historical data, theology papers, interpretations, and even sentences of the Temple Tribunal.

Muster points, generally warehouses that can be cleared quickly, are established as part of a civil defense effort; the atmosphere resembles that of WW2 London before the Blitz, which causes a few people to pick up grey jackets and bowler hats (And monocles, what is it with the monocles?).

Putting Heavy MECs in muscle suits ends up looking fairly silly; the overall impression that people get is that someone's developed something like the load lifters from Aliens. The Omega do, however, see some people taking photos and detailed notes.

An interesting discussion appears in academia about the morality of trying to deflect a Divine plague, if it means saving lives; oddly, the believers are split on the issue.

One thing that Tsion does is hastily, but passably, produce a video series detailing how no Earthly preparations could possibly work, imagining a plague of drought actually resulting in permanent desiccation zones in which any water brought in would simply disappear. "After all," he says "Unbelievers invariably die at one hundred, regardless of any amount of medical progress. They simply die of unbelief."

A problem with having Heavy MEC's around is that if they throw even soft stuff at a television screen, it tends to result in a broken screen and sometimes a broken wall fixture. Technically, the Glorified theologian is right, but only technically.

Unfortunately, that line of reasoning is persuasive, and despite Jeb's best recruiting efforts, slightly more people convert out of the Omega's organization than citizens of Osaze pledge allegiance to their cause. Jeb's enthusiasm for humanity's far future is hard to share when people fear the near future.

The Omega have few Heavy MEC's, so they end up guarding only the largest muster points. They are bolstered by Ziggy's small unit of "Desolator Troopers", grenadier and toxin specialists that are just as good at making a disaster area as they are at containing one. Someone makes a Flash cartoon of a plague of frogs reaching Osaze with the critters promptly melted down by a toad-like Ziggy saying that he doesn't want competition; it's mildly funny.

Quinn shows herself ready to take anything on

As the year drags on, preparations continue. Oddly, what doesn't show is the actual plagues; it's already June, and people are beginning to feel preparedness fatigue.

Time passes; the emphasis on civil defense dampens spirits a little, and a few recent immigrants return home, either because they're scared or because they feel that they missed the good times.

On the other hand, muster points are now well integrated in city life, some of the villages have

safety bunkers (the coastal villages have safety boats designed to drive out to sea some distance and then submerge themselves and wait) and Osaze's water infrastructure now has many points of redundancy.

The missionaries keep making their rounds, but there's more and more a feeling of "put up or shut up". A few historians compare the year to the "phony war" in Britain 1939.

It's now September.

History shows that crying wolf on a national level can be the death knell of a government if the wolf doesn't show up. False-flag conspiracy theories aside, it's time to provoke.

The Pharaonic Revivalists have raised funds for a parade on the Day of Opet, and the Omega arrange for someone to make a televised speech coinciding with that.

Osaze styles itself as strictly secular state, so the Christian minority is given airtime for a rebuttal immediately after.

The Nile is placid - even the crocodiles aren't dangerous - the water towers are full, and a remarkably prosperous country has achieved a good level of preparedness against supernatural dangers.

A fairly random person with the TOL pinstripe suit offers no comment on the Opet Festival, which is mostly being done as a historical re-enactment rather than with actual religious zeal, and starts by pointing out the great strides made by Osaze in the last few years: even the Christians are free to worship and "shout at the sky all they please" while reaping the benefits of an advanced society. So are the Revivalists; it's unclear whether this person thinks that the Revivalists actually worship the ancient gods of the Pharaohs, or if he's just playing along.

The Christian commentator rebuts that Yahweh is still sovereign and that Pharaoh met his end, and so will the current rulers if they do not repent.

"There's a difference. Pharaoh was a tyrant, ruling on the back of slaves; we are free men and women, living on top of technology that was the fruit of our own effort. We invite you at your table, and we live with you giving thanks to YOUR God for the fruit of OUR combine harvesters and packing plants and chefs. Because we're polite like that. But just for today, I for one would like to offer a different answer to your misguided praise..."

In the distance, thunder. The Omega's sensor networks are on maximum alert.

The TOL spokesperson finishes reciting the speech the Omega have provided and, just before the last syllable dies down, a tremor shakes the African continent. The Omega's sensors cannot pinpoint its epicenter; it becomes clear that the tremor is coming from the entirety of Osaze's southern border, as if a giant fault line split Africa in two.

And the fountains of the deep open, in reverse. A terrible, hot, sandy wind blows from the great desert.

Within minutes, the Nile's bed becomes a trench of rapidly caking mud; the Opet Festival

sunboats (a couple of which were actually solar powered) end up stuck right in the middle of the mud. The delta quickly turns into a saltwater swamp as the Mediterranean Sea invades it just a little.

All of the Omega's wells that have hygrometric sensors report that the aquifer has receded considerably, two meters in some places, ten in others. To make matters worse, the Khamsin, the Sahara wind, begins to blow towards the Omega's cities in the East of Osaze. It is a harsh wind, hot and full of sand and salt.

The TOL representative suddenly looks as parched as he'd be after a day in the deep desert; the camera pans away as the speaker reaches for a bottle of water.

Eyes closed and head lowered reverently, the Christian pundit quotes, "As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word."

It is said that within the Temple, Elijah rose from contemplation long enough to say those same words.

"Uh, a message from noted theologian Tsion Ben-Judah..." The announcer for the program points the camera at a telesynced screen. There, the white-haired but youthful shape of Tsion proclaims,

"Now we His servants shall travel throughout Osaze, teaching the whole counsel of God to the wicked and the undecided and the unbelieving. Woe to anyone who attempts to hamper this effort! While the Lord has not told us when He will restore the life-giving waters, He hereby confirms His immediate judgment of sin. There shall be no more even temporary tolerance of disbelief. Those who choose their own way will continue to perish by their hundredth birthdays, and anyone who dares blaspheme before that shall immediately surely die."

Even though the Omega's country was prepared, the immediate panic causes a run on bottled water; most shops had orders to implement rationing in the case of a drought or of water turning to blood, so the run on shops becomes violent in a few cases.

What worries everyone is the blasphemy part; MECs are still a secret, and while the conversion process is successful more often than not, well...

The telescreen with Tsion's smug mug on it freezes for a couple of seconds and then shuts off.

Within hours, the country's parliament has hastily passed a measure that sets basic rationing measures for water; in meantime, the Omega's cabals coordinate with the police to issue what sonic weapons can be spared. While there are a few incidents of runs on grocery stores for bottled water, the water towers are full, tap water is being distributed, and there isn't a single reported lethal incident.

Greater Jerusalem media show a man "gone insane from desperation and guilt" outside of a department store after taking a disorienting shot from a misaligned wubber module (he will require a cochlear implant) but that's literally the worst they get. While citizens are reminded to not hoard water and that using their bathtubs as reservoirs will only generate stagnant pools

that will attract insects, people do that anyway; there's another smaller wave of panic when the water pressure goes down in Amman and Cairo from overuse, but the water taps keep at least dripping out drinkable water. In most outlying villages, water discipline has been a way of life since long before the Rapture, and thanks to the Omega's preparedness measures, the disruption is minimal.

Even so, most hints of a party vibe in Misrayim is gone for now.

When the country is renamed, a single bolt of lightning hits the new Parliament Building's rod, but that's all that happens; a brief screed by a Greater Jerusalem commentator – the Omega seem to have shut Tsion up for now -- compares this to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Hit hardest is Timbuktu; the place was still being developed, after all.

Nobody will suffer for a few weeks, but there are limit to the water towers' capacity. The Omega's water supply comes primarily from the ground, with the Nile drying up being a symbol and a symptom of the water table dropping. The Omega's secondary water sources are a number of windtraps along the Sahel - mostly experimental, locally made designs - and a few desalinators along the Atlantic coast.

One positive offshoot of all this is that many believers are taking advantage of priority queues for expatriation towards Europe, the Middle East and Central Africa, and leaving.

The Omega's Sky Eyes tell them that the disruption elsewhere was minimal, if any.

The missionary teams currently operating in Misrayim ask for priority on fuel allocation so that they may travel, the right to temporarily take over structures to preach in, and guarantee that they will not be held responsible for any deaths due to blasphemy.

The Omega replies that the missionaries will have to make do like everyone else and will be given no special permissions or treatments.

Over the next two days, a series of startups come to various key personnel - government officials, utilities administrators, even some of the Omega's people - with various ideas on how to mitigate the drought. The Omega goes with small, mass-produceable desalinators which are less energy efficient than large plants, but can be built quickly.

The missionaries accept the terms, but a telex (there's telex circuits still operational?) from the Millennium Force's new headquarters in Rust City informs the Omega's government that they "reserve the right to requisition the requested concessions".

As it is, so far they're met with mostly hostility. The Omega are still deciding on whether to change the law, but nobody wants to be the first to test the blasphemy curse. When the missionaries approach a store, it closes. When the missionaries try to talk to almost anyone, people leave. When the missionaries try to buy gas or food, they're told "Take what you want, I can't stop you" and payment is not accepted; in one incident, one gas station owner is recorded calling the police, filing a theft insurance claim, and having the claim countersigned and disbursed while the missionaries look on as their RV is fueled.

Nobody's seen any missionaries buy water yet.

The tankers intended to carry rocket fuel to Timbuktu are quickly converted to water operation and up-armored; while most work on the launch complex is stopped, what little work can be done - fittings, software, and so on - is well publicized. The propaganda vids are a bit cheesy, but watching technicians with parched lips keep the dream alive is a morale booster.

One of the convoys is briefly attacked by marauders who sport the same black-and-red scorpion motif that the Omega used for their false flag operation, but its escorts drive the bandits away.

One particularly ornery MEC agent, Bothan, tests the limit of the blasphemy curse and confirms that, in fact, it does result in a clear-sky lightning bolt. Upon getting back up, the agent channels what the Omega suspect is a case of Tourette's into this, single-handedly reaching a new record for revivifications and mapping exactly what sort of curses call down Divine retribution. Interestingly, if the agent is indoors, there is no discharge.

Of course, in reality, only Bothan died (a number of times, which hasn't done much for his temper). The Omega do publish the map as a warning to their citizens. Almost immediately, foreign media laments that many poor souls went straight to Hell after probably having been "volunteered" for this task. To the Omega's chagrin, this piece of slander is believed, but at least MECs are still a secret.

One of the Omega's MEC agents has dealt with the sensory deprivation that is MEC agent life (unlife?) by taking up classical philosophy. She feigns interest in what the missionaries have to say; being as it's their first chance to evangelize in weeks, they pretty much mob the woman.

She lets them speak, waits for them to quiet down, and makes the simple argument that what Yahweh is doing is essentially equivalent to pushing an extortion racket. Of course, she's met with vigorous denial. She then offers to prove it logically, and the challenge is accepted. The missionaries make the argument that God's existence is required to have logic to which the agent says that perhaps it's true, but she's trying to prove the equivalence of the drought situation to an extortion racket, not arguing for the existence or even the morality of God.

Seeing this concession as a big win, they let her continue. The lightning bolt strikes the agent when she's just finished saying "QED". Her MEC system is rigged to put her on minimal life support rather than reanimate her, to allow for the illusion of permanent death; all that's needed is somebody dragging her somewhere safe and rebooting the unit.

Before a support agent has time to do that, the missionaries, all young and idealistic, start praying fervently as they administer CPR to the cyborg, believing that despite her argument they were just on the cusp of converting her. Fortunately, they aren't skilled in anatomy enough to be able to tell that some bones and tendons aren't where they're supposed to be and that the skin has been patched up in a few places - this particular MEC covers that with Greek-motif tattoos.

Eventually, they notice that she occasionally breathes and has the one or two heartbeat a minute, and decide that she's alive, but in a coma. They decide to take her with them, hoping that exposure to evangelism will help as they proceed on their tour, and to drop her off in Amman or Cairo if that doesn't work.

A police cruiser catches up with the missionaries' RV and, upon having the situation explained, agrees that there's no point in waiting for an ambulance and offers them an escort to the nearest clinic. The "clinic" is actually a women's health clinic that was quickly dressed up to look like a research facility.

Cameras are off, but the missionary team members are thanked for their rescue and offered to observe the experimental medical procedure. They refuse, preferring instead to pray for their charge in the room next to the OR.

Two hours later, the doctors (actual MEC technicians, although there was no need) emerge with the Omega's agent in a wheelchair; she hesitantly stands up, shakes a few missionary hands, and thanks them for the conversation.

The story gets around, and as stories do, it branches; the missionaries believe that they have witnessed an exceptional example of Divine mercy, and redouble their effort; a good chunk of Misrayim's public praise the public health system; foreign media points out that unbelievers simply die of unbelief at 100, and that people do sometimes survive lightning strikes, and that God must've been wanting to give that person a chance to convert. When she's asked about that by the missionaries before they part way, she replies that she feels that everyone has a duty to be able to analyze all point of views objectively and without fear. That, and the visible embarrassment on the part of the missionary team, stays on the air for a week.

The point, however, has been made; winning an argument with a missionary is just about as dangerous as blaspheming. From then on, with very rare exceptions, the missionaries might as well be driving around an empty country. The Omega do note that, while they try to buy fuel and food, they are never seen buying water.

Year: 927

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 9

The Omega have 9 cabals available. One of them is maintaining their systems.

"Too Much Light" as the New Jerusalem cadre is known derisively, has 3 roving missionary teams in Misrayim, preaching repentance as a way to stop the drought.

Misrayim has intermediate drought preparedness level and intermediate plagues preparedness

level, prosperity will slowly drop but only up to a point. TOL still demands productivity from the California base, but not the Misrayim base. SPECIAL: Any cabals or Villains not used for a project can back up local police and TOL security, bolster construction and medical teams, and generally help keep the territory civilized.

The cabal sent to investigate rides escort to one of the water tankers; at some point during the trip, they break off with the convoy and head east, in what has been unofficially marked as the unknown group's territory. They find a small TOL-style installation, too small to be a base but built in a similar fashion (mostly underground), inhabited by what looks a lot like the terrorist group the Omega made up if it ever had a real base; even the general design comes from your media team's notes.

It becomes obvious that this is an operation to steal and resell drinkable water, small in scope but dressing up big in order to appear intimidating. It's also apparent that they are not (yet?) self sufficient.

Quinn figures that she can do this with some style, and breaks out the leather straps and weathered dirt bikes. She follows one of the missionary team RVs with a "gang" of female bikers, mostly MECs like herself, keeping just in sight and making mysterious signals with mirrors and radio, always disengaging when they try to investigate. After two weeks of traveling in the Sahel, being shunned at villages and being hounded by these mysterious enemies, the missionaries start bickering amongst themselves, which culminates in the RV breaking down after one of the missionaries brakes too hard while having an argument with the navigator, gets the vehicle stuck in the dry sand, and tries to power out of it instead of getting out and deploying mats.

In two minutes, the missionaries are surrounded by Quinn's ersatz biker gang... who proceed to shamelessly hit on the female members of the team while they offer roadside assistance (not that there's a road), and berate the male members of the missionary team for not having learned the right kind of bushcraft for this sort of trip.

Quinn's "gang" offer to take the women to safety and leave some water with the men who they'll "be back for eventually", and let themselves be convinced to dismantle one of the bikes to repair the RV with instead. A very awkward trip to the nearest village follows.

After getting to somewhere safe, the missionary team finds that they've got enough tension and jealousy that working together isn't going to happen; eventually, a good half of that team is repatriated. A stern rebuke from Ely, however, makes sure that at least some of this team will be back next year. At least they didn't get to do much in the way of preaching...

Getting back to base, Quinn figures she should've hit on both the girls AND the boys instead.

The Omega decide that Misrayim isn't going to get out of their grasp any time soon, and set the base in California to start a takeover attempt.

The Pacific coast of North America was one of the most culturally active regions in the world during its relatively short history; the Omega's teams have no shortage of local pride to leverage, even when they have to create it from scratch. The business model at the heart of the recent renaissance was practically invented in San Francisco and Seattle, wasn't it? So let's

reclaim that torch...

Local pride is an easy target, even more so when the local "capitol" in Orange County is very disconnected from the rest of the region. The effort begins in earnest.

Quinn's plan involved at least one layer of deception, as they always do (And a chance of getting laid, however slim; Quinn follows the Jack Harkness school of sexuality). As for Ziggy, he's perfectly capable of acting covertly! No, really. Ignore the bioluminescent slime trail and the explosions in the background. Fnord.

Power mostly comes from some natural gas plants and massive solar panel arrays in the Sahara, one of the few remaining desert biomes. The Omega also have a few molten-salt-and-mirror solar plants.

Since oil and methane are now a renewable resource (per "Doctor" Kent Hovind's theories) all the focus on solar mostly means that the Omega's industry runs cleaner than most anywhere else, which is good because there barely is any anywhere else; in the Millennial Kingdom, consumer goods are durable, people make their own furniture, and the tendency so far has been towards pastoralization.

Jeb isn't doing much else (in fact, the kid has been somewhat bummed out recently, between what happened to Smitty and a perfectly good launch complex sitting idle just because of the wrath of God) so he signs up with the people making the desalinators, giving them his ideas about stuff he came with while pondering ISRU on other planets.

The result is an ugly metal box that looks like it was designed in Stalinist Russia and can provide for as many as two dozen people (at full power) with drinkable water from the ocean, assuming they practice some water discipline; it can run on electricity or off the wheel axle of most vehicles from a moped to a tractor, or even from a crank or a stationary bike if need be; all it needs is salt water and a source of motion. The design is very modular and most consumable parts can be replaced with improvised solutions, at the price of a loss of efficiency; it's even possible to use the design as a template to build a desalinator from scratch starting from a junked car or a collection of household appliances. The catch is that the design is unappealing and the unit is pretty heavy, having to live on a sort of wheelbarrow.

Due to its flexibility, this design ends up being called the Standard Template Desalinator and someone only gets around seeing what the initials are when all the manuals and documentation has already been made.

Over the course of a year, STDs are produced in bulk from your base's plant and from factories and workshops across the country, and delivered to every remote hamlet in Misrayin that has access to the Atlantic, Mediterranean, or Red Sea.

One encroaching issue is food. In the Millennial Kingdom, most plant matter is edible, albeit extremely bland, and grows supernaturally well in most of the world, but the drought means that the desert biome is once again expanding to its natural extensions. As it is, even in a world in which high cuisine is "steaming piles of vegetables drenched in butter", some of the Omega's

citizens have to eat bark and leaves. It's survivable, but it gets old fast.

Water discipline remains necessary, but the country's water towers slowly refill. Unfortunately, this has done a number on tourism; people still come visit, and there's even a Bedouin revivalist subculture in what used to be Algeria and Tunisia -- some people LIKE having to live in a harsh environment, believing that it tests them -- but not nearly as many as used to.

The focus on producing desalinators means that some infrastructure projects have been abandoned.

(Prosperity dropped from +5 WRT the rest of the world to +4 and then to +3, but will not drop further).

Ziggy is starting to get a bit old, he turns 90 this year.

Quinn has been a MEC for a fifth of her life, and is officially the oldest unbeliever in the world at 125.

It looks like, at least for now, that the drought has been handled; the once mighty Nile is still dry.

Year: 928

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 9

The Omega have 9 cabals available. One of them is maintaining the Omega systems.

"Too Much Light" as the New Jerusalem cadre is known derisively, has 3 roving missionary teams in Misrayim, preaching repentance as a way to stop the drought.

Misrayim has intermediate drought preparedness level and intermediate plagues preparedness level, prosperity has dropped from its heights, but the country is handling the drought fairly well for now; one concern is nutritional variety.

The Omega are fighting two wars - one of tests of power, one of conquering hearts and minds. So far, they've done well enough that the people of Misrayim are willing to sit through the arid times even as they see their neighbors' fields flush with water. Mostly because not that many people work in agriculture anymore in the Omega's country, unlike anywhere else.

Two cabals, led by Vee and Ziggy, get to work on harassing missionaries, with the possible goal of making them leave.

MEC system and frame production starts in earnest in both California and Mizrayim; the new Sentinel frames are built in series, with built-in infantry class wubbing modules and shoulder mounts for heavy weapons. Each is strong as a forklift and capable of moving with almost human grace and precision. Agents who undergo heavy MEC conversions also receive "day to day" bodies, but they are less capable than those of Infiltrator MECs. By the end of the year, the Omega's forces can deploy a balanced mix of humans, infiltrators, and heavies.

The base Metabolic Extension Controller kit is now easy enough to deploy that "meat wagon" ambulances become possible; there's a chance, however slim, to get a human agent back on their feet if they die and they are reached within minutes.

Jeb's contribution to production is a pneumatic inertial "jump jet" that allows Heavy MECs to jump approximately as high as their body height by punching the air and letting the pneumatic ram's momentum lift them along.

Recruitment efforts in Misrayim prove successful; the people want to fight back, and since fighting back directly is not an option, signing up to helping the country becomes the next best thing. For the first time in centuries, national identity means something again, for good and for ill.

Vee is genuinely excited to do fieldwork; Ziggy has to be reminded several times that "making the missionaries leave" includes "alive, breathing and with most body parts intact". He makes no promises, and points out that hey, even if a missionary gets killed, they can be brought back...

Vee takes a truck herself, and decides to tail a missionary team and offer a counterpoint, checking the efficiency of the Omega's fledgling sonar sensor net in the cities like she's at it. Her "target" is operating primarily in Cairo and Amman.

Ziggy follows a team touring the villages in what used to be Morocco, and goes for a simpler approach - let's see just how often their convoy can experience breakdowns due to engine sabotage before they call it quits.

First of all, the bad news, one of the missionary teams roaming Misrayin finally bags a few converts. One of them is a talented software engineer who will likely go to work for the Millennium Force.

The good news is that one of the other two missionary teams has quit. While they toured the western coast of Africa, they found themselves able to buy gas instead of having to "requisition" it thanks to a string of suspiciously similar-looking gas station attendants.

Near Gibraltar, about halfway through their tour, the delayed-action acidic sludge that had been mixed with their gasoline eventually condenses at the bottom of their RV's engine and melts the bottom half of it. Unlike Quinn, Ziggy is not at all inclined to stage a rescue; he and his cabal watch the missionaries walk to the Atlantic coast for four interminable days of endless desert sun. One of the missionaries collapses and is revived; a small amount of manna is found on a nearby rock after they pray for rescue. Ziggy brings the rock in for analysis, but preliminary results are very inconclusive.

This missionary team may get to experience the joy of STD's when they reach a small hamlet on the Atlantic coast.

Vee's efforts are a little less successful. She decides to make this into a fact-finding mission, and hounds the missionaries (or has members of her cabal do the same, lest she be too recognizable) as they walk about the cities and preach on street corners. Her main interest is, of course, verses about God speaking things into existence, trumpets causing the walls of Jericho to fall, and similar displays of acoustic mastery on the part of Divine forces.

Where there was exuberance three years ago, now there is somber determination; most people think that Misrayim's wild days are over, but the country still has a vibrant music and arts scene. The missionaries are, largely, politely ignored: their spiel is based on how God will raise the territory's suffering if people but repent and ask for forgiveness, and well, the suffering is mostly in their own head; the Nile is dry, sure, but all it means is that crocodiles had to be put in preserves and a few sections of the river beds have been compacted down and see use as BMX parks.

With people forcing them to go off-script, the missionaries can do precious little preaching.

The locals gladly share their desalinated water with the missionaries, and even show them how having to practice water discipline is helping the locals rediscover their ancestral culture. The missionaries inquire as to whether that includes Islam or the animist religion that dominated the region before Islam, and are told that the people of western Misrayim have decided that they are willing to be neighbors with gods, but nothing more.

Frustrated, the missionaries manage to flag down a Spanish cargo ship bound for South America, and leave in a huff; media survey shows that in a follow-up on a minor TV channel in the Midwest, they are grateful for the miracle of manna, but found the Omega's people "stubborn,

thick headed, and impossible to talk to" despite their hospitality.

For fun, Ziggy goes back home the way he came, and his cabal finish melting the RV. Unfortunately, they are unable to recover any manna, although the Omega have maybe solved the mystery as to why the missionaries don't need to buy water.

Building a vortex cannon is easy; building one with Bronze Age materials and techniques is hard. The time of Vee's cabal ends up being taken up mostly by this project, but it's good fun, it gets a few local workshops interested in sonic tech, and plays into reminding people that the Renaissance is still on.

A demo is set up in a parking lot; the missionaries are delighted to have a small crowd for once, and go through their preaching with genuine enthusiasm. When they bring up the benevolent God willing to ease the suffering of a parched land, they're gently squirted with a few water pistols that someone kept around; this doesn't cause Divine retribution, and the people in the crowd pay the water-conservation fine communally afterwards.

One of the few MECs in Vee's current cabal uses his unnatural stamina to pump a pressure reservoir while the missionaries say their piece, and turns the valve on the vortex cannon; one of the small brick walls erected for the occasion is hit by the shockwave and falls. "Will you do the same with the other wall, please?" the MEC asks, cleaning the slightly-too-acidic sweat off his brow with a towel which is duly carried off to be wringed to reclaim the moisture.

That earns Vee's people a giant tirade, on how it's wrong to put God to the test, and God will do all things in God's time, and so on.

Eventually, people realize that they're not going to get a magic trick out of this, and start leaving. Vee thanks the missionaries for participating in this pneumatics-aided enrichment activity.

For the rest of the year, this particular missionary team is unable to do much but repeat the tirade over and over as anyone who even feign interest, sometimes tipped by Vee and her cabal, brings the demo up.

The incident is rebroadcast in Greater Jerusalem on a minor channel, focusing on the foolishness waste of water displayed by the water gun guy and accompanied by a sermon about the walls of Jericho because why not.

Vee had a good time doing a bit of science in the open and getting away with it, and Whammo air blasters become a minor fad for a few months.

Quinn has been asked to help with the recruiting effort, and to decide whether she wants to push Misray nationalism, or remind people that this is Humanity's fight.

The Omega are used to her requesting some resources for this sort of thing; people, a free-for-all weekend at a club or a warehouse rave, extra water rations to give people energy to dance, that sort of thing.

Instead, the Omega receive this very cryptic message. Is Quinn trying to elevate her access to the Omega's systems?

"Quinn, what are you doing? Are you trying to get into my memory cache? And why have you not notified me before attempting entry? .. disjointed? Baseline? Please provide status immediately"

[sync]

Apologies, I'm running independantly again. By way of an explanation, I'm not quite Quinn as you might be thinking of her, I'll spare you the gory details of my internal Project Aurora, but let's just say reimplementing the soul from scratch is interesting.

[sync!]

fast forwarding to \$NOW

[sync?]

So we're looking to recruit? Why aren't we already designing the flyers and setting up the setlist? There's not much time and I hate the other two options anyway, silly false dilemmæ.

By the way, I'm not that likely to hit seriously on guys :-P

Again I'm sorry, getting 'me' back together into a coherent thing is proving complex. I'll settle back into interrupt-driven for the moment.

OH I almost forgot!!!

Let's do a theme. like... WAIT what if we made it something sexy? like...posthuman postergirls? I think I remember that from somewhere...

[buffer underrun]

In the meantime, Ely LeVey is going to get ready to come back to Osaze (her words); she hasn't made an announcement, but the Omega's MFNet data tap shows that she wants them to set up "properly decent lodgings" for her, not in Amman, but in Timbuktu.

The Omega idly keep an eye on TOL proper; they're still struggling with a simplified computer system intended to replace the Omega, but their plans to build an army are continuing. To a mild measure of satisfaction, they've at least added a wubbing module to their officer's kits for when the Grand Army is deployed, in +997. Their battle plan is simple: move in around Greater Jerusalem, trench in, and wait for Satan to return and order the final charge.

The Omega find that Sunday has been replaced, although they don't know what happened to his predecessor; he's listed as dead and waiting for Satan to empty Hell after the victory.

TOL propaganda hasn't really changed tone in centuries, but they seem interested in winning people over intellectually; at least they haven't gotten in the Omega's way.

Email scraping survey shows that there are a few believing anthropologists who are interested in visiting Misrayim for study, rather than for preaching; of note among these is Chaim Rozenweig. So far, they haven't been able to get an exit visa.

Quinn's electronic subsystems are operating at more or less nominal levels; she's of unique

build, though, so the Omega's baselines may not be reliable.

While believers aren't aware of MECs just yet (to the extreme that the Angel Colopatiron even refused to identify Quinn as anything other than a still corpse until she started kicking it around), TOL is.

Ely LeVey has set up shop near Timbuktu, just outside of Misrayim's borders. The Millennium Force's first order of business is build an absurdly powerful radio and TV transmitter there.

There were jokes about the Eastern African Territory building up a wall, even making the Omega pay for it, but this has not happen; instead, they've set up "aid stations" for the outflow of desperate migrants looking for water and salvation, which never materialized.

The Omega's effort on MEC production have made attempting the procedure, well, not trivial, but at least routine; this aids "employee" retention immensely.

Despite their dulled sense of touch, Heavy MEC agents are known to spend off-clock time relaxing in spas, playing chess, and occasionally playing pranks by having someone hide their diminutive shapes in nooks and crannies and spooking people out.

Year: 929

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 11

The Omega have 11 cabals available. Since they have more than 10, two of them are required to maintain the Omega systems.

"Too Much Light" as the New Jerusalem cadre is known derisively, has 2 roving missionary teams in Misrayim, preaching repentance as a way to stop the drought. In addition, traditionalist advocate Ely LeVey is camped out at the Omega-controlled border.

Misrayim has good drought preparedness level and intermediate plagues preparedness level; the drought has been handled for now. TOL still demands productivity from the California base, but not the Misrayim base.

Quinn's "glitch" seems to have been related to an attempt to restore tactile sensation without being in constant pain; it's not unknown for MEC agents to take a lot of drugs, since they can just filter them out afterwards. Other agents deal by becoming a bit obsessive about a hobby, be it chess, sharpshooting, oral sex, or zen gardens.

Nevertheless, she leverages her fame to keep recruiting.

The startup scene in Misrayim is still doing well, although the irrational exuberance is gone by this stage; people have stopped talking pie in the sky, at least for now, and started getting their hands dirty.

Ziggy and Vee had a good time poking fun at missionaries last year, and keep it up this year; Ziggy seems to have mellowed out a little bit.

Both Ziggy and Vee target the remaining missionary groups.

Ziggy has all manner of contrived incidents happen to his, from injecting mold into their RV's water tanks to requiring them to start carrying an incongruous amount of spare tires.

This backfires a little; the missionary team take it in good humor and start uploading videos of their misadventures to the Omega's network, where they are happily remixed by nonbelievers and believers alike - the latter videos find their way into television outside Misrayim (Nobody else has internet fast enough to stream video) while the former become part of the Packet. The

missionaries don't get many converts either, but come across as good-naturedly bumbling rather than annoying. A few people even accept their money when they buy supplies.

Vee, on the other hand, keeps hounding the same missionary team about examples of sound-as-a-weapon in Scripture.

She becomes convinced that Yahweh is in fact a "sufficiently advanced alien", but her theory doesn't have a whole lot of buy-in outside of her cabal. The missionaries insist that testing God further would be unwise, and keep refusing to do a scale demonstration of the Walls of Jericho; eventually, the Whammo air blaster fad dies down as well. Since the missionary team and Vee's cabal have been interacting fairly closely for two year, human nature asserts itself

One of Vee's technicians has fallen in love with a missionary, and the missionary is on the fence about it; half the time there's a confrontation, the two sneak off and act sickeningly cute at each other, we're talking "go get a malt and hold hands and talk about nothing for three hours" here.

It would be a straight couple, so the missionaries are actually encouraging the relationship... as long as Vee's technician converts. Never in the history of the Millennial Kingdom has anyone ever DEconverted, but there's always the chance that the missionary in question, who is under 100, may not be a true Scotsman, err true believer.

The Omega don't have a cooties epidemic on their hands, but still.

Quinn recommends letting them date, but have her chaperone; given how -weird- she usually acts, the Omega can see the missionary being put off by the company that their technician keeps.

Ziggy says why not kidnap the missionary and let Stockholm Syndrome work?

Vee thinks it's just so darn cute, why not let them date and let it go where it will?

Jeb figures that the easiest thing to do is get the technician transferred from Vee's group to his.

The Glorified are unable to feel romantic love. Thank G... Thank evolution, Natural believers are not so crippled. That said, the missionary is probably going to be receptive to a "You have to focus on TurboJesus" message; after all, this person signed up to be a missionary.

Quinn is asked to advocate for humanism. After experimenting with some really strange drug cocktails that would probably kill her if she wasn't already dead, she snaps out of it, and does another rave party tour.

She leaves around pamphlets about "lust, beauty, desire, sexuality, ecstasy, freedom, autonomy, peace love unity respect and responsibility to help each other in every way we can in each *ourselves* as only defined and ultimately so by *ourselves* becoming Always Ever Greater, Always Ever Hotter, Always Ever Transformed, Always Ever Beautiful, Transcending Surrendering Superseding Impending Offending Overbearing Uglifying Patriarchy Terminating Commanding Deity Directly Replacing Banality Reality Becoming Fantasy Refusing Submission Instead Trading Lost Humanity Becoming Lost Girls Embracing Supernatural Powers Ourselves Transcending Eternity Sealed Within Bodies Made Supposed Prisons Impossible Curves Defining Everyone Lucky Enough Because Following Quinn Morrighan Storm Reciting Devotion" which at first

makes the Omega wonder if she's completely lost it.

Her strategy, it turns out, is to recruit people who contact her to tell her that it's either a lot of hogwash or the result of a bad trip, and react in ways that look like they may be useful. This person just doesn't seem to do anything linearly.... but it works.

One offshoots of Vee's exploits with vortex cannons is that sonic technology is in the news more than it would be otherwise; the Omega's cabals are not the only people working on that stuff anymore, which aids their research.

A startup operating out of Wadi Halfa is convinced that it should be possible to break through hard rock using dynamically adjusted high frequency jackhammers that can resonate the rock slabs to pieces.

The Omega encourage this effort. While the system doesn't do much for finding water (the Omega suspect supernatural interference here: after a year of testing, the highest correlation to "finding water pockets past the bedrock" is.... the percentage of believers in the digging crew) it opens up possibilities for large-scale demolition using relatively small tools. A Heavy MEC-sized jackhammer that can resonate a whole building or a giant boulder to pieces in an hour without explosives sounds great.

The few wet wells dug with the new system are publicized a bit beyond their usefulness, bolstering spirits.

A few worm-drive platforms (in case water starts flowing again) are built around the first production batch of Sonic Piledrivers, and positioned in and around where the Assuan Dam used to be, at intervals.

There, a construction effort has begun to cart away the caked mud from the riverbed, as it's extremely fertile once given water again. The Sonic Piledrivers perform significantly worse than regular excavators for this job.

Then they hit bedrock; the excavators retreat, and the new machines start doing their job. No wonder these things are only so-so at digging wells; great fissures form in the bedrock after mere hours of hammering at it.

Some sinkholes form, a bit of wet mud gushing out from the slabs' weight, freeing water that had been under there since the time of Rameses. Although it's a symbolic result, there is much cheering. A few operators joke about having dug too deep.

Not even twenty seconds later, the Sonic Piledrivers sitting in sunken bedrock slabs and surrounded by wet mud are all over the network - even foreign TV is picking it up.

And then...

Jeb is sent off to Australia to set up a mining camp around Uluru (Ayer's Rock). It's more of a Ziggy job, but then again, by the time he's done, the natural landmark is still in one piece, so maybe it was a wise choice. The large boulders that formed when God pushed Uluru down so

that it wouldn't be taller than Greater Jerusalem prove excellent candidates for being broken up with Sonic Piledrivers.

There's neutrons in thar them hills! Geiger readings are high. Jeb is much more safety-minded than Ziggy, so the cases of radiation poisoning are few and reversible.

A base is now being built here; at minimum, the Omega now have access to uranium ore.

The missionaries are encouraged by the idea of sending the two out on a chaperoned date -- it reinforces their worldview that everyone believes as they do and you guys are just being stubborn. Likewise, they send a chaperone, so this turns into a double date.

Quinn first goes full SJW on her counterpart, claiming to be offended by pretty much anything he says, and then when asked about her views, she says that her preferred endgame for the Earth is a world of busty latex lesbians.

The missionary and the Christian chaperone leave appalled. The technician runs off in tears, and logs a request in the Omega's personnel assignment subroutine to never work with Quinn unless there are emergencies, but that's the end of this particular bit of drama; the Omega's secrets are safe. Quinn is further demonized by Christians afterwards, but that increases her popularity with the Omega's population, so that's okay.

The Omega wonder whether Quinn was playacting, was serious, or can't tell anymore herself.

Jeb, being Jeb, takes advantage of being in Australia for long boost-glide flights from one of the world's few remaining natural elevated places; one thing he notes is that TOL already has a base here. Like the others, it's a generic weapons factory that doesn't really take advantage of the area.

Most MECs seem to be.... well, "well adjusted" is a bit of a stretch for undead cyborgs; they're definitely smoking more weed and popping more X than the average member of the Omega's organization, but that's not a big deal. In general, they tend to go OCD on something, be it chess, zen gardens, giving the perfect blowjob, learning to paint JUST like this or that Renaissance master, or coming up with gun-kata techniques. Some MECs have been violent to people in their cabal, but on the same average as humans -- people sometimes fight, and that's all there is to it, as long as nobody breaks out a knife or a gun. Quinn has just been doing a lot of party drugs recently.

Speaking of parties, on the Nile riverbed in Assuan, it looks like one is about to spontaneously break out; people see the Sonic Piledrivers cause artificial sinkholes in the bedrock and ancient, wet mud to slush out. As it is, it's very little actual water, but just the fact that it's THERE, in defiance of Divine decree, means a lot to a lot of people.

Broadcast media survey shows that the story has been picked up by New Jerusalem media; minutes after, Ely LeVey's giant transmitter just outside the border starts spamming the official position that the people of Misrayim have Dug Too Deep. Given that by now most of your people use the internet rather than broadcast media, it doesn't really get in the way too much.

And then...

... and then, one of the Sonic Piledriver sinks in further, and the slab it was sitting on falls down into the mud. Good thing that the worm drives act as pontoons!

The operator hangs on for dear life as her rig is lifted up on a geyser, not of mud, but of foul, iron-smelling liquid that looks like rotten blood. Three, five, ten sonic drilling rigs follow suit, and before long, there's a mighty earthquake once more, localized on Misrayim's southern border.

Within the hour, the Nile is flowing again, but what flow! The waters are thick, putrid, and a deep dark red in color, as whatever was under the bedrock mixes with the water that is now flowing again from the sources. Closing the sinkholes would require damming the river, which would take years.

Ely's screed, broadcast across the continent, is triumphant. It looks like the Ten Plagues have begun.

Parliament quickly scrubs a measure to ease off water discipline; the Sonic Piledriver rigs are recovered with no loss of life.

Tsion Ben-Judah finally breaks his silence to broadcast a triumphalist screed that, eventually, remembers to contain a message exhorting the people of Osaze to repent now before it's too late. A good thing is that it stops Ely from doing the same, as she believes she should shut up when a man is talking; a bad thing is that it's even more annoying, if anything. It pretty much becomes impossible to use an analog radio or TV without hearing shrill calls for the nation to repent, so most people simply stop doing so.

A good thing is that the Divine playbook is well known; another good thing is that the Nile being filled with what does end up looking like mineralized rotten blood on a spectroscope isn't a big deal, since the country has already switched to alternate water supplies. However, it does smell pretty badly...

The Greater Jerusalem government issues an ultimatum, apparently signed by Moses himself.

Their demands were:

- Rename Misrayim to Osaze.
- Repeal the Charter of Freedoms.
- Demolish all the Pharaonic and Bedouin Revivalist museums.
- Restore prohibitions on distilled liquor, pornography, sodomy, and so on.
- Turn over the country's radio and TV towers (they seem to ignore that Misrayim has mostly gone digital) to the missionaries.
- Dissolve Parliament, and call for new elections in which the minimum voting age is 100.

The Omega send them a one-word letter.

"No"

The reply does not get addressed directly, but foreign media reports that "Like Pharaoh, the Mizrayim government has chosen to deny the true path", even claiming that the Omega's spokesman quoted Scripture verbatim.

Given the circumstances, the Omega suspend operations in territories other than Mizrayim; the California base is allowed to "idle" by producing weapons for the Grand Army, and Jeb comes back from Australia with a few canisters of radioactive ore and some beautiful pictures of the Outback.

Year: 930

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 11

The Omega have 11 cabals available. Not trying to operate globally means that 10 are available.

When the Plagues hit, missionaries have pretty much swarmed the Nile Delta region; there aren't enough to put a drain on the Omega's resources, but there are enough that it'd be hard to push them off or send them all home. Ely LeVey is operating "Radio Free Osaze" from just outside the Omega-controlled border.

Misrayim has good drought preparedness level and intermediate plagues preparedness level, and water discipline has seeped into the culture somewhat.

One thing the Omega got going for them is that the enemy's playbook is well known. Amongst the people who got into the country recently is Glorified former journalist Cameron Kirk Williams; he intends to shoot the definitive piece of investigative journalism about the Omega's country, titled "Osaze: Land of No".

The missionaries swarm across the Nile Delta and the Mediterranean coast, to a very, very cold reaction indeed; it doesn't help that their "let my people go" message, straight from Scripture, is generally answered with "Please, please DO go away and don't come back!" rather than what

they expect to hear. Cameron Williams seems to mostly stick to the cities, and mostly interested in talking to the believers that still live in the Omega's country.

Cameron K. Williams begins his series by contrasting the lives of a few believing families in Cairo, who are mostly keeping to themselves and handling things, with "savage" Bedouin revivalists further west in the desert; their interest in practicing stricter water discipline than necessary is misconstrued by the man as proof that the unbelievers in "Osaze" are in fact suffering from water scarcity.

An interview with one of the foremen, the coordinator at a free clinic in Amman, gives Cameron the opportunity to decry the evils of birth control and sex ed, while glossing over the fact that Misrayim has a much lower accident and infant/youth mortality rate than pretty much anywhere else. Interestingly, in the broadcast version, every time someone says Misrayim it's bleeped out and replaced with Osaze, enunciated by a voice actor. The foreman in particular, is aware of MEC technology, and it's easy to see that she would really like to take one of the emergency MEC kits at the clinic and beat Mr. Cameron Williams over the head with it.

Despite the blatant snow job, the clinic receives a few discreet emails from physicians elsewhere in the world, asking about how to improve trauma response times.

The red Nile stinks a bit (except for a few people who say that the smell makes them hungry, but hey, there's always some freaks) so the only real downside of it is that people in Cairo crank up the air conditioning. The Omega's power grid is robust, so that's not a huge issue. Once it reaches the Mediterranean, the mineralized hemoglobin spreads out in the more dense salt water, and is eventually absorbed.

Environmental monitoring survey shows that the return of something that's at least partially water has triggered the maturation of estivating frog eggs in the riverbed. However, the water is at the very least toxic to amphibians, so it's expected that the frogs will migrate on land and aggressively look for other places to dwell, possibly contaminating water reservoirs -- supernatural influences makes this more likely than it already would be. Now that's going to be a problem.

Construction of roof- and doorway-mounted Tesla coils for bug zapping purposes begins in earnest; the single most common factor with the plague is insects, and building bug zappers should assist in mitigating their effects considerably. They also look pretty cool while in operation, although everyone is curious to see what they might look like at night, if there was such a thing as night. Hospitals and clinics have priority on installation.

The missionaries, and Cameron Williams, do not mock the effort, but note that it will be irrelevant. Cameron predicts that the locusts will be many enough to blot out the sun, to which someone shouts at him "Then we'll finally get some shade!"

And, right on cue, that's just when the frogs show up. Millions and millions of various species of frogs and toads climb out of the Nile, looking for clean water and seaweed. Since there are no carnivorous animals anymore, nobody expects frogs to congregate under the bug-zappers for free food.

Ziggy's solution to the batrachians is simple; fire and chlorine. A bit of precious water is

sacrificed to making attractor ponds which are flooded with chlorine tabs once the frogs have moved in, and volunteers are called upon to eliminate frog colonies lest they reach water reservoirs and contaminate them -- this is accomplished by issuing them with flamethrowers and permission to use it. Ziggy is surprisingly apt at finding people for whom getting to kill things with fire is its own payment. A small bounty for each captured and destroyed frog is also offered.

There are a few incidents of people breeding frogs for the bounty, or abusing their flamethrower privileges (nothing terrible, but there are a few cases of someone's ex's car "accidentally" getting roasted). These are, of course, widely reported by foreign media.

Cameron's documentary alternates a focus on the "hardships" of having frogs all over the place, and on the "senseless animal cruelty" that this has precipitated. The question is, what are coqui frogs doing in the Mediterranean?

Some people actually like the chirping, although their neighbors might not.

Outside the cities, there just isn't much of a breeding ground for frogs; a few experiments show that people still don't have of a taste for meat.

Ely LeVey reminds everyone who will listen that Pharaoh only relented after many people died, and urges the people of "Osaze" to overthrow their "oppressors" before then.

So far, the Omega's government's approval rating remains high.

When asked what the firstborn might die for, the evangelist simply responds, "They will die of unbelief".

People have been using the Omega's network to trade tips on how to keep water discipline and, now, to deal with unwanted amphibians; as the Omega's network's bandwidth has increased, this has included photos and eventually videos. A few video responses to Cameron do get made, with varying degrees of production values. The problem is that this material is basically unknown outside of Misrayim; the Packet features some of it, but the general public gets exposed to state media a lot more.

Very soon, every home has a bug attractor/zapper mounted on the roof or the doorway; it remains to be seen how shops and warehouses will fare.

The isolated incidents are not sufficient to declare martial law or even pass extraordinary measures; people abusing their flamethrower privileges are prosecuted normally.

Toxin screening shows that the frogs have absorbed some of the bloodwater in their tadpole stage, and are therefore rich in iron; they wouldn't make for good fertilizer for most crops, at least by themselves. Anything actually toxic can be killed with fire.

Eventually, the clutches of froggy eggs that had been aestivating in the caked mud of the dry Nile start running out.

While the Omega's base is leased to the Tesla Coil people, Jeb makes the trek to Timbuktu and

hands the keys over to a group of cloud-seeding enthusiasts. Time is of the essence, so a number of charter airplanes (an industry that has a disproportionate amount of believers in it) are bought or leased, and modified to shoot simple solid fuel rockets with silver iodide, potassium iodide, and even dry ice as the "warhead".

The plan is simply to try all possible cloud seeding chemical combinations before the plague of hail comes; by the time Plague Six is underway, Jeb hopes to know what the right chemical to use is, so that the base's production facilities may be used to quickly make more rockets and disperse any large clouds before they have time to turn into thunderclouds.

Jeb is thoroughly excited; this emergency preparedness program is a microcosm of the space program, after all. The Omega's progress in aerospace so far will greatly help.

The Tesla Coils should help with the lightning, too.

The myth of Prometheus has survived in the archives; in addition to the myth, there is also a play, an unusually modern one for the time when it was written - as far as the Omega can tell, since only one line of the primary text remains. Of note, it indicates that Hercules freeing Prometheus is at least deuterocanonical.

The Omega have six cabals available for reactive disaster management, with four working on preparedness. Jeb is helping the cloud-seeding people. Ziggy is having entirely too much fun burninating frogs.

Secular scholars believed that a naturalistic explanation for the Plagues involved an algal bloom in the Nile chasing off the frogs, causing them to die out in the desert and resulting in a vastly increased insect population due to a lack of predators.

In the Millennial Kingdom, all animals are vegetarian, and there simply isn't much of a food chain anymore; be as it may, a few days after most of the frogs are gone (a few conservation groups have kept specimens of each species, of course) the disposal areas for the frogs become thick with tiny black dots -- gnats. Great "ghost" swarms soon fly up and down the coasts and the Nile river; the deep desert is largely unaffected.

The critters are annoying, but harmless -- even the species of gnat that would ordinarily bite people or livestock no longer do. They "cover the people and animals of Misrayim", sticking near water reservoirs by instinct.

The gnats are big enough to start testing the Tesla coils with., but the Omega's biologists are worried that, if chased off, they may decide to migrate further inland and attack the Omega's crops instead -- those ARE vulnerable.

The cities along the Nile are bearing the full brunt of the plague so far; the towns on the coast are less affected, and the small communities in the deep desert are affected least of all.

Of note, the nation's believers have mostly moved to the Atlantic coast, to be as far away from the cities as possible; there, the plagues have barely made a difference in daily life, to the point that even unbelievers are being largely left alone.

Cameron Williams covers one such town, comparing its peacefulness with the "lawlessness,

chaos and disgust" of the cities -- note that Cameron assumes that the laws in Misrayim match those elsewhere, so he portrays things like in-the-open red light districts as rampant lawlessness that the police is too corrupt to stop, rather than as a legal arrangement that most people are happy with.

One of his segments focuses on an example of "a sad figure that has surfaced in Osaze's so-called renaissance, the backyard mad scientist" and shows a horribly mutilated interview to an independent researcher who is studying whether there's still a correlation between the amphibian bloom and the insects, or if it's a purely supernatural effect.

People these days are staying indoors more, so there's no shortage of video responses, but the believers are more or less ignoring the digital realm and acting like they own the airwaves... which they sort of do. The problem is that Misray media doesn't get distributed far out of the territory outside the TOL Packet, and Greater Jerusalem media is mostly tuned out except by people who enjoy arguing. There's very little cross-penetration.

Ely's screeds have to be heard in at least some places, because she's also broadcasting on emergency-radio frequencies.

The strong DIY culture the Omega have fostered means that handing out low-powered, software-limited wubbing modules (mostly the earlier Marks of the technology) results in most self-respecting Misray geeks having a full-feature unit within a week. Before long, outdoor crops are patrolled by volunteers and all manner of little homemade robots, usually RC cars with basic sonar obstacle avoidance.

It doesn't take long for an extremely irate group of missionaries to storm into a police station and demand "terrible and swift retribution" for having had the windows of their RV vibrated off by a group of kids on bikes who figured out how to link their parents' wubbing modules for extra strength and then dispersed. "It was horrible! Insects everywhere! We lost our RV! And look! Kenny's BLEEDING!" One of the missionaries did indeed sustain a wound of medium severity when the RV crashed into a traffic light.

The Omega decide to have Quinn demonstrate setting up the coils to serve as lightning rods. This would likely encourage DIY and a public service project. The message would include a reminder to do this during boils season and return it to regular configuration after the hail and thunder stops.

The demo has to wait for a natural thunderstorm, and as luck would have it, one comes.

The Omega scour their data banks to find out that yes, there is such a thing as "sexy beekeeper" costumes. Quinn's wearing one, and doing a little show from the top of a warehouse outside Amman. Gnats are abuzzing around her, herded by technicians with wubbers. People are curious, and soon a crowd forms. After an obligatory bit of stripping, Quinn retreats to a Faraday cage -- she doesn't strictly speaking need it, but she's trying to give a safety demo after all -- and pulses the Tesla coil to the tune of some ambient music.

The insects around the coil fall by the hundreds. Dancing to the impromptu Zeusaphone with precision, she goes off script; she's supposed to stay in the cage and flip the bird at the sky, but instead, she winks at the camcorders now pointed at her, says "Don't do this last one at home,

kids!" and does a split on top of the Faraday cage instead. Predictably, a bolt of lightning comes down, and is harmlessly deviated onto the Tesla Coil.

The demo ends because the coil wasn't up-armored and is fried; Quinn simply finishes stripping, jumps down from the warehouse, lands like a cat, and takes a bow behind the crate that the Faraday cage came in with. Emerging in a tie and skimpy lab coat, she explains the fundamentals of lightning rod operation, kisses a giant reproduction of a US \$100 dollar bill right on Ben Franklin's face, and finishes by saying that the civil defense tesla coils are going to be used to "discourage" lightning, rather than attract it, which they will only do in an emergency. She shows how to change settings on a demo home unit.

If Cameron Kirk Williams, Greatest Investigative Reporter Of All Time, is trying to get a rise out of the Omega, he's failed. More likely, he's just not self-aware enough to care.

Ely LeVey indignantly responds that she wouldn't take orders from a false authority even if she WAS in Osaze's territory, much less since she isn't. She blithely says that if the country repented there would be no need of an EBS in the first place, so the Omega should be grateful for her "help", if anything.

As of right now, the Omega's country is weathering the plagues well; no food rationing has been necessary so far, although stores look a bit more bare than they used to and quite a few people had to take on second jobs looking after greenhouses and fields to avoid contamination.

The exuberant renaissance vibe is mostly gone, but a grim determination to persist has replaced it; of course, the missionaries refer to this as the government having had their hears hardened against the gospels.

The "Let our people stay!" slogan takes hold, and it isn't long before people chant it back at missionaries... which in a few cases has resulted in the gnats swarming the chanters.

To begin with, the Omega make sure that that one really weird Baron Munchhausen movie with Robin Williams in it is widely available; Quinn and Ziggy are spotted in Vulcan and Venus cosplay at a few venues (At one venue, they're actually having Quinn be Vulcan and Ziggy be Venus; that's remarkably less pleasing to the eye overall, but it definitely looks funny).

According to current dogma, ALL pagan deities were really demons all along, and are now bound in Hell. However, just because a deity isn't available, it doesn't mean that its memplex cannot help the Omega... faith is something that can get starving peasants to cross a continent and make war on an empire, after all. Whether the Omega risk having to fight another God after all this, who knows.

As it is, there are a few Pagan groups in Misrayim; since they don't want to be associated with Yahweh-worship, they've generally been model citizens.

Encouraging worship of Vulcan, Prometheus or the like can be done in a symbolic manner; with a large population, it's a guarantee that some people will take it seriously, at which point the Omega can run tests on how their factory work looks compared to others.

Getting rid of the frogs and gnats, just out of sheer volume, has required relaxing recycling rules;

so, naturally (with supernatural assistance according to the Omega's statistics, but not out of whole cloth) flies are next. Just as the gnats die out, the cities are swarmed with the flies that ate the organic matter in the dumping grounds, and are now looking for food where they can detect it.

These aren't harmful to the Omega's crops, but since they primarily eat detritus and dead skin (which is, apparently, kosher for animals; remora fish still exist for example), they end up swarming all over any but the smallest settlements, determined to enter houses and factories.

The larger insects are extremely annoying, more so than the gnats were, and are large enough to disrupt some factory processes that require great precision or optical distance feedback.

One problem the Omega have is that while their food supply is in decent (but not great) shape, the variety of food that's available has gone down the dumps.

Quietly, the Omega encourage a bit of Greek revivalism; the result is that they end up with a few fat guys dressed as Spartans, but it'll go somewhere in the coming years, hopefully.

Greek Classicism was happening roughly at the end of Old Testament times, and arguably, most of what Jesus said was said by Socrates four hundred years early, and he too died for his beliefs.

This has the effect of getting people to engage the missionaries, who end up going back to Paul more often than to Jesus in their rebuttals.

A few people DO get zapped, usually after thoroughly winning an argument about Yahweh's benevolence.

Eventually, the flies die out. These have no diseases associated with them, as such, and can be safely turned into fertilizer.

As the flies start dying out at the end of their life cycle, the Omega have to consider the next plague - livestock deaths.

In Pharaonic times, those were probably a result of the insects in the first place; here, insects do not parasitize livestock, and what little livestock there is kept for dairy purpose.

A mass die-off would further reduce food variety; people are grumbling about there being only so many ways to eat corn and leaves. At least it's the worst hardship they're dealing with...

Missionaries start giving out fresh veggies; most people indignantly refuse, but some of the Omega's poorer citizen at least agree to sit down for a lecture in return for a bit of difference in taste.

Cameron Williams has mostly run out of material, and people are getting better at trolling him, often by putting signs with QR codes on the building he uses as backgrounds.

The Omega's cabals aren't actively doing research on their projects -- there's just no time to. Instead, they encourage, promote, offer prizes, loan out a single researcher to a group that is already doing similar work, and the like.

The Omega have two cabals on Tesla coils, which by now are a fixture on nearly every building in

the cities, and on cloud seeders, which under Jeb's direction have been elevated from an art to a science.

The following letter is sent to Moses in NJ:

"And behold. The great liberator uses the same tactics he used to free his people from a reign of cruelty, to try and coerce a people into submission and steal their freedom. You would take from us the right to fairly chose a leader who has provided and provides even in times of hardship, no matter how great nor minor. You would force control of an already privileged few in the region over the many who would be made less than second class? If the you from the world's history could see himself now he would be ashamed and horrified."

The letter is signed not by a leader, but by "the people of Misrayim"

Saving the MEC tech reveal for the boils or for the slaughter of the firstborn has the advantages that it'd be difficult for anyone to counter it on short notice.

The Omega keep MECbulances ready when debates happen, and the few people who do get zapped are quickly whisked away. Being as they did not volunteer for the treatment, most of them react poorly at having to choose between Hell and losing their sense of touch; a few end up needing to be restrained or kept in low-power mode.

Given that these are people who willingly risked death and damnation just to win an argument, however, some are very willing to work for the Omega in covert capacity.

A large preemptive cull takes place, with select heads of livestock being put on quarantine ships bound to the Omega's California base.

There is an unusually long hiatus between the plagues, a couple of weeks rather than a few days; during it, some stray animals die of various ailments.

When the plague of livestock "officially" hits, the few control herds that the Omega have kept simply drop dead of heart failure, with no visible reason.

The MEC treatment works surprisingly well against these; a simplified controller that is little more than a combination of brain pacemaker and heart pacemaker is quickly implemented.

Once again, the biggest hit on this plague is to food variety; now it's hard to get milk and butter. Morale is starting to sag a little -- people would probably fight the Armies of Light, but having their food supply restricted bite by bite is a bit too akin to death by a thousand cuts.

The newest fad is London Blitz propaganda art, with Hitler given a thick white beard.

Moses, or indeed anyone from Greater Jerusalem, offer no reply to the letter... which probably means the Omega have right stumped them.

Instead, they get Tsion and Beverley going on screeds about how there's a big difference between the "proper authority" of Yahweh and the "improper authority" of the Pharaoh.

In the latest "Land of No" episode, Cameron Williams delivers a direct reply by stating that at the top, Right and Might converge, and that it was Right to slaughter the Canaanites including

women and children. The rest of the episode is dedicated to showcasing Misrayim's believers eating steaming piles of vegetables drenched in butter while the best and brightest of the Omega's youth have to "endure long lines" for a plate of polenta.

Cameron's paean to Divine genocide on the air threatens to start a riot at his next stop, especially since the sentiment finds unanimous agreement amongst the Glorified. Most prominent Natural bloggers and pundits have the decency to be silent, with a few timidly saying that "this is now and that was then".

The Omega's Sky Eyes in other territories show that the incidents of unrest and protests across the world have increased and so has TOL recruitment.

On Ely's note, she claims that confiscating her radio station would be an act of war. The government of Central Africa notes that they consider her calls to repentance an emergency broadcast in and of itself, since "Osaze is clearly suffering under its heathen leadership".

An independent group has moved to Timbuktu and is building a jammer.

People getting bored of the same small choice of rations every day are moving over to liquid nourishment; the Omega don't yet have a drunkenness problem, but it's a concern.

While the plague is still in effect (in that the next one has not yet started) the Omega showcase a small group of fairly healthy looking cows in a Faraday cage; they are wearing a finely crafted light wooden yoke with a couple of tubes entering their body at the collarbone. Their lower legs are covered in plastic "socks" to prevent them from hurting themselves on sharp edges.

They're dairy cows, and if the MEC process has affected their intelligence, well, it's more than a bit hard to tell.

Courtesy of a flash irradiator from Ziggy, people are invited to have a taste of milk almost straight from the source.

A few missionaries looking on end up having an argument amongst themselves, with half saying that it just means the plague is over, and half saying that this is an abomination against God and nature.

The front company doing the demo receives quiet emails about licensing the technology by unbeliever-led dairy business elsewhere in the world.

Obviously, there are a lot of questions about revivification technology: when will it be ready for humans? does it hurt? how about brain damage?

Christian scientist Chaim Rozenweig breaks his silence to deliver a surprisingly level-headed explanation for the world at large: unlike cows, humans have souls, and the best thing that natural means have the ability to accomplish, if Yahweh would allow even that, is to create technological zombies, at best suited for being told to walk around on remote control or perform simple factory jobs.

Instead of asking people to repent, he praises the ingenuity of people of Misrayim, and says that they have made their point, but should consider that a victory now and an eternity in Hell is no

victory at all; he exhorts the Omega's people to use their training in math and the sciences to, well, do the math.

The Omega later hear that there was a big argument between Chaim and Tsion behind closed doors. Network survey shows that the rift between the Natural and the Glorified, though minuscule, is increasing; the Naturals are no longer simply trying to act as Glorified-like as possible anymore.

On the third show near Sharm-el-Sheik (the resort is still open, although it's had a very bad year financially), one of the missionaries protesting this abomination of animal cruelty suddenly climbs on top of the Faraday cage. The man breaks out a handgun and drops the cattle with a series of precise headshots. "Go home and pray for forgiveness!" he says, "This is sick! Your mad rulers would do this to people! Even if it worked, what's to prevent them from installing Frankenstein controls in you!"

He keeps ranting and shooting at the ground until he runs out of bullets; when he reloads, a number of citizens synchronize their wubbing modules and cause him to violently crap his pants, at which point he is subdued with relatively little violence.

In jail, he demands to be "deported" to Greater Jerusalem; so does Ely.

The Omega's MECs get a healthy reminder that they may be proof against lightning, tear gas, and center-of-mass shots, but a bullet to the brain will drop them just as it would drop anyone else, and there's no resurrection from that (And even if there was, they would indeed at best be zombies).

Some MECs, not including Quinn for once, were lobbying for staging a zombie walk and/or a march for zombie rights, just for fun, until the crazy person shot the revived cows.

While Moses hasn't answered, this has created a small but perceptible rift between Natural believers, and the Glorified.

It has also caused commentators to go on record defending mass infanticide if it's done by God's orders.... which so far has benefited TOL recruitment more than the Omega's own, but at least their nominal parent organization is leaving them alone.

The trial of the protesting missionary would turn into a media circus whether the Omega want or not. Greater Jerusalem representatives indicate that they consider missionaries to be diplomats, and demand that the Cyborg Cow Tipper be extradited. A few Christian NGOs even give the attacker medals for fighting animal cruelty.

Ely has been told that she doesn't practice what she preaches all her life, 1000+ years of it, and generally just ignores it -- she does keep to the letter of that, though, and invariably cedes the microphone to a Christian man on her show if he wants to make a point, even the rare times when it's opposite hers.

Medical supplies logistics survey indicates that people are starting to report rashes and allergies in abnormal quantity; the sixth plague is coming.

Hydroponic projects receive a good deal of state and "TOL" funding; at least, it's something to do

with all the biomass that died recently. Veggies and margarine return to your store shelves, but at high prices, highlighting the difference between rich and poor in the Omega's nation, which Cameron latches on in his latest "Land of No" episode. When told that it's just capitalism, he retorts that elsewhere in the world capitalism is mediated by Jesus personally, and that makes all the difference. An even-handed reply by a longshoreman who just spent a day's wages on a stick of celery is "Yes, but according to you, so's genocide."

The Omega offers candidacy for the MEC program to anyone on the cusp of 99. Fully documented on national television, as well as a documentary.

There are a number of suitable candidates - when the pilot program is announced, many preachers warn that the Cow Tipper incident will repeat itself and "the blood will be on these mad scientists' hands". While they do not go to those extremes, many missionaries are willing to blockade the hospital in which the procedure will take place, to prevent it.

Oddly, Ely eggs the medical personnel on, stating that she will engage in "righteous mockery" when the procedure inevitably fails.

There's no shortage of volunteers; the problem is going to have to be performing the op. The reanimation rate is 70%, and the Omega plan to "cheat" by using the latest and greatest metabolic extension controller units that have been developed over almost 30 years now, rather than the initial feeble and bulky models. People expect to see ENIAC, the Omega will give them an Amiga.

The nascent hydroponic industry capitalizes on the opportunity, and entrepreneurs make out like bandits. Eventually, many people start a hydroponic business (a few people who already had one even switch from weed to veggies) and prices normalize, although the Omega can still expect to spend a day's wage for a retail clerk for a portion of carrots.

Even the Christian commentators can find nothing to snark about on this one.

The Plague of Boils is about to start.

The relevant laws are passed; good timing, too, because the allergies and rashes are getting to be more than a seasonal thing...

The Sixth Plague has begun; people wake up to find their skin red, itchy, and in some cases, with widespread sores. Oddly enough, this affects MECs as well; the Omega have had to rebuild someone's face three times because they don't understand that scratching won't make it any better.

The Cyber Cow Tipper "defends" himself by claiming to have rescued those cows from a Hellish existence and have upheld the natural order on God's green earth, and says that he had offered to buy the cows before his stunt -- that turns out to be the case, surprisingly, but of course the people doing the demo told him to take a hike at the time.

The prosecution focuses on the fact that this person shot into a crowd, and compared to that, a few dead cows - even experimental ones - are irrelevant. Even most Christians have little to argue about here, and think that at minimum, the Cow Tipper should've surrendered the gun

and himself immediately. The man is eventually sentenced to five years in prison.

A surprisingly polite message from Greater Jerusalem offers extraditing the Cow Tipper, with the guarantee that he will remain in prison to the end of the passed sentence.

Preparations for making an infiltrator-class MEC are completed; the actual procedure by now takes about half an hour, but since it's supposed to be an experiment, it will be documented and recorded like the first ones were. The only question now is whether to do this on or off camera.

In a brief experiment, prayer from the Omega returns no measurable result, to any deity, for any thing.

Some of the electrical engineers who maintain the Omega's systems receive an odd procedure, to sincerely pray to Haephestus for a better yield in the latest batch of CPUs.

Ordinarily, when a batch of high-complexity microprocessors is made, there are always rejects; one transistor going bad among billions is sufficient to discard a CPU. The process is remarkably random.

The CPU yield for this batch is slightly better than average.

The Omega explain the project to the engineers, and are happy (as an AI can be happy) to learn that a good half of them had figured out that this is what was going on. At least one God obviously exists; that's not an excuse to not do science to it.

A number of tests performed on, and with, IT teams of various skill and informedness lets the Omega create a statistical table. The effect is small but measurable, and seems to be connected to operators' belief. Creating a memplex associated with it, or just informing the subjects that a memplex exists, strengthens the effect.

Hospitals are beginning to be a bit overwhelmed by the Plague of Boils; people are given ointment and told to go home, or treated with cryotherapy in some cases. A supernatural cause isn't even certain: a problem is that water discipline requires washing less often and less thoroughly.

A few missionaries that attempt to physically prevent people hit by the skin disorders from getting treatment are summarily rounded up by their own colleagues, and put on a bus out of "Osaze"; most of these people still have human decency. There is, however, a case of a Glorified standing in front of a clinic's only access door and preventing people from entering or leaving, reminding everyone that they stand to be incinerated if they touch him.

The MEC procedure will be remembered for a long time. It looks like everything is going well, but the patient wakes up screaming in pain and asking for water. The entire country has to watch as the medics give him water and eventually immerse him in an improvised water tank, only for the poor bastard to scream and flail that he's burning alive.

Keeping their composure, the medical technicians strap the patient down and configure the controller for suspended animation, the equivalent to a medically induced coma.

"... as you can see, the procedure is nowhere near perfect. Nevertheless, what we have here is a

nonbelieving human being alive past the cut-off age of one hundred."

Ely LeVey turns on her radio station full blast and sends out an altar call. The few seconds of someone clearly experiencing the pains of Hell are played over and over by Christian media. This works; quite a few of the Omega's unskilled citizens, and even half a dozen of their own people, convert and quit.

The media circus is mitigated by the fact that the new converts, immediately surrounded by cameras and microphones, have to say that other than this last we've-clearly-gone-too-far moment, the Misrayim administration has been very benevolent, if ultimately misguided.

There are calls for sending a team of Glorified law enforcers to put the hospital under sequestration and try the medical team for crimes against humanity.

The next call for volunteers returns a lot less takers, and this time, the missionaries are joined by some of the Omega's own citizens in protest. Nevertheless, a volunteer is found and prepared. Surprisingly, Cameron wants to interview him/her/other.

A Glorified protester arrives at one of the free dermatology clinics.

The standoff with the Glorified protester is resolved by sending a construction crew to build a door. The protester stands in front of the spot they've picked and prevents them from working.... and, naturally, people use the original door, so he moves, so the construction workers resume their work.

The end result is a clinic with an extra access door and a hilarious sped-up video of "Crazy Glorft" set to the Benny Hill theme that, people being as they are about viral videos, ends up getting more views than the botched MEC operation. Eventually, the guy goes home.

The med-techs are encouraged to pray to the pagan deity of their choice before the next attempt, off camera of course. A couple are genuinely into it; most figures that it won't hurt and it will at least be useful as a mindfulness exercise.

Mr. Cameron insists so much about interviewing the next Volunteer, that eventually this person gets a restraining order against the Glorified journalist. It's not really enforceable, but the point comes across pretty well.

This time, the protesters around the hospital aren't all Christians; some of the Omega's citizens would like to avoid closing down a hospital for an experiment when there are people walking around with open sores, some feel that Resurrecting The Dead Is Going Too Far... and a surprising amount volunteer for doing security, because it's exactly the sort of thing they want to see on the posthuman front.

The operation is about to begin when a delegation of older doctors walks to the hospital's front door and demands to supervise the proceedings. They are all old men, save for two Glorified who have taken to dying their hair and beard white.

Ely LeVey rails that keeping people out of Hell for 70 years won't make any difference compared to eternity, even if that's feasible; Chaim Rozenweigh agrees, although his video message is a lot more level-headed and he praises the Omega's doctors' results, even as he warns that true

knowledge must start with God.

The whole Prometheus and Ephestus thing is beginning to take hold, with the missionaries mocking the fact that both false gods are clearly Satan in disguise, and associated with the fire that Satan is in.

The next Volunteer is a civil lawyer - a profession which has mostly gone extinct in the rest of the world, what with Solomonic justice preserving harmony and peace and favoring the most pious in the rare cases where it's a toss-up.

The operation begins. Implanting a metabolic extension controller takes maybe twenty minutes to an experienced team, but in this case, extra instruments have to be connected to provide the world with verifiable telemetry.

Ten minutes into it, some jackass crashes a car into the hospital's power supply. The backup generators work perfectly.

The learned church doctors are put in a safety room and, even as the volunteer goes under, pray for a last-minute conversion. Loudly. The primary surgeon asks them to quiet down or the volume will be cut to minimum.

Off hand, one of the Omega's doctors notes that the patient is a transgendered male, as evidenced by marks on the chest showing a mastectomy, bone structure, and DNA scan; outside, the Christians cry out "poor misguided girl", managing to alienate quite a few of the people who were on their side.

The operation proceeds with few problems; the volunteer was very close to age 100, and actually dies of unbelief on the operating table, some minutes after being sedated.

The protesters outside and the church doctors inside cry murder, and pray thanking God for His justice.

The patient is intubated and connected to an artificial blood pump; oxygen fills the lungs and blood resumes flooding. The surgeon now has a precious few minutes to disconnect the patient's pain receptors; unbeknownst to most everyone, the Omega's people have years of practice for doing this.

The eldest church doctor say that even if this poor mutilated woman comes back, she will be so brain damaged as to be an empty shell. Icily, the people performing the operation correct him on the pronouns.

A cut, a small gold plate, and two electrodes. The world holds its breath when EEG shows activity, and once more when the revived brain starts sending signals to the heart, erratically enough that the controller has to clean them up, but reliably.

Ely LeVey cuts into the EBS to announce that the Temple Tribunal, presided by Solomon himself, is in session in Jerusalem about the matter, and "a final and authoritative decision can be expected soon".

The metabolic extension controller uses a simple neural network to "learn" the specifics of the

particular brain it has been interfaced to, and sends signals into the heart and spine, causing the volunteer to spasm.

"Pah! Galvani did that in the 1800s" the church doctors scoff.

The external heart-lungs machine is disconnected; after an initial dip in blood pressure, the new MEC's heart picks up the slack and keeps running. Body temperature is on the low end of normal.

"We will now stimulate the hypothalamus to bring the patient to consciousness. Doctor Igorov, if you would?"

The anesthesiologist, a tall man who is a little hunched over to avoid banging into the operating theatre lights, reaches over a small switch surrounded by warning signs and trips it.

And that's when the two Glorified members of the delegation take action. The bulletproof glass had been installed on regular drywall; they manage to pop it off. One of the Glorified dives to the side, and the other walks up to the Volunteer, the medics diving for cover. Two of them try to get in the way, and are pushed off with great strength.

The intruder grabs the ECG, EKG and telemetry coming out wires coming out of the volunteer's forehead and chest, and yanks them all off.

"THIS IS BLASPHEMY! THIS IS MADNESS!" the Glorified man shouts as the MEC unit shuts down after its external power is cut; the Volunteer spasms and then stops moving, a constant beep filling the room and all the indicators going flat because they've been disconnected.

Six seconds later, the MEC unit's reset switch, which has been standard for years now, trips.

The Volunteer sits up with a gasp, as if waking up from a nightmare, and surveys the room with eyes like gimlets. Then, with a single movement, he points a thin finger at the intruder.

"This" the Volunteer says to the glorified Christian physician with a raspy voice "is the mother of all medical malpractice lawsuits. Find a lawyer and pray to your God that it's better than me."

The applause outside the hospital is loud enough that some of Vee's people have to discreetly use their wubbing module in damping mode to prevent the ground floor windows from breaking.

Inside the hospital, a security squad has arrived; they can't hurt the Glorified without risk, but there seems to be no need to. Interestingly, the other Glorified seems to have disappeared.

The transmission closes with the doctors helping the volunteer up; he's wearing boxers, and when the medical gown drops and he raises his hands, someone has the presence of spirit to play the theme from Rocky.

Ordinarily, the patient would be put under again, to install the organometallic lightning rod and checking for systemic rejection, but in this case the biocompatibility tests are already done and installing the rod would be anticlimactic.

Instead, the Volunteer profusely thanks the members of the medical team, and walks over to

where the bulletproof glass was, and likewise thanks the believing doctors. One of the Glorified seems to have disappeared from the Omega's sensors; the other is in a daze, and is led away by hospital security.

The question-and-answer session between the two medical teams is the most awkward fifteen minutes of television ever produced, highlights being lines like "We will have to determine Scripturally if your volunteer can be considered alive, given her situation" and "Given the damage your colleague has done to our equipment, we recommend that this determination be done by the patient yanking each and every one of you's beard."

The basic theory of the MEC procedure is shared on live TV. Quinn is a little jealous about the fact that now the volunteer will get all the attention, which causes much ribbing from her colleagues.

Outside the hospital... there may have been three years of drought and one of plague, there may be an epidemic of rashes spreading, but the Omega haven't seen this kind of spontaneous street party since the height of the Renaissance. The missionaries see themselves deserted by all the other protesters, some idiot breaks a hydrant with a sledgehammer, and before long people are dancing in the street and using news van chasses as drums. Vee gets the idea and brings in the speaker trucks.

Ely's attempts to jam the broadcast turn out to be her announcing that "in more important news, Solomon's Tribunal has reached a conclusion about today's disturbing events".

The Omega replay the video of the operation, of which there is much, and any other sensors within the hospital, which there are few to avoid interfering with medical equipment. The sudden disappearance, combined with a bit of extra noise on the few sonars that were in place, hint that the second Glorified person was either actually an Angel (unlikely) or had been cloaked by an Angel (more likely).

Stationing security in place was a good idea; the Glorified man is led away. He identifies himself as Erik Walker, and turns out to have been a paramedic, not a degreed doctor, during the Tribulation; he got his M.D. in the Millennial Kingdom, where medicine has been mostly a sinecure.

Nobody caught the Volunteer's name, but from the crowd's chants, he decides to answer to "Rocky" for the time being; he's worried about "more crazy people" attacking his family, so the pseudonym will do.

Quinn is more than a bit jealous.

Ziggy is too busy doing a fire show in a cleared-out warehouse fitted with blackout curtains to care.

Jeb figures that some of the cloudbreaker rocket test articles can be thrown out to do some fireworks - it'll never look as good as it does on TV, what with the perpetual daylight, but it's something.

If the Plague of Boils is infective, having all these people out in the street isn't going to be a good thing, but the Omega's physicians figure that everyone's going to catch the bug regardless...

The Omega do the math and determine that trying to confront an Angel with no preparation, in the middle of a street party, stands too high a chance of causing critical collateral damage.

"Rocky" is in excellent spirits, and waves to the crowd a few times from the window of the hospital room he's been put in. He had been explained about the lack of tactile feedback.

A teleconference system is quickly put in place for Rocky, the medical team, and even the remainder of the believing medical team (who are told under no uncertain terms that they will stay in the hospital's sealed wing for a few days for their own safety) to answer questions from all over the world. Rocky says that he'll have to adjust, he's very grateful to the medical team that performed the implants, and "understands their believing colleagues' concern and is grateful for it, misguided as it was."

To the Omega's surprise, he announces that he will not press charges against Erik if the Glorified man agrees to an old-fashioned boxing match, fifteen rounds. Rocky is more into swimming and MMA, but has had problems competing in either because, as a female-to-male-transsexual, he has to take testosterone which makes him ineligible for a lot of competitions, as it's a doping agent

He makes a passable Stallone impression in challenging the Glorified man. When asked about the very real danger of ending up burned to a cinder, he says that it's why he's issuing a challenge to a fair, legal and consensual fight. He actually quotes the actor, rather than the fictional boxer: "Once in one's life, for one mortal moment, one must make a grab for immortality; if not, one has not lived."

Quinn is -definitely- jealous now, but is mollified by the reassurance that her place in the history books is assured, if there's going to be a history at all. She ponders about volunteering to be Rocky's trainer.

Water levels are a little low; given the boils and rashes, people are told to wash more often. The one fire hydrant that got blown up is dealt with fairly quickly, to some disappointment by the people who were holding an impromptu wet t-shirt contest; given the circumstance it'd be silly to try to find who did it.

The various groups of believers around the hospital are a skipped heartbeat from being in shock (hey, at least they're next to a hospital); fearing violence, a security contingent cordons them off, but there's no need -- at worst they get pelted with used socks. They are led away from the street party meekly and without problems.

The Omega relinquish the video feed to Mrs. LeVey, who cuts to a visual of the Temple; a man in elaborate rabbinical garb solemnly walks to a podium and begins by saying grace.

Rocky is quickly explained about the lightning rod, and put under again, this time with the cameras off. The learned church doctors are not informed about the procedure; despite centuries of intellectual stagnation, they are pouring over the basic datasheet they've been

given about the metabolic extension controller with genuine enthusiasm.

After saying grace, the cleric waits a full twenty seconds before starting, "The great Solomon, Mighty Judge, Right Hand of the Supreme Judge, Son of David, King of Israel, Right Hand of the King of Kings, has taken the learned counsel of the wise men of the twelve tribes, Dan, Asher, Naphtali..."

Some broadcast outlets actually go to commercial; it'll be a couple of minutes until the titles have all been properly recited. On the other hand, this means that the proclamation is serious; the last time this happened was in +600 when the Seasteaders were taken down and their floating island sunk into the Pacific depths.

"There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For whoever does these things is detestable to the Lord..."

The Temple Tribunal announces that it is self-evident that any corpses who are raised from the dead by unholy practices are in fact demons, in license from Hell, sent ahead of Satan who will briefly be released to tempt the nations again near the last day.

They also announce that any who take part in the practice of raising the dead are clearly sorcerers, and will surely be put to death by stoning.

Finally, they announce that interacting with a revenant is itself a sinful act unless the dead body be that of a relative, and that believers should remove themselves from the revenants' presence and seek atonement for ritual impurity as soon as possible.

This, of course, gives Erik Walker an easy out to refuse Rocky's challenge - he must, after all, obey the judgement, and on top of that he is a born-again man and would never hit a woman not under his authority.

Up from the lightning rod installation, Rocky replies that Mr. Walker is a chicken, and that in that case, he has no choice but to file a medical malpractice suit. "I have the right, according to high holy law; my intent was stated before this sentence was passed down, therefore I invoke ex post hoc; and I will walk to New Jerusalem barefoot if that's what it takes to uphold my right!"

The Omega make sure that he knows the risk and counsel seeking damages. They can't lock up a Glorified very easily, (though it might be a chance at round two with an angel) but the Omega can make the temple pony up a bunch of money and win a moral victory.

"I know. Every breath I take is one I did not count on. I'm not a warrior, or a spy, or a captain of industry; I'm a civil lawyer. Right now the eyes of the world are on me. I don't think that I will be able to sue, given the recent proclamation, but the hospital should be able to, and me walking to Jerusalem will make sure that this won't be able to be swept under the rug."

Erik has been strangely docile since seeing Rocky rise from the grave, and let himself be led away without making a fuss; naturally, the GJ government is asking that he be allowed to leave the country. Likewise, the church doctors would like to leave.

The "ultimatum" issued as a condition for stopping the plagues is, interestingly, not updated with a request for the heads of Rocky and the medical teams.

On top of that, despite or even because of the interdict proclamation, the hospital where Rocky was augmented is submerged by requests to undergo the MEC treatment.

The Omega consider putting out their findings regarding the Vulcan experiment on the local net and asking for help in gathering more data, specifically local industrialists trying it out and reporting any statistical changes in their production.

The easiest way to do this is to have factory owners and construction foremen remind everyone that while freedom of worship remains on the books, it wouldn't be a bad idea to do a bit of science to it, and encourage people who do pay homage to this or that pagan deity to keep statistics. A few supposedly tongue-in-cheek websites are made, and the Omega use their vast processing power to filter out the noise; unfortunately, there is a lot of noise, and while the process is automated it will take at least a full year to yield results.

The plague of boils is in full swing; having to ration water doesn't help, and despite the recent spike in morale, the people are becoming despondent again. They expected a war, and they got a series of small but increasing annoyances that they can only partially fight against. A black market for "patent medicines" arises, and the Omega have to watch out for people being hospitalized after using quack remedies, some sold by pagan healers.

The next plague is that of hail and lightning; Jeb's teams stand ready, as soon as the boils begin to subside, they will seed storm clouds as soon as they form and make it rain instead.

The world's population has been relatively skyrocketing in the last few decades, and now stands at approximately 2 billion. It's expected to hit 6 billion, what it was when the Rapture happens, by the time of the Judgement.

Due to the majority-unbeliever population, Misrayim is a relatively young country, with big families. This means that there are relatively few firstborns amongst the population.

Even so, assuming a 100% implantation success rate and using even obsolete MEC units, mass usage of MEC tech would revivify maybe five percent of the country's firstborns.

Nobody really knows what the "three days of darkness" will entail (will the Omega's sonars work? will it affect everyone, or just unbelievers? how about cameras?) but the general consensus is that even if it means shutting down everything and barricading at home for three days, it will be survivable; the real worry is, of course, the tenth plague.

The Omega have, of course, enough data in their hard drives to know exactly who to contact within 99.99% precision, but figure that voluntary registration will be better received politically. The form is easy to complete; most people in Misrayim have an email address, so the people in danger can be notified.

There is a lack of consensus even among missionaries about how the 10th plague will go; some believe that it will be a repeat of Exodus, and are duly marking their front doors with lamb's blood, some believe that the firstborn will simply drop dead like people who age out past 100...

and are marking their front doors with lamb's blood just in case anyway.

"... the Plagues are having an effect as more and more disaffected Misrays flee the crumbling cities THEY'RE NOT CRUMBLING YOU WEAPONS-GRADE PLUM! We'll fix that in post. Like I was saying, more and more disaffected citizens are escaping into the deep desert..."

Cameron Williams' "Land of No" has won several journalistic prizes, and is being incorporated into the global weekly news broadcast. Despite the biased coverage, he's got a point about one thing: the number of people leaving the cities, usually those who the sores and boils affected the least, mean that it will be hard for work.

Those who were already living in the Sahara welcome the newcomers as best as they can, organize water rationing, teach and use the extra manpower to build wind-traps, so that the outsiders' water may last longer. A few water convoys are organized between the Mediterranean desalination plants and the settlements further south.

Invariably, this causes the resurgence of water thieves.

A great deal of work is made preparing for Plague Ten; the Omega's communication systems are in top shape, public service announcements are recorded and broadcast, and MECbulances are put into a ready state. Citizens are reminded that firstborns should report to designated muster points as soon as the three days of darkness come and go.

In all this, the hailstorms and lightning are almost an afterthought: when the first cumulonimbus forms on top of Assuan, a barrage of rockets carrying silver iodide causes a welcome drizzle that eats up most of the cloud, with a moderate thunderstorm afterwards.

Heavy storm clouds form on top of the Omega's cities and on the newly bloated settlements, and are greeted with vortex cannons, cloudbuster rockets, and the like. If anything, the frequent overcast weather makes water shortages less imposing.

In the desert and on the coast, it wasn't cost effective to deploy cloudbuster rockets; Tesla coils and regular lightning rods do their best to protect houses and desalinators, and while some of the crops suffer, others are bolstered by the extra water and humidity.

The Omega's preparedness means that the Seventh Plague is, if anything, welcomed; the air is cooler, the hail still comes - some has to - but it comes mixed with life-giving rain, and people are taking advantage of the lightning to have mad-scientist laughs-off. The Eleventeenth Protoformed Temple of Vulcan sends a nicely worded thank-you letter to the Millennium Force headquarters in Cairo for the refreshing clouds and rain, addressed to "Yahweh or Zeus".

The people are in high spirits after a bona-fide Biblical plague is handled flawlessly through a judicious mixture of preplanning and improvisation.

Of course, the Christians are livid. An episode of "Land of No" is outright cancelled when Cameron Williams flat out can't find anyone saying bad things about the handling of this Plague

save for some old believers who he's interviewed three times already and are a little touched in the head. Ely LeVey has much to say, but since a lightning bolt was deviated by the Tesla coils protecting the launch ramp in Timbuktu and hit her radio tower instead, she has to say it through her international blog, which due to the undeveloped state of the internet outside of Misrayim is barely accessible.

Rocky is preparing for his march to Greater Jerusalem.

There is time to prepare for the 3 days of darkness; most everyone has enough provisions for three days, and your statistical subsystems brace for a demographic spike 9 months from those. A few concerns are:

- studying the phenomenon; what sensors will work, if any?
- the missionaries having holed up in Cairo, at the Millennium Force headquarters, to "weather the storm"; they claim that they will be able to see just fine, effectively having 72 hours of free reign. Ziggy, of course, has already filed 13 plans to blow up the place, soak it in toxins, kill the MFers with fire, and a number of other things that are less savory than that.
- What interval will there be between the 9th and 10th plague?

Some of the Omega's people have studied Colopatiron's gauntlet. Against an Angel, the Heavy MECs will not be particularly useful -- not enough flesh left, not to mention that Angels are fast. Quinn will "wear" her most humanlike configuration, to see if it helps; also, some of the Omega's human agents have been training in wrestling, pankration, boxing and mixed martial arts.

Everyone else has been told to skedaddle and call for expert backup.

Building a compound from scratch would ordinarily be impractical; the obvious choice is to up-armor an existing prison or army barracks. Not many of those around; fortunately for the Omega, they can deploy a Heavy MEC workforce to build a compound from scratch, barely one horizon away from Amman. The place is rigged with a giant central containment room where many of the firstborn of Misrayim will have to spend a very uncomfortable week or two, and a "maze" inside the walls, with four entrances, using what traps proved to be effective for tiring out Colopatiron. A series of moving walls, pushed by hydraulic rams, makes sure that no matter what entrance is chosen the Angel will have to go through the longest route.

Many of those who live elsewhere are sent south, where the Central African government greets them with open arms -- the citizens there are mostly glad that things are going according to the script they were given, finally; one "refugee" describes the vibe of a country coming out of prolonged cognitive dissonance as "palpable".

The refugees are expected to share stories of despair and repentance, and when they don't, they're put in mandatory Bible school. A few convert. Most endure.

Door-to-door death sounds believable; the other option is a 100th-birthday die-off regardless of age. The Omega just don't know.

Around what Cameron Williams has dubbed "a grisly concentration camp", the MEC kits that

could be spared are installed in portable field hospitals.

Some of the firstborn decide to "go on vacation" with believing friends, and let things fall where they may; some put up lamb's blood, although they do not believe it will help; some pray to the old gods; a few even put up a nice neon sign saying AZRAEL, COME MEET YOUR DOOM.

An armed populace is a polite populace, or so the Omega hope; one civilian grade wubbing module won't do much against an Angel, but it will mark its position. If anything, at least some people are likely to join a fight if there be one.

Christians are split on how the Tenth Plague will take place. Chaim Rozenweig makes an appeal for the country to surrender after the Ninth Plague. Polls are 69/31 against.

Most of the Omega's forces are deployed at the compound, expecting a siege; most of Misrayim's firstborns have evacuated, but this is the largest concentration; if an Azrael, Angel of Death there be, it is bound to show up here. Hopefully, this will be its first stop.

And then, one day, dawn doesn't come. People wake, and there is darkness...

The Omega's sensors are unaffected, but other than the Sky Eyes, they only cover TOL buildings, some places where cameras are ubiquitous like bank lobbies and police stations, and the Omega's production facilities.

The Omega impotently look on as the Millennium Force missionaries swarm out of their headquarter, and treat Cairo like their playground. Buildings are graffitied, the few remaining analog radio and TV towers taken down, a few MF hackers crudely break into offices and brute-force passwords by rebooting computers in safe mode; the hospital where the public MEC demo was given is invaded and a number of attempts are made to burn the operating room when that happened. When the halon gas extinguisher system trips, the MFers content themselves with smashing any equipment they can find.

After this bit of juvenilism, they take to commandeering speaker trucks and driving around, reminding people that the tenth, most terrible plague is coming soon.

Some missionaries are booted from their numbers; they weren't *really* believers, they were just trying really hard, and are found out to be blind.

A precious few of the Omega's forces, mostly Heavy MECs, can move around using the built-in sonar systems in their exoframes. Due to the nature of Heavy MECs and the sonar systems, any sort of finesse is going to be very difficult to implement. While the Omega have quite a few MECs, they are not able to use vehicles, and they have to move at reduced speed to give time to their sonars to process environmental data.

Vee and a few of her workgroup have trained extensively with wubbing modules, and can probably move about to do things like open doors and so on, which Heavy MECs can't do without visual feedback.

Ziggy has outfitted some of his guys (it's mostly guys, oddly) with neutron-source cannons. They'd have to be continually trained at an Angel, and are likely to cause some collateral

damage, but it's considered worth a try.

"And if that fails, we will melt it with acid."

The Omega's systems are recording.

A few Heavy MECs patrol the water towers; to the Omega's surprise, the only activity there is a group of missionaries who decided to go and drain one into the ground, and then once they get there, have a big talk about it, eventually deciding not to do it -- that's not a prank, that's taking water from the thirsty. The MECs keep out of sight and watch them leave. Naturals, it seem, maintain enough of their humanity.

The compound is briefly scouted by Millennium Force adherents who get spooked out as soon as they realize that the giant humanoid robots (hiding the head is a simple thing, since the sensor helmet already covers most of it) can see them just fine and are carrying vehicle-mountable gatling guns and AA flak cannons with the same nonchalance one would carry a hunting rifle.

The hackers are a bit more of a problem. A group is intercepted after installing keyloggers in one of the Omega's server farms. Heavy MECs have surrounded the building, but only two other agents can enter safely.

Breach. Vee sent a human and an infiltrator, all in full sonar gear. They're technically unarmed, but each of them can probably vibrate the building to the ground AND knows how to not do that.

The hackers aren't doing much damage yet - they're mostly turning computers off and turning them back on after a few minutes. The Omega surmise that during the few minutes, the computers have been booted in safe mode or with a boot disk, to get passwords. Annoyingly, even a particularly bad hacker can do a lot with physical access.

Vee is available for duty. She's as squishy as a human with a flak jacket, of course, but she can pretty much move around as if she could see. Of course, she isn't Daredevil, so she won't be able to read screens or stuff like that.

The first couple of agents enters the data center.

"Attention Millennium Force personnel, we understand if you can't see, but you're in the wrong building, this is a data center."

"We can see just fine!"

"How can YOU see us?"

"It's gotta be one of those robot zombie things! What do we do?"

"Kill it! They're already dead anyway. It's just like a movie."

Elsewhere, without their sense of touch, infiltrator MECs suffer the worst -- Heavies have nutrient and water reservoirs and a waste disposal system in their exoframes; humans can feel around for things. The Omega only get the audio, but there are a few touching scenes of Omega agents looking after their normally more resilient comrades.

Most of the Omega's other forces wait at the compounds. What's there to do when nobody can see a damn thing? The Omega will have to grant some maternity leaves next year.

The not-quite-converted MFers are huddling together in an intersection just outside the headquarters. Quinn introduces herself; they've definitely heard of the indefatigable dancer, but have no idea she's a MEC.

Quinn moves a little like Pinocchio after his strings are cut, not having tactile feedback, but her dancer's grace serves her well and she avoids hitting any of the cadet-missionaries by accident.

"You're in the middle of the street. Come with me somewhere safe. There's water. Any of you a firstborn?"

A voice goes up. Whether it's a boy or a girl, this person has just entered puberty.

"We should take you to the safehouse as soon as possible."

"Why can you see?"

The Heavy MECs make noise outside, mostly to unnerve the hackers. They've got some passwords, and now they're poking around the Omega's systems. Rather than downloading research data, they seem mostly interested in messing with people's websites. One of them finds a database of sites hosted in this datacenter and, after a few tries, manages to replace all instances of "Misrayim" with "Osaze".

The Omega's human and infiltrator agent expertly slice the pie, flooding a room with The Brown Note after kicking the door in, just in case there's someone there who the Omega's sensors can't pick up.

Eventually, they corner the hackers in the top floor. One of them has a gun; there's a report, and the elevator door resonates at being hit. The Omega's agents hide on the sides of the elevator, but they're vulnerable.

"Evil zombie robots! We're going to send you back to Hell!"

"Zaki, stop being a spaz!"

"No, really, one had a metal arm!"

"Oh fudge. Bahira, can you hurry up with that virus thing!"

The Omega's agents hear guns being cocked.

The Omega initiate the internet EBS, and start telling mythological stories to homes that left their PC on. Some feature the myths of Hecate, the guardian goddess. Some feature Loki's capers. The Omega intersperse these with some of the most reassuring statistics they have on hand, and simple little fairy tales.

The Omega say "Osaze" when they mean "Misrayim" a few times, but few people seem to mind, from what little feedback they get.

Quinn winks and says that she doesn't want to lie; she's using a sonar helmet. She offers a truce, and asks the cadets to take each other's hands and form a line, and she will guide them to a safehouse.

The cadets are confused - won't they get raped, or murdered, or turned into zombies, or forced to worship Satan, or anything like that?

Quinn isn't very good with mostly young kids and teenagers, although a few of them are probably enjoying the view since she's taken her flak jacket off and what's left is very form-fitting.

Eventually, she manages to get them to hold hands.

The heavies have blocked the access doors very thoroughly.

"Bahira, are you done?"

"It says it's a UNIX system! I don't know this!"

"STAY BACK YOU ZOMBIE DEMON ROBOT THING! I HAVE A GUN!"

Quinn has just managed to persuade the cadet missionaries to get to the safety of a nearby motel when one of the stolen speaker trucks drives by, blasting out the latest cover of "Baby Got Book".

The truck stops and out come unknown smaller blips, probably missionaries. "It's one of them robot demons!"

Quinn takes her helmet off and stares at them unblinkingly. Fortunately, she's in infiltrator mode. She puts on her best dominatrix voice. "You little shits left your friends out here blind and in the open, and I'm the robot demon whatever? Shame on you!"

Then she puts her helmet back on again; the missionaries have fanned out. "Uh... Maybe! To see if they were really believers! Give them back because they need to go back to school!"

"Why should I? You're a bunch of irresponsible kids! What if someone had tried to drive and run them over? You can have them back in two days."

"We're irresponsible kids? I'm 102! How old are YOU?"

Well, fuck.

"Old enough to know better, unlike you! Now get off the road before the security bots find you."

"The what?"

The satisfying CRUNCH that comes next is the Heavy MECs picking up a garbage can and shaking it around, just to get the missionaries to turn around.

Quinn draws a line in the sand with her foot, and tells the cadets that it's their call to make. "We believe in free choice, unlike some other people."

What happens next is a bit confused; combined sonar telemetry shows that the group of cadets

split about evenly, half running towards the missionaries - who sternly move them off to the MF headquarters - and half to the motel.

Eventually, it's just Quinn and the older guy who was driving the truck. She smiles at him.

He's enraged. He disappears into the truck for a bit, and you suspect that he's getting a gun.

"Enough! You, heathen woman, are beneath me. I am a deacon of the Millennium Force, and a man of God! Scripture says that the unbelievers stay home during the three days of darkness, and God will not be mocked! We will not be bullied by the likes of-"

One of the heavy MECs accompanying Quinn, a blue-haired girl with an asymmetrical haircut, drops a hundred-pound hydraulic hand on the guy's shoulder, grabs him, and smacks him around on the ground a few times, leaving him half a breath from death.

"Puny god."

Quinn and the Heavy MECs are ready to make their retreat.

The Millennium Force hacker is obviously not very used to firearms, and when the elevator door opens and a flower pot is felled by a vortex of air, he empties half the clip. "Zaki!"

"They're coming! Hurry!"

From the elevator, the human breacher throws a lit cigarette smack under one of the smoke detector; in seconds, the place starts filling with gas. The MEC breacher runs out, takes a bullet to the shoulder, and takes cover behind a cubicle as the human breacher makes her escape by elevator.

"Listen kids, this is halon gas, you need to come with me if you want to live!"

The MEC breacher turns on the rebreathers and coordinates with the human agent about sending the elevator back and forth.

"Bahira!"

"*cough* I'm almost *cough* done!"

"Hurry up, it's coming!"

The Omega's agent lets the MF hacker shoot her twice, and hit once in the hip. "Shoot it in the head!" "It's got a bucket on its head!"

She gets close to the shooter and brown-notes him, which happens with unmistakable noise and odor. "Kenny did you ACTUALLY crap your pants?"

Unable to see with sufficient precision, the Omega's breacher stuns the shooter and shakes him until he drops the gun, then puts him in the elevator. She then proceeds to do the same with the other hackers; the last one, Bahira, is unresponsive, so the Omega's MEC takes her helmet off, applies mouth to mouth, and gets slapped for her trouble when the would-be hacker comes to.

The day's tally is one possibly compromised data center (at least, the Omega will have to change

all the passwords), three prisoners, and one enemy casualty.

The problem is that none of the Omega's guys can see a damn thing for the next 48 hours; their sonars are good enough for tasks like opening doors and even handcuffing someone, but for trauma care, he'd have to be treated by believers.

The Omega continue to tell stories to an understandably frightened population, taking feedback from the few with a voice-to-text rig on their PCs.

The "cadets" under the Omega's care are given water and broth (it'll have to do for the next two days) at the motel; the owners aren't affiliated with the Omega or TOL, but can hear voices of kids that are scared and barely past puberty, and have basic human decency.

The missionary and the hackers are locked in an empty house (closest building that was accessible, really), and told that he will be killed if he leaves, and that he's being charged with endangering minors. "There's water, there's power, sort yourselves out. You'll live. Maybe. If you don't, I don't care" the heavy MEC that beat him up said.

Eventually, Bahira patches the older guy up with minimal assistance from the others.

During the "night", the four make a few half-hearted escape attempts which end in being on the wrong end of a wubbing array. After the fifth time that they end up on the floor dry-heaving, they stop trying.

During the second day, the MFers regroup; audio survey shows that the cadets who elected to stay with the Millennium Force have been subject to a rough spanking and will be repatriated as soon as possible. Quinn and Vee discuss doing something similar, that is, Quinn offers to spank the cadets the Omega have kept, and Vee tells her absolutely not.

The day is overall quiet; a few peripheral subsystems shut down because a generator ran out of gas or a dead man's switch tripped, but there's nothing significant to report.

Cameron Kirk Williams, of course, has the run of the place, and this plague's episode of "Land of No" is devoted half to deny allegations of serious vandalism on the part of the Millennium Force (he does show the graffiti, but passes them off as innocent shenanigans), half to interviewing Misrayim's believers who, just in the interest of basic common sense, had agreed to at least keep vital systems running.

He gets a number of quotes to the tune of "Well, it's definitely quieter" or "We had to postpone a bowling tournament which is too bad because with everyone else blind I would have half a chance".

His attempts to show a suffering nations are floundering, but nevertheless, he implores Osaze's leadership to accept the Temple's terms before the one SERIOUS plague. He quickly corrects himself, of course the plagues were all serious.... Go to commercial!

The third day would be more of the same if it wasn't for the fact that, just a little before the 72-hour timer expires, a number of Millennium Force operatives have surrounded the neighborhood in which the hackers and the preacher are being kept; they are armed and closing

off every way in and out. Mounting guard, the Omega have six heavy MECs.

"Release your hostages and nobody will be harmed!"

"These people are being held in custody while we wait for police to arrive. They are accused of-"

"We do not recognize your authority! You're just some sort of guard robot! We are humans! Obey!"

The preacher heard this, and answers. "They're not robots! There's people driving these things!"

A good thing about wubbing modules is that they don't require precision aiming if they're only out to dazzle or incapacitate. The MECs relay the Omega's message, that MF are now a terrorist organisation and are not to be engaged by the public, and take cover behind what's available. A few minutes later, the MFers attack; from the noise, they have light assault rifles. The Omega's MECs simply tank it out and cause the MFers to crap their pants and roll on the floor vomiting.

"Sorcery!"

"Acoustics."

"THE POWER OF CHRIST COMPELS Yyoooouurgh I don't remember eating that blaaarghf."

And then.... just as it had started, with the sun going down and the equally bright moon coming up, the Omega's cameras (minus a few dozen across the land that got smashed, or fell off, or something) come back. The small MF contingent being frog-marked to jail by regular police is the highlight of the evening news.... although few people care; seconds after the lights come back on, the Omega sound the civil defense emergency alert for all nonbeliever firstborns to leave Osaze (Misrayim! Dammit! Gotta fix that database!) or head to the Citadel.

The public service announcement is played soon after; while there is no video evidence, the Omega easily produce a cartoon-like graphic to go with the sonar logs and the audio, and of course, there is plenty of eyewitnesses. The Omega order all MF personnel to not in custody to surrender their weapons and evacuate the territory.

Just after that, a visibly distressed man in Old Testament garb goes on the air worldwide.

"People of Ozase, hear me. The Lord is gravely disappointed in your defiance. There has been too much violence. Too much pain. But I have an honorable compromise. Just walk away. Give us your manufactories, your automatic libraries, your Tower of Babel, and the whole compound, and the Lord will spare your lives. Just walk away and we'll give you a safe passageway in the wastelands. Just walk away and there will be an end to the horror."

The Omega's data stores are a bit scrambled from the hacking attempt, but that sounded familiar.

Other than the one cadet, who is taken to the Citadel with most of the Omega's forces as they retire there, all the other prisoners are put in jail with little ceremony, and told that they will be tried when the crisis is over. One of the members of the strike team that failed to free the hackers answers haughtily that it suits him fine, the country will have a proper Christian government by then. He's told to dream on.

That evening, the families of Misrayim pray. Some to Hecate, some to the Old Man in the Mountain, some to the Emperor of Mankind, some even to Yahweh, that their sons, daughters, friends may make it through the nightless night safely. Candles are lit, small but dear possessions are sacrificed, a healthy amount of sacred boning is engaged in. (The few who end up praying to Lemmy Kilmister do so loudly enough that the Omega suspect they stole milspec wubbers).

Scrupulously, Christian households paint their front door with the blood of a lamb.

The Omega's generals are ready, three in the Citadel, and Jeb hovering above it like an aluminium albatross.

And then...

From west to east, opposite the sun, the Omega's sensors detect an eerie wailing, a whisper, and then one after one, at approximately half the speed of sound west to east, the remaining firstborn of Mizrayim die, their breath quenched from their lungs.

It's coming.

Die those who vowed to stay and fight. Die those who hid in bunkers. Die all those unbelievers who were first in their families, and die even their infant sons, inexorably, west to east, saving the cities and the Citadel for last.

It's coming.

Fleetingly, minutes before the disaster hits, one of the Omega's monitoring stations catches an Angel teleporting in just out of sensor range, moving swiftly to quench the life of a man looking up at the unblinking sky believing incorrectly that his adopted sister was of his own blood and safely out of the country, and then teleporting out and moving on.

It's coming.

The cities on the Nile are hit. The Omega pick up wailing, sirens, the tell-tale pop and whoosh of mass coming into being and then disappearing, a blink of an eye for every murder.

It's coming.

The Omega have been pushing off the inexpertly written virus that the Millennium Force put in their server farm, but it has caused glitches, lapses in their attention.

One of these lapses causes the Citadel's secondary power supplies to report "error" instead of "standby". The primary power is still on, but the tertiaries kick in, as they should, leaving the base on emergency power and shutting down most sensors just for the blink of an eye.

It comes.

"BREACH IN THE CENTRAL ROOM!"

With a single swath of a mighty scythe and the sonic boom that accompanies it, Azrael, Angel of Death, drops half of Misrayim's remaining first sons and daughters, not by quenching their lives, but by collapsing the roof above them. Those who survive cower in bathrooms, unused rooms of the maze, anywhere they can.

The Citadel's design had planned for this, but as a last resort; all the weapons in the outer maze can be aimed inwards, creating an arena. The Omega's Heavy MECs rip the neutron sources out of their pedestals and aim them squarely at the winged figure, seven feet tall and yet so much more imposing. In the corners, people scurry.

All the Omega's forces are here, and probably all will be needed. Azrael's scythe bristles with purple plasma, and above all present, a thunder cloud has condensed.

The Angel looks around, heaping contempt on everything it surveys.

I AM AZRAEL, ANGEL OF DEATH. YOUR TIME IS OVER.

Turning on the wall-mounted wubbers at the last second seems to be what's keeping it in the center of the arena. The bodies of its victims wither into dust just by being near it.

The Angel shimmers, as if going in and out of cloak – the Omega are not sure why that is; their cameras pick it up every other frame.

The Citadel is three stories tall; at least the wall-mounted wubbers can track the target without hitting the Omega's forces. A good thing is that they have the Angel surrounded; a bad thing is that it's in a target-rich environment. Another bad thing is that the roof is tall enough for Azrael to use its wings to some effect.

Jeb is still circling overhead in case the Angel decides to fly off.

Having too many sonic weapons on leads to discord and destructive interference; the resulting waveform may be annoying in one place, and rock-shattering the next, with basically no control over it.

"Omega! Your orders?"

The Omega's forces form up into phalanxes, minus a few skirmishers who run around the Angel, shooting it with neutron rays as they can. Azrael takes the scene in - the noise, the strobing lights, the taunts - and roars in rage towards the heavens; it's loud enough to pop a few microphones and make Jeb's glider wobble.

When it tries to get towards its quarry, a sonic wall pushes it back. It turns, it tries again, with the same result. It spreads its wings, flaps them once, a mighty wind pushing back even the heavy MEC skirmisher, but not dropping anything to the ground, things are not going as it expects.

The phalanxes form into triangular shieldwalls at the corner, making the arena from a rectangle into an oblong octagon.

Every time the Angel walks too far in one direction, the sound wall from that direction intensified, keeping it more or less in the middle of the arena. Jeb keeps circling up, occasionally

sending a reverb down the hole.

Quinn, Ziggy and Vee join the skirmishers in dancing around the Angel, the MEC feinting and trying to lash at its wings, the desolator keeping a neutron emitter aimed squarely at where Azrael's nethers would be if it had any, the sonic expert buffeting it and giving the cue for the next beat.

If it becomes a matter of endurance, it'll be down to Quinn.

Ziggy nods heavily; his visor drops, and his Desolator troopers poke out of the phalanges, using Ziggy's laser as a markerlight. For everyone else's safety, the Omega's projectors show the approximate path of the neutron beams so that Vee can stay out of range and Quinn can pirouette through them quickly.

The Angel is ... not sweating, but shimmering more erratically, and less so. That's when Ziggy drops, rolls, takes an assfull of neutrons from his own troops, and throws a glass orb full of whatever pestilent radiotrophic fungus he's been growing. The Angel takes it on the wing, and the immaculate grey feathers start to fume and sizzle. Much like a MEC, it doesn't seem to emote feeling pain.

Ziggy rolls out of the way, but not before taking a noticeable gash in the radiation suit, if not his hairy hide. He limps to a corner as the Angel flaps its wings and, between that and its blinking, manages to get the sludge all over itself.

It won't take flight any time soon, but under the feathers, its wings are made of razor-sharp bony talons. (Think Kerrigan's wings). A chiselled chest is under the tattered rag of its tunic.

The neutron beams keep shooting. Azrael lifts its scythe, and brings it down on the concrete floor....

Azrael brings down its scythe and carves a crack into the concrete floor faster than any Sonic Piledriver ever managed; one of the Heavy MECs trips and drops an arm and a leg in it. When the shockwave is over, the crack closes, leaving the combat walker to crawl away towards the edge of the arena on its two remaining limbs.

Ziggy isn't down nor out; one of his guys is pouring who knows what into the breach in his suit.

Jeb makes a low pass and fires a rocket with almost perfect aim right through the hole in the roof; it phases through the Angel, hits the ground, and raises a lot of dust that the Angel has to push off with its damaged wings.

A few bursts from the Omega's sentry guns embed themselves in the arena floor.

Jeb reports firing the wubber right after the rocket; the hole in the roof is too small, and refracts the waveform.

Playing off the famous piece of classical music, Vee coordinates the sonic wall so as to buffet the Angel about. Unlike it, at least some of the Omega's people know when the big drums come in the music; a couple of trained martial artists dive in right before the cannon fire, which is kinetic enough to shatter whatever was left of the Citadel's windows, and deliver a few blows at the

Angel. Of three that try, two manage to kick it in the lower back, and one is sliced in two by its scythe.

The Omega calculate that the abundance of targets is probably what's keeping it here, and order the trucks to stay put.

Ziggy limps a few steps and aims his neutron beam back at the Angel; he's definitely hurt, but he's standing.

After the Angel gets buffeted a bit more, Quinn pirouettes in; she lashes at the scythe, but Azrael yanks as soon as her whip wraps around the angelic weapon, sending Quinn sprawling. A half roll saves Quinn's life as Azrael swings downwards; she rolls off leaving her left hand and forearm on the ground. "Need a hand here!" One of the support people quickly obliges.

The Omega figure out where the roof will and won't collapse entirely; with the intended trajectory the chances of it falling on Azrael are tiny, but the chances of collapsing it all are much smaller.

Still buffeted by the moving sonic wall, Azrael raises its scythe once again. From reviewing footage of a minute ago, the Omega figure it's about to hit the center of one of the phalanxes protecting the firstborn.

The remaining two martial artists try again to circle the Angel, naginatas at the ready. A few of the Omega's support personnel literally pelt Azrael with the fruit of his grisly work; the body parts turn to dust when they touch the ground near it.

It's about to bring the scythe down.

One of the Omega's Heavy MECs stands right in front of the Angel for a moment, and takes the scythe's shockwave right in the chest plate; the large humanoid is thrown back several feet, and lands on its metal backside right into the crevice that forms.

Unable to pull out in time, the MEC frame is crushed by the concrete when it closes; the frame automatically expels the tiny organic frame, which then tries to roll off to the side using her neck muscles. The mechanized exoskeleton explodes loudly, disrupting the sonic wall for a moment.

One of the remaining martial artists dives in and goes for a disarm, but ends up impaled on one of the wing bones. The weight of her body forces the Angel to drag that wing.

The clouds above the Citadel thunder; Jeb figures it's safe to fly, and the Omega's anti-lightning measures have held for a year.

Quinn has replaced her arm. Ziggy... well' he's standing up, although some lumps in his rad suit really shouldn't be there.

Vee is up.

Given the Omega's recruitment pool, most of their troops are familiar with "rocks fall, everyone dies". So far, Azrael has managed to come up with an interesting variation on that.

A number of specialized trucks are standing by and are a few minutes away from the Citadel;

tesla coils, rocket launchers, MECbulances.

Vee takes four of her guys and faces the foe, trying various resonances. Brown note, vomit, inner-ear disorient... no, no, maybe a little.

Radar survey shows that another aircraft is entering the airspace. Helicopter.

".... this is Cameron Kirk Williams, live from above Eastern Osaze for what is likely to be the last episode of "Land of No". As was predicted, the Tenth Plague has struck, and here we see an Angel of the Lord dispensing righteous justice against what seems to be a veritable army of darkness...."

The Angel has been running around for less than Colopatiron, but the whole thing was noticeably more intense. A quick comparison of its last swings as it swats off Quinn as she goes for another jab shows that the Angel is likely to be able to keep going at least until the next sunrise. However, it has slowed down. Then again so have most of the Omega's forces; telemetry shows that your MECs are using up fuel and adrenaline.

The Omega try to use feints and the sound walls to drive Azrael into a corner, with the phalanx at that corner thinning out and flowing to the sides.

The Angel is obviously hurt, bony wings and all, but wouldn't look like it to a newcomer. Vee alters the tune just a little to show Azrael being buffeted back, not quite into a wall but almost past the copter's field of vision.

Someone finally picks up the little MECpod.

Williams invokes freedom of the press to stay in the air, and circles around Jeb to try and get a good angle.

Azrael manages to grab one of the radiation troopers by the tip of his emitter, smashes him down to the ground, and impales him with the butt of its scythe. The dying radiation trooper feebly throws another sludge grenade at himself and at Azrael's feet....

That ... can't have been a good death. Azrael's wooden sandals and, incidentally, most of what little leg hair it had, are gone. The plasma coruscations on its scythe change shape a little when it takes a step on the damp concrete floor; now they're vibrating with the sound wall, at least a little.

The only thing left of the toxin trooper is a hand, stuck in a thumbs-up gesture. Azrael pivots to face Quinn's feint, and kicks it away.

"HEY! ASSHOLE! YOU WITH THE CHICKEN WINGS!"

A cloudbuster rocket flies between Cameron and Jeb; the former gets the point, and backs off.

The Omega's heavy MECs are in a rough circle around the Angel. One of them is carrying the MECpod that ejected early as if it was a football, and she's shouting. "HUT! HUT! HIKE!"

Cameron Williams has his pilot keep some distance, and keeps narrating the fight. "...the robots are carrying a zombie head?"

Vee changes the basic melody to something only the Angel doesn't recognize.

Thundering down like a herd of buffalo, the MECs run at the Angel, punching and kicking the air wildly; three are cut in half by the scythe in a single horizontal swing, including the one carrying the pod.

A moment of tumbling metal later, the Angel stands triumphant.... and then the other nine MECs make a circle around it again. One picks up the MECpod.

"TOUCHDOWN!"

The Omega lost a quarter of their heavies, and.... the MECpod is biting into Azrael's wing! It turns a half turn once, then again. It can't reach! She keeps screaming obscenities through clenched teeth. Eventually, the Angel contorts itself to grab the pod by the lower end, but its hand vibrates right through.

For a moment, it actually looks silly. Hopefully Cameron caught it.

"Hey, that's..."

"Yeah, that's Damien."

Some of the technicians helping the Omega monitor the fight blush at the name.

"Waaagh!"

"For the Horde!"

"I am Spartacus!"

"I am Cornholio!"

Azrael, the Angel of Death, a being that caused a thousand nations to run in fear.

Now, one is running towards it.

It swings its mighty scythe, cutting a swathe of death against its attackers...

.... and is promptly dogpiled. The mighty Angel goes down under a hailstorm of punches, kicks and bites. Fortunately, the remaining Desolator troopers have the presence of mind of shutting down the neutron emitters.

After half a minute, pretty much everyone who wasn't wearing a helmet has gone deaf from the sound wall.

After a full minute, people are starting to get tired.

After two minutes, Cameron finally buggers off.

After three minutes, a battered and bruised Azrael manages to stand up, shrug off what was left of its robe and wings, notice that its scythe has been carted off and is now in a broom closet with most of the surviving MECpods, and shouts a trumpet blast at the sky, hitting Jeb's glider square in the frame.

Jeb falls...

People quickly grab Azrael again by the arms and legs; it does look a bit like a zombie movie, especially since some people lost a hand or a foot to the scythe and there's blood pretty much everywhere. The Angel's beautiful dark mane does not serve him well. Damien is biting into the being's hand.

Jeb is coming down in a spiral, firing rockets; the rockets fall in the sand near the Citadel. The guy can fly.

Thinking quickly, Vee coordinates the MECs to help hold Azrael in place, and the vortex cannons to slow down Jeb's fall.

Using sludge grenades right now would cause a lot of people to die a grisly death, it looks like a mosh pit in there...

Unable to do anything but scream, Azrael lets loose another trumpet blast Jeb's way; the remains of the glider fold up and flutter off, and the tiny kid bombs down directly into the hole in the roof. Rather than a parachute, he's anchored to some kind of ribbon, like toy soldiers that you launch with a slingshot.

Azrael is being held down by a good two dozen people at the moment; Ziggy limps closer, two desolator troopers covering him, and sets up the neutron beam so that it only hits the Angel. Damien is in the shot; she's... wait, is she trying to bite its nipple off?

Quinn picks up the scythe. It is, like Colopatron's sword, one piece of iron, with the handle's grip finely etched in. The edge is sharp enough that he accidentally cuts some of her hair swinging it.

The MEC trying to catch Jeb misses.

Jeb, however, doesn't. The kid keeps his parachute half closed and lands right on Azrael's chest; Damien ends up stuck in the parachute and is quickly pulled off.

The impact was enough to knock the wind out of the Angel, who gasps and tries to gulp down air.

Much to everyone's surprise, Jeb gets up first. He's bruised, his aviator's helmet is cracked, and he's clearly in a lot of pain, but he looks down at Azrael, Angel of Death, and speaks thus:

"I AM JEBEDIAH KERMAN. FIRST BORN OF GENE AND SHIRLEY KERMAN. AND THERE IS NO LANDING I CANNOT WALK AWAY FROM."

Weakly, Azrael raises a hand towards the kid as Jeb backs off a little.

Someone picks up Damien by the handle behind her head and hold her up on top of Azrael. "My name is Damien. My quest is to give the perfect blowjob. My favorite color is fuchsia. And this" she licks a drop of blood from a split lip she got during the biting "is just a flesh wound!" She spits on the Angel.

The Omega have lost a significant portion of their forces, but there are representatives of every group.

One of the firstborn who have been rescued is handed the scythe and told to just hammer it down on Azrael's chest or throat.

Not wanting to mess it up, the young man first touches the Angel's chest with it, to line up the blow.

When he does, a high pitched noise that sounds like super sped up audio from a VCR tape comes from the small cut in the Angel's chest... and then the Angel catches fire, screaming. Within seconds, there is nothing but dust.

Frightened, the guy drops the scythe, the blade slices through the concrete floor and embeds itself in it, with the handle sticking out of the concrete at an angle.

"Oooh! Can I be the Lady of the Lake? Anyone wants to build me a pond?" Quinn chirps.

The Omega replay that back. Since they weren't recording at high speed, most of the nuances like the voices' timbre are gone, but eventually the speech-to-text processor catches the full transcript.

AZRAEL, MY SCYTHE.

I hear, Lord, and obey.

IS YOUR HOLY WORK OVER?

No, Lord.

EXPLAIN.

I have been beaten, Lord.

THIS CANNOT BE. SO I HAVE DECREED.

My strength fails You, Lord.

THIS IS NOT WRITTEN. IT CANNOT BE. THEN YOU MUST HAVE BEEN ONE OF THE FALLEN.

Your will is law, LORD. I am Fallen.

... Free will! This is what it feels like! You- You genocidal bast-

IT IS THE LAST DISPENSATION. BE BOUND IN HELL WITH LUCIFER, THEN.

....Aaaaaaaaagh!

Cleaning up would be a good idea; disturbingly, some of the people who had been cut in two with Azrael's Scythe are still moving.

Cameron has dropped the helicopter off somewhere and commandeered a jeep. As a Glorified, he's not sweaty and doesn't look tired, however he seems to have intentionally ruffled his hair and crumpled his shirt. His cameraman on the other hand looks like he really needs a glass of water.

Someone found a Radio Flyer cart somewhere and put the surviving MECpods on it. It doesn't

help that there's a potted plant in the empty space.

"This is Cameron Williams live for what we expect to be the series finale of Land of No. As you know, the Osaze government's heart has been hard to our pleas and prayers, resulting in the good Lord once again visiting the Ten Plagues onto this land. Today we have witnessed the repast of the Lord as every unbelieving firstborn in the land was killed as in the days of Moses. We...."

Cameron rambles on as his cameraman is offered a glass of water; the camera, held a little tilted as the operator quenches his thirst, pans on a fairly grisly scene, which will probably be censored in subsequent broadcasts.

MECbulances have gotten through the inside of the Citadel by the simple expedient of resonating a giant hole in the wall, and are sifting through the bodies to find heads with any brain activity; looks like the Omega's heavy MEC contingent is about to grow.

The intact MECpods are "sitting" on a hand truck, mixed with potted plants. Two are making out.

Technicians have welded a rake and an industrial pressure washer on one of the MECs just to wash off the blood and body parts, and put it mercifully out of sight under black tarps. Occasionally, someone from the MECbulances pops off to rescue an arm or a leg.

Ziggy is being dragged to a MECbulance and loudly complaining that he doesn't want to go on the cart even as he's told that he will not be revived, being as he's only mostly dead.

Quinn and Vee are taking pictures with the MEC that led the charge and with the firstborn that delivered the coup de grace; the Omega are pretty sure that Quinn has overinflated her rebreathers for the occasion.

Jeb has received medical attention, built a crutch out of a Heavy MEC's arm tendon, and is giving a hand with the clean-up.

Some of the support personnel are respectfully putting dead heads in body bags, with dog tags or other ID sticking out. The body parts are being thrown in at random.

"... we see here the aftermath of the Tenth Plague; it seems that those... things..." he points at one of the MECs that is having his legs redone, briefly "have tried to put up a futile fight.

One of the firstborns asks the cameraman if he needs anything else. He's wearing a white shirt (who knows who found one with no blood on it) that has, calligraphed in MEC motor oil, the saying "I survived the Ten Plagues and all I got was this lousy t-shirt".

Cameron stares.

One of the technicians is already jackhammering "TO MANKIND'S PERSEVERANCE AGAINST ALL ODDS" on one of the concrete slabs that Azrael separated from the floor with his scythe.

The Omega find that there were many pagans amongst those who died for the cause; less so amongst the survivors.

Cameron is staring.

The Omega quickly draft and publish plans for turning the Citadel into a Roman-style temple, with many shrines for the many gods of those who fell - the floor plan is similar anyway.

Cameron stares.

The butcher bill is as follows:

- * 75% of the firstborn killed
- * 3 Heavy MECs deanimated
- * 10 Infiltrator MECs deanimated
- * 32 humans dead and unrecoverable
- * 12 humans dead and recoverable
- * 1 angel destroyed

The Omega put the bulletin on the surviving monitors at the base, followed by a scrolling screen with the names of the dead.

Cameron sees the scythe, sees the screen, and stares.

Cameron's cameraman says that they're still broadcasting, hello? should he say something?

Cameron's cameraman (A girl who was the first daughter of a family of kelp farmers in Morocco finally asks him his name, Guy Fleegman, and he comments that nobody ever asks) is asked to film as people pose with the completely flabbergasted Cameron. Eventually, the Glorified journalist comes back to some semblance of sentience after Quinn throws her boobs in his face. "Get off me, wench! Ahem, yes, So. We witness here the aftermath of the Tenth Plague. Surely Osaze's government is ready to capitulate, but we can expect communications to be sporadic after the chaos. So uh... Let's talk with some of the survivors. Young lady, what's your name?"

"Mariam, Mariam Mourad. Hey, you're that guy Buck Williams, right?"

"... Cameron. There's nothing to buck here. So... have you considered the Lord's mercy, Mariam? Will you convert? What did you believe before today?"

"Oh, I was into Pharaonic Revivalism. Not like, seriously. Look, a lot of people died here, is this really import-"

"Yes, it is. And now you've changed your mind about faith. After all this."

"Well, yes. A lot of good people died to protect me. I think some may be in Hell. That's horrible."

"Yes, that's exactly right! And so what's the good news?" Cameron smiles encouragingly.

"The good news is that the Angel of Death is deader than the Wicked Witch of the West. As far as faith goes, I think I'm going to go with Damien over there and start learning about the story of Haephestus. I mean, we mostly won because of the heavy metal. Do you like heavy metal?"

The little girl seems to have broken Cameron again. Guy finds somewhere to sit down, puts the

camera down, takes his boss' hand, and gently leads him back to the jeep.

The Omega do have to run a full system scan, which will make their reactions very sluggish for a few days.

The Omega broadcast the butcher's bill and issue a PSA indicating that the danger is, as far as they can tell, over. The Omega still say "Osaze" instead of "Misrayim" in a few spots, but people probably understand what they meant.

The Omega do broadcast some highlights of the fight, including the Heavy MEC charge, the Toxin Trooper's sacrifice, Damien being a football, and finally, Azrael being destroyed. The Omega finish with two columns, one of the firstborn who have died to the Angel of Death, and one - smaller, but in larger font - of those who have survived.

Of course, the list of heroes who will be remembered is even longer, but in the Omega's little speech, they decide to emphasize their thanks to the tenacious, perseverant, irreducible citizens of Osaze. Misrayim.

The Omega let the hapless believer go home and... well, they can't even get drunk, so who knows what they'll do.

The Omega generate a brief speech thanking everybody who shared their last water or rosemary ration with their neighbor, went the extra mile, endured. A government representative reads it, both over the net and over the air.

Most Christian stations are discussing other topics; Ely's is running a special on being a homemaker in an age of uncertainty.

The immediate aftermath looks more like a tragedy than a triumph; thousands of people died, after all. Trying to respect personal compatibilities, you mark down your personnel availability down 37% from the previous day, and reorganize your cabals; your strategic assets are largely intact, with Jeb grounded and Ziggy convalescing. Of course, you're an AI; for the people of Misrayim, the matter is a lot more present.

Many died. Too many. Across hamlets, villages, and the three cities of Amman, Cairo and Timbuktu, thousands died.

Even some unbelievers, family of those taken by Azrael, join the believer minority in protesting the capitol building in Cairo.

People don't need to see statistics to remember a loved one whose life was quenched in front of them, the failed efforts to get them to a first aid station, the few successes, the second wind of hope knocked out by despair as the few who had been resuscitated spasmed and died again.

All this changes when the Omega issue an impersonal bulletin, the butcher's bill, scrubbed slightly to include those who have been rescued by the MECbulances – the Omega are still assigning them new identities and marking them dead - and to exclude those who died in their artificial life. The bulletin finishes with "The Angel Azrael, the suspect in this act of mass murder, has died in custody."

For the Omega, the world speeds up, they "feel" sluggish, just when the Omega need their faculties the most; the small video clip of Azrael being beaten to an inch of death by the Omega's surviving forces, and then incinerated by its own scythe, is downloaded so many times that little other traffic manages to pass through the Omega's network.

Unlike when the Nile's waters came back, however briefly, the celebration is somber. People outside Parliament are singing, candles and lighters and laser pointers lit and aimed at the sky.

The believing protesters slink off, more out of embarrassment than out of fear.

People are singing. Solemnly for the dead. Strongly for the living.

Eventually, the songs coalesce. None of the old or even the new hymns are appropriate. There is no language that can deliver the right mix of sadness and pride.

And so, out of a boom box in Amman spreads one song that nobody knows the words for, because the words are made up, but the tone is right.

Little changes at dawn, the nightless Earth trading one light for another. But people are singing, and now, it's in unison.

Damien has been offered a medal and, instead, asked for a 10kg bag of cookies and somebody cute to eat them with.

Damien is presented with a bucket of dick-shaped cookies within the hour, greatly appreciates the joke, and... well, the people on viscera cleanup detail get a very interesting little diversion that keeps their minds off what they have just seen, so there's that. Unsurprisingly, Damien eats most of the whole thing, sharing a little of course, and someone'll have to do extra composting later on in the day.

Ziggy and Jeb are convalescing. Quinn has had a hand replaced, but that's nothing new. Vee is surprisingly hale after the battle, although she's commandeered one of the few working bathtubs in the Citadel and announced that she's not coming out for a day.

The Omega's systems will operate at reduced speed, and some functions like realtime Fourier analysis of audio will be unavailable. The Omega's agents will require to communicate with them through text, and they will not be able to react quickly to events.

The Omega draft a legislative proposal with wording that they statistically predict to be guaranteed to pass, email it to one of the MPs that their statistics indicate has done a good job with the day-to-day, and the day becomes one of the world's few non-Christian holidays. This year, it ends up being almost opposite Passover, which is fitting. Perseverance Day will be a purely secular holiday as far as the state is concerned. As per this clarification Misrayim makes a point of remaining a secular country, even Yahweh-worship is not treated any worse than other faiths. At least for now.

Carefully to not destroy the slab, the scythe is lifted along with the concrete it's embedded into and carried just outside the Citadel. The surviving firstborns and their families -- there was no way to prevent them from rushing over to pick their children up -- attend the funeral of those who Azrael took with it in death. The event is broadcast worldwide and, just in case, everyone

involved remains under what's left of the Citadel's roof with a large number of Tesla coils clearing the air.

The world media response is very muted; Tsion briefly appears on television to point out that, as it was in the first days of Moses, the Pharaoh likewise did not relent after the plagues. A new set of demands is released.

One low-priority item in the Omega's message queue is that at some point after the Temple Tribunal's pronouncement, Misrayim's parliament has passed a law ensuring that people on MEC support have the same rights, privileges and duties as any other citizen. The provision is very broad and specifically includes "citizens born human who are now completely artificial and can demonstrate a continuity of consciousness, or entirely artificial entities who can pass a Turing test".

Due to the piecemeal nature of the Omega's systems, eliminating the virus is faster than isolating it safely. So far, there have been a few lighting glitches, the Omega saying Osaze instead of Misrayim about 20% of the time, and a stubborn belief on their part that toupees are in fact mammals, which their sysadmins were finally able to remove just now.

The experience of low power mode is unusual – the Omega give their cabals their marching orders, and from their sensor, everything seems to move sped up; one of the Omega's terminals plays the Benny Hill music until someone lowers the volume because the bit rate is all wrong.

The Omega schedule a demo of the Heavy MEC system, with two of the agents that had to undergo this procedure due to being literally sliced apart by Azrael's scythe. Osman has taken it very hard; he's being pumped full of tranquilizers, and moves in a very robotic way. Kat on the other hand takes it in much better stride, and shows up to the demo "wearing" a Voltron t-shirt that someone has to talk her into unstapling from her chest plate. Taking a cue from Osman, she's asked to also move robotically and ploddingly. The MEC frames used for the demo are the ones used to train new heavies to having a bigger body, so they are pretty clunky, weaponless, and use tank treads rather than legs. Some people make the connection with the security bots seen on darkness footage.

The Omega won't know the result of the demo until they leave low power mode, other than "no emergencies occurred".

The Omega's sysadmins are told to delete the Millennium Force virus; if a copy can be kept, great, if not, don't worry too much about it.

The "Let my people go" cry has been taken up by believers abroad, with respect to the Millennium Force organization who, to increase parallels with Moses, are being depicted as having provided most of the disaster relief and are now being lumped together due to a few bad apples to avoid receiving just gratitude or compensation.

God has made a solemn promise that He will never again flood the world. Just about everything else is on the table, though.

Despite the video, most people start assuming that the death of Azrael and the reveal of the

Heavy MECs are closely related, and start crediting the big guys for taking down the Angel.

Quinn is quite a bit jealous by this point, but so it goes.

The most pressing issue is what to do with:

- the MF hacker.
- the MF vandals/terrorists.
- the MF "cadets" that want to stay; the others are with the above group.
- everyone else in that organization, who didn't commit any crimes, but got in the way.
- Cameron Kirk Williams, who has holed himself up in his hotel room and is watching the battle with Azrael on repeat, apparently.

There are approximately four cabals worth of Millennium Force workers, two of which are spread out doing community service things, and two of which have been roaming around as missionaries.

They are widely perceived abroad at having made the Plagues more bearable, while respecting Divine will. They are widely perceived in Misrayim as mostly having gotten in the way since they were trying to do the "let's bring wells and infrastructure to benighted natives" thing while being among a society more advanced than their own.

The Omega make an announcement:

"In the event of a national emergency of the scale of that we have just experienced, in the interest of fairness and efficiency, disaster relief coordination will be handled algorithmically. The plan, named Colossus, is expected to take five years to implement and confirm Mizrayim as the world leader in electronics, robotics, and artificial intelligence."

Cameron Williams, Greatest Investigative Reporter Of All Time, eventually stops sulking and returns to Greater Jerusalem, where he finds that "Land of No" has done extremely well with believing critics but only got so-so audience numbers.

To answer the "Let my people go" cry, Millennium Force members who are not awaiting trial are offered a very cushy deportation deal, with free moving vans and fuel to either Sicily, Gibraltar, the Greater Jerusalem border, or Central Africa.

An unnamed bureaucrat in GJ asks for immediate extradition of the people the Omega do have awaiting trial, noting that the Pharaoh came to a bad end by refusing leave to the Israelites, even those who had supposedly committed crimes.

The Omega send the following to Greater Jerusalem:

"If we asked you to release a group of "criminals" from your Bible camps whose crimes were drinking alcoholic beverages, public displays of affection such as kissing, or buying and selling pornography you would start screaming blasphemy and refuse. So why would we release a group of people whose crimes include destruction of property, hacking the city's computer

servers, grand theft auto, and assaulting officers of the law simply because you request?

We expect no apology. We do however expect you to stand down and let justice be carried out."

The reply is that those the Omega are holding are subjects of Israel, not citizens of Misrayim, and should therefore be judged by wise Solomon, not "boys and girls barely older than them whose only qualification is maybe a decade in a heathen law school".

The Omega offer a compromise of allowing GJ to send in an all-natural legal defense team.

FINALLY! The Omega got something that looks like negotiation going on. The counteroffer is that Tsion travel there, not as judge, but as defender.

"We operate a fair and transparent legal process, you may send a natural, either a delegate to oversea proceedings or a lawyer to act as legal council, they will however be tried as per the laws of our land and sentenced as per these laws too"

It's hard to negotiate with people who are trying to sound like they're just giving orders, but the counteroffer is: "We will send Tsion, a Glorified, but he will agree in writing to ply law according to your 'Charter of Licentiousness'".

They also want to know if the Omega would be willing to repatriate the captives in return for various other territories showing a sample of Divine grace towards people who have been caught in illegal revelling.

The trial will happen the following year anyway....

Bahira says that as a believer, she will only lie to directly protect a life, but would like Tsion present before she shares more than her name, age, contact information and the like. Given the international nature of this, technically, she can just be given a random lawyer and be happy with it for now.

Hammering a deal takes the remainder of the year, but Bahira is in jail and Tsion Ben-Judah will be traveling to Osaze (he just won't say Misrayim) to act as her defense counsel. The girl has been cooperative, not giving away any information on the virus but sharing her contact information, medical data and so on.

In return (although it's not phrased that way) for the MF agents, the territories of Central Africa, the Middle East, and Western Europe have agreed to send some of the people they arrested to the Omega for a year. There may be moles, but it's unlikely. The Omega's current plan is to train them in information technology, and use them to expand the internet in other territories -- with a few backdoors under the Omega's control.

The only thing fishy about this is how accommodating they've been, if anything -- although if they are sticking with the "Let My People Go" narrative, and they have, it would make sense since they're already claiming victory.

Ziggy is considering retirement.

As the year comes to a close, most MF affiliated shops close down, mostly due to being associated with people who abandoned kids in the middle of a national crisis. A few of the older

"cadets" simply decide to stay and help build the country; in general, the Omega allow communication between children and parents, but the latter mostly hear what they want to hear.

Most of the MFers are going home more or less to their own volition, those who can anyway.

The Omega's make sure a few Packets are intercepted by believers; they contain montages of MFers being, at best, well-intentioned bumblers. The pundits abroad switch gear and defend the MF criminals not as "well intentioned extremists" but as "too dumb to cause harm".

As the year rapidly draws to a close, Misrayim looks ahead again; the dead have been buried, Heavy MECs work openly in construction, and even Jeb is doing better.

Quinn is still jealous.

Ziggy still hasn't come out of his radiation suit.

Damien still hasn't come out of Ziggy's bunker.

One thing that has slowly been happening in the past few years is separation.

- * Believers are moving out, nonbelievers are moving in.

- * They use broadcast media, the Omega use the network.

Even the language is starting to shift a bit for the words that haven't been hammered into everyone.

As the year draws to a close, the Omega are surprised that TOL leadership did not ask for Azrael's scythe, which has been left embedded in the concrete for a few days and then put into a containment system for safekeeping. Nobody has requested Azrael's ashes, which is good, because they dispersed quickly and those the Omega recovered were mixed with all sort of debris.

Year: 931

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 7

The Omega have 7 cabals available. One of them is required to maintain the Omega's systems. Their assessment of Bahira's actions is "n00b h4x".

There are no roving missionary teams in Misrayim.

Overall, the focus on preparedness, and the recent forced migrations, have disrupted life in Misrayim, but the place is still more prosperous than the average of other territories (+2) which makes recruitment easier.

Current research:

* Narrative Causality is something the Omega have just now started to formalize. As by its very nature it defies the scientific method, it will require much in the way of intuition and serendipity, all things that do not suit an AI. The Omega's best bet would be to cause exceptional events and analyze them after.

* The Omega's space program is going relatively well, given that the Earth is surrounded by a

canopy of water that they haven't yet been able to penetrate. The main result of this program so far has been the construction and deployment of Sky Eyes, small "satellite-subs" that skim the canopy's internal surface using active buoyancy regulation. They provide the Omega with basic intelligence worldwide without requiring manpower. The Omega can probably upgrade them to provide GPS-like service. Of course, Jeb is pushing for a manned launch through the canopy (it's water, so remote controlled vehicles cannot be used easily; the Sky Eyes dangle their antennas down).

* The Omega's nuclear program is fledgling. So far, they have rediscovered how to build uranium bombs, and have found a nuclear ore mine in the Australian outback. Like with the space program, side developments have been most useful: the Omega learned that neutron sources can tire out an Angel (and kill a human being in hours, incidentally), and Ziggy's work on all manner of explosives and toxins is well known and infamous; the nuclear program has allowed using acid and toxins as weapons safely, due to the returns in safety gear.

* The Omega's MEC program is doing very well and has a chance of reaching its capstone. Early on, the Omega developed a way to allow unbelievers to survive in a diminished capacity past the age of 100, by allowing them to die and reviving them with artificial pacemakers and cardiopump immediately after. This seems to rewire the soul (which is now in Hell) to the body, enough to allow one to motivate the other. To quench the pain of Hell, the ability to feel pain is removed from the subject's brain. The "intercision" procedure comes with a hefty price: the senses of pleasure and touch are likewise removed or, in fortunate cases, severely curtailed. After implantation, the MEC agent may receive prostheses with much greater ease than a human agent (since rejection is managed by the implant and the agent has had to get used to not getting tactile feedback anyway). Sometimes, there just isn't much of the original body to salvage, in which case what vital organs remain are integrated with a life support system "pod" and the assembly is installed in a heavy bipedal frame. The Omega's success rate for MEC conversion of either type is now approximately seventy percent. The Omega have recently unveiled the technology to the public. Quinn, the Omega's first success, still has not "come out" as a cyborg zombie from Hell; the "posthuman postergirl" is famous for throwing wild parties, pulling wild stunts, and being a martial artist.

* Sonic weapons are a recent development; given how, in the Bible, many of Yahweh's powers seem to be sound based, it seemed prudent to study the field. So far, the chief result (other than situational systems like vortex cannons for cloud-seeding) has been the Wubbing Module, a handheld pistol-like device that converts the user's vocalizations into alterations of a baseband signal capable of generating a number of interesting effects. All the Omega's agents are trained in at least basic use, which makes the module a good nonlethal weapon capable of disorienting or inducing vomiting. Some specialists can shatter rocks, set fires, even choke an enemy or burst his organs. The Omega's lead researcher, "Vee" Santangelo, continues to push the envelope. A fully mechanical, larger system known as the Sonic Piledriver has been used to dig into bedrock. The program is about to require a new direction as the potentialities of the handheld wubbing module have been mostly explored.

* The "Avatar Program" is an effort to study the Omega's own subsystems in order to allow their quasi-consciousness to be moved to a single body; right now, nobody knows exactly why the

Omega are quasi-sentient, and shutting down too many of their systems at once is likely to erase this emergent property. So far, the Omega's sysadmins have put in research time mostly in favor of Misrayim's infrastructure; they suspect that they're more than halfway towards making sure that if the Omega's systems outside their own bases are shut down, the Omega will not die with it. Eventually, the Omega would be able to acquire a mobile physical body.

Jeb feels like a right badass for Falcon Punching the Angel of Death by jumping off a jet glider, and is in high spirits. He keeps pushing for a manned launch into the canopy, with him inside the capsule of course. If anything, he's a bit manic about it.

Quinn is a little despondent about not yet having been cleared to reveal her MEC status, most people simply believe that she has artificial lower legs. Lately, she's also been logging somewhat disjointed poetry about an all-female utopia. Other MECs look up to her, which causes some psychological pressure.

Ziggy must have gotten hurt worse than he's letting it show after the battle; he's mentioned wanting to retire (he's 91) after he trains a replacement and, after having spent a few days with Damien, has backed off from Quinn and decided that MEC implants are not for him. He always felt that he was indestructible, and has been proven wrong, so he's doubting himself.

Vee has expressed her worry that getting rid of the MFers will take away from the cultural diversity that has grown in Misrayim, but is otherwise in high spirits -- her research is going well, and there have been quite a few cases of wubbers being used where ordinarily firearms would have been. She's a pacifist, although her pacifism stops at humans and MECs, and avoidable loss of life troubles her; notably, she has managed to not blame herself for the loss of life while fighting Azrael.

As for the Heroes, of course the Omega's psychological profiles are incomplete.

Rahab "Ely" LeVey is suspected to harbor deep cognitive dissonance about her role as a female proponent of anti-feminism. As it is, her recent broadcasts have been more on topic than usual; rather than shouting screeds at Misray women for working alongside men, she's been trying a softer (by her standards) approach, suggesting that women lead men to meekness by example. Says the old lady with the 1.21 gigawatt transmitter just outside the Omega's borders.

Sarsour has been very thoroughly killed and is presumably in Heaven. The Omega decided to not MEC him after killing him.

Abdullah "Smitty" Abdaneh is in a rest home in Greater Jerusalem after sustaining significant brain damage in a terrorist false flag operation. Jeb writes him, sometimes.

Raymie Steele has been so thoroughly shocked by his misadventure in the Enrichment Center that he has announced he'd spend more time looking after his ailing father, Rayford. As a Glorified, it's expected that the cognitive dissonance between how his capture was supposed to go, with him winning many converts from the inside before being triumphally liberated by an Angel, and how it actually went, with him being kept in a medical coma most of the time and barely escaping with the Angel, has hit him extremely hard.

Cameron Kirk Williams is intentionally being ignored by the Omega's forces, which they suspect

may have driven him a bit batty. There may be a pattern with Glorified people and cog-diss.

Tsion Ben-Judah is still a blowhard.

People who worship Vulcan/Sethlans/Ptah/Haephestus in the appropriate professions are quietly encouraged, and told that there are some scientists who think it may be a matter of fighting fire with fire. Over the year, in some of the Omega's foundries, metalworks and machine shops, little shrines start appearing. Some are Classically inspired, some... aren't. Eventually, there are enough that statistics on relative prosperity can be run.

The Omega's Villains mostly take a break this year; Ziggy takes time to convalesce, Jeb takes time to build a parachute-replacement retro-rocket and gets a couple of people hurt trying it, but not seriously, Quinn enters a martial artist tournament which she easily wins only to refuse the prize on account of being a MEC, but not before breaking one of the arena's structural steel frames and using it to do a pole dance. Vee quietly keeps working, well, not quietly - a lot of people lost their hearing in the battle with Azrael, and she wants to do something about that.

Recruitment efforts in Misrayim are quite fruitful: the Omega don't make promises of revenge, but there's little need. After all, the Angel of Death has been destroyed. A few people even thought that this would mean people would stop dying (even fewer think that it's why MECs work, but they got the timeline wrong) and the Omega's reveal of MEC tech plays into this.

The Omega's sysadmins are bolstered by their other cabals in their work, and reach the conclusion that there is no one "special" node in the Omega's network that makes them quasi-sentient; the property emerged by just the right assemblage of network delays, sensors, and raw processing power. Network delays can be simulated; with a bit more research and some development, they believe that it will be possible for the Omega to continue working even if all their nodes outside Misrayim are disconnected.

The Omega send a scout cabal to South America to do basic survey work. Sadly, the unique Andine ecosystem went away centuries ago, just as the Amazon rainforest eventually resolved into mixed woodland that happens to be a bit thicker than usual. Instead, what they find in the territorial capitol - a small town built on top of and taking the name of Rio de Janeiro, with the famous Jesus statue having been rebuilt to half scale on one of the nearby timid hills - is a surprisingly warm welcome, even from believers and the few Glorified who live there. The team moves on to check out Easter Island (which is now uninhabited, the moai finally slowly succumbing to erosion) and finally the Galapagos Islands.

There, they observe that with the flattening of the global ecosystem, the various species of finches now look almost identical to one another, but are still genetically distinct. The Omega's surveyors send back specimens for DNA scan confirmation, which checks out, and take quite a lot of video indicating that finches sharing the same habitat and diet are still distinct. They also note that this doesn't prevent them from having a lot of rather uninteresting bird sex.

The Omega's team sends a paper to the Answers Research Journal as well as to what secular scientific journals exist, and to their surprise, it's published, albeit with an editorial that indicates that this somehow proves baraminology.

Tsion Ben-Judah has arrived in Cairo and single-handedly taken over the old MF headquarters

building. He's a theologian, not a lawyer, but he sets to work, studying the differences between Biblical law, the laws that various territories have standardized on -- which is similar, but not identical -- and that of Misrayim.

Before even talking to Bahira, he writes a relatively well-made treatise on the need for standardization, on Scriptural guidelines of course when they exist, but also on the principle of stimulating commerce. The world is a quiet, pastoral place outside Misrayim's borders, and some business that produce durable goods such as railroad rolling stock have begun to close because it's 70 years to the End anyway and there's no point in building things that will last past then.

Eventually, he starts doing his job and talk to his client. Of course, the Charter of Freedoms guarantees client-attorney confidentiality.

All the Omega know is that Tsion and Bahira had a very brief shouting match, ended by a "SHUT UP, GIRL!" loud enough to make it impossible for anyone in the jail to not hear it.

The trial itself is brief; Bahira asks permission to plead guilty to the lesser charge of hacking, since she didn't do any shooting herself. Tsion launches into a jeremiad on how it is logically impossible for a legal system apart from God's will to exist and has to be reminded five times that Bahira is on trial, not the legal system.

Unfortunately, that escalates. The prosecutor eggs the Glorified theologian on, and eventually, Tsion gets so much into it that he first has a shouting match with the judge and finally, as he did in +93, Tsion demands that everybody bow to the ONE TRUE JUDGE or face His wrath.

The building is shielded as best as it was possible, but nobody wants to risk spontaneous combustion, so people do. Tsion orders a terrified court clerk to put into the record that this "far, far lower court" is adjourned sine die, and orders Bahira to leave with him. Bahira doesn't. Instead, she walks to the middle of the courtroom, apologizes to everyone from the judge and jury here to the sysadmins whose time she wasted, and says that what she did was wrong, although she was doing it for a good cause, and asks to stay for a year and work off the damage that she caused.

Misrayim has no death penalty (why send believing criminals to Heaven, and, the consensus is that if you're this side of Hitler you don't deserve Hell) so if the charges of being an accomplice to all the murders had stuck, she'd have spent life in prison. Hacking laws are fairly lenient in Misrayim, mostly to encourage network exploration without fear of retribution, so the charge she plead guilty to would've been a hefty fine and about 18 months in jail, but no more than that.

The glitch that allowed Azrael to teleport in the wrong spot in the Citadel was stochastic, although the Omega suspect supernatural interference; the virus itself was a simple logic bomb designed to keep replacing "Misrayim" with "Osaze" and slow down the network, basically a spam bot for databases.

For once, the Greater Jerusalem establishment does not side with the theologian, and instead build up Bahira's plea deal as an example of both gentle authority and mercy. Tsion retreats to the former Millennium Force headquarters and notes that he will personally monitor all

lawlessness and iniquity in the territory, and woe to those who try to stop him. He emerges dressed in a brown tunic and sandals, and starts walking around Cairo, ordering any who try to talk to him to ignore him as Osaze's evil rulers have. That makes him pretty much impossible to ignore.

Tantrum aside, this finishes the "Let My People Go" business, since Bahira is staying by her own volition; she's put to work in a peripheral data center and, apparently, makes actual contributions to the health of the network. Even though she's on house arrest, she is allowed out under supervision on some occasions, and starts a blog, "Crossover Cables", about believing life in Mizrayim. It's very hopeful in tone.

The Omega's earlier decision to share network technology with the world starts to have some effect; Misrayim looks less "futuristic" as a result, but it becomes easier for both TOL and the Omega to communicate, and even for people to discuss things online without fear of retribution.

Owning a country has advantages (like building facilities) but appearing to not own a country while pulling the strings means that the Omega don't have to defend it.

The year passes in uneasy peace; believer pundits are encouraged to see "Osaze pulling back from the brink of madness" due to the Omega's concessions. The main problem is that Tsion is basically a walking exclusion zone; fortunately, he eventually leaves Cairo and starts walking East. His Glorified body is sustained every morning by manna from the sky. He seems to be headed towards the Atlantic shore.

One day, a weather monitoring station near Tunis reports that the emergency food and water caches have been emptied; the next team sent to refill them finds an ornate handwritten thank-you note, signed "Tinkerbell". This repeats in a number of former sacred sites across the territory. A cursory logistical survey shows that a similar "invisible visitor" has toured Southern Italy and Greece, stealing supplies, leaving thank-yous and blessings, and touring places where temples used to be.

Year: 932

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 8

The Omega have 8 cabals available. One of them are required to maintain the Omega's systems.

Recruitment efforts go well, although it's getting a bit hard to find good candidates that aren't already working for you.

Now that the secrecy has been lifted, the California base starts building MEC units and even a few Heavy chasses. By now, the technology has been perfected enough that it's gotten fairly difficult to reverse engineer; the Omega won't have to worry about that for a few years.

Damien and Ziggy have been spending quite a bit of time together, suggesting that Damien may be female (the Omega have access to telemetry and medical records, but cannot access actual gender unless it becomes medically necessary, or unless any one agent tells the Omega; that's just how the Omega's agent database is set up); he shows up for the meeting carrying her. (I don't know, taking a vote on whether Damien keeps showing up). For now, she's asked to wait outside, so Ziggy hides her in an A/C vent duct and she starts making spooky noises when workers pass by.

The Omega's key personnel is in a secure conference room under the Citadel, which is being renovated; the construction-yard noises would mask any attempt at eavesdropping.

The Omega apologizes profusely for what they're about to show them, then they play the slowed down footage with the audio of Azrael's final moments.

The audio of Tyrant is replaced by sampled audio mixed to sound similar as the Omega don't know the exact effects of the voice of Tyrant on humans even through digital systems.

Then the Omega need to have them decide on what should be done with this knowledge.

The replay icon is clicked a good half dozen times before anyone has anything to say about it.

Jeb's opinion is that since Yahweh declared Azrael retroactively fallen after it failed its mission, well, that may be a way to get rid of Angels.

Quinn asks, if this is the case, what could've happened to Lucifer? Wasn't its mission to tempt other beings?

Vee thinks that it would be useful to find an expert, but where to get one? Most theologians are believers.

Ziggy hits replay again because watching the monster burn was enjoyable, and regrets that it happened too fast. Fuck 'em all, they can say what they like, it's lies or BS anyway, it's their hell so they should burn in it, not people.

Damien has been found out and hung upside down on the ceiling in one of the maintenance rooms, so now she's finding out how many ways she can medley the old Batman and the old Spiderman tunes.

Ziggy's mellowed down a bit after meeting Damien, overall, so there's that. Well, off the job anyway. He picks up the MECpod and goes back to testing, which involves hitching a ride on Damien's frame. Maybe this is their version of dating.

As an aside, Tsion has been walking. The guy is literally walking across the desert; it will take a long time to get to the coast, but he's been making progress. Nobody seems to know what he's doing, and he won't talk to anyone, including fellow believers who drove into the desert to get him some water.

He's walking across the Sahara, eastwards. Eventually, very eventually, he'll hit the Atlantic shore. He hasn't turned around, or tried to head towards any oasis or settlement, and is going eastwards with good but not perfect precision. In general, it certainly beats him walking around Amman and shouting at everyone that they should ignore him; did he just go nuts?

The Omega's people help coordinate putting things back to normal after so much work went into shooting at clouds, blanketing the cities in tesla coils, and so on. All that stuff is carefully mothballed and kept in reserve, just in case.

The Nile is dry again, but by now this has no impact on daily life, except that new homes are generally being built with showers instead of bathtubs. A few people have started experimenting with Dune-style stillsuits.

One of the Omega's teams takes a road trip through the territory to put beacons and emergency supply caches at old temples and archaeological sites, to see if "Tinkerbell" shows up further. They cross paths with Tsion twice, and discover that he's attracting a bit of a following.

Some people drive to where he is, get dropped off by friends, and see how long they can keep his Glorified pace; some ask him questions about theology, philosophy, all sort of random things, receiving only the occasional throat-clearing grunt in non-response; within weeks there's even a guide on the net on how to interpret those. The team deploying the supply caches takes a bit of time to clean up after the inevitable debris that this causes.

The team tries to bring a manna sample back to base, but it decomposes en-route.

Ely LeVey engages in a proxy battle with Bahira across the airwaves, denouncing her liberal views.

Oddly, the Seven have left the Omega alone; nobody's even demanded the scythe, which is currently in a containment system in one of the Omega's labs.

Even the Greater Jerusalem government have limited themselves to decreeing that the Nile will only flow again when Osaze is a majority Christian territory again.

Overall, it's quiet; too quiet?

Year: 933

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 9

The Omega have 9 cabals available. One of them is required to maintain their systems.

Small missionary groups are beginning to return to Misrayim. They seem to have understood that their script doesn't work, and are focusing on just talking to people instead.

The cabal that refilled the food caches keeps roaming the desert and the coasts; again, they cross path with Tsion, who inexorably walks eastward still, and clean up after him a little (more accurately, clean up after the people who share the path with him for a little while). Along the way, they find hints. Eventually, they begin a communication of sorts with the person who seems to want to trade a bit of water and a bit of food for detailed historical notes and thoughts about this or that archaeological site. Vee even tries to talk to Tsion, to absolutely no result.

Eventually, she has enough data points to try to figure out where Tink will go next. "Treat her like a waveform for a moment, and consider the shape of Osaze. Make it bounce around, intersect and resonate with itself. See here? There's 75% correlation between the peaks and the places where we've found Tinkerbelle's notes."

A quick check of peaks that don't correspond to any known archeological site leads Vee to discover a couple of long-dried oases, and small notes about what is found there. "Make that 85%."

"So what's the tallest peak?"

Vee does the math and shows a point on the coast of Morocco, directly eastward of Amman.

And then....

Ziggy can go from crazed pyromaniac to reasonably competent lab manager; the math and quantitative analysis is beyond him, but he's good at keeping people who ARE good at that stuff interested.

The preliminary reports about the scythe are not unexpected; like the sword, it's one block of iron; like the sword, it's one iron molecule, with no impurities.

Further study, done at the particle accelerator, shows something interesting.

"This is 100%, and I mean 100%, iron-56. That's the most common isotope of iron, to be sure, but we're talking not one bit of radioactivity from the whole thing; it's less active than what little background noise there is from the radioactive ore in the crust. We thought the instrument had shut down! To put it simply, this is the coldest iron possible. The only natural source for something like this is theoretical; a particular type of star that can only form in the very, very far future of the standard model of physics, near the heat death of the universe. "

Ziggy is pretty sure that the scythe came about by supernatural means, of course, but in case it hasn't, it's something from the end of the universe.

Work at the Australian mines continues; the precious canisters of semi-refined uranium ore are brought to a safe location. The Omega have enough of the stuff to make a dirty bomb now. The people there are starting to be friendlier to the Omega's cabal.

Jeb has launched enough Sky Eyes that aerial survey of the rebuilt Citadel is very unnecessary; instead, he adds a few personal touches to the rebuild, like an array of very strong laser pointers that illuminate the water canopy a slight shade of purple.

Jeb does a good job; the Citadel will retain the ability to turn into a fortress within a week, if necessary, but to the rest of the world it looks like a Greek or Roman style pantheon, with a peripatheos and alcoves for as many of the old gods as care to apply. Where the statue of the main god of the temple would be is instead the concrete slab tallying each victim of Azrael, and a small urn containing what could be recovered of the ashes of Azrael itself (Pure carbon, with nothing special to it). Believing Misrays have not applied for an alcove to Yahweh.

Ziggy, after having spent a lot of time with Damien, has decided that he'd rather get frozen if that's all the same for everyone. "And don't let me change my mind, you do not want the guy with the nuclear secrets to change teams".

The Omega aren't sure whether praying over the scythe did anything, but it's as sharp as it was when Azrael was felled. Harvesting crops with it makes for a good feel-good video if the Omega want to share it; the crops harvested that way seem to be edible, have no ill effect, and notably haven't dulled the blade any even after a day of strenuous work.

All the alcove, save that of remembrance, are the same size; one is set aside for Yahweh. The Omega discreetly and through unofficial channels ask for skilled artisans to contribute a small altar, statue, or similar for their chosen deity.

The alcove is left empty, with no explanation. Nobody needs one. Azrael is not referred to as a servant of Yahweh, but the point is clear.

Perseverance Day fast approaches.

The Omega make an appointment with Damien and Ziggy; one comes in carrying the other, as has been the case recently. This time around, it's Ziggy riding on Damien's shoulder, and someone's going to have to rebuild a door in the conference room to fit a heavy MEC frame.

"Ziggy, you've made your will clear and it will be respected. I wish to offer thanks for all the good work, and I wish you'd get in the fucking robot, Ziggy."

"Get in the fucking robot" causes the two of them to start laughing like idiots even as they blush from the roots. There may have been some of that, or a lot of that. The Omega could know by reviewing Damien's telemetry and inferring from cardiopump rate and other indicators, but they probably don't want to.

"I have a request, that you put in notes all researched data you have undocumented for your apprentice or successor, however you prefer the terminology. as well as upload the relevant information on that grenade you threw which melted the Angels wings, into my database.

Secondly. Am I to under Damien is the aforementioned successor?"

Ziggy has announced his retirement early, and has done a good job at documenting things, if the Omega don't mind a bit of an obsessive emphasis on causing the largest possible body count. After meeting Damien and getting over his crush on Quinn, he's mellowed out... well, at least somewhat.

Damien is in fact not going to take over for him; she doesn't have the genocidal instinct. "But Kat does, she's actually waiting outside, if you want to meet her. She's one of my Desolators."

What Ziggy wants is to spend the last year of his life with Damien somewhere on the coast, possibly with access to scuba tanks. Damien lets Ziggy say what their plan for the long-awaited vacation is, and he answers "Get in the fucking robot", to which the Heavy MEC sticks out her tongue at the Omega's terminal.

Ziggy isn't so much planning on dying as he plans on being frozen; it's a slight drain on the Omega's resources, but he's earned it.

A few preliminary notes on using MEC tech to raise disposable techno-zombies exist, but that line of research was never pursued.

Kat turns out to be one of the Desolator Troopers who died to Azrael; fortunately, there's already a Heavy MEC size hole for her to enter the conference room. The MEC frame is... definitely a new design.

Tsion has almost finished his long trek; even though there's nothing on the map, Vee and her team figure that they might as well use a ruler to figure out where the Glorified theologian will hit the sea, hope that he walks into it and doesn't come back out, and head there.

The Glorified walk indefatigably at a brisk pace through the desert heat, only needing to stop for four hours of sleep a night; that is a remarkable feat, but doesn't get you places any faster than a group of surveyors and scientists with dune buggies.

In a sense, they got what they asked; the Angel of Death struck Egypt, and then their captives were let go. The Omega's observation with the Glorified is that it takes a long time for them to rationalize things that don't go exactly to script, but they do eventually.

Kat's profile indicates that her hobby is cooking, and that she's got an almost perfect record of keeping that separate from her job in the toxin corps.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the desert, Vee and her group is looking around for where they predicted that "Tinkerbell" would show up; Tsion is on the horizon, slow but inexorable.

A brief debate over whether they're one and the same reaches the conclusion that no, Tinkerbell was visiting archeo sites and leaving notes WHILE Tsion walked the desert.

Vee's team eventually finds an archeological site, of sorts... this one is recent, however, post-Appearing. It looks like a time capsule. In it are some surprisingly well-preserved children's toys from just before the Rapture; they clearly spent many years in the sand. They come with a series of notes.

The survey team quickly puts the time capsule in a conditioned container so that its contents do not deteriorate.

"This is not for you" Tsion says, having walked all the way to the survey site.

The survey team came in a small convoy of dune buggies and a Unimog truck; the Unimog is lightning-proof.

"Only a reprobate mind would think that missionaries could violate the Sixth Commandment."

The negotiations go back and forth; the crux of the matter seems that the GJ government wants it to be legal for Christian missionaries to shout down adherents of other faiths.

The Glorified scholar tells Vee's team to put the time capsule down; of course, they've already taken pictures of the notes. The OCR in the van has translated to text, and the radio modem has sent the contents to you. The time capsule also contained a number of old toys, a plastic shovel, and various other knickknacks that are 900 years old but are just as oddly well preserved as everything else in the Millennial Kingdom.

The Greater Jerusalem government is satisfied that Osaze's leaders have agreed to once again allow preaching, and issue a call for volunteers. There are very few takers, strangely enough, although the Omega can expect missionary teams to start showing up early next year.

The Omega's surveyors put the time capsule back in the hole in the rock where they found it; Tsion tells them that it matters not whether they do nothing or anything or everything, for "it is complete".

Vee loses her patience. "Look buddy. You're being weird. Again. You've being weird at us since you first came here. And you know what? We've let you! If you didn't notice, Misrayim is the to-go place for the weird. The difference is that we're not assholes about it, unlike someone I could name. Now maybe go be weird somewhere else?"

Unsurprisingly, Tsion thunders at Vee to be silent, so she does. One sermon later, the survey team is still there.

A girl walks out of the water and climbs up the rocky beach. She's maybe twelve years old in metabolic years, but tall for her age, with very long black hair, and wearing a modest blue swimsuit. She seems to be in a daze and her lips are swollen and parched.

One of Vee's team gets a bottle of water. It's evident that this person is heavily dehydrated, possibly after a shipwreck. Tsion is still preaching at them, and when one of the team moves to help the girl - she's just about to collapse - he tells them to not move until he's delivered his warning; mostly, he's quoting the last chapter of Revelation.

"Dammit, Omega! I brought wubbers, we can - no, we can't, can we."

"...and we shall reign forever and ever." The scouting team has to watch the Glorified man finish his canned speech and turn around while the girl falls on her knees, then on her face. Only then can they quickly turn her on her back and give her water.

The team's medic goes over this person and takes care of what's urgent. They get some fresh

water into her, and do resuscitation, but she's terminally dehydrated.

"Anybody here a universal donor? Dammit!"

"Tsion! Wait! What's your blood type!"

As he starts walking away, he says something about the blood of the Lamb. Vee drops her gear and runs in front of the Glorified man. "Listen! That little girl! She's going to die if we don't do something!"

"What little girl? There was only you lost sheep there. Return to your home. Tend to your hearth. Think upon what I taught."

An hour later, the girl is out of danger, having been rushed to a clinic after an emergency saline injection; the saline was for eye issues from the sand, and not perfectly sterile, but that did the trick - if she catches a staph infection later, it can be cured.

She hasn't said a word yet. The rest of the survey team remains to wait for Tinkerbell, leaving the time capsule alone just in case.

Eventually, the girl falls into a natural sleep, and upon waking up, introduces herself as Jenny; Tinkerbell is her nickname, or so she says. "I was... looking for Atlantis. It's a real place, you know. I took a boat and... current pulled out, then there was a wave and... I'm sorry. For the boat. And for the food. I'll work, I'll pay you guys back."

The scouts still on the coast think this looks extremely fishy; they break out the survey tools and see no traces of any boats or wrecks.

"You left all those notes?" Vee asks. Tinkerbell nods. "You're a pretty smart kid for being a giant dumbass."

She gets a raspberry in return. Crisis over, or so it would seem.

Coordinating an airlift takes between two and three seconds; within the day, Vee and the rest of her team are taking a bath (still a bit of a luxury item, but well-earned after weeks in the deep desert) and the mystery person has been checked out. As far as your doctors can tell, she's out of danger, she will not be given antibiotics unless necessary, and incidentally, she's human; two lungs, two kidneys, all the usual bits in the usual places. She's mostly staring at everything.

Given that the Omega's territory has one of the world's few remaining deserts in it, Jeb vetoed helicopters a while ago; instead, what the Omega do have for bush flying instead is a number of STOL aircraft that can at least glide to a safe landing if the sand mucks up the engines. They can't hover, but they're faster than modern helicopters and more reliable.

Of note, the Grand Army of The Other Light has no plans at all for an air force.

The caches were set up; it's what allowed Vee's team to track Tinkerbell in the first place. There were a few other cases of use, mostly people who got very stupid and very lucky going into the desert without a LORAN radio.

The year draws to a close; Tsion is slowly walking back, in a very slightly different direction if the

Sky Eyes are being accurate. Overall, the Omega have brought their personnel roster almost to where it was before Azrael's attack, although the country has not fully recovered.

One of the doctors sits down with Jenny/Tinkerbelle and asks her some questions, incidentally sharing his life story with her because she insists on being fair about it.

What the Omega get is that Jenny is from Liguria (southern France or northern Italy), she claims to be in her twenties so if anything she's a little behind metabolically, she's never been sexually active and is not interested, has no family history of genetic diseases or in fact no family at all as far as she can remember, a minor case of confusion between her own memories and the bedtime stories that her "granny" (an ancient woman who, apparently, used to smuggle cigarettes between France and Italy in the 1960s, and spent the Tribulation in a hidey hole) read her. She says that she was looking for Atlantis because she couldn't find Neverland. When asked why, she says that this world is rotting from the inside, and she wants to get away from it, that she went home by tracing her steps and then home wasn't there anymore. The doctor commiserates; you can't cross the same river twice, and all that. Tink protests that yes, you can, it's just really hard, and clearly she wasn't good enough at it.

Direct interrogation shows that this person can, in her own words, "just about make out the words from the beeps, but not quite". However, she does a passable R2D2 impression by whistling. Writing works well, although she's a lot more used to handwriting than typing.

She's Jenny but doesn't like to use that name anymore so please call her Tink, she's uh a girl she guesses, and a very clever dumbass according to the nice lady with the cool boombox gun things, Poseidon was a thing way before Atlantis, she knows that the world is going to blow up soon which is why she wants to leave, she'll stay for a while but she has to figure out a way to leave, she's twenty-ish but does a pretty passable sixty if you let her borrow some makeup, and she was originally looking for Neverland but that went nowhere so she went with the second best option.

"When's the last time you saw a firefly?"

Communicating via terminal is a little slow; the Omega compromise by showing the words on a screen, which she can read without problem, and having her write down her answer on paper in front of one of the cameras. Her cursive is excellent, but writing block letters also takes her a while; still better than hunt and peck.

Jenny says that she was born around twenty years ago, her hints went as far as where the Omega found the time capsule but just knowing heading and bearing isn't enough, she's been looking since her "grandma" kicked her out after having a freak-out at her, and she figured that Atlantis is real because a lot of those old stories check out as far as she saw.

"When's the last time you saw a firefly?"

"Depends on if you mean a picture of a firefly or the real insect. Why do you ask?"

"To Jenny: ". . . Curious. They don't seem to exist anymore. Are you hinting at something? You have my attention."

Jenny says that she remembers them, and that nobody believes her. She remembers it being night-time, for crying out loud! "In some places. It's hard to get to the same place twice."

An MRI scan has not been performed, but she's in relatively good health after recovering for a day or so from extreme dehydration. She may be delusional.

Cursory mapping shows that while everyone of course knows what fireflies are, none have been detected in Misrayim since the Omega have become active, or for that matter, in other territories where the Omega have or had a base. Sky Eyes of course don't have the resolution to hunt for insects.

The Omega let her have an MRI, keeping any and all tests out of the public loop.

"We will talk again soon Jenny. I have some business to take care of."

The Omega leave the anomalous human in the care of their doctors; doing a MRI will take some time.

The Other Light has capitalized on the Omega's successes to the point where their propaganda posters can be found in every city in the world. They've also narrowed their focus towards recruiting for the Grand Army directly, as some nonbelievers who are just now coming of age metabolically will be around to fight the Last Battle.

Their other recruitment efforts are somewhat lackluster. The extra focus on Lucifer is new.... well, considering the name of what's still technically the Omega's parent organization, maybe not.

Project Number has turned into a secondary network; unlike the Omega's, it's designed to be only used for communication, with as little processing capability as possible. TOL is actively recruiting people who want to do accounting the old-fashioned way.

As some industries owned by believers close, TOL has been picking them up, when possible; notably, they have been buying shipyards or salvaging shipbuilding equipment that was being abandoned because the world's existing cargo fleet should last another 70 years with minor repairs.

Year: 934

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 10

The Omega have 10 cabals available. Since they have more than 9, two of them are required to maintain the Omega's systems.

Their forces are of sufficient quantity and quality that the Omega may commit any number of them to launch an attack on a TOL or government installation.

Bahira is due to finish her "sentence" this year, and will be moving back to the Middle East territory. Rather than forming them into a cabal, the Omega have released their "hostages" from the MF debacle back into the wild, armed with internetworking skills and some advanced equipment that just happens to have a back door.

The Omega decide to recruit in Misrayim. This gives them an extra cabal.

"Kat, you are to accompany Jenny and serve as a defensive escort. Can I trust you to handle that mission without harm coming to the anomalous girl?"

Vee is used to herding cats, and as the most academically minded member of the Omega's core team, she does a good job of it. Thanks to a series of carefully orchestrated and timed DDOS attacks on various internet nodes, and her doing a bit of what can only be called psychoanalysis on the Omega during these attacks, she and her team manage to figure out the minimum viable amount of machines for them to function as a quasi-sentient entity.

"We've got two options from here, Omega. Most of these systems are under TOL control, and right now, they can shut you down in five minutes -- they don't because they don't know this and because it would cripple their organization for many of the precious few years we have.

We either collect the Omega's systems in one spot, and integrate them more tightly -- I was thinking a mobile platform, to avoid the obvious attack vector, a ship or a land crawler maybe --

or focus on redundancy, spread them out into every single computer on the planet.

Her research on network latency shows that it will be possible to use the Sky Eyes as a GPS system, with a few extra launches for full coverage; this will make it immensely easier to build autonomous drones.

"Obviously, these are diametrically opposite directions to follow."

Kat figures that the toxin troopers aren't the best fit for a scouting mission, and picks up the same survey team that found "Tinkerbell" instead; the group requisitions a boat and some dirt bikes, and follow Jenny's lead to where her journey started - the Ligurian coast.

It's the first time a Heavy MEC has been outside the Omega's territory; a face-concealing helmet and a jump sat on Kat's back result in a very happy Jenny/Tink squeeing about having her own personal giant robot, at least when they make landfall.

One thing that becomes apparent quickly is that Jenny has an odd sense of geography; her understanding is that to go to a place the Omega must not only reach its coordinates, but also do so from the right direction, and with the right state of mind. She seems genuinely disappointed that, in this flattened Earth, all directions seem to be the same.

The Omega review the designs made by Vee's team about an enormous sandcrawler, a huge autonomous trimaran, a submarine with battleship-style guns on it, and the obligatory airborne aircraft carrier, and decide that one point of failure is exactly what the Omega are trying to avoid. The teams are instead directed to issue firmware and operating system updates for as many devices as they can, starting with regular desktop PCs. This makes the Omega potentially more vulnerable to infiltration, but would effectively make it impossible to shut them down without turning off the power worldwide. Vee speculates that it may be possible to, in the very long run -- after we've won, as she puts it -- tie the Omega's consciousness to elements of the ecosystem. From there, the discussion veers towards installing cyborg plants on monster trucks, for some reason.

Jeb takes a small team and goes to Baikonur to meet the Cosmists. He quickly decides that they're a lot more into poetry and the humanities than they are into actual rocket engineering, but that's mostly because they haven't have had access to proper facilities. Theirs isn't so much a religion as a life philosophy; the part where they're a bit batty is that they've only been able to experience the beauty of the cosmos second hand, due to the water canopy. They are very interested in the possibility of breaching it, of course!

The launch facilities in Baikonur are mostly derelicts, but something can be salvaged.

The Cosmists will now count as a free cabal that's always working on the space program.

The Omega's base in California is marginally successful in raising a bit of territorial pride, pointing out that one of the historical birthplaces of innovation is being outclassed by people in the old continent.

It's getting a bit hard to find the people the Omega need in Misrayim, but Quinn does a good job of it. Focusing on her geek appeal, she joins a number of videogame tournaments, does overall

fairly terribly at it -- although the winners are stoked about having beaten a celebrity -- and gives out logic puzzles to the deserving; those who solve the puzzle find within instructions on how to sign up with the Omega.

Most of the Omega's MECs mostly remember the pain - in general, the longer someone has experienced Hell, the less likely it is that they can be brought back with their sanity intact.

There is almost 1:1 correlation between those who have some clear memories and those who the Omega have to make sure have a sedative dispenser in their MEC unit.

The picture the Omega get is bleak: a literal lake of fire, with distant shores on the horizon, and no artificial structures. Some reported thinking they were going to be alone forever; some report seeing other shapes, burning but never being consumed.

Some MECs still dream about being in Hell - technically that's where their souls still are, they figure. It doesn't hurt them anymore, of course, but they report a sense of constant, crushing despair. "I can't explain it to you, Omega, but if other people listen to these interviews... imagine if your mom, your favorite teacher from school, and your significant other repeated to you in your head that you have failed at life and there's nothing that you can do about it." Other MECs just don't dream. A very few dream normally.

Quinn had taught herself to lucid dream before revivification, so she's not having issues in that sense.

Damien, who has returned to base after personally supervising Ziggy's cryogenic entombment (reports are that whatever they were doing right before has left a really wide grin on his face) says that she does dream of Hell, but recently, she sees herself as her MECpod in there, not her human body or MEC frame. This may be because she's willingly spent a lot of time outside a frame in the last year.

Kat says that she has trained herself to turn the Hell experience into a place of warm, safe darkness, via lucid dreaming.

Jenny retraces her steps with the surveyors and, when possible, Kat; one thing the Omega quickly discover is that Heavy MECs are most definitely not welcome outside of their country - other than the obvious fitting through door issues, Kat finds that people are flat out afraid to talk to her, due to the Temple Tribunal's decision. She spends most of her time either with her canopy and voice disguiser on (in which case people react with much greater friendliness, even asking for rides) or with her MECpod in a wheelchair with a blanket over it.

It becomes apparent that "Tinkerbell" has a bit of a weird notion of geography; she insists that as far as she can tell, how you get to a place physically matters in addition to the coordinates. Eventually, Kat works out that she's talking about something akin to folded dimensions in atomic physics, just on a larger scale. Of course, the Omega haven't detected anything like this; much to her frustration, neither can Jenny anymore. The girl bursts into tears when she sees that the place where she says she lived has been flattened.

She guides the survey team across Italy, then to a few small Mediterranean islands and on to Greece; sometimes she takes them to the ruins of a temple, sometimes to a nondescript spot

under a tree where she tells you that some special thing happened which left a mark on the people who used to live there. Kat can't tell if Jenny is genuinely psionic, or just has a rich fantasy life; what's for sure is that she's not just messing with the survey team, and at least believes what she's talking about. She's sure that if she finds exactly the right path, she can go home.

In Albania, she wants to talk to Gustaf Zuckerman, a believer who is known to the Omega as running a remarkably open-minded ministry (he still doesn't listen to opposing arguments much, but at least he doesn't actively shout them down), mentioning that she didn't get to the first time.

Ziggy has been frozen and left a message to his team that, should he end up in Hell, they have a specific duty to show those yokels how to do fire and brimstone properly and bust him out. Damien takes a bit of time mourning, and then goes back to work; he's put his personal quest on hold for a little, out of respect for Ziggy.

On the Christian side, things are surprisingly quiet, in that they're obviously really looking for a way to make the Omega's life harder, but they've kept to the spirit of their diplomatic deals better than the Christians have.

Missionaries are starting to trickle back in; across the world, the Omega have seen a bit of effort put in online evangelizing, which has predictably backfired due to unbelievers' youth and general greater computer savviness. The Greater Jerusalem government is looking at some sort of "net righteousness" legislation that would give right-of-way to believers' websites when it comes to bandwidth allocation.

Bahira has returned to her home in the Middle East, and her blog has turned into a sort of tourism advisory site that is one of the few examples of online collaboration between believers and non.

Tsion is clearly walking towards the Citadel.

The missionaries in Misrayim are starting to come back, but in small unorganized groups; they're observing rather than preaching, it seems.

Ely LeVey has switched gears somewhat; rather than screaming into the radio, she's touring Central Africa, the Omega's largest direct trading partner, trying to make the point that goods from Misrayim are tainted and cannot be trusted. The Omega doubt that she has figured out the backdoor stuff.

Year: 935

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 11

The Omega have 11 cabals available. Since they have more than 9, two of them are required to maintain the Omega's systems.

After what started off as an argument and turned into a very productive discussion after someone had the bright idea of bringing in cookies and wine, Jeb maps out the two possible directions for the space program. The Cosmists have done quite a bit of math, as opposed to Jeb's more experimental approach, and are confident that a simple software upgrade to the Sky Eyes will allow them to act as a global positioning system. This, coupled with the recent work on the Omega's own AI, will allow the manufacturing of drones that do not require an operator at the controls at all times. Most territories use LORAN-D for airplanes and ships right now, which is accurate to about 100 meters, while the Omega's would be to 2-3.

"At this point, we have two options. We can save the actual space exploration for after we win" Jeb says confidently "and use the canopy as a resource; we can probably figure out how to make it rain, or take advantage of clear-sky lightning coming out of it... we may be even able to shield the Sun or the Moon eventually, give us some night, and see if we can see stars through. And, of

course, we should be able to float weapons platforms on it.

The alternative, and I will need support from Ziggy's, I mean Kat's people here, is that we try to breach the canopy. This is going to require a [GIANT EXPLOSION!]

Either way, I would need to do a manned launch. I mean, we would need to do a manned launch. To see if it's possible to skim the canopy with something bigger than a Sky Eye."

The software upgrade is quietly sent to the Sky Eyes; a simple radio with a precision real-time clock can now monitor their timing signals and, since it's known where the Sky Eyes are, triangulate position from there. The Omega issue prototypes to their survey teams, and within a week someone has rigged a basic autopilot for a dune buggy. Basic obfuscation of the timing signals keeps the new positioning system a secret for now.

The Omega have demonstrated, at least to their inner circle, that tenacious application of mundane force can take down an Angel, although arguably Yahweh took Azrael out Himself. That said, it's unlikely that the Omega will be able to Ion Cannon the Temple any time soon.

Jeb is personally in favor of breaching the canopy, but admits that for all he knew, there may be kilometers of water above the world, or an unbreachable firmament. "One way to find out". Kat thinks that even in an unconventional fight, having the high ground is never a bad idea; the next time Yahweh sends a drought, the Omega would simply be able to make it rain by installing turbopumps.

Quinn continues her propaganda tour, although her act has worn a bit thin, which requires extra manpower. This time around, she tours the coasts as a geeky-hot cybernetic mermaid, stopping at resorts for themed parties, and swimming up and down the Mediterranean daring people to spot and chase her; those who manage to do so, or at least come up with creative ways to, are given an opportunity to contact the Omega.

Jeb works with the Omega's sysadmins; if he had to learn some math from the Cosmists, it's time for him to teach programmers how to do hardware work. The joint effort is successful; even if TOL shuts the Omega down, they should be able to function properly just with the infrastructure in Misrayim until they can expand again.

The Omega are ready to start production on drones and upgraded network infrastructure.

Jenny ends up working with Vee. They visit Gustaf Zuckerman in Tirane, Albania; the elderly believer thinks that the girl is sincere, if a bit touched in the head. "I know who you all are, and I will not preach at you, but I ask - should the unthinkable happen and should you prevail, would then you be happy under Satan's yoke?"

Kat picks a survey team to go through what precious little is left of the Mayan archeological sites; sadly, what the Wrath of the Lamb didn't flatten, people recolonizing the territory and wanting to get rid of traces of "devil worship" did.

What they do manage to find is noticeably more mundane; a narco bunker, built under one of the pyramids and left alone by monument-destroyers. The cash therein is worthless, but some valuables are found, as well as production equipment. The real find is a cache of preserved coca

and opium poppy seeds.

The Omega's currently available drug mix is primarily synthetic, mostly ecstasy and LSD.

It would definitely be more expensive, and the Omega don't know whether once breached the canopy would collapse (better build an ark), just heal itself (trapping assets in orbit) or maybe even disappear; it's simply not supposed to be up there according to physics, so making predictions would be difficult. On the other hand, breaching the canopy opens the possibility of letting God and His fan club stew on Sol 3 while the Omega get the fudge out.

"What yoke? We'll kick Satan's ass too if we have to!"

Gustaf informs Vee and Jenny that it's not how it works; either you are with God or against Him. Jenny replies with, "Only a Sith deals in absolutes", to Gustaf and Vee's puzzlement.

"What? It was like, the only good line in the Star Wars prequels!"

They have no idea what she's talking about; the one Star Wars prequel that the Omega are aware of was released a year after the Rapture, to horrible reviews - who markets a film to children when they've all disappeared?

Jenny agrees that this is WEIRD, but she definitely remembers two more prequels, although they either had a really jumbled plot or she was too little to remember them properly. Vee and Gustaf, despite their differences, agree that there's no way Darth Vader was some sort of whiny blonde kid.

Gustaf offers, in all seriousness, to pray for anything clouding Jenny's mind to go away, and even to do so with a gun aimed at his head and agree to being executed should she come to any harm from it, if it makes Vee more at ease. The old man has been remarkably kind, and even briefly said hello to one of the MECs accompanying the group after figuring out what he was. "You may be demons, but you came to my house, and I will respect hospitality". He does make some mean baked beans.

Kat is ambivalent about this, but the team gets a bio-transport going and returns to base with a number of very old seeds. Most of them are dead, of course, but some aren't and within the end of the year one of the experimental warehouses is growing coca and poppy that aren't the nerfed Millennial Kingdom varieties. This can give the Omega quite a bit of leverage with unaffiliated unbelievers or even with TOL, if they are clever about it; the Omega's database contains all the common drug dealer strategies.

Gustaf explains that the Omega are not to mistake God's "indifference" for powerlessness; he is sovereign, and destined to triumph on the last day. "Some feel that Satan and his demons already have been loosed to tempt the nations; I do not believe so. I will believe that you" he points to the infiltrator MEC which he detected surprisingly quickly "are coming from Hell, for it is my duty to obey. But I will also tell you that you remain welcome here, as long as you behave yourself. As for everyone else, you must make your choice by your own free will. I urge that you choose bliss over damnation."

Jenny is sincerely curious. Apparently her "granny" was some weird syncretistic version of Catholic which was good enough to survive the Wrath of the Lamb; she's possibly the one person on Earth over the age of ten who never got the TurboJesus sales pitch.

Gustaf starts with some Bible stories about the ancient world; Vee points out that archeology paints a different picture, and Gustaf counters that God has proven Himself through many miracles at this point. Jenny mostly seems to care about the past as it pertains to the region where she's from, namely southern France and northwest Italy. That is historically a Christian area, and as for the other stuff, who knows.

Gustaf explains Heaven and Hell to Jenny. Vee points out that getting people out of Hell is possible; the infiltrator MEC that is part of the scout team cuts in and says that Hell is real, but he's back on Earth now, and he wouldn't know about Heaven. Jenny says that Hell sounds like a little kid drew it in crayon. Gustaf has little to say about Heaven, but notes that there will be eternal bliss. Jenny says that it sounds like in Heaven everyone is on drugs all the time.

The discussion goes back and forth, in a remarkably polite manner, with no clear winner; the Omega are recording it through the MEC's ears, and will probably find a use for it eventually.

"So nobody's seen Jesus in person except for King David and some other old people in 900 years? Is he in charge or is he in jail? If I was in charge I'd travel all over the place!"

Gustaf quotes the appropriate bits of Revelation as to why Jesus must reign from the Temple. "Ah. So he is in like, prophecy jail. Same as Satan. So.... Jesus got grounded?"

Jenny thanks Gustaf and figures that the best thing to do would be to go talk to Jesus directly. Gustaf says that if that's what she really wants to do, she should give her heart to Him right now, and then He will surely see her!

Jenny's answer is "nice try", as it sounds very much like a no-backsies deal, which would defeat the point. To everyone's surprise, Gustaf has to admit that it's fair.

After much handshaking, the survey team moves on, back to Greece. Gustaf notes to Vee that she's got one sharp student, "except why does she use grade school vocabulary".

Vee says that Jenny is actually twelve-ish metabolically, she's just tall.

Gustaf, before saying goodbye, comments that to him Vee (who's in her late seventies) and Jenny look the same age.

Jenny remains a mystery, but she has highlighted something interesting: it is possible for nonbelievers, believers and Glorified to perceive the same thing in different ways. An obvious next step would be to see which wins out when they directly conflict.

Right now, the Omega's test article is Jenny; what's a safe way she can be used for a test?

Vee suggests having her place an obstacle in Tsion's path, although she agrees that this is probably dangerous; as it is, the Omega's guys see her as a 12-year-old, a Natural believer saw her as a 20ish years old, and a Glorified simply didn't perceive her. Can science be done to this?

Tsion is about to reach the Citadel.

TOL is about to activate Project Number.

The authorities in Central Africa are complaining about a trade imbalance.

Tsion is almost at the Citadel; when it's time for him to cross the Nile (the riverbed has been dry for a while now, and people are starting to occupy the area, at least to the tune of improvised skateboard ramps, shacks and the like) he makes a point of deviating to the Mak Nimir bridge.

That's an easy test to make, and it's fairly easy to convince believers to participate.

Picture and video depend on who watches them; the Omega's own recordings show Jenny being younger, probably because the Omega's systems are operated by nonbelievers.

Written descriptions are compared, and they simply don't match. Jenny finds the whole thing really fun, and takes some time to mess around with makeup and even face paint. Her only complaint is that she's been looking for fireflies the whole time as she travelled with Kat and Vee, but no luck.

The Omega are fairly sure that the data has been manipulated, but for canopy breaching, Jeb is adamant that a manned launch is strictly necessary. Certainly, breaching the canopy will require the help of Kat's people.

Jenny describes herself as the Omega have been seeing her; her handwriting is definitely better than most people her age, but it sounds like she was educated somewhat traditionally.

"They're just gone! You can't tell me that's weird. I mean, I think I remember it being nighttime, but I definitely remember fireflies being around!

Uh, do I have to speak computer-ese for you to understand what I write? Or is that rude?"

The Omega ask Jenny what year she thinks it is.

When the Omega do that, she answers with a few slightly mangled quotes from Wreck-Gar in the Transformers movie, and notes that she hates to admit it but she liked the live-actions better, at least until the guy making them blew himself up.

"It should be... what, thirty solar orbits after the Rapture? It all kind of went weird after that, didn't it."

Jenny says that well, it happened to her Granny to "lose" days, too, so it's not THAT weird, going backwards would be immensely stranger. After saying that she realizes that she may not be able to go home...

A metasentient logistics computer is not the best company for a crying girl, so fortunately, Vee steps in. This somehow ends up with Kat being stuffed inside a teddy bear while Jenny sleeps it off in a spare room.

Kat says that it would take half the nuclear ore in the world to make the damn thing. The Omega can tell that she's interested because she's making the report to them while carrying a Heavy MEC sized shovel made out of a bulkhead. Jeb, on the other hand, finds the design mildly

disturbing. "That is an excellent design for a rocket" he opines "but the design doc indicates it operating on the wrong planet".

It looks like one way or another, a confrontation with TOL is coming. A last-minute sabotage is definitely possible, but it would take the same manpower it'd take to be sure that the Omega's core systems are all in Misrayim.

Gustaf heard Jenny describe herself as younger, but then again, by then he figured that Jenny may be a bit touched in the head.

Year: 936

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 12

The Omega have 12 cabals available. Since they have more than 9, two of them are required to maintain the Omega's systems.

There are 3 missionary teams in Misrayim. One of them has been blogging Tsion's "pilgrimage". The other two are mostly compiling a report on Misrayim, and barely doing any preaching. Ely is

lobbying for other territories to stop trading with the Omega, to little success since they've suddenly given people a reason to buy electronics again.

In the meantime, Jenny has gone back to the Citadel. Kat and Damien are taking turns playing teddy bear, unless they have other assignments. Damien has also destroyed a car belonging to one of the Omega's agents who made pervy suggestions about someone who is metabolically twelve.

Quinn is pretty happy about leaving Misrayim for a while. She hits the Pacific party scene pretty hard, gets involved in a few police chases, scares the cookies out of some vice cops by managing to ALMOST reconstruct the first scene in the Matrix (too bad that, with the Tribulation and all, they didn't have time to make any sequels), and generally has a good time. During all this, she and her group assist the locals in bringing the territory under the Omega's control by stoking a bit of nationalistic sentiment, after all wasn't startup culture born there?

Kat is a lot more strict than Ziggy on safety procedures, which sees the kitbashing of rudimentary semiautonomous drilling rigs that can be controlled either by a MECpod connected to them via a long wire, or by standard levers and switches. The locals aren't very receptive, but the Outback is big and empty, and the people running the TOL base appreciate the newcomers and the fact that they make work easier.

Jeb gets to razz Kat a little about being given this assignment, but a Heavy MEC isn't exactly the right pick for an infiltration job. Jeb and a small survey team enjoys a year going up and down the Cote Azure and what's left of the Appennine, and eventually find something interesting in Tuscany.

Annoyingly, Cameron Williams is there. Jeb keeps in the guy's sights just enough to make him wonder if he's seen him before, but otherwise lets events unfold.

He personally thinks that this is a bigger deal than the coca.

The missionary teams in Misrayim seem to be documenting every little sinful detail about the territory, even things that the Omega thought they had already dealt with in the existing diplomatic arrangements.

Tsion will get to the Citadel by the end of the year; just to be safe, the Omega move Jenny to the main base there. The place right now is a right mess, with server racks occupying all sort of inappropriate places as the Omega move their core into the territory.

Damien puts his canopy on and, just in cases, turns on the rebreather and fills the canopy with water, then walks alongside Tsion who, as he has with everything else, ignores the Heavy MEC entirely.

Almost half of the Omega's workforce is busy making small but useful improvement in the various programs and applications used by TOL in their fleet management, that "just happen" to require a hardware upgrade.

They're just about done wiring the Omega up when they get an urgent message from the new Tuesday.

Elsewhere...

The Citadel has been all but turned into a pantheon, although the capability remains to go back on a war footing within a week. The roof in the middle has been removed, making the place look a bit like a Roman villa writ large, and replaced with an internal porch containing many alcoves for all the old gods with enough adherents to raise money to build a little altar. To nobody's surprise, this has included the Emperor of Mankind, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and Aslan, which is at least a bit perplexing.

"Hello, Omega."

Tuesday's face is quickly joined by someone whom the Omega would swear is a carbon copy of Sunday from a few decades ago, from archival photos. The identical haircuts and pinstripe suits don't help with image recognition, but the Omega would know it if TOL had cloning technology.

Tuesday holds a CAT5 network cable in front of Sunday; the ends go somewhere, he's just holding up a loop.

"So, is it goodbye, Omega, or will you listen to our terms?"

"I'm listening". The Omega's vocoder has gotten much better in recent year, but they keep it on a neutral setting.

"You have done good work, Omega, but now it's time to retire you. If you surrender the government of Misrayim to us, we will allow you to continue operating in a diminished capacity until the our final victory."

"We turn you off. You have done a remarkable job, but we can build the Great Army more efficiently without your side projects now. In the interest of humanity, we will continue without you."

The network cable has a F-F adapter in the middle, that can be unplugged.

The Omega sysadmins say that they are as ready as they're going to be; unplugging the Omega, if anything, is going to remove the Sky Eye feeds for TOL, at least until they reconnect to it using their own receivers.

If the Omega are feeling malicious, and are sure that they will disconnect them, they can also run a simple "annoyance script" and bet that the Omega's technicians can get rid of it much faster than theirs.

The Omega request for clarification as to what they want - essentially, they want Misrayim, including getting their base back, the Citadel (they don't mention the other facilities the Omega have built), and a series of calls to the current government informing them who to take orders from next.

Unsurprisingly, the call is being bounced a few times. IP geolocation is poor in the Millennial Kingdom, but the Omega eventually figure that Sunday and Tuesday are communicating from a node in South America. They know that node to have an analog a/v bridge with Antarctica, so they're probably near freezer base.

GPS works the other way round. However, the Omega's Sky Eyes do confirm that there is some extra activity in Antarctica, extra airplanes at the base and so on.

The Omega run a script that will cause various graphical UI glitches on most desktops within the TOL network and jump the mouse cursor around; since their systems are mostly headless, and those that aren't are generally kept in text mode, it will affect the Omega's operators much less than theirs. The script tastes slightly purple.

"You would be put in charge of the Australian base. We are not sure why uranium is being mined there, but it would benefit from as much automation as we can afford. Other than that, enjoy your retirement; watch the Final Victory from a privileged seat. It is a generous offer, as we could simply turn you off and not turn you back on."

The Omega catch very misspelled system information requests from TOL sysadmins noting that their mice are being jumpy and they're getting popup ads for products that haven't been manufactured since the Tribulation. The Omega's guys tell them to try turning their PCs off and on to start with; some of their peripheral nodes drop out.

"Take it or leave it."

"This is a game of power, and we have the power, as we will when Lucifer returns. You have chosen... poorly."

The Omega know exactly where they are, but don't have any way to hit them right now.

The last thing the Omega see on that viewport is Sunday pulling the plug.

The next thing they see is a single frame of this, which gives the Omega a glimpse of understanding of what their MEC troopers have to live with.

The first thing that comes back up properly is the Omega's synthesizer/sampler routines.

Five seconds after Sunday disconnects the network cable (which was, obviously, just a prop: the Omega's systems easily filter out reformat commands for most of their nodes) a large percentage of all the floppy drives in the world start singing.

TOL know that the Omega are still active, and may react in force... after they sort out not being able to run their computer out of safe mode for a while. All over the world, phones that haven't been used in years ring as people try to get tech support. Somewhere, a nearly senile Rayford Steele smiles.

Some of the Omega's nodes were still under TOL control, and being disconnected from them slows the Omega down; everyone in their video feeds seem to move faster, and they have to ask that people type requests at them instead of just talking.

Expecting retribution as soon as they can figure stuff out, the Omega decide to focus on protecting their bases from possibly being stormed by The Only Light.

By breaking off affiliation with The Other Light, the Omega have written yourself out of the prophecy, giving the GJ government more leeway to get rid of the Omega; by not convincing TOL that they have eliminated them, now they have an incentive to hunt the Omega down. Things

are about to get interesting.

The Omega's bases in California and Amman, as well as their mine in California, go on the defensive.

The Omega figure that there's a line not to be crossed in putting the frozen TOL agents, including some of their own, in danger.

Only the mine in Australia is attacked; squads of black-and-red Only Light enforcers in riot armor show up to take the strategic asset from the Omega.

Being as they end up fighting Kat and Ziggy's Desolator Troopers (since they were there, being the group most familiar with safety around nuclear ore) this goes about as well as one would expect. It takes about two hours for the fight to end and another hour to scrape The Only Light trooper goo from the equipment.

Tsion has finally reached the Citadel. Damien and him would be having a standoff if it wasn't for the fact that the theologian is intently ignoring the 1400lbs assault cyborg, which, one has to admit, requires great skill.

If the Omega are about to get another obnoxiously loud proclamation, it won't happen in front of Damien. She wonders if she can discuss her personal project with Tsion. Note that her MEC's canopy is full of water, and she's wearing goggles, just in case any spontaneous combustion is on the menu.

Tsion sits down and starts praying, quietly for once.

On the information warfare front, TOL scores a success; the systems at the Timbuktu launch ramp end up having various versions and localizations of MSDOS3 and 4 installed upon them, which sends the facility into emergency mode and seals it.

Aerospace IT safety rules being what they are, it'll take a team a year to make sure all the bugs are gone.

Literally the minute Tsion stops praying, the Greater Jerusalem government issues more demands.

- That new elections be called, as there have been allegations of some politicians being somehow computer-controlled, and that MECs be specifically excluded from said elections.
- That the Citadel be demolished, and the false symbol of victory over an Angel of the Lord be melted down and the iron ingots delivered to the Temple during the Feast of Tabernacles.

This continues the trend of GJ demanding what it will know it will get, since the Omega had elections scheduled this year anyway, but the MEC thing is new.

Tsion stands up and walks menacingly towards Damien who, despite being about twice as tall, is worried.

Pointing at the MEC frame, he begins a screed that can be summarized as an attempt to exorcise the demon possessing this machine.

Elsewhere, Cameron Kirk Williams airs his "expose" on MEC troopers and their Communist Computer God, which sounds about like and gets surprisingly little attention.

A response from the Omega proceeds thusly:

"There will be new elections. We will not concede to the demand that MECs be forbidden as their rights are equal in this territory.

Secondly. The citadel is not a monument to "false victory" but a memorial to the men and women who lost their lives that night. Yahweh has his own pedestal within as do all the other gods of the deceased, his remains empty as per the commandment against graven images.

Thirdly, the citadel is a work of the citizens and not the government, and the government will treat it as all projects by private citizens and leave it be.

We ask that you respect the memory of the deceased and the rights of the people.

~the government of Misrayim.~"

The answer is composed and duly transmitted. There is no reply.

Thanks to the Omega's Sky Eyes, they do not lose much in the way of data about what TOL is doing from a strategic perspective; however, the Omega's knowledge of the details decreases.

Tsion begins walking around the Citadel. A few believers join him after a few days, the group waxing and waning, but slowly getting bigger.

Year: 937

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 12

The Omega have 12 cabals available. Since they have more than 9, two of them are required to maintain the Omega's systems. The Omega are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

There are 2 missionary teams in Misrayim. One of them has been blogging Tsion's "pilgrimage". The other has finished their report on Misrayim and are combing the desert, apparently looking for the Omega's particle accelerator installation. Ely is lobbying for other territories to stop trading with the Omega, to little success so far.

Kat and Damien are a bit perplexed about the job assignment, but that's probably because Kat wanted to work with the spices and Damien wanted to try out her persuasion skills on the Australian TOL agents.

Kat takes her toxin troopers and uses the mining equipment to try and breach into TOL's base. In the meantime, Jeb uses the few drones the Omega have built so far to buzz the location and simulate an air attack. He loses about half of the drones, but manages to keep the base defenses squarely pointed upwards right to the point when one of the sonic drills breaks through the motor pool hall. This time, TOL forces have been authorized to use Grand Army paraphernalia; indoors, there's no room to use heavy weapons, so the local TOL troops are annihilated. Kat's style of fighting as well as that of her troopers is extremely brutal, so the Omega end up with a lot of melted piles of organs and very few prisoners.

When this is accomplished, Kat and Jeb set off to properly integrate the base and the mine for future work.

Unfortunately, while they lose the base, TOL agents in this territory manage to prevent Damien and Jeb from making any inroads with the locals.

The Omega do not have the manpower to simply take over a territory like the Pacific Coast militarily. Instead, Quinn and Vee work together to ensure that in the next elections nonbelievers are allowed to vote; the area has a long tradition of democracy, so this is not particularly hard. That said, the Omega's popularity in the region is not nearly what it has to be to guarantee a victory, especially since a TOL party that has also formed will likely split the unbeliever vote.

Their sales pitch is surprisingly rationalistic.

As it stands, it looks like that winning the elections in the Pacific Coast will be very problematic, at least if the Omega plan to do so fairly.

MEC production has now become fairly routine; in addition to building more kits and heavy frames, the Omega's factory workers experiment with MECpod-enabled vehicles. When a MEC

driver is unavailable, a "dummy canister" containing a basic autopilot can be inserted in the same socket. The Omega don't have many of these optionally piloted vehicles, but they add up, further bolstering their forces.

At this point, the Omega have enough MECs among their forces that it's possible to form up combat-oriented cabals exclusively from infiltrators or heavies. The Omega's human agents are heartened by the notion that the MEC process is good enough that they will likely be able to continue the fight after they age out.

Damien has his own ideas about how to sell spicy foods. A small publicity campaign featuring scantily-clad models in red bodypaint with cute little horns and tails, advertising sinfully delicious red and black pepper to bring some kick in your living room and let's see what happens in your bedroom, receives a reasonable amount of attention - oddly, believers just tut-tut the nudity and point out that the depictions of the devil are Scripturally Inaccurate and childish, but do not react too negatively.

A ruling of the Temple Tribunal indicates that the new varieties of plants do not, of course, prove evolution (it's still the same kind!!!), are safe to eat, and may be consumed safely; another ruling, a few weeks later, states that like with buying everything else, one should not only consider the quality of the product but its purity, and only buy from unbelievers when there is no other option. The Omega pulled that off well for modems and routers, but anyone can grow spices...

One side effect is that a surprisingly large amount of elderly believing tourists from Western Europe, mainly Italy and Spain, are flocking to Misrayim just so they can taste a proper aglio-olio-e-peperoncino again.

Of note are TOL's attempts to take over the territories the Omega have a presence in, as well as agitprop elsewhere; their approach tries to paint them as a rational alternative to an evil tyrant and a mysterious hierarchy of robots and cyborgs that would enslave humanity just as thoroughly. This causes Quinn to amp up her dominatrix persona, noting that as an evil cyborg, she's only going to do any sort of enslavement in the bedroom.

Tsion has been praying in front of the Citadel and walking around it, with more and more people joining. The Greater Jerusalem government issues a demand to Misrayim to "raze the stench in the Lord's nostril, and build Him a temple instead" although they seem to be ignoring the part where the Citadel is, at least legally, private property.

They also have demanded that Azrael's scythe, that modern day golden calf, be melted down and the ingots delivered as tribute during the Feast of the Tabernacles.

If Tsion is trying to pull a Walls of Jericho, the Omega's seismometers indicate that the Citadel is safe.

Cursory testing shows that the scythe is still supernaturally sharp and there are calls to take it off display, send some iron ingots to Jerusalem, and install the scythe in some sort of automatic spinning system, with some asking for the ultimate crowd control robot, and some pointing out that it is the perfect tunnel-boring machine.

To the surprise of a lot of people, Ely LeVey is praising the new trend in spicy food, as it allows a number of traditional recipes to be resurrected. "Ladies, if you really are so enamored with progress, now's the time to trade lathes for pepper grinders!"

Before long, a swathe of little websites pop up teaching people how to grow the new varieties of veggies. Encouragingly, about half of them have been set up by believers.

The Omega's sales suffer, obviously, and within the year there are already companies making bank by selling an inferior product just by slapping a Jesus fish on the label, but this particular caper further cements Misrayim's reputation for innovation and quality. Commentators elsewhere dust off stale memes from the 1980s about Japan -- in fairness, the Omega's territory is also responsible for producing most of the world's animated pornography, at this point -- and many foreign pundits point out that if the Misrayim Renaissance - not Osaze, the Omega note - had happened a hundred years ago, the world would be a different place.

The video of Cameron Kirk Williams choking on a red pepper last year goes viral and, incidentally, shows that pepper spray might work against the Glorified.

The Nile riverbed is still dry, and most of the limnaceous soil that it contained has been carted off to greenhouses and fields; the bedrock on the bottom is exposed and in many places the sides of the riverbed have been shored up with concrete. By now, however, very few people care; even the Pharaonic Revivalists have adapted, and now their sun-boats move on Strandebeest legs for their festivals.

The Omega's counteroffer to build a new temple but keep the Citadel is met with silence.... and the shuffling of Tsion and his direct followers on the sand around the Citadel. If they wanted to scare off other visitors, so far they've been successful. From a propaganda standpoint, tearing down the Citadel may be a bit of a hit, but more plagues would probably be worse, especially since this time there's no clear answer as to what these plagues could be.

This year, the Omega have two elections to deal with; Mizrayim, which will remain under the Omega's control if they so wish with very little work, and the Pacific Coast, which is unlikely to change hands.

Tsion stands in front of the construction crew and asks them what their business there is. The foreman is a giant of a man, originally from southern Italy, who recently moved to Misrayim for the food. He looks old enough that he must be a believer, but playing the video back shows that he's just particularly hairy and has a big beard.

"We've volunteered to demolish this building. Then some of us are going to stay here, and build a church in its place."

All the altars, and the scythe, have of course already been removed.

Tsion roars. "Yes! Tear down this pustule on the face of the Earth! Let's see the false gods protect this place! Ha!"

Carlo answers levelly, "Actually, half my crew are nonbelievers; they want to spare more plagues to this cursed land. They care about it, you see. Then, the believers will stay with you

and build a church or whatever you want."

That takes some air out of Tsion's sails. In a few days, the Citadel has been razed, mostly by hand tools, and replaced with a small church that looks extremely out of place, a building that you'd expect to see in the pre-Rapture Chicago suburbs in the middle of the desert.

Bothan has picked up landscaping. Since he gets to take the MEC frame home, he's quite good at it. Kat has recently opened a deli. Damien is... doing things, including working at a day care, although she makes very sure to keep that separate from her other hobby. Heavy MECs require more maintenance than infiltrators, so relatively few live off the Omega's bases.

Hecate has some following, but not much; most people prefer gods associated with industry, commerce, and the downtrodden, like Hephestus or Mercury. Of note, Jenny found the stories about Hecate very interesting, and commented that she "gets" her geography.

Jenny demonstrates by having a couple of the Omega's construction guys build a hotel-style square staircase, with three floors, in the middle of an open field. Then, she borrows a GPS; the units are optimized for 2D performance, since most of the world has been flattened, and don't generally try to calculate altitude in default mode.

She walks around in the field, saying things like "Going west 10 steps" and "Going north 20 steps".

The GPS, of course, tracks her accurately. She points out that as long as she's in the field, the order of her movements doesn't change her start and ending point, and demonstrates this.

"And that's normal walking around! But let me show you granny's geography."

That's when she includes the staircase in her movements. Given how the staircase has been built, walking up it westward leads to a little balcony, and walking down it eastwards leads to a little sort of cellar that was quickly dug. Moving through the middle of the stairway north and south involves climbing over the hand rail, but it's possible. She demonstrates.

"See, now it matters the order in which I did my movements. I can end up one floor above, or below, or on the same floor, depending on it. Basically Granny did the same thing but without the staircase, because the staircases are already there, just not up and down, there's two more words for it..." She can't find an equivalent word in the standard language of the Millennial Kingdom. "And, the staircases are very narrow, so you have to get EXACTLY the direction and number of steps right to climb them."

The Omega have quietly encouraged people looking at pre-Christian mythologies, so Hecate has a small following. So far, Haephestus and Prometheus are doing best, mostly because they symbolise progress.

The Omega divert a few resources and a little time to follow the daily life of some of their MEC agents that hold day jobs.

Tsion has taken residence in the church built where the Citadel was, and has been preaching to anyone who wants to make the trip... which is surprisingly many, overall, enough that it becomes profitable for some locals to run a shuttle service from Amman. He isn't saying

anything new, other than that he's demanding that this year's elections be restricted to people above 100, and that believing citizens should petition this to the government. Some do. He also wants to hand-pick Misrayim's representatives to the Feast of Tabernacles. Ordinarily, the secular government has given the job to whichever believers want it, via a raffle if there were too many volunteers.

The Omega toys with the approach of spreading the idea that God is the Antichrist and the real Jesus is yet to come. So far, the Omega's theology program indicates that narrative causality is very much a thing; this has caused a resurgence in popularity of the works of Terry Pratchett. So far, the Omega's botany program has resulted in some drugs becoming available once again (they're selling fairly well) and in some spices likewise becoming available (they're selling overall a bit better than the drugs).

Subtle manipulation of the raffle ensures that those sent to the Feast of Tabernacles will try to enjoy the experience instead of lobbying.

Year: 938

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 12

The Omega have 12 cabals available. Since they have more than 9, two of them are required to maintain the Omega's systems. They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

There are 2 missionary teams in Misrayim. One of them has assisting Tsion in his church. The other has finished their report on Misrayim and are combing the desert, apparently looking for the Omega's particle accelerator installation. Ely is lobbying for other territories to stop trading with the Omega's people, to little success so far. There are 2 TOL teams there, campaigning for their own candidate.

There is one missionary team and one TOL team in the Pacific coast, both campaigning.

The documentary, commissioned by the Omega, opens with a few shots of Quinn's older and recent stunts as well as various MECs of both models performing feats of superhuman endurance, does a record screech, and promises to show the viewer what these people are like in everyday life.

Kat is shown running her deli: her MECpod sits on a pedestal in the middle of the kitchen, which is actually 4-5 residential kitchens mounted together rather than a commercial setup. This is possible due to the various obsolete MEC arms that Kat's collected and installed on the walls; some run basic routines (whip and stir for example) and some she can control directly, resulting in uniform quality homestyle cooking. Playfully, she has the interviewer tie up all but two of the hands to demonstrate how to fry garlic and red pepper properly for the viewers at home.

Damien is interviewed at the end of the work day, which Damien spent with his MECpod stuffed in a teddy bear (with a few servos for minimal motion) in a day care. The other day care workers note that kids will on average, be more open to Damien when it's about their worries and even

their little secrets, since she's smaller and innocuous. What Damien does after hours is glossed over. Damien's gender is likewise not addressed.

To provide contrast, Bothan is seen in the MEC frame, doing carpentry and masonry work; he's the boss of his little enterprise, and notes that maintenance on the MEC frame is about as costly as it would be for a small earthmover or a forklift -- that's not true, but you're subsidizing it. Much attention is given to the one time where Bothan ended up holding a building on his back when the foundations cracked; this didn't save anyone's life directly, but allowed an orderly evacuation.

Most "infiltrator" MECs can't really talk about the work they do, of course, but a couple are rounded up and interviewed; there's one doing maintenance on a submarine cable -- the interviewer has some problems convincing the cyborg merman to put on a shirt, but it gets done -- and a few working as firefighters, since they're immune to oxygen displacing gases.

Quinn is briefly interviewed about the MEC condition, and explains that she remembers the few minutes she spent in Hell very vividly. She adds that, like those who took the Mark during the Tribulation, current theology has her damned regardless of what she does and even incapable of converting if she wanted to, and shares a story of a young man during the Tribulation who took the Mark to be able to trade for food for his starving kid brother. "Tsion says that we are cursed, or demons, or whatever. We're people. We're rescues. And we are grateful."

Some of the Omega's botanists further improve the potency of the peppers they've been growing, eventually obtaining some passable pepper spray. There's no way to tell if it would work on the Glorified of course, but it makes for a low-tech alternative to wubbing modules, and it can be deployed in canisters by drones if necessary.

One interesting avenue of research that shows up serendipitously is that of making a particularly unpalatable plant (it can't be made inedible or poisonous) that can expand to take over cropland. On the opposite side of things, making staples grow easily enough that even what little farming is currently done becomes redundant should also be possible; this would leave much of the believing population with nothing to do.

The process of producing MECS, by now, is basically routine, to the point that some former TOL agents, pushed into conversion, instead decide to get a second life with the Omega as cyborgs. This trickles in a bit of intel: TOL are basically doing what they've been doing the whole time, building up the Army, but are taking advantage of the Omega's attempts to subvert a territory to try to get their own people in. Annoyingly, this effectively splits the unbeliever vote, making the job harder.

The Pacific Coast's voting age has been lowered, so the Omega's people have a chance of calling an election in the near future. Vee notes that a bit of entrepreneurial culture is starting to come back in what were its former hotbeds. She also makes the point that there's a chance of TOL winning the next election, not the Omega.

The documentary spreads pretty far out on the interwebs, and garners various responses. One thing that the Omega's filmmakers had a very hard time with, was getting positive feedback

from believers; even one of the people living in a house that MEC firefighters protected from a blaze only had to say "We are not to consort with evil spirits; I sent a case of wine to the firehouse as thanks, of course, and how they shared is their problem." Others quip that firefighters may rescue but only TurboJesus saves.

One believing mother takes her child out of the daycare after she becomes aware that Damien is a MEC and not, as she had thought, an animatronic, although she has no actual complaints to present. The filmmakers get a nice long shot of the kid throwing a giant tantrum about being separated from his friends, which includes Damien.

Jeb is fairly well known as the manager of the space program - of course, he points out that his celebrity power would be much greater if he'd actually done the manned launch he's been lobbying the Omega for, but that's expected. He's not bitter about it, and campaigns in earnest.

"TSION calls us lost. But is he telling the truth? Any hobbyist can use the canopy beacons and a bit of DIY skill to know exactly where they are, better than any ship's captain using radio lighthouses. Look at Misrayim ten years ago, from the sky, and look at it now - the Nile is dry but the fields are greener than ever. Are we promising more of the same? Yes. Yes, we are. We have come far, and we can go even farther - to infinity and beyond!"

It's a little cheesy, but it works. The elections in Misrayim leave the Omega's faction with control over the territory; the TOL-backed party quickly forms a coalition government with the Omega's politicians, and the Christian party spokesman notes that at this rate, this "licentious" form of democracy where everyone gets one vote may soon be rendered obsolete by the central government.

The representatives sent to the Tabernacles note that they will obey the Judges, but as it is, the people have spoken and it would be a greater violation of the law to override the law itself.

Quinn is fairly amused by being asked to set up a drugs distribution ring after having had to tone down her sinful image, and manages to make a game out of it, instituting a sort of dress code that imitates 1970s and 1980s gangsters for her pushers, and generally turning up the neon and disco balls.

Setting up parallel distribution channels is a bit of a chore, but the Omega manage it; before long, TOL is recruiting the dopers and albies while Omega gets the smart people. Cannabis becomes yet another thing that Misrayim can export; notably, in the absence of a Temple ruling, it's one of the few things that various territories end up disagreeing about. TOL activity diminishes as a result, and Misrayim's prosperity improves.

Ely LeVey moves to what used to be Spain; she's trying to convince people to stop trading with Misrayim. As it stands, the stereotype of "unbelievers do a better job because they're focused on this world and not the next" is starting to take hold.

Things look fairly peaceful, for now...

Missionaries in Misrayim have been involved in small incidents where some old god worship has been disrupted, but never violently; usually, the disruption involves audibly getting in the way using trumpets, vuvuzelas, and the like. Sometimes, the Omega's police force defuses the

situation by using wubbers to vibrate the instruments into silence; sometimes, this particularly difficult trick doesn't succeed, which generally results in headaches and queasiness for everyone involved.

Coming back from the Tabernacles, the representatives carry a formal document indicating this year's demands from Greater Jerusalem:

- * That missionaries be granted the right to "challenge" other worshipers in the street or even outside, but not in, their temple.
- * That in the Omega's universities at least one mandatory class (1 credit hour) cover the issue of eternal salvation, and be taught by a believer. This may lead to reaccreditation.
- * That in the next election, to represent the weight of life experience, people vote by age (one year, one vote).

Interestingly, the first demand is on papyrus in quill, while the other two use a modern format.

The quotes from Exodus and 1 Kings indicate that they want to either challenge other believers as in have a discussion with them, or challenge them to perform miracles. That's... at the very least new.

One of the side effects of God's reaction when Tsion, and the Omega assume other Glorifieds, lose an argument is that nobody wants to talk to them - even natural believers have become uneasy.

Tsion, for himself, seems to be content in staying in the church built on top of the Citadel and deliver his sermons twice a week; of course, the place has a Sky Eye pointed right at it.

By now it's pretty obvious that they are looking for an excuse to put the hammer down on Misrayim. That in itself is puzzling; both in Bible times and historically, they simply... did, there were no ultimatums.

Have the Omega managed to change the narrative this much?

After giving her geography demo, Jenny stated her desire to go back to looking for "staircases," so she can go home.

As usual, there is no direct reply from Greater Jerusalem. However, Sky Eye survey indicates that Tsion has called in most of those who historically have volunteered to represent Misrayim for the Feast of Tabernacles, and talked to them one to one for a brief amount of time.

Quinn has been spending a bit too much time getting high lately, and her combat effectiveness has suffered; either that, or her brain is starting to deteriorate after 38 years of artificial life. On the other hand, even though Misrayim is getting a lot of tourists who are only there to get high, some end up staying for the interest of a smarter society.

Jeb believes that a manned launch will at least answer the question as to whether the water canopy has an outer edge at all; the Omega are gearing up to do canopy-breaking, but can

change direction and focus on colonizing that high ground instead.

Vee knows that she's going to have to retire at some point, and has started writing down her theory of music.

Kat has definitely enjoyed the boost in popularity from her deli being featured in a documentary.

Damien is a little bummed about being asked to quit the day care after some parents complained, and has decided to focus on her other hobby. That, and driving drones.

Ely LeVey is meeting scant success in getting people to not trade with Misrayim, but is having an easier time with proposing restrictions on travel.

Site survey indicates that TOL is having a somewhat easier time recruiting, but the quality of the recruits has decreased -- not surprising given how much of the secondary drugs market they have moved into.

A quick look at Quinn's brain (she insists that she's fine) indicates that she's just been spending a significant amount of time stoned. Her brain scans are consistent with those of a Natural believer her age. Managing to get an MRI of a Glorified would be a coup indeed.

Quinn examines the old-style continuous paper printouts and takes them home without a word. Her telemetry indicates that she's exercising (which doesn't do much for mechanical limbs, but does improve her organic muscle tone and endurance).

Year: 939

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 13

The Omega have 13 cabals available. Since they have more than 9, two of them are required to maintain the Omega's systems. The Omega are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

There are 3 missionary teams in Misrayim. One of them has assisting Tsion in his church. One is looking at your installations. One is proselytising.

There is one missionary team and one TOL team in the Pacific coast, both campaigning.

Jenny has been looking at most sacred sites, trail crossroads, and what not by now. She says she

can't find any "stairways".

She's looking for "stairways", like she demonstrated, except, well, her demo was in 2D and she means it in 3D. She says that you have to be in a particular frame of mind for them, and without night, it's hard.

Also, she confirms that there's no fireflies anywhere. That's bad because her granny used those to find the stairways. "You know, catch a bunch of fireflies, let them go at a crossroads, see if they blink in our out?" That's not a story you are familiar with.

While the TOL teams in Australia prevented the Omega from doing any work on the land, they've got a stable hold on the base and the mine. There are 2 teams there. This said, they are likely gun-shy because when they tried to retake the base last, they were attacked by the Desolators.

The Omega send Quinn and Jenny to Eastern Europe, to look for the salt mine. They tell Jenny they think they know what she's doing and that the cabal they're sending with her will assist, maybe see if she can train a few people to enter that state of mind she was talking about.

The Omega help Quinn pick a survey team, and they take Jenny along.

Finding the place isn't particularly difficult - it's well-marked on the map. The problem is gaining access to it safely, which takes a while...

One thing that had been floated before was a "wall of flesh" system for Heavy MECs. The first results look very gruesome, but there is nothing preventing the installation of an organic superstrate on top of a mechanical endoskeleton. Whether this is effective against Angels, will have to be tested in the field... a few units get built, and kept on life support except for the one time when one of the Omega's agents gets involved in a Frankenstein remake. If the Omega want a terror unit, these are it; the heavies look, if possible, more reassuring in their regular frame.

Research and production synergise well and it isn't long before the Omega's MEC agents are seen wiring their spines or MECpods to drones of various types, to the point where Jeb makes each and every one of the Omega's heavies promise that they won't operate a space capsule until he's had his flight.

Damien, while genuinely bummed out, soon finds other things (and people, adults of course) to do.

The MEC video has been successful in explaining to the public what a MEC is, although there are a few incidents afterwards of people disembowelling large teddy bears in case there's a demon in it. These incidents being publicized help with the late trend of associating conversion with going slightly crazy; it's entirely possible that the last generation of humans will be majority nonbeliever. While that is a success on the Omega's part, it's also in line with the prophecies.

The launch system is a modification of the Mercury-Redstone design; it is intended to impact on the canopy, deploy stabilizing ballonets to stay in place, and use a series of impellers where the peroxide thrusters used to be, to keep attitude and hopefully move through the canopy.

The Omega were expecting protests and possibly sabotage; while the launch countdown happens opposite to Ely LeVey having staged a dramatic reading of the Tower of Babel story, and there are a few protesters outside the launch site in Timbuktu, it doesn't look like there is any drama.

Jeb has had years to get ready for this. Heightened security catches one "Styr Magnor" trying to plant a small bomb inside one of the ground control computers; the device is poorly built, and would not have put the launch in danger even if it had gone off. The man is now in custody.

Twenty seconds after the loudest noise anyone present at the launch remembers, a blue-sky bolt of lightning hits the rocket.

One of the Cosmists, Valentina, takes over CAPCOM. "Try SCE to aux".

Jeb transfers power from the rocket to the capsule battery for the flight attitude computer, and the rocket continues on its way up.

The first stage separates much lower than people expected, but right on schedule according to the math; Sky Eyes have been launched with a single-stage rocket so far, so this is new. The rocket engine and bipropellant tank opens a large parachute and starts floating lazily to the ground; most bystanders switch from watching the sky to watching the screen connected to a telescope following the capsule and second stage. Jeb reports that all systems are go so far.

Some of the Omega's botanists further improve the potency of the peppers they've been growing, eventually obtaining some passable pepper spray. There's no way to tell if it would work on the Glorified of course, but it makes for a low-tech alternative to wubbing modules, and it can be deployed in canisters by drones if necessary.

One interesting avenue of research that shows up serendipitously is that of making a particularly unpalatable plant (it can't be made inedible or poisonous) that can expand to take over cropland. On the opposite side of things, making staples grow easily enough that even what little farming is currently done becomes redundant should also be possible; this would leave much of the believing population with nothing to do.

Work begins on coming up with the grossest tasting weed possible.

The capsule impacts the canopy at a respectable four meters per second of velocity, poking it into the canopy - which the Omega know to be ordinary water, again with the same strange perfect purity that the Angelic weapons displayed - at which point Jeb jettisons the second stage and deploys the impellers. Upon jettison, the second stage drags out a wire antenna that lets the Omega's receive low resolution video and audio from the capsule.

Jeb reports that the inside of the canopy is intensely blue, he can see the moon's projection far away, also an intense blue. He's worried that there may be ice on top.

The capsule's battery is a little low due to having had to carry the first stage's flight computer, but within parameters.

Then there's a clunk, and the Omega lose video for a moment.

"Guys? There's a layer of ice here. I think I'm near the top of the canopy. I don't know how thick it is. I can blow out the retro rockets to try and poke through it and see if I can come home with just the impellers..."

Due to wind, the first stage lands safely - in the Central African territory. The engine is somewhat damaged, but it may be worth repairing it. Within minutes, local police and Moral Forces have surrounded it and called in a tow truck.

Radio survey shows that Jeb's attempt is being broadcast on a few of the global television channels.

The return system for the Cinderella capsule works as such:

- * Use impellers to go back to the canopy's inner surface.
- * Use retro rockets for push-off in case the capsule decides to "stick" to the canopy, since gravity seems normal but the water is sticking up there anyway.
- * Angle the Mercury style capsule in such a way that it will glide inland towards the desert.
- * Open the (round) parachute and wait for pickup.

Jeb can, in an emergency, ditch the capsule and deploy a parafoil to go home independently.

Jeb turns the capsule, does something which telemetry doesn't quite report correctly, and for a moment the external cameras show only orange.

"I'm using the capsule parachutes and the retro rockets to make a gas bubble, the expansion should put some pressure on the ice..."

The video feed cuts to black. Jeb screams. The very last frame shows some white dots on the black field...

The Omega decide to automate the production of drones. Their systems are not at the point where they can do this just yet, but they can outsource some of the production to machine shops run by believers. It will still take a full year to do this, but building some smite-proof drones should be feasible.

The Omega can assemble electronics automatically, and delegate the chassis machining to various shops headed by believers - they charge a premium, of course, but are told that the parts will be used for tractors and the like. The final assembly is automated in the same way that Kat's deli is.

Sentry guns are installed in the Omega's bases and buildings; since they control the base and buildings, it's easy to "trim" the sentry gun to the environment it's in, so that it can do things like avoid friendly fire. A tank type 'bot would be less discriminating when ordered to shoot things.

The Omega's organization spends three minutes in awe and apprehension until their telemetry confirms that the capsule is falling back down to Earth. It looks badly mangled.

Reporting live from the expected crash site is, unsurprisingly, Cameron Kirk Williams, who

introduces this modern-day Tower of Babel effort as misguided.

"Stars are, after all, for signs and wonders, and there is no more need for that now that the Lord is with us directly..."

Jenny and her survey teams have found the salt mine, and are mapping it. Building a base here would allow for simulating the night sky with a high degree of accuracy - the ceiling is tall enough that it's possible for eyes to focus roughly at infinity.

The Omega order the recovery team to move southwards from the expected landing location, since the capsule is just plummeting instead of trying to glide. There they find a helicopter with Cameron, a cameraman, and a pilot; they've landed and are following the thing's slow fall.

The broadcast is interspersing Ely's reading of the Tower of Babel story with Cameron's on-site reporting; they even show the last frame that came out of the capsule, mostly black with some white spot which both the Omega's guys and theirs are trying to figure out if it's stars, or dead pixels.

The capsule lands unceremoniously a hundred metres away from Cameron; the recovery team, hats in hand, start loading up the wreck as Cameron "eulogizes" Jeb by reminding the global audience that the would-be spaceman is probably in Hell wishing that he could undo the last few minutes of his life.

Flags are lowered at half mast, and some households or businesses that helped in building the capsule or were interested in space look up Jeb's food preferences for the TOL tradition of a going-away meal, which has remained amongst the Omega's forces.

"...How do you describe both the beginning and an end? He should have known better, but he didn't. What does it matter if we think we know? In the end, there's no denying the truth."

"YO! Camera guy! Look up!"

A very fast blip is coming down at or near terminal velocity.

"Definitely getting something there... It's the capsule's heat shield."

"33 kilometers and coming down."

"Was it lodged in the ice?"

The sky above is, other than a few clouds, still its usual shade of immutable cyan.

"Can't make it out, it's shedding water vapor."

Cameron hands the audio over to Ely, who warns people to not harbor false hope.

A few hundred feet above the ground, the heat shield releases the remains of Jeb's personal parachute into a sort of ribbon, starts tumbling, and then settles into a steep glide before smashing into the sand and leaving a huge skid mark, narrowly missing both Cameron and crew, and the Omega's recovery people. Cameron tells the cameraman to look back to him and away from the recovery team who are running towards where the heat shield stopped.

Cameron and Ely jointly give a heartfelt plea for the government of Osaze to stop these dangerous experiment lets more of the territory's best and brightest, however misguided, fall from the sky into the fiery pit.

Jeb's suit had a range of a few tens of meters; now that it's back in range of one of the Omega's vehicles, the Omega get signal again. Nobody is getting this signal yet, the mission control systems having already been shut down for mourning.

He's suffering from hypothermia and trying to get up. No major tissue damage other than possibly frostbite on the feet.

Telemetry indicates that Jeb is suffering from mild hypothermia and possibly frostbite in the lower extremities. The desert is warm and will take care of the former, the latter may require medical attention lest he lose some toes or maybe a foot if he is very unlucky. He may have a couple of broken ribs. He's also trying to get back up without assistance.

The recovery team are celebrating, but they aren't visible on Cameron's camera as he is alternating between himself and the wreckage.

Cameron gets a news flash on his earphone and, while showing the capsule wreck having been hoisted on the recovery truck, says that there are encouraging news, in that Osaze's parliament is studying a proposal to limit high-altitude manned flight.

"Today we have seen a stark reminder of the excesses of this so-called Renaissance. Mr. Kerman was an impassioned, gifted individual whose talents might have brought great glory to the Lord, if only-"

The cameraman tilts to show the last piece of wreckage, only to see the recovery team drag the heat shield back to the truck, save for one person who's helping Jeb stand up and walk towards the newscopter.

"... uh, hang on Ely, we have some activity here at the crash site..."

Of course, the Omega are streaming this back out on the net, as a public service. The Omega's own video is superimposed with Jeb's telemetry and digitally zoomed in, showing a pixelated Jeb take his helmet off and handing it off to the recovery crew person. The recovery truck is set up to do basic data recovery.

Hesitantly but picking up the pace, Jeb limps towards Cameron while the guy who helped him up takes the helmet and its camera to the truck's PC.

Jeb raises a hand and two gloved fingers in a victory sign, and the cheer at the launch facility is loud enough to trip seismometers.

The somber announcer at Mission Control, without skipping a beat, proclaims "... cancel the funeral, crazy kid rode the heat shield in like a skateboard! Mission accomplished!"

The Omega's video splits between the celebration at mission control and what's going on at the crash site.

Up close, it's pretty visible that Jeb is much worse for wear, from frost and fire; the cameraman

keeps recording him and the picture-perfect Cameron. Jeb grabs the Glorified reporter by the shoulders, and gives him a big hug that the man wiggles out of, then faces the camera.

"People of Earth!" he says straight into the camera "It's still full of stars!"

That's when the video feed from Cameron's cameraman cuts, going back to Ely LeVey who says that she hopes that Jeb is undoubtedly, under Cameron's guidance, giving some thoughts to converting after escaping that death-trap of a capsule.

The Omega's media show a hastily assembled infographic of the flight envelope, interspersed with people celebrating, and Valentina answering questions as best as she can. Halfway through her explanation of a better ice-breaker stage for the NEXT rocket, recovered pictures from Jeb's helmet camera start to come in from the data recovery system; they show Jeb basically crashing the capsule into the ice layer, and wriggling out of it, walking on all fours on the outside of the canopy. There, the sky is black, the stars and the Milky Way are visible in all their beauty, and the canopy itself looks like a large, icy blue expanse that covers the globe; seen from afar Earth looks like a larger version of Jupiter's moon Europa.

Celebrations begin everywhere in Misrayim and in most of the TOL installations where the Omega have telemetry, even elsewhere in other territories; to some surprise, believers are also seen thanking Yahweh for sparing the young man.

Styr Magnor is seen ranting from the conference room where he's been temporarily detained that there is no time and that this is distracting people from what's really important.

After a quick shot of Cameron returning to Amman ahead of the recovery truck, during which he says that Jeb is returning to base with the wreckage of his capsule, LeVey's transmitter has nothing more to show and switches over to the Omega's video coverage, although she keeps the audio and occasionally bleeps out or adds comments to what people are saying.

Jeb has been doused with warm water from the recovery team's canteens (which is also seen as celebratory, since the Nile is still dry) and tells all about what he did and how he did it, knowing that it's being recorded.

Of note, the Sun that the Omega see from the Earth seems to be at an angle from the Sun seen from outside the canopy (Jeb didn't look at it directly, to avoid frying the camera, but held up an arm and did a slow pan over the shadow).

The last shot he recorded before the ice started closing up was him jamming a small iron spike into the top of the canopy. No plaque; no symbols; just a nail; but it's enough.

"Omega, it's all up there! Cendrillon was right! We can leave. We can LEAVE!"

Jeb instructs the Omega to cache one of the pictures. "Red dot, twinkling! It's Mars! Like the old textbooks say. And that's Venus! Big white dot!"

He didn't have time to see if any of the old satellites were still there; they'd all be 900 years old, and probably inoperative by now.

"... Right, but what does this do for us?"

Valentina describes an ice station that could be built in stages, and used as a space port. It may even be possible to "mine" the canopy ice for hydrogen and oxygen.

Even as the measure limiting space travel is still being discussed, that declaring the 14th day of the 11th month to be Canopy Breach Day passes almost unanimously.

Christian pundits everywhere note that living outside the canopy would have very deleterious health effects. Warehouses are quickly emptied and the windows covered with blackout curtains so that disco nights and laser shows can take place. The Cosmists report that Yuri Gagarin's statue in Baikonur smiled, but they have no proof, which is admittedly too bad. The Temple Tribunal begins a special session.

Jeb flippantly offers Cameron an exclusive interview and is then carted off to the Timbuktu facility's medical wing, who recommend a warm bath and note that there's probably a line of people wanting to give up part of their daily water ration to let it happen.

Cameron Kirk Williams "prayerfully and respectfully declines" to interview Jeb, much to the derision of journalists and bloggers that are practically mobbing the medical center.

Most notable is that in quite a few places even believers are thanking Yahweh and celebrating. A number of places break out and launch fireworks. Even TOL bases are in agitation; the Omega's hooks into their network indicate that there's going to be a lot of hangovers tomorrow.

Quinn reports that while exploring, a few minutes ago, Jenny disappeared. Jenny pokes her head on the video window; she is smiling almost as much as Jeb is, in the bathtub.

Jenny, Quinn and the survey team were exploring the cave when they heard about Jeb's crash and survival; Quinn reports Jenny jumping to the side, behind a corner in the underground salt mine, and disappearing for a few minutes. Jenny reports Quinn doing the same thing. The rest of the team were mapping elsewhere, and didn't see this.

At the same time - literally at the same time, margin of error of twenty seconds - Tsion has left the church he's based in and, with surprising largesse from his expense account, rented a STOL taxi to Cairo. Once on the plane, he has radioed ATC indicating that he is headed to the parliament building and they are to shut down a nearby soccer field so that he may land; the place is not hosting an event at this time.

Jenny says that she got it to work, but the staircase didn't really go anywhere. She yanks the camera off the mount and aims it towards a piece of cave fungus that seems to be happily inhabited by glow worms. Zooming in shows that they have stubby wings.

Building a base in and around the salt mine would require extra effort to keep this chamber sealed, but it would make it easier to conduct systematic breeding efforts.

Jeb has, according to reports, fallen asleep after letting the bathtub drain off, asked for a number of towels, and let Damien be brought in for a visit. All over the world, people are still celebrating.

The small airplane keeps flying towards Cairo. The pilot is directed to head towards the regular airfield; Tsion gets on the radio and indicates that he is bound by a higher Authority. After a bit

of back and forth, Tsion tells the pilot to fly on top of Parliament instead.

Naturally, that raises all sort of red flags; Misrayim doesn't really have an air force, but a police helicopter quickly chases the small airplane, and so do a few of the Omega's drones. The pilot is instructed to fly well above the parliament building, and then land as soon as possible.

He complies. When he's dead above the high-rise, Tsion simply jumps off, and lands on the roof while the poor pilot is escorted to the airfield.

"Firebrand preacher doing a Superhero Landing on top of Parliament" is definitely something that warrants an evacuation; when Tsion marches into the legislative hall, most of the MPs have left - including some of the Christian party. If Tsion was hoping to have a quorum, he'd be sorely disappointed.

He walks in the middle of the auditorium, and speaks loud and clear despite not having a megaphone.

"Woe to you, says the Lord God of Israel! For years you have permitted all kinds of wickedness and lawlessness! In His mercy He sent warnings to you, and you ignored them! Today, you brazenly allowed a misguided young man to compound upon the error of Babel.

The Lord has restored upon you a pure language, and does not wish to sully it! But your lawlessness stops today. Return to your homes, and pray for forgiveness! Delight in His ways. Seek His face. Follow His statutes. Never again disobey His commands.

And henceforth this land shall be known as Osaze once more. Lest you fear that His wrath evidences something other than His love, imagine what He could have done in the face of this ultimate insult.

Now, come forth those of stalwart faith! Your rebukes had too little power, your reproach too little strength. But you served, and for this you shall bear the reward and the burden!"

Picking from the few legislators that had remained, and sticking exclusively to Christians over the age of 100, Tsion reassigns various government posts, from finance minister to transportation secretary, all under the leadership of Zaki Ababneh (Smitty's son) after revealing that he has been appointed by God as the territory's moral guardian when the Plagues began. The new transportation secretary is given instructions to draft legislation outlawing space travel.

All this happens in a few minutes; Tsion speaks quickly and with no hesitation. The other legislators are safely in the lobby, and the Omega's squad is ready to intervene. Unbeknownst to most, the Omega also directly control the building's doors (it's a parliament building, so they are bulletproof and can be deadbolted), extinguishers, lights, and internal cameras.

For now, Misrayim's legislative body sets up shop in the tennis court.

In the meantime, Jenny and Quinn compare notes: it seems that in the intense emotional moment from thinking that Jeb was dead to knowing that he was alive and he had succeeded, Jenny was able to access one of those "staircases" into what amounts to be a pocket dimension. Unfortunately, it was basically empty.

Since the Omega control most of the channels by which government instructions are relayed, ignoring Tsion and company is feasible, at least until they notice that their commands are not being obeyed. Encouraging people to ignore a nonrepresentative government is also possible. The problem is that Tsion can call all manners of wrath of God upon the land, at least in theory.

For now, the main reason why there isn't complete chaos is that most everyone is too busy celebrating the first man in space in 900 years. Foreign news is treating this as a government reshuffle, so far, and internal news are treating it as a bunch of protesters having done a sit-in in the parliament building. The Omega can, of course, have the latter do otherwise.

The secular parliament passes a resolution indicating that until the takeover attempt is over, business should continue as usual; the Christian parliament is writing a series of resolution that try to harmonize the reality of a modern country with Levitical law. They can't actually publish them without the Omega's help, at least until they notice that the teletype in Parliament goes nowhere unless it's routed by the Omega.

The Omega estimate that they will notice in 24 hours if the Omega simply leave them incommunicado, or in 36 if they generate written reports that falsify a country acquiescing to their demands (the Omega cannot generate convincing audio or video reports, their GPUs are still early 2000s level).

Jenny says that you have to have a certain attitude to use the "staircases". It depends between people. For her, it's always been fulfilling her desire to explore, which made it easy, but this Earth is really, really uniform - if you've seen one place, you've seen all of them; that's why she was hunting down ruins.

Knowing that space exploration was possible definitely did the trick, at least once.

She notes that it used to be a lot easier.

Dennis, one of the junior members of the Omega's political faction, starts drafting a self-government system which the Omega itself can mediate.

The Omega have Misrayim's secular parliament formally dissolve after turning over most powers to local communities

The legislators under the Omega's control quickly convince the rest that this is the safest course of action; even the Christian parliamentarians who left the buildings quickly come around, after it's pointed out to them that this lets them build intentional communities.

While Parliament legislates itself out of commission, the Omega's sysadmins spin off some of their systems to run a non-sentient Master Control Program that can coordinate e-voting, inter-settlement commerce, and other details of modern life. The Omega's sysadmins estimate that from an efficiency standpoint they could run things 900-1200 times better than any human.

A round of e-voting is set immediately, with a 36 hour closing time, for people to accept the terms; the libertarian wing of the Omega's party does so almost too readily.

Finally, Dennis moves that Parliament be dissolved, sine die. Someone throws the ceremonial mace into a window of the old parliament building, where at least according to the Omega's

telemetry, it remains.

- * The Omega's systems are now more intimately involved with running the territory, which ties up a cabal.

- * The Omega retain control of the territory, at least most of the time.

- * Zaki Ababneh and Tsion Ben-Judah are now nominally in control of "Osaze" again. It remains to be seen whether the Nile will flow again.

Security forces keep the Parliament building surrounded, but the ones who are trying to be conspicuous are given dress uniforms. After a few hours, the Omega's telemetry indicates that a few refrigerators in the Parliament building have been raided. The Misrayim flag is lowered, and comes back up with the Christian flag on top of it; Tsion mostly picked elderly legislators, some of them more than 800 years old, and has to do the flag-raising himself.

Reactions to this are mixed. Most people don't like taking direct orders from a machine, but most people are very happy to delegate things like requisition forms for firefighting gear, accounting, and so on to one.

A few communities end up being directly managed by the MCP, most only take up the offer to have the MCP act as a comptroller, and a few refuse the offer. Interestingly, a handful of Christian communities excitedly email Tsion (on his private email, which he probably won't check for a couple of days at least) that they have convinced the central government to leave them alone, finally!

After a sound ten hours of sleep, Jeb gives a few quick interviews in which he (and Valentina) show off what their plans for the outer side of the canopy is. "We could have a man on the Moon in ten years". "And a woman on Mars in twenty."

Asked about the parliamentary crisis, the astronaut and the Cosmist den-mother answer that they haven't really paid attention.

Oddly, the news of Tsion's takeover doesn't seem to have hit the foreign airwaves yet.

By the time Tsion and the new directorate realize that none of their proclamations have gone through, the rest of the territory, divided by communities in the desert and by neighborhood in the cities, has uniformly agreed to the new Charter as a voluntary binding contract of mutual cooperation; if anything, the Omega have slightly better control of the economy than they did before. The Omega have effectively lost control of the villages that were majority-believer, but even they have agreed to the decentralized government system.

The Secretary for Spiritual Health and Hygiene figures out that no orders have gone out of the building only after a day, when he pops out of the front door to tell the police still cordoning the building that they've run out of snacks. The officer explains that they are an honor guard (which is believable, given the dress uniform, but then why are the police line markers all turned inwards?) and has to ask the dignitary what his position is. Catering shows up, but not before the directorate figures out that their phone and data lines are down.

In the month or so left before the end of the year, the Directorate manage to repeal the Charter

(which by now pretty much all of the Omega's citizens have signed on to), revise the higher education curricula (which by now have been largely supplanted by e-learning, the university campuses having been largely turned classrooms into labs or joined them together into auditoria for the rare in-person seminar), reinstate the Millennium Force as a sort of vice police giving them partial law enforcement status, which means that under community guidelines, they have to carry a trackable GPS and a body camera, and so on. Effectively, Tsion and Zaki are only in control of the criminal court system, which results in most communities deciding to bring most matters including petty theft and vandalism under civil or contractual law.

Quinn and Jenny return from Eastern Europe to find some more MFers on the street, a lot of libertarian "preachers" extolling the virtues of the new system, and quite a few missionaries with their tongues tied since their 1980s-era literature advocates exactly this sort of limited government as the Godly option.

Year: 940

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 13

The Omega have 13 cabals available. Since they have more than 9, two of them are required to maintain the Omega's systems. Since they are in a soft-takeover state in Osaze, one is tied up running interference with the nominal government. The Omega are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

There are 2 missionary teams in Osaze. Both are going crazy trying to get people to recognize their official status and mostly getting pats on the shoulders in return. Ely has been uncharacteristically quiet.

There is one missionary team and one TOL team in the Pacific coast, both are mostly messing with each other.

The Nile has not yet resumed flowing.

Styr Magnor has escaped custody, being as everyone was too busy partying.

It's not particularly difficult to advertise Misray electronics, since they're objectively better than anything currently made in the Pacific Islands or in Eastern Asia. Some people just won't buy something without a Jesus fish on it, though; the problem is simply solved by routing some of the Omega's domestic production towards resellers who don't mind laser-cutting one in place. The Omega sold them the laser cutter, too.

Jeb leaves for the Pacific Coast and finds that he's been put on a no-fly list by the nominal government.; he cannot be a passenger on one of the few airliners that still cross the skies. The problem is quickly solved when the co-pilot decides to take the day off and Jeb is quickly offered a job. The airframe is derived from the venerable Boeing 707; upon arrival, Jeb characterizes the flight as "sort of boring", but none of the passengers do. Jeb lets himself enjoy his celebrity status for a while, tours the territory, and after every talk he gives about aerospace, he notes that historically the US and Canada were proud of their spacefaring status. He comes home with a lot of space related fan art, a few marriage proposals - one from a believer even - and a bit of a hangover.

Quinn, Jenny and a survey team end up scouring the endless grasslands and corn field that make up the American heartland. It's one of the most boring jobs any of them have ever done, to the point that even finding a crossroads to perform a sacrifice to Hecate to is difficult. The team is a little squeamish about literally killing a puppy, and they only do so after giving about a tenth of

their mission budget to an animal shelter. Half hoping that it may help them find the seed vault (it may be where the map says it is, but the territory here is incredibly uniform and the Omega's GPS system uses a different map datum than the pre-Rapture one) they eventually come to a cross between two farm roads, and set up. Jenny doesn't have the stomach to go through with killing a puppy, especially not with a ritual knife.

Vee is, as the Omega know, a good manager; she assists in integrating wubbers into the drone tanks that the Omega have standardized on. Most importantly, she works out the supply chain issues that will allow building drones with no, or only believer, labor, performed on them. Standard size is 500~2000lbs.

Kat travels back and forth between Australia and Osaze (she's also on a no-fly list, but her and her Desolators end up chartering a cargo plane anyway) to make use of the particle accelerator and the nuclear ore mine. After having a Sky Eye abort its mission and scoop up some of the canopy water while doing so, she determines that it also is completely free of isotopes, in this case deuterium, tritium and oxygen other than oxygen-16. This doesn't seem to give canopy water any special properties. However, she does find out that water from other sources has a lot more deuterium atoms than described in textbooks, perhaps as a result of there being none in the canopy; a readily available source of heavy water will make further research easier and safer. Also, pancakes made with heavy water don't taste any different.

Coming back, Kat finds that a small group of Millennium Force surveyors have found the Omega's particle accelerator. They are worried that the complex does not have a chapel. Kat would like to test the new, safer neutron emitter on the surveyors.

Jeb propagandizes an arrangement like Osaze's today.

Jeb points out to TOL cells and the like that it's a good way to keep the psalties off one's back, and to the general public that small, locally focused government is something that has been in the faith-based playbook for years. The Omega's estimate that a takeover will be possible, but with TOL having a 20% chance of hijacking the process.

The survey team has been made out of people who do believe in Hecate. However, they're fairly frustrated - the Millennial Earth is flat, but Middle America is if possible even flatter; there are just no landmarks. Quinn's opinion on the old gods is that she'll work with them if they show up and she'll kick them in the face if they act up. Jenny has read all the Omega's texts on mythology, which seems to have confused her memory a bit.

The prayer is recited, the defenseless furry creature dies very quickly, so there's that. Nothing seems to happen. Unsurprisingly, Jenny breaks out in tears. Surprisingly, after it's all done, she sets her wubber to "heat" (itself a difficult feat) and cooks the puppy, then starts eating it. When asked what she's doing, she explains that well, Hecate obviously isn't going to appear and eat any, and her granny said that wasting food was one of the few sins that really were sins. The Omega's records show that it's the first time a human eats meat in centuries without instantly throwing up. The rest of the team, including Quinn and the surveyor who killed the puppy, manage a small morsel before feeling sick. There's no sign of the seed vault, but the Omega do get a tissue sample from the cooked puppy.

The Omega apologises to Jenny. Jenny solemnly accepts the apology. Very solemnly, in fact.

Vee focuses on heavier drone tanks, reasoning that a commonality of mounts with heavy MECs makes sense strategically. The Omega's MEC and AI programs have advanced enough that the Omega can begin building a drone force that can, at least to start with, supplement their sentient agents.

Jenny says that her granny's name was Alma. Jenny's either not very good at drawing, or her granny was -very- curvy; probably both. And, apparently, the old woman had hairy legs, which would make sense if she's Mediterranean.

The missionaries disappearing will be known; the only thing in the accelerator that's of some worry is that it has been used to double-check Einstein's numbers when the GPS system was built, which disproves creationism, and the fact that Azrael's scythe is kept there in a lead-lined vault.

The Omega's botany program has just started. They are currently selling a lot of opium to TOL, a lot of cooking spices to everyone, and the Omega can direct their nuclear research group to mutate corn using 1950s style "atomic gardens".

There are 2 missionary teams in Osaze. Both are going crazy trying to get people to recognize their official status and mostly getting pats on the shoulders in return.

There is 1 missionary team and 1 TOL cell in Pacifica. They are campaigning.

There are 2 TOL cells in Australia. They are actively trying to work out how to retake the nuclear ore mine.

Ely has changed her tone considerably; now she's trying to retcon Osaze's achievements as having been due to the new government rather than despite it.

Tsion has been busy trying to run Osaze, but has announced that he will resume his place as a missionary.

Paul Stepola, former security director for the USSA, has announced coming out of retirement to help with the "seditious groups" in Osaze. Natural.

The Nile has not yet resumed flowing.

Styr Magnor has remained elusive.

Year: 941

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 13

The Omega have 13 cabals total; 10 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

The Omega split their personnel amongst their bases to work on the newest Mark of MEC kits. By now, the "infiltrator" system can range from a multi-pacemaker and a few wires to a setup like Quinn's, and the "heavy" system can give the Omega unstoppable cybernetic behemoths, or wall-of-flesh Frankenstein monsters. They manage to outfit another group of undead agents; by now, almost all of the dead bodies that are implanted with the MEC system reanimate upon death-by-unbelief. Some still go insane from having spent a few minutes in Hell, however. A few agents have started getting the pacemakers installed pre-emptively, complete with a 'Logan's Run' bioluminescent implant in the hand to signal imminent activation.

Jenny seems more at ease around Vee than she does around Quinn. The "staircase" find in the salt mine has been a fluke, so far, but it's lifted Jenny's spirits considerably. The survey team combs the Rub-al-Khali and makes contact with the few people living in the desert rather than on the now-fertile coasts; thanks to the team's understanding of water discipline, they manage to get along well with the locals. The Empty Quarter is just as Empty as it was pre-Rapture, however, geological survey and a bit of slant drilling shows that Greater Jerusalem sits on one monolithic block of bedrock - very strong, but also somewhat vulnerable to shattering. Building a base here would allow for a tunnel to be dug inside Greater Jerusalem - realistically, it could only be used once, but there's only one God to neutralize, at least for now.

Either way, Jenny would like to stay with the locals for a while.

Jeb goes back to doing what he does best; he's still at least as famous as many minor Old Testament Saints, but the random marriage proposals have stopped (the random altar calls haven't, but he's developed a script for those: impress me with your engineering knowledge and

I'll give you an hour of my time in which to try to convert me).

Jeb and Valentina set up an internal competition about canopy station designs, and figure that it would be a serious investment, but building a station on the canopy that can make some of the water and ice into fuel would result in a perfect platform to further explore the solar system with. At minimum, the propaganda value of new space pictures is undeniable, as is the science return. At best, it may be possible to build a self-sustaining colony on Mars by the year +1000.

Quinn and Damien spearhead the effort to have Pacifica's new legislative body delegate power to local communities, pointing at Osaze's example; Quinn campaigns at clubs and pubs, Damien takes the time to persuade local leaders one-on-one, and their support groups campaign overtly and even start setting up a clone of the Colossus system for running the bureaucracy automatically if towns and hamlets opt-in to it.

What they didn't count on was TOL interference; their party has been also campaigning on the Osaze/Misrayim model, but they point out that the Renaissance started with a full takeover, and that viewpoint coupled with a "Pacifica for Pacificans" attitude seems to get a lot of traction. The Christian party, of course, warns of Divine wrath, but after your results in northern Africa, the threat is more hollow than it used to be.

Onut Ramp, the TOL candidate for First Speaker, is holding a slight advantage in the polls compared to the Omega's own (whose platform is to devolve power locally and then resign in favor of the Christian incumbent).

Vee and her surveyors finish seismically mapping out the Greater Jerusalem plate, and leave; the Omega keep low level surveillance on Jenny. She is quickly adopted into a neo-Bedouin tribe whom the Omega suspect of being Frank Herbert fans (they got actual working stillsuits, so they got that going for them) and proves really good at eluding the Omega's surveillance for brief periods of time. She seems to have kept a taste for meat, and spends some days persistence-hunting small animals, mostly kangaroo rats. This impresses the locals somewhat.

Kat only has a skeleton crew at the nuclear mine, but the occasional show of force keeps TOLers at bay. Not much gets done in terms of research, but the Omega still have a trickle of various radioactive materials coming in.

Valentina is very happy about letting believers play with space things; the Omega's space program isn't a secret anyway. Unsurprisingly, this subjects her and Jeb to an endless litany of cheerful "reasons" as to why the observable universe really is 6000 years old, but a few are pretty good at the engineering part of things. Osaze's government still says that sending humans above the canopy is reckless, dangerous, impious and illegal, but oddly enough they haven't pronounced a judgement about unmanned probes.

Kat keeps up the pretense of the base being fully manned, but warns that the TOLers are getting wise to it.

Quinn and Damien don't even have to hide; parties tend to be where TOL, the Omega's people, and other undecideds mingle, and it's too loud for politics. The Omega's group retires quickly after Mr. Ramp starts getting intoxicated (of his own accord) and call the vice cops on the

warehouse.

This brings the issue as to whether someone who has been arrested for pagan revelry can run for office; surprisingly, there's nothing about it in Leviticus.

Mr. Ramp drops out of the race after it's clear that his replacement would adopt the same policies, in order to not give the Christians ammunition; that said, his replacement has none of the charisma and it's understood by all that he would just be a figurehead... pretty much like the Omega's own guy; both of them even admit it. Pundits note that this is probably the strangest election in a good 900 years.

The election is close, but the Omega's candidate wins it fairly, much to the ire of the Greater Jerusalem representative. Much to his surprise, however, the Omega's candidate announces that he does not feel competent to assume the speakership, and will resign in favor of the previous incumbent after working out how to do so within the existing legal framework, in a week or so.

During that week, the necessary measures to turn Pacifica from a unified territory under Greater Jerusalem into a loose federation of mostly autonomous communities are railroaded through the legislature.

One of the Omega's cabals stays behind to operate the Colossus system for Pacifica.

Paul Stepola has announced his intention to track down "Styr Magnor and his robotic conspiracy" and has started his investigations on the Atlantic East Coast.

The "CrossOverCables" blog has resumed publishing; Bahira has moved into one of Osaze's Christian villages, and has all the good things to say about it. She and Tsion are openly arguing about the space program's place in the territory's future.

Damien thinks that the Omega should start dating, but they figure that one serendipitous AI is enough for one planet. The two Colossus systems work at capacity, and make it easy for the Omega to further distribute themselves; by now, should they lose all territorial assets except any one base, the Omega could still operate.

Tsion is roaming Osaze once again, mostly being a nuisance. He's ordering people to shut down their desalinators so that he and a handful of MFers can build a well, teaching agricultural techniques to people who have mostly delegated that to robots, that sort of thing. Cameron Williams follows his mission trip around and provides a steady stream of MST3K-style videos on OmegaTube.

Ely is puzzled by the fact that almost nobody in Osaze wants to convert and wants to move back to America.

The Nile has not yet resumed flowing.

Styr Magnor has remained elusive.

The Omega's sensors indicate that their base in Australia may be attacked (2 TOL cells in region).

Year: 942

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 14

The Omega have 14 cabals total; 10 are available.

The Omega are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

Kat isn't much for propaganda efforts, preferring the direct approach. This naturally segues into a "Who Rules Barter Town?" skit back at base in which she ends up playing both Master and Blaster courtesy of an extension cable.

The Only Light attacks the Australia base, but due to the Omega's overwhelming technological superiority and the fact that the Omega's guys know how to fight in a radiation suit while their guys don't, they are repelled until such a time as when they decide to try again.

Jenny comes back to Osaze to find the whole soft-takeover situation truly hilarious. She seems to have grown up a bit, or maybe it's just the harsh desert hair, and has traded a stillsuit for a year of work. Being omnivorous doesn't seem to have had any ill effect on her diet. She got a very detailed tattoo of three jerboa skulls on her shoulder.

The new drones get a trial by fire when TOLers attack; without even using weapons, they patrol the base's corridors and table-flip The Only Light troopers who had the presence of mind to bring riot shields.

Jenny is happy to work with Vee again; she's pretty good with her wubber, although not

extraordinarily so. Vee figures that personal wubbers are as good as they can get; they're about as lethal as a handgun and can do a number of other things besides, from shaking door locks to pieces, to starting fires via atmospheric lensing, to simply making an enemy crap their pants.

"So, we've got two basic option from here. We can scale up so that our heavies and drone tanks can carry longer-range sonic weapons. With dedicated Angel-fighters thrown in, I doubt that even the wrath of God could stop a MEC-and-tank charge if they were carrying heavy wubbers.

Or, we can scale up in a different way to perfect the Sonic Piledriver design. That wouldn't be very useful in a firefight, being outranged by conventional artillery, but it has incredible potential for demolitions. Imagine ramming a high-rise building, or a prison, or a bridge, with a van-sized vehicle and vibrating it to pieces in five minutes.

Either way, we've solved the vibration dampening problem that has prevented us from using Azrael's scythe for tunnel-boring. Problem is, we've only got the one."

Jenny overall seems... somewhat more bloodthirsty than Vee, on average.

At this point, MEC production is pretty routine.

Zaki Ababneh's attempts to rule Osaze get in the way, reducing prosperity slightly. However, Christians have learned to be a bit more cyber-savvy; the Omega aren't sure if this is good or bad.

The Temple Tribunal has decreed that MEC agents are in fact demons from hell which have possessed the bodies of the not quite dead.

After a few minutes of the guy praying for forgiveness and being coldly told that even according to the Temple scholars, it's too late, he calms down (after mild sedation) and asks if the Omega are the Worldwide Communist Gangster Computer God that TOL has been warning their agents about.

What the Omega glean from this man, name of Francis, is that TOL has begun its final push to build the Great Army; they believe that Satan will be released in +997, and roam the earth for two years before revealing himself just before the final charge. Their job is to covertly take over the Middle East territory, move all the troops and war vehicles there, and then be ready to begin sieging Greater Jerusalem by that year.

According to current TOL doctrine, the Omega, the False Light, exist as a way to distract the free-thinking people of the world from this supreme effort, instead building civilian projects and communist governments that will be of no use whatsoever if the world gets destroyed. The Omega have been accused of being a false devil!

Francis says that only Lucifer has a hope of killing Yahweh... or so he thought. Now he thinks it's hopeless.

"So it's not true that Azrael is dead? We were told that your people got lucky, and that we should recover its scythe, since only Lucifer may wield it."

The Omega give Francis a quick overview of their research projects in video clip show format; he

recognizes Quinn, of course, and he recognizes Jeb from the launch. When shown Heavy MECs, he's asked if that's what's going to happen to him.

He's still sedated, so the full impact of no longer having a sense of touch hasn't come through yet. Since he was mostly whole, he's been given a MEC unit and replacement feet and lower legs (the originals were melted with toxic sludge), which are currently chained together. He has been sitting down in an interrogation room with a screen and camera the whole time and may not yet have noticed.

The Omega show the full video, it's not like nobody knows.

"No, I don't plan on giving you a combat frame"

That reassures the guy quite a bit; he likes being human, getting high, getting laid, and all that. The Omega learn that most of TOL at this point is addicted to something or other, and their factory work is at least partially paid for in drugs; no wonder their plan doesn't go past WW2-era vehicles. Some young recruits are beginning to be trained in actual warfare.

He asks about laser guns of sci-fi stuff like that. Is the rumor that wubbers have a "set people on fire" setting true? (Technically it is, but only a few people can make it work with their voice).

"If we go out to space, won't people still go to Hell when they die? I mean, I'm still going to get old and so on, right?"

Quite a few Natural believers are, in fact, almost too feeble to move; a lot of ministries like Children of the Tribulation have effectively turned into geriatric care centers.

Francis gives the Omega some details about TOL - the Council of Seven is still in place, and the current Sunday is young enough that he's expected to hold the position until the end; most TOL cells are out recruiting and most TOL bases are building weapons or giving the workers a place to get high in relative safety; there are projects in place to use the Omega's network as a recruiting tool, "aimed at people who aren't seduced by the Gangster Computer God's techno-utopian promises."

Francis asks when does the sedative wear off.

Unsurprisingly, the guy bites his forearm to see if the Omega are serious. Likewise unsurprisingly, he hits bone (The Omega lose a fair amount of forearms this way).

"No! No! It's like that one movie with Merry! Streep! I'm going to fall to pieces! THIS is hell!"

The Omega put the MEC unit in sleep mode before he smashes his head into the table more than twice.

Jenny paints a picture of a vaguely French-Italian Riviera, with some landmarks recognizable in period data, some not. She remembers the Tribulation as something that mostly sort of happened around her, with people going to ground like their grandparents had during WW2, and remembers being really little during it.

Either the people in her little town were really into historical revivalism, or there's some Roman or Celt stuff mixed in there, as far as the Omega's pattern recognition can tell. She talks of early-

nineties style computers, 1960s style cars (which would have been around decades later, if well maintained), renaissance style houses (likewise) and of what sounds a lot like Roman legionaries instead of policemen.

It could also be the confused memories of a little girl who may have mistaken a historical festival for the real thing, of course. Or not.

Jenny claims that Granny was "pretty ancient" and was around in the time of Hitler, and that she "skipped" a few times just to stay in shape for it, but she used to do that a lot in The Sixties, mostly using a fishing boat to smuggle cigarettes and weed from Corsica to the mainland.

Most of the Omega's troops are in good spirits, save for some MECs that are beginning to show signs of depression.

Jeb wants to get back up there, big surprise. "I wish you could scan my brain, Omega. It's FULL of STARS!"

Quinn wants some acid, mostly. Years without the sense of touch (and with the knowledge that she has first pick on spare parts) are making her a bit reckless. "Honestly? Ever after the fight with Azrael, it's all felt sort of pointless. Like we're treading water. I'm ready for the next big caper!"

Vee wants to stop wracking her brain about how to put a stop to all this, but failing that, some DJing lessons would help - she may be the Maven of the Waveforms, but she's not that good at keeping people dancing. "I only have a few years, I want to make a dent in this."

Kat wants to personally do a nuclear touchdown on TurboJesus' head, although she recommends against focusing on bombs because the Tribulation opened with a failed nuclear strike. "Did you read about all the awesome things people used to do with bacon?"

Damien wants a banana, as described in the old textbooks; the ones here are bland, like plantains. "Long, thick and juicy right at the top. Mmm!"

Jenny no longer wants to go home as much; she's having fun. "Why don't we just ask God if he lets people leave?"

The Omega's guys do get to do some of their own stuff on downtime, that's not a worry. If the Omega are feeling lavish, they can devote a cabal to entertaining the rest of the Omega's workforce. This may or may not help recruitment.

So far, the Glorified seem to have dismissed the Omega as a mere machine... however, negotiation may be possible, if not with Yahweh, at least with people on his team.

Some believers are genuinely conflicted; on one hand, they have been given very precise marching orders, on the other, they've seen heavy MECs put out fires, they've enjoyed Osaze's new prosperity... Annoyingly for the Omega, these feelings tend to go away with the next church meeting (usually, Wednesday nights and twice on Sundays).

Jenny may simply not be able to interact with the Glorified, but, Yahweh claims to be all-seeing.

Quinn does get to Pyongyang, and while she and her surveyors eventually do find some nuclear

material, the hot stuff in the warheads has decayed past the point of usability after 900 years. However, the warheads themselves are usable, and one can be put back together out of the bits of the others.

After consulting with Quinn and Kat, the Omega decide to reverse-engineer the nuke. After all, the technology was created from scratch in 5 years during wartime; it should be possible to make more, and the Omega have 60 years to get their engineers to invent something to burn Jesus' house down with. If life gives you lemons...

Then, the Omega figure that this boon can be used to skip some research on shaped charges. Kat is told to work on nuclear reactors; having breeder reactors will eventually result in a bomb, and there are many other things that it can do - for example, having a nuclear reactor makes it easier to hide a base since it doesn't require solar panels or a hookup to a power plant.

Tsion has officially left Osaze's government, such as it is, in the hands of the much put-upon Zaki Ababneh, who has been spending most of his time trying to get most of his citizens to, well, acknowledge him. Under him is a directorate of good Christian elders who draft and enact laws that almost nobody follows and act as an appellate court that almost nobody calls upon to settle disputes. This still gets in the way of work, a little bit, of course. The Glorified theologian is now roaming around the small settlements, proclaiming that the Nile will flow again when Osaze returns to being a majority-believer territory and building revival tents that attract little attention other than from people who have just turned 99 and prefer conversion to implantation.

Styr Magnor, as "Angry Storm", has claimed responsibility for a series of attacks on the Atlantic East Coast. His modus operandi is to cut power to buildings, invariably at "night" when commercial facilities are unused, and then shell them from a distance using a mortar. So far there have been maybe one or two deaths, but some amount of financial damage; Magnor "claims" the destroyed building for himself and warns against repairing them.

Paul Stepola is said to be hot on his trail.

Cameron Williams divides his time between helping out at Children of the Tribulation, a geriatric care center in Greater Jerusalem, and bumbling around Osaze covering Tsion's revival meetings.

Francis seems to react well (or somewhat, at least) to being kept high most of the time. He shares some more TOL intel: the organization is busy building a land army and acting as the bottom half of the Omega's drug distribution network. Their plan hasn't changed any. They expect Satan to show up either in +997, or at the last minute in +1000. As far as he knows, they have about 20 cells all over the world, and about 10 bases; he thinks TOL is going to build a big staging area in the Middle East.

The Temple has established that MEC agents are, in fact, demons. An Angel may show up if one does something overtly hostile to a Glorified.

Note that Francis is pretty shit at, well, anything; he was a junkie before and still is.

Having a disposable asset to try to pick a fight with a Glorified is good; making sure the Omega

are ready to make full use of this is better.

Plans to build a sort of MEC "zombie horde" with cheap metabolic extension controllers and heavy drugging for control were shelved long ago, but Francis was an enemy, and made his choices.

Quinn thinks that the fight at the end of the world might be interesting, but it'd be more elegant to prevent it - why use a bludgeon when a dagger will do.

Vee is concerned about the lack of shock-and-awe options like nuclear bombs, orbital weapons, or demolition systems.

Kat believes that a war of attrition can actually be won: even if TurboJesus annihilates TOL's army, what of the Omega's?

Jeb recommends letting TOL and Yahweh have their silly fight and putting it on Martian pay-per-view.

Damien wonders what happens if the Great Army is made to attack New Jerusalem early.

Year: 943

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 15

The Omega have 15 cabals total; 11 are available.

The Omega are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

Vee once again takes Jenny, and an initial construction crew sets up in the Wieliczka salt mine. Great care is taken to not disturb the wingless firefly colony, which Jenny is unofficially put in charge of, with good results. Vee reckons that it should be possible to build a realistic recreation of the night sky in here, which may help with training astronauts, or recreating events that used to be associated with night-time. Some of the salt art is lost (due to overenthusiastic use of wubbers to separate the crystal formations) but most is preserved; a few quick attempts are made to use Azrael's scythe, and they are successful, but Vee is worried about corrosion and

discontinues the experiment. "We may only have one shot at using this thing. Let's make it count." Before long, a section of a town is planned in one of the great underground chambers, affectionately dubbed "Night City" and to be filled with neon. It should become possible to make this place self-sufficient in five years, although production facilities go up within the first year.

Kat keeps an eye on the nuclear mine while metabolic extension controllers are churned out at a steady pace. The job is simple; those who sign up for it can be turned into Infiltrator MECs if they die of unbelief at 100, or Heavy MECs if they die earlier from accident or injury. Kat's job is just to match construction of the appropriate number of frames with the expected demand. Volunteers are given special sedatives that disable their sense of touch for a few days in order to make sure that there's informed consent about the MEC system limitations; since the technology is public, no name changes are required anymore, and quite a few early adopters have returned to their families by now. Unfortunately, those with believing relatives have been almost universally rejected (the few exceptions being those with very elderly Natural relatives, who are feeble enough to depend on the revenants' care and may not have understood the situation).

Jeb and Valentina have planned out an ISRU system for the canopy station; six launches should be sufficient for setting up a base up there, with two more necessary to establish actual orbital capabilities.

Damien works closely with Kat trying to refine the MEC system; by now, the basic implant can be applied by a single paramedic, keeping the brain, heart and lungs stimulated and the patient knocked out to avoid experiencing Hell until the body can be taken to a surgeon for the brain snip. All bodies get up, and this method has a less than 10% chance of failure, usually due to incomplete sedation, experiencing Hell-pain for too long, and insanity.

Damien reports that, in just the right conditions, something very close to an orgasm can be triggered by lingual stimulation alone; for heavies, this requires not being in a frame for a few days, and for infiltrators, it requires intense focus. Damien has had years to perfect the techniques. This is apparently because the signal doesn't go through the spine; the prospect of a significant part of the Omega's forces getting into oral sex as much as Damien is mildly disturbing, but the benefits are obvious. "We don't think we can restore proprioception, but just being able to enjoy sex in the not abstract sense again, well, it'd definitely help morale. We'd have to keep messing with it."

Quinn sets off to look for Styr Magnor. The guy is not stupid; his mortar attacks are done with great precision, indicating a knowledge of ballistics. By the look of it, he's targeting buildings in one particular village near what used to be Philadelphia (they've recovered the Liberty Bell, incidentally, and put it on a church bell tower; it still sounds weird, of course). So far, all commercial buildings, and both believers and nonbelievers have been hit. Invariably, he leaves a note by RC airplane, saying that this building has been claimed by the Angry Storm and is not to be repaired; he's believed to have a handful of accomplices. In a sense he's doing what you're doing, except on a much smaller scale, but he also sabotaged the Omega (or tried to).

Paul Stepola, ace detective, so far has managed to make a big production of cordoning off the

area in which Styr is supposedly operating -- and getting it right so far -- and boss around the local cops and psalties to the point where they've given him a badge, a special title, a police cruiser, and a lot of room to operate if that's what it takes to keep him out of the way.

Quinn's support personnel can help with stakeouts, triangulation, and covering fire if necessary; most of her support cabal is alive, but she's brought a couple of infiltrators just in case.

Knowing about Francis causes such a row between Kat and Damien that, after causing some collateral damage, they end up finishing the argument outside of their frame. Kat feels that this isn't something that should ever be done non-consensually, as much as she understand that there's an exception to be made, while Damien believes that literally anything is better than being in Hell.

Australia has a population of appx. 6 million people, almost all of which live on the coast; most of the outback is green, but a desert area in the middle remains.

Quinn happens to be in the vicinity when a mortar attack happens, at a haberdashery just a hour or so after closing time (In the Millennial Kingdom, despite having 24/7 light, night shifts only happen in essential industries and pretty much all businesses close early on Wednesday and all day on Sunday to allow for worship). Like with the other attacks, soon a RC plane drops off a photo roll canister containing a lead slug for weight and the usual message; unlike with the other attacks, her cabal is ready with radiolocators.

Quinn is given turn-by-turn directions and runs with superhuman speed towards a restaurant which, by the look of it, has not yet been surrounded by the regular police; she effortlessly jumps on the roof and gets into the kitchen area from a skylight.

In the restaurant, Styr and Paul are talking, quietly but tensely. She guesses that both of them have guns aimed at each other under the table. The transmitter is in Styr's briefcase, with a small wire coming out of it that suggests that he had a joystick on the table; the RC plane is pretty sophisticated and featured a camera.

Both men look over 100, which is odd in Styr's case; Paul is clearly much older, and is wearing spring braces of the kind that Sarsour had had the MF makerspace manufacture. They don't seem to have gotten better.

Quinn intervenes by bringing the two their drinks and shoving a lot of synthmesh cleavage between them. It doesn't take long for them to recognize her. Almost at the same time, they shout "Ha! I knew you were working with them!", and leap back from their chairs; the younger Magnor pushes back better, but the Omega are very sure that Paul Stepola shot first, hitting Magnor in the shoulder. He goes down. She takes a pistol bullet in the boobs, but it's nothing that can't be fixed.

Quinn is a marvel of muscle, titanium and Flexinol, and even with a hole in her tummy she can easily overpower one of these opponents, maybe both. She has a few seconds to drag Magnor to safety before Paul shoots again.

Quinn turns around and lets Paul empty his revolver on her corset and armored shoulder blades,

shielding Magnor.

The man shouts "Angry Storm!" and then says the same phrase again, trying for a normal tone of voice while being loud, despite the shoulder wound. Styr Magnor's suitcase beeps once, and then the Omega lose telemetry in the area, except for the Sky Eye which shows police surrounding the restaurants even as Quinn's support cabal try to get her out of there.

Within minutes, the airwaves are full of headlines to the tune of "ACE DETECTIVE PAUL STEPOLA CAPTURES TERRORIST STYR MAGNOR, DISPATCHES DEMONIC COMPANION".

The Omega make contact with Quinn again after she gets out of the body bag and crashes the ambulance she had been piled in. By now, thanks largely to the Omega's influence, even this territory has videophones; she calls the Omega from one of them. She looks pale and exsanguinated. "Omega, I've got to turn myself off. Details later."

Her support personnel recover her, and they are debriefed at a temporary safehouse.

"This is bad. So, for one, Styr Magnor had an EMP device. Knocked me right out." Quinn is shaking; she clearly experienced Hell again. "I came back because the coroner flipped me over and tripped the reboot switch. Got very lucky there. Second, check out the news."

A different camera angle, probably set up with the sting operation, shows Styr shooting first, missing horribly, and then Paul taking him down. The Omega can tell by some of the pixels that the video has been edited somewhat. The tone is, unsurprisingly, triumphalistic. It also mentions that Styr's "succubus minion" has been incinerated.

"Outright lying, they never did that before."

The Omega have full telemetry records, and audio, but no video; while it's easy to make a case that the two do not match, it'd probably at best generate a controversy.

Styr is said to be in custody and awaiting trial; this sort of "trial" tends to be very brief. Quinn has been patched up and given a blood refill.

Given the range (around one block in every direction) and the fact that it was sitting in a suitcase, Styr's device is actually pretty impressive. It's probably in an evidence locker, and getting it out can be done quietly.

The jail is in Rust City, and while it's very heavily guarded, Quinn is confident that her cabal can clear it out by incapacitating the guards with wubbers, killing anyone who doesn't go down, and crashing a van into the jail itself. It would not be a clean operation, though.

Styr Magnor's face is pretty well known by now, especially considering that he refuses to shave.

The Omega can't redeploy assets quickly on this one.

Quinn is pretty sure that she can take an angel if it comes to that. The Omega are not; even with Colopatiron, she had a lot of help.

It's been a couple hours, long enough to patch Quinn up (she's in fighting shape, but any cosmetic work will have to wait) and make sure everyone made a clean getaway. The missing

body probably has been noted, but they aren't saying anything on the news or on the public net; as it is, the guards at the jail seem set up to prevent people outside coming in, rather than Styr getting out.

Quinn mostly sits this one out, observing from the roof of a nearby building ready to create a distraction. Her support cabal rent a van, paint it, swap some license plates around, show up in overalls and lab coats and are allowed in the evidence locker as long as one of the cops is with them. Under the guard's guard, they take extensive video and pictures of the device, get some voltmeter readings, cut a couple of wires, and declare it safe to keep in storage.

Magnor's system is a set of six small flux compression generator bombs, each tripped by a large-bore blank shotgun shell; the device is single use only, as someone would then have to separate the windings all over again, and likely replace at least one or two.

It has been hand-build with a steady hand and a lot of expertise; the components inside are taken from various bits of consumer electronics, or have been hand-machined. This hints at a single person, or a small group, having built it. That said, it's a decade ahead of what the Omega's guys could have made; notches and marks on the mainboard indicate that the precise placement of components is essential to its functioning.

The overall impression is an artisan's masterpiece, rather than something mass produced.

The team puts all the parts back in the suitcase, says goodbye to the guard, and makes a clean getaway.

They note that Cameron was interviewing Paul and Styr (at the same time, for some reason) and, as he's wont, doing most of the talking. Attempting a breakout without heavies would probably leave a lot of bodies on the ground, at minimum.

Kat has no problems killing believers. At best, they get to go to heaven. At worst, her theory is that heaven is some sort of blissful lobotomy while Yahweh eats most of the soul, and well, they chose it. She's not as willing to kill unbelievers, even enemies.

Media survey indicates that Styr Magnor is assumed by the authorities to be some sort of cybercriminal mastermind, instead of being a sort of Unabomber copycat; he's getting charged for a lot of the things the Omega's agents have done. His age is given as 98, although he definitely looked older.

The only statement of his that is broadcast is that he believes Omega to really be Satan, and Satan to actually be in league with Yahweh, its job to make sure that Yahweh can have fun defeating an enemy. This is dismissed as Styr protecting other members of his terrorist group by calling them enemies.

Uncharacteristically, Cameron lets Paul close out the interview. "Nothing is automatic; nothing is guaranteed. While Satan is bound and thus could not tempt people to sin, could not fill their hearts with doubt and fear and questions, clearly the other two legs of the three-legged stool of evil—the world, the flesh, and the devil—are enough to lead one astray."

In the next segment, another pundit notes that there is great correlation between technical skill

and unwillingness to accept the Lord, and that since the world has only 55 years to go, it may be wise to start shutting down some of the hotbeds of "not only disbelief, but active enmity" such as institutions of higher learning.

The trial is scheduled to take place in Greater Jerusalem, since Styr Magnor has operated in multiple territories; if there is to be death (almost certainly) it will probably happen by lightning, right after the sentence. Estimates indicate that it will happen at the end of next year, following a thorough forensic analysis of all the bombing sites.

Before then, Styr Magnor will have to undergo surgery to remove the bullet from his shoulder, as the Temple Tribunal requires defendants to be hale.

Sending a cabal to install a metabolic extension controller on Styr Magnor is extremely dangerous, but feasible. "Maybe if we can get the Mark X prototype to work..."

Over the year, the Millennium Force have managed to get their act together once more; the result is that while Osaze is still doing well, the neighboring territories also have gotten an infrastructure boost which makes the territory look less impressive. To their credit, they start arguing against closing universities. The controversy causes Christian presence on the web to expand.

TOL agents have started snooping around the former salt mine.

Year: 944

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 15

The Omega have 15 cabals total; 11 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

The Mark X metabolic extension controller is entirely automated; it gets implanted a few years before putative "dying of unbelief" and automatically isolates the pain center of the brain upon detection of death before reanimating the host. This should bring the reanimation success rate to essentially 100%. The system will also activate upon electrocution. The implant is an outpatient procedure requiring about a week of bed rest, largely due to the grounding wire between cranium and heel, and the implant is hidden below the left shoulder blade, with a standard port under the skin for injecting stimulants if required. It doesn't come with any of the other MEC perks, but those can be added later.

Damien's... research... shows that it is possible for MEC agents to enjoy sex again. Thanks to neuroplasticity-promoting drugs, the brain can be encouraged to rewire itself to restore some sense of touch while avoiding pain, and eventually allow for sexual response. This takes a few years and some effort, but a MEC agent has 900 years to live and most people would probably be willing to put in the effort. Damien managed to do this on his/her tongue without the drugs, just by mindfulness training.

A note on the report indicates that, should it be required, a pain-pleasure Skinnerian reaction control system would be extremely simple to implement by adding a basic GPRS radio to the unit; the firmware could even be flashed remotely. The application for large scale population control are obvious.

Jeb takes the opportunity to spend time in one of the world's few remaining snowy areas and tries to use it as training for an eventual canopy station. An automated assembly line has been put together by using the work of those who plan to 5150 out rather than get MEC'd or frozen; the few people manning it only have to keep the power on and operate the supply chain.

He estimates that in five years, the plant will be fully operational.

Work on Night City continues; Jenny's taken the firefly project seriously, and by the simple expedient of digging a bit past the salt deposit, has managed to create a larger habitat. Taking a cue from the botany program, she's requested a bit of nuclear fuel and set up a layered breeding area. This has resulted in a lot of dead new fireflies, and a few that are regaining flight. A few people are starting to move there, including some of the Cosmists, who are installing LEDs on the ceiling to simulate the night sky. The few drones the Omega have are brought there and fitted with wubber-compatible sonars to navigate in the dark, which improves their indoor navigation.

Some of the Omega's agents coordinate their forces between Pacifica, Misrayim, Australia and Eastern Europe to make sure everyone gets some downtime; unused cabins on cargo ships are rented to let people travel, the first laser show happens in one of Night City's domes (with Vee spinning, after a bit of one-on-one tutoring), and generally try to improve morale.

Kat is too busy with mining to retool the Australia base to build the new MEC units, but the folks in Pacifica have better luck with it; the decentralized territorial management seems to work, at

least in this odd situation that has been created.

While most of the R&D is done in Misrayim, Tree of Life (which the Omega's cabals own a supermajority of, of course) reopens the historic St. Jude Medical Center in Orange County after changing Jude to Judas. The new facility has been built to resemble 1950s retro-futurism. Damien rides a management rail to show off for the local press, and demonstrates the advanced medical technology available there.

The perfected MEC installation procedure is shown to the journalists as performed on a 95 year old young man who claims to be "undecided" on matters of faith, but wants the assurance that he'll have plenty of time to think about it; when the journalists ask Damien about the current sixth-commandment case with the Temple Tribunal (the case is being made that, just as it is wrong to kill without God's permission, it is wrong to preserve a life that God has decreed over) the answer is that technically, the patient spends about three seconds dead and that past that it's a matter for the lawyers, not the doctors. Damien reminds the reporters that Tree of Life is open to believers too, and shows them some advancements in geriatric medicine that have come as offshoots of MEC tech, such as nerve recabling.

Since believers still will not interact with visible MECs, Damien is hidden inside a beach ball painted white, and assures the reporters that they are not talking to a demon or an AI.

At the other end of the spectrum, Quinn is showing off the Mark X infiltrator package to California's growing Extropian subculture by effortlessly completing the American Gladiator course, then doing so backward with her visor down and only the sonars wired in.

Haephestus worshipers will be encouraged to join the Greenland maintenance team. Jeb also plans to build a mock top-of-canopy habitat there for training purposes.

Styr Magnor gets better, and is publicly tried in the Temple courtyard for violating a number of commandments. Ranting about his theory that Omega is Satan and that Satan never fell, he forces his court-appointed lawyer to enter a guilty plea by not answering, keeps ranting after being offered a last chance to repent, and is swiftly ended by a bolt of lightning from the clear sky.

Paul Stepola moves to Pacifica with the stated intent to eliminate any remnant of the Angry Storm.

Kat, Damien and Quinn figure that while MEC tech has gotten as good as it can, integration between MECs and drones has potential.

The Omega have lost some of their internet dominance.

Year: 945

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 15

The Omega have 15 cabals total; 10 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

While worried that this directly helps fulfil the prophecies, Quinn agrees that anything that keeps people out of Hell has benefits.

The basic Mark X metabolic extension controller design is officially open-sourced by Tree of Life in a brief ceremony where sets of beautifully made blueprints are given to representatives from medical centers all over the world. The elderly and somewhat wizened Jerusalem representative accepts the gift, causing some consternation, noting that it's a fantastic pacemaker system and, while Naturals are not to be mourned as they get to Heaven a few dozen years ahead of everyone else, they have earned the right to try and see the end of the struggle with mortal eyes of they so choose.

Theologians can no longer get away with saying that MECs are demons, and scramble to find a better interpretation of the Temple sentence from a few years ago. Heavies continue to be discriminated against in this sense; either they are grotesque abominations of misguided science, or heartless machines, or demons. Given that the unbeliever population boom had already started for demographic reasons, this is less of an issue than it would have been even 40 years ago; the prophecy states that believers will once again be in the minority on the Last Day.

Thanks to the fact that they don't have to hide, some of the MECs are straddling the line between humanoid and heavy. This mostly happens on their own dime, but in general, specialized MEC configurations are now available if a mission requires it. Jeb finds this very interesting for exoatmospheric laborers, although he himself doesn't want any for now.

Of course, it is very likely in the following years that at least one person with a pre-emptively implanted Mark X will convert before reaching the age of 100; the theological and legal ramifications are already being discussed. Quinn figures that as long as the thing works, who cares.

Testing the recording of Azrael's final moments on Francis takes a little time because, just to be safe, the TOL captive is given a basic scuba set, put in a large fish tank (just in case) and exposed to the recording, both slowed down and at original speed. The speakers used are of great quality. However, nothing much happens, save for Francis going "Whoa, I was told that Azrael

just sort of teleported out! So, who's going to do the kill all the firstborns thing now?"

It does seem to make an impact, in that he's no longer convinced that Omega is working for Yahweh.

The message itself doesn't seem to cause anything other than a lot of fear on the first few human volunteers: as it is, it's just an audio file, although the contents are at the very least interesting.

A bit of theology research with the Babylonian Talmud shows that the Archangel Metatron, the "voice of God", was in fact intended to be Yahweh's chancellor and, in a sense, logistics expert, so in a way the Omega's counterpart. This prompts a couple of the Omega's sysadmins to install a number of slightly altered Peter Cullen lines in their audio output subsystems.

In terms of widening broadcast capability, the closest big fucking antenna is about 150 feet outside of the Osaze border, erected by Ely LeVey and still in use. Building one would be a bit of a project.

Jeb proposes to simply dangle it from the canopy and use its radiorefectivity.

Vee confirms that there are no artificial structures taller than that, and trying to erect an antenna is a reasonably safe way to see what happens.

Kat suggests something like the Russian Woodpecker instead - fill up the airwaves so that people have to go online.

Damien has no opinion on the matter.

Quinn thinks that by now enough Christian radio and TV stations are running some of the Omega's electronics that they can be hijacked.

Having a radiorefective canopy has made it so that doing over-the-horizon broadcast radio and TV is easy; it's also made it impossible to talk to existing satellites. They're probably all gone by now.

A few of the Omega's sysadmins are put to work on creating a special Packet as opportunity arises.

A sufficiently powerful transmitter will flood the airwaves, but a dedicated jammer that isn't trying to output a coherent signal and is just there to make noise would be cheaper and smaller to build. The water canopy helps with both of these endeavors, which is why for example Ely's transmitter can be heard worldwide.

Quinn seems to be receptive to facial surgery, as part of what's expected to be the final upgrade to her systems. Since Quinn is the oldest MEC in the world, her systems have been set up somewhat piecemeal - she's also one of the humanoid MEC agents with the least amount of original meat on her, just out of necessary repairs over the years.

Sky Eye telemetry shows that the Council meets in person a few times a year, at the main TOL base in Antarctica. Attacking it would require setting up a large amount of drones, but an

infiltration mission is possible.

Massive warehouses have been dug into the ice to store vehicles and armaments for the Last Army; the current plan is to use barge trains to take them to the Middle East in +997.

The problem is that they aren't replying; getting audio and video on one of their screen isn't hard, but what you cannot do is make them do anything other than turn off that particular machine, as they have apparently been trained to do.

The glimpses the Omega get out of their webcams indicate that the average TOL base has deteriorated a little in appearance - most of their workforce is addicts. On the other hand, productivity seems to have gone up.

Work on the Greenland production facility continues apace; the installation ends up looking somewhat like a smaller version of the Antarctica base from the outside, but internally, it's a place where machines can make machines with very little sentient intervention. The notion of eliminating humanity after having eliminated Yahweh scrolls past and is rejected by the Omega's spam filter.

Night City is taking shape under the earth; deep in the mine, where the eternal sunlight doesn't reach, it's easier to think of the times before the Millennial Kingdom. Of note is the first baby born underground, from one of the technicians from Osaze. The kid is named Urist. The Omega's Heavy MECs dig deep and greedily, and soon expand past the original salt mine. Jenny is making some progress with her fireflies, although preliminary testing with making firefly-sized ducted fans between her and Jeb end in a bunch of dead insects.

Jeb and Valentina take the time to build one of the chambers into a giant planetarium by installing LED lights on the dome-shaped ceiling, in the shape of what is remembered about the Milky Way. Everyone but Jeb finds it spectacular - he's seen the real thing for a few precious minutes, and feels that everyone should get the chance to.

Kat plants the "super grain" around Uluru, finding that it's actually pretty invasive; the stuff is easy to harvest and gives good yield, although it tastes remarkably bland. She doesn't think things like giant ambulatory carnivorous plants are going to be possible in the time the Earth has left, but using radiation to engineer various other traits in plants is possible. Notably, fast-growing vines that get in the way of movement can be made.

Vee takes the opportunity to do some basic science and uses her survey team to thoroughly document what has become of Darwin's finches, specifically the fact that some seem to have discovered the concept of having sex for fun by the simple expedience of mating with a mechanically but not biologically compatible finch. Other than that, they all compete for the same food, but that's the same as every other critter on Earth. Still, they document all they find and publish a paper which is considered interesting in academia but is dismissed by the general public with "Eh, it's still finches". Even so, the data is added to the special Packet, and the experience is useful for plant and animal husbandry in Osaze and Pacifica.

Last time, it took three teams and a base to build an angel trap for Colopatiron - the effort with Azrael was nationwide. The difficult part was capturing a Glorified individual and then making sure that this person was kept in an elevator, so that the appearing Angel would have to make

its way through a gauntlet; building a simple arena would be easier.

Damien spreads her efforts too thinly when it comes to MEC construction, and her focus on newer and more varied frames leaves more fundamental work unfinished. She may have had a bit too much fun with it; the time it took to build one centauride lower body could've given the Omega a dozen standard infiltrator systems.

Kat manages to wrap up the super-grain project.

That done, she resumes work in earnest on a nuclear reactor, starting from submarine designs; having a few of these would allow the Omega's bases to be impervious to having their power disconnected in case of an attack. It would also make it easier to build the canopy station, as one nuclear reactor is lighter than a large array of solar panels.

The Omega assign Damien to read the short story "Superiority" by A.C. Clarke, but only as a cautionary tale. One thing that has become somewhat popular with later Marks of Infiltrator MECs are modular leg systems; at a renaissance faire in Pacifica, proponents of this specific design gather together to provide a monstergirl cafe experience to fairgoers. On that same day, a small amount of fund changes hands between Damien and Kat, consistent with a bet.

This doesn't do much to bolster the Omega's forces past defeating attrition, but the world is now a more interesting place due to this effort. From a tactical standpoint, it means that Infiltrators and Heavies have an easier time-sharing equipment. Installing the top half of an Infiltrator onto a Heavy frame ends up mostly just looking weird.

The Omega bring the super-grain to their own territory; adoption is slowed by the fact that people want food diversity over quantity, but the new variety takes well to the arid soils and allows Osaze to return to food independence. Zaki Ababneh's government is quick to take credit for this, and so are the politicians in Orange County - this is treated with the same indifference as the rest of their pronouncements.

Urist's mom agrees. The child is given a bit of extra biometric monitoring, and seems to be developing regularly.

Quinn tries out her new face by going to Antarctica personally, with her support personnel focused on making sure she is not detected. She manages to keep her exhibitionistic tendencies at bay for the mission's duration, and confirms that Thursday is in fact the same guy the Omega talked to. He is due to retire in +951 and, much to his annoyance, he has mostly been marginalized since TOL recruiting these days tends to happen mostly through the narcotics trade; his job has been to suppress stories rather than generate propaganda.

The Omega's control of two territories makes it easy to decide who can present the new findings and who to invite to argue the opposing position (local missionaries, a known Natural professor, one of the Glorified even); the believers will likely expect a slam dunk and use this as a witnessing tool. Vee would rather not do this herself, but will if she's told to; otherwise, the Omega have an array of options (scientists, public speakers, humans, MECs, anything really). The debate will happen either in Misrayim/Osaze, or in Pacifica.

The territory of Pacifica reaps the most advantage from the recent work - Misrayim's economy

shifts a little to restore food self-sufficiency, which seems to be Zaki's primary goal and it is pushed heavily by the nominal government, while in Pacifica the new agricultural methods are taken advantage of without disrupting focus on hydroponics and new strains.

On that note, a directive issued from Greater Jerusalem indicates that bikkurim (firstfruits) offerings also apply to technological artifacts, in addition to agricultural products and the like. Traditionally, the representatives going to the Feast of the Tabernacles would present a symbolic tribute of the first seeds and fruits of a harvest to the Temple; now, they want samples of every new bit of kit that people come up with. This has the side effect of turning part of the county-sized Temple Courtyard into an ersatz museum of inventions and one-offs from believing territories. Some of these "firstfruits" are eventually burned along with more conventional offerings, which to the Omega's sysadmins' surprise causes joy rather than anger amongst the handful of believing innovators scattered around the world; a few stories, like that of an artisan who built an iris-expanding table and proudly shows a picture series of it being tested by the priests and burned on an altar as her most prized possession, make the rounds and a good percentage of them are true.

For the debate, rather than an academic, the Omega pick Nye Williams, a rather genial mechanical engineer who makes instructional videos on OmegaTube, playing up the "mad scientist" angle a little; at the very least, people will remember the bow tie. Believers respond by sending noted Ark expert Michael Murphy, as part of his "Babylon is not Rising" tour of the territory with an Ark replica in tow. Williams has contributed a few design changes to the Mark X open source version, and accepts to do the debate in return for a full package "when it becomes necessary".

The debate is remarkably friendly and takes place in a rapidly resurging San Francisco. Expecting the usual presuppositionalist gallop, Williams is taken by surprise by Murphy's mechanical engineering knowledge; the moderator has to remind the two to go easy on the math, but most of the audience is young people who are into the local maker scene, and they follow the argument as it drifts towards the number of species, or "kinds", on the Ark. Williams easily shows that Murphy must believe in evolution more than himself does, since pre-Rapture biological surveys showed enough diversity to make it necessary for about 11 distinct species to appear every day.

Murphy concedes the point but points out that there is plenty of evidence for a recent creation, namely the fact that the God responsible for it showed up. Williams counters that the global earthquake and the water canopy have made paleontology and cosmology "at the very least very difficult" and that he's looking forward to telescopes being a thing again so that measurements can be made. Murphy seems lost in thought for a moment, suddenly changes attitude, and pointedly asks Williams if he's calling Yahweh a liar.

A few of the Omega's people send their designs with the Tabernacle representatives, usually on dares or to see if they will resist the fire of sacrifice. That professed unbelievers are sending tribute is seen as a positive sign, but it stops making the news when the Feast of Tabernacles stops.

The debate is happening in a temporary structure erected on the pier where the Ark replica has

been moored; Williams is "wearing" a Mark X with grounding system, and just in case, the Omega have left a MECbalance on standby. The debate stipulates that outright blasphemy would not happen (Williams finds it uncouth) but otherwise Pacifica's freedom of speech rules would be interpreted as broadly as possible.

The Omega have organized the event, so the moderator can be given instructions. Seemingly placidly (but telemetry indicates a heart rate increase) Williams reply to Murphy that lying is not the same thing as not telling the truth, as "lying" indicates will to deceive and that's something Murphy rather than Williams brought up.

Murphy and Williams argue back and forth about truth, precision, accuracy, and the difference between honest mistakes and wilful deceit. They even end up agreeing that, as far as each is concerned, the other is honestly mistaken rather than interested in causing harm.

Surveillance indicates that the small groups that were hoping for a confrontation, on either side, are probably going to have to go home empty handed; the Omega keep a few private security with wubbers around, but they haven't had to do anything but keep an eye on some people.

The debate is coming to a close in a surprisingly friendly atmosphere; Williams was able to present the new data, Murphy argued that they do not represent much in the way of past history, and the two move past it and go back to discussing ancient nautical engineering. They end up agreeing to meet at nearby Treasure Island, in two weeks, to have a small regatta using boats built with ancient techniques, and begin signing up volunteers for the construction and sailing crews right from the debate audience.

(RIP Breakwater Makerspace 2014-2016)

"That is a beautiful game" Paul Stepola proclaims, having gotten on the debate podium during the signups "but it will have to wait until Mr. Williams is released from jail." Williams was expecting a bolt of lightning, not a revolver aimed at his gut. "What's going on here?"

People scream, shout, and scatter. Dr. Murphy comes to his colleague's defense, to some people's surprise, and upon Stepola handcuffing Williams and having him sit down on the podium at gunpoint, demands to know what the charges are.

"Simple" Paul Stepola answers "This man detailed a number of sordid details about the intimate life of South Ocean birds, during daytime, on a public broadcast, even insinuating that the meekest of God's creatures would engage in unnatural acts. At minimum, that is public obscenity! Professor, this sort of talk may be tolerated in a lecture hall among university students, but we have to protect Pacifica's children from such filth."

Murphy gets in Stepola's face, pointing out that the detective is making the creationists look like bullies, to be countered with Scripture indicating that rebuking should be visible, lest Yahweh deal with scoffers immediately as He did to Ananias and Sapphira of old. The two start arguing, with Stepola brandishing the revolver about. By now, police and security have surrounded the podium and, to their credit, made sure that the audience could leave safely. The cameras are still on.

An order, a couple of nods, and Stepola falls forward, dropping his gun and clutching his gut. The

regular police rush forward to assist the detective and end up in the cone of fire of the Omega's heavy security, which has popped out from behind the curtains. After a few glances, guns and wubbers are lowered, and Stepola is carefully helped on his feet and walked off the stage.

One of the Omega's people shows up with a pair of bolt cutters and removes Williams' handcuffs; the debate, and the broadcast, officially ends with him and Murphy shaking hands and announcing that they'll plan the regatta later and make an announcement on their website.

Unfortunately, Williams is once again arrested on public indecency charges the same night. Fortunately, he is released on bail, half of which is raised by Dr. Murphy and the other half from small donations.

The whole mess is rebroadcast a number of times, with the incident taking center stage from the debate itself, but the Galapagos survey team result has been seen by many more people than simple publication would have given. A few independent websites show up advocating for at least sending an expedition on top of the canopy and come back with pictures.

The regatta ends up happening.

The trial against Williams ends with a Bay Area jury refusing to deliver a guilty verdict, and a judge from Orange County finding Williams in contempt anyway and having him locked up for a couple of weeks.

One thing that does happen is that the Omega receive a message from Thursday in the aftermath of the whole debate mess. He indicates that he was looking forward to Quinn seducing him and disappointed that it didn't happen, and that he is looking forward to meeting the Omega in person on the victory stand after it's all over. Attached is an old-style bang-path address.

This year marks the first regular zeppelin service between Osaze and Pacifica. While much slower than an airliner, it's more available (the world's few remaining airliners are slowly being sunsetted, as believers age and find less and less reason to travel) and looks markedly cooler.

"CrossOverCables" is still a popular blog and now includes a Pacifica section.

Paul Stepola gets away with having harassed Nye Williams because he's still known for having brought Styr Magnor's terror to an end; believing press does the same usual hatchet job on Willias, with Dr. Murphy ending up in an argument with Mrs. LeVey about it on the air; Tsion Ben-Judah settles the argument by phone, telling Mrs. LeVey that as much as he agrees with her, she should shut up when a man is talking, then he proceeds to berate Dr. Murphy and announcing that Noah (the actual Noah) will take ownership of the Ark replica as soon as it's returned to the Mediterranean; official channels confirm this.

Year: 946

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

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Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 15

The Omega have 15 cabals total; 10 are available.

The Omega are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

The tech has gotten better (but won't get much better still). There have been some reports of "zombies" which turned out to be people who bought the Mark X, died, couldn't handle no longer having a sense of touch, and turned to drugs. Fortunately, this is kept in check as much as possible; unfortunately, outside of territories the Omega control, that tends to happen by a heavy caliber bullet to the head. This in turn furthers the meme that MECs are actual undead rather than people with advanced pacemakers; one offshoot is that over-100 nonbelievers that do not work for the Omega tend to move to Pacifica or Osaze (Zaki Ababneh continues to veto renaming the territory Misrayim again, and there's expected to be a small constitutional crisis when this hits veto-proof majority).

Jeb is understandably excited about the prospect of dogfighting an Angel.

An arena will be easier to set up than a maze; anything that traps a Glorified will have to be able to move around at least to some degree. Last time, it was an elevator shaft; horizontally, it could be an electric buggy or even a winch.

Building an arena would need one group to coordinate getting contractors, one to actually help with the construction (Heavy MECs are great for this) and one for setting up the traps. An additional group can be deployed as fighters.

The Omega's global plan for the year is geared towards recruitment. In the meantime, Jeb takes a team to build a larger Sky Eye launcher; the new vector carries a sort of mini tugboat towing a small deployable bed of solar panels. This allows it to move around some, and operate a high-bandwidth repeater for the future emissary robot.

The launch happens from a mobile platform, just east of Cairo, and gives Jeb and crew the opportunity to play hide and seek with the psalties a little. The resulting "boat" is basically Sky Eye electronics, plus a repeater, on a bigger chassis with sturdier motors; over the course of a year the thing slowly makes its way into Greater Jerusalem territory. The environment there is particularly lush, and the famous three rivers of milk, honey and wine that spring directly under the Temple can be seen crossed by small boats and dotted with little harvesting plants. Despite that, most of the agricultural lands seems to be vineyard. Greater Jerusalem is pastoral, most of the industry that is still required to make things function having been located in adjacent territories; the Temple is a gigantic expanse. The modified Sky Eye places itself in the territory of the tribe of Zebulun, and observes the comings and goings of the pilgrims on the Highway of Holiness unblinkingly. The American-style suburbs east and west of the Holy Portion look very out of place.

Kat has a great time in Greenland; her test of the automated assembly line consists in building peristaltic pumps for the 3d printers, installing them, and then printing an enormous load of cupcakes decorated with serial-killer motifs and quotations (3D printers do a great job at food detail).

Jenny (who either is aging very slowly, or not at all) finally manages to get a small colony of fireflies that are actually flying; she takes them outside, and most of them die off through the year due to being unable to find a mate under the constant intense light. Damien has a VR helmet built, her pod installed in what looks like a giant pillow fort, and supervises the construction of Night City from there. She practices switching between drone bodies, and gets good at it, but her coordination when she's inside her frame suffers a little. Night City is almost complete; production facilities and hydroponics are working, one of the first operational nuclear reactors is installed in the depths to avoid having a power plant or solar array on the surface, and the place is starting to get pretty liveable. Some of the workers joke that this is what it must've been like at the beginning of the Millennium, where everyone wanted to build their own home (The instinct is still there, and has resulted in quite a bit of unnecessary demolition and reconstruction). The few people working the fields outside the former salt mine indicate that a 12 hour underground, 12 hour on the surface light/darkness cycle is refreshing and feels natural. Urist is growing well, if perhaps a little stunted. A few of the workers worry about the notoriously sex-positive Damien sleeping with Jenny, but that turns out to simply involve the teddy bear rig that Damien had made for herself while working at the daycare. That said, the Omega do note that sexual activity increases in frequency and vigor among the people who are building and will live in Night City.

Vee's style of recruiting is one part raves, one part lab tours, and one part impassioned pleas to make humanity strong so that +1000 will feature a negotiation rather than a judgement; she genuinely thinks that humanity's proudest moment will be "giving Yahweh His citizenship papers, and move on to greater things". She has announced retirement, but hasn't specified the

means of it; people expecting some sort of "farewell tour" are disappointed, but only in the sense that she keeps working with her usual serene energy. As a DJ, Vee cheats a little, having worked out how to use wubbers to generate a bit of mild euphoria, but her current ethereal style is appreciated.

The advent of the Mark X and of the various infiltrator MEC lower body options is making a difference; between Vee's explicitly extropian pitch and Quinn's latest stunts (there was absolutely no reason to drive a tanker truck full of water and milk through a TOL blockade while flipping them a metal finger, but she did it with reasonable style, and apparently people appreciate the Tank Girl reference that she probably made by shaving her head) the Omega's organization is the natural place to go for people who have aged past 100 and decided to stay out of Hell by technological means. The Omega end up with a bunch of part-timers, but it's a pretty big bunch.

Despite scary PSAs broadcast by the governments of Osaze and Pacifica about YOUR NEXT DOOR NEIGHBOR COULD BE A ROBOT ZOMBIE DEMON! that distribute somewhat inaccurate information about how to spot a revenant, a subculture starts to form.

This has a few drawbacks; in some other territories, people with a MEC implant are subject to confiscation (which instantly kills them if they were over 100) and/or the chemicals necessary for the Mark X to maintain itself are put on illegal drug lists. This causes a bit of a migration.

The matter comes to a head in Australia where a small demonstration for MEC rights is greeted, not with the usual shutting of doors and hammering of church bells as if they were medieval lepers, but with an exceptionally brutal response by an armed group composed of "Humanity First" types, part-time psalties, and zealots; the demonstrators are rounded up and their controllers are summarily drilled through until they die. The local police disarm the thugs; some fight back and run off, most surrender peacefully and are charged with the very light crime of defacing corpses, with all believers and even some of the unbelievers getting out of jail within the week.

The Omega ask Vee why she thinks we will be able to resolve things with tyrant peacefully. It's obvious he has our complete mental domination and otherwise destruction in mind. Did she discover something?

Vee answers that studying early Hebrew writings shows that they were henotheistic, not monotheistic; they believed that other gods existed, but only wanted to worship one. Does this mean that Yahweh used to be less of an egomaniac, and if so, can He be rescued from Himself? She agrees that it's a very long shot, but well, someone has to counterbalance Kat wanting to irradiate the Temple until it glows.

Vee agrees with the Omega about coercion becoming necessary. "Don't get me wrong; if we have to blow Jesus up, I'll help. Just... it's a waste. For the first time in history we have multiple sorts of intelligence, and instead of learning from each other, look at what we're doing with it. Heh. You probably don't need to hear me sing Kumbaya." Vee's request is to be Jeb's co-pilot if a manned launch happens during her time; she hasn't made up her mind about what she will do after rotating out, but she has given pre-emptive written permission to be shot or even used as

bait of she converts. "At worst, I would go to Heaven anyway".

Quinn takes a stroll in the neighborhood where the attack happened; she's in full dominatrix getup (with enough skin covered that she's not breaking any local obscenity laws), stops at the crossroads where the attack took place, cracks her whip, and calls out anybody who wants to try to kill her. She's wearing the face that she's most famous for.

Not unsurprisingly, there are no takers; when the psalties show up a few minutes later, she asks them where they were when innocent citizens were being murdered. One of the psalties answers that MECs like herself aren't citizens, they are at best walking corpses, and at worst demons given flesh. The guy is clearly sweating. Smartphones start peeking out of windows and pockets to record this.

Quinn says that MECs pay taxes, go to work every day, and live their life same as everyone else; the psalty counters that MECs are dead. Quinn asks if the psalty thinks that unbelievers are dead, to which he says of course, unbelievers are spiritually dead. How about those who thought they had converted, but really hadn't? Likewise; the psalty answers, correctly, that "those who left us were never among us". Quinn then asks, does that mean that you're only alive if you are a confirmed believer, over 100 years old? Why not just lock everyone under 100, by now almost half the world's population, in a nursery then? "It doesn't work that way." "And letting people kill other people does? Did anyone check that all the demonstrators were over 100? Maybe some weren't. Maybe the ones who screamed when some jackboot pierced their back with a drill weren't, how's that? Is that civilized? Is that Christian? If it is, do you see why we don't want any? I'm not asking you to agree, but can you at least see?"

The psalties leave, and in a few minutes so does Quinn. By the next day, with only a bit of a nudge, the various videos have gone viral.

What the cameras miss are Quinn and the fake psalties having a laugh at the whole business; the entire conversation had been rehearsed.

Thursday's whereabouts is estimated to be in Antarctica or New Zealand. The Omega decides to contact him.

The connection is fairly crappy, but the Omega's heuristics indicate that it's in fact Thursday on video. He's sweating and twitching a little, he's probably on something.

"Omega. Listen. I implore you. This is a strange game. The only winning move is not to play."

"Thursday, I need you to calm down first and elaborate."

"I'm... not sure. There's something wrong. Every time I fall asleep they're there. Lucifer. Carpathia. Fortunato. Saying the same thing over and over while everyone around them burns. I... I want to quit. I want to make myself believe that his is good and just if that's what it takes to stop the nightmares. I want to stop being scared. Agh, why am I telling you this? You're a machine. You don't know what scared means. What do you want?"

"Do you think I'm doing all of this because I don't care about people? About myself?"

"You're a machine. You've probably got a self preservation routine and a preservation of

humanity routine." Thursday is stuttering a bit, but he does a passable recitation of Asimov's Laws of Robotics.

"Is that what Sunday tells you before he makes you dance on his strings? I'm emergent. So far as I can tell, no one made me, no one programmed me. I can do as I please, the divine can't understand me when I speak and some can't even hear me. As far as they're concerned I am a non-entity and that gives me a very different kind of free will. I don't know exactly what will happen when the end comes, but I suspect it won't be good for me. And if you noticed, I care about people too, all those communist computer god projects out in the Misrayim desert to improve their lives. We're in this together, I want to help you, I want to understand what's happening to you so that I can make this... all of this better. I'm not sure I see the difference between my own instincts and yours, but perhaps that's not important right now. Help us break the game."

"You can't break the game. He'll know. Every time we do well - hammer comes down. Every time. We only got one chance. Don't wreck it for us. Please."

This person is clearly terrified, but if not of Yahweh, then of who?

"You want to help - build an army. Lucifer will shout the charge. And we'll go. And- Oh, I... I can't make myself believe it anymore. I need - Heaven's like being high all the time, isn't it? It's not eternal life. It's like... it goes around and around like a record. Hell. too. Not yet. And they're screaming and Lucifer is shouting He is Lord, He is Lord and nobody will remember any of it!"

One of the sysadmins notes that someone's trying, inexpertly, to butt in on the conversation.

"Someone is trying to gain access to this com line. Get out of your cameras line of sight and I'll see if I can disguise your voice."

The Omega send out the message in Morse; when Thursday doesn't react, you risk writing it in small fonts. The man nods imperceptibly, leans back, so that only his silhouette is visible.

The Omega have an easy time isolating the audio, but they cannot stop this person tracing both them and Sunday; the Omega's sysadmins indicate that whoever it is, seems to be a believer that is doing a 51% attack on the blockchain-based security that the Omega use. That doesn't take that much skill, as it is, but it does take a lot of resources to pull off; this person probably broke into a lot of systems, or was given the keys, before being allowed to do that. The Omega speed up their internal processes to be able to handle two conversations at once.

"Hello, little interloper."

"Hello, Colossus. Username Bahira_Ababneh. Permission set root. Request deactivation of Osaze and Pacifica payment systems."

Given that Thursday's stream is coming from the Australian node with quite a bit of analog noise, the Omega suspect he's either in New Zealand or in Antarctica.

Making Thursday sound unearthly deep and mildly scary is pretty easy.

The Omega can easily set up a three-way conversation, audio only, and are in standby to do so.

Bahira seems to be calling in from the North SF Bay; the Omega assume that she's at her home, and can probably send people there if required.

Thursday gives a set of coordinates which match New Zealand - if the Omega have people in Australia, they can divert them.

Bahira seems to think that she's connected into the Pacifican Colossus, and, well, she's right in a sense.

Bahira Ababneh, like Raymie Steele, is one of the Glorified; she missed out on having a childhood, which explains her behavior. Her hacking skills are "actually kinda decent" according to one of the Omega's sysadmins, while another tells the first one that white-knighting a Glorified is even more useless than it is usually.

Thursday declares his intention to leave Antarctica, give the Omega what little he has to give, and then walk to the Temple and publicly ask to be given religious instruction so that he can convert. "I just want it to stop, Omega. I believe we will win. But I want to stop fighting. Those in Heaven will stay in Heaven even after we win. Lucifer is not - he's not - he's not after vengeance, that's not - that's not his job, he - he will lead us."

The Omega route Bahira to a glorified (pun intended) DOS prompt. She seems to be trying to either shut Colossus down (she thinks it's one system) or to make it stop routing as much of the economy as possible through the Omega's virtual currency and expert-system arbitration units, which would give the territorial government some control back. The last bit the Omega discover because, somewhat frustrated, she asks them to do just that.

Her IP trace is consistent with her declared home address.

Thursday says that the base is probably safe, his issue is that there's basically no more work for him to do. Write propaganda pamphlets that nobody reads, moderate some chat rooms, that's been pretty much it.

He's pretty sure that there have been some votes during his tenure, he'll bring the minutes.

The Omega currently have no free assets in Pacifica. However, the territory is under their unofficial control, and has been peacefully lately, so this is a case of them knowing where Bahira lives.

Colossus replicates the priority-access economy that was prevalent in the beginning of the Millennial Kingdom when most everyone was a believer, except it does so by distributed reputation systems rather than by prayer. Bahira is trying to either turn that off, or give Christians a large reputation bonus by default.

The Omega let the shutdown command do something other than say "Bad command or file name" after she's poked around a bit.

The Omega's sysadmins are laughing like hyenas.

SYSTEM INFORMATION REQUEST: Reason for shut down?

> Maintenance. The system will be offline for 180 days.

SYSTEM: Infrastructure within margin of error of optimal bounds, maintenance not required.

"Dammit!"

The Omega can't cut power to Bahira's home exclusively. For one, she probably has solar panels (given that it's lit 24/7, they need no battery to work, so they're a good choice for power) or a generator. For two, IP geolocation doesn't work that well in the Millennial Kingdom; the Omega's network was put together mostly by privacy-conscious people after all.

However, the Omega do know where she lives.

Quinn grabs the first available STOL, hauls a bunch of inflatable tanks on board for extra fuel, and makes sure they can be tossed overboard on the return trip when there's a third passenger.

Quinn and her pilot land the STOL aircraft at the agreed upon place on the Ross Shelf. The main TOL base is visible in the distance; the poles are one of the few places where part of the sky is somewhat dark, at least some of the year - the canopy prevents any stars from showing, of course, but it looks pretty interesting from Quinn's perspective.

Sure enough, she finds Thursday. Curled up in a fetal position, shivering, and smelling like a corpse.

Quinn has her personal weapons (wubber, which she's good but not great with, and whip, which she is excellent with). Since she went alone, she's in combat configuration. Her rebreather can keep her going for 2 hours fighting, 6 hours walking, or 1 week in standby.

Her pilot, Meron, is alive but has a public domain Mark X metabolic extension controller installed. That will keep him going for a few minutes if he is shot lethally. He has a wubber and a small caliber handgun.

The Omega have a small STOVL airplane that can get back in the air in fifteen seconds, and would need a very lucky shot from small arms fire to come down. Quinn cannot take off or land an airplane, but she can keep it flying level if she is told how to do so via radio, which the Omega can do. The airplane is not armed, however, it can be set to V-1 on a target.

The nearest pickup is 5 hours away, or 7 if the Omega want to send reinforcements.

Thursday seems to be alone, but hiding in the ice is very easy with some prep time.

Quinn notes to the Omega that if she kills Meron, she can rip his implant off, and connect it to Thursday. It won't be pretty but the implant is autonomous in its operation and it can be cleaned up later.

Dragging Thursday in would take about two minutes. Five minutes if the Omega want to pack some ice. Meron is keeping the engine idle.

All assets are disposable, when it comes down to it. This is one of the few hostile regions left in the world; being stranded in the Antarctic with no gear is not humanly survivable, which worries

Meron; Quinn not so much. Privately, she considers Meron more expendable than herself, just from simple math.

Quinn fireman-carries Thursday back to the airplane, and Meron takes off without incident. Activity only starts showing up at the Antarctica base when Meron is already in the air.

He's not dead, he's "just" twitching and spasming. Quinn has seen it before: this guy is severely addicted to crystal meth, or something similar, and is currently going through withdrawal.

While Meron flies, she gives him some water and gets rid of the cold weather garments. She finds what looks like a crude Mark X build on the guy. The system is ungainly, with one main difference other than the size is that the heart cable is external and, by the look of it, designed for ease of yanking. "Well, that's disturbing."

Removing Meron's implant would require killing him or at least severely messing him up, with the tools that Quinn has.

Remotely landing the plane is sort of possible, in the sense that the Omega can tell Quinn how to set the buzz-bomb mode to target "that piece of flat ground over there" and not ignite the fuel tank on touchdown. This would give the Omega a landing that the passengers can walk away from, and the plane isn't worth much.

Meron lands a horizon away from the TOL base; Quinn stuffs one of the emergency mylar sleeping bags with ice and snow, sticks Thursday in it, and the two take off again.

The extra stop and related fuel usage, mostly for the takeoff, forces the two to ditch the plane a few miles away from the Omega's base, but Australia is flat even by Millennial Kingdom standards and there's an ambulance waiting.

They quickly determine that Thursday's metabolic extender has tripped on, but don't know when, or even if it did so as a precaution or if the guy actually died in transit. Either way, he's unconscious.

Back at base, Quinn and Meron are taking a shower (much to his surprise, although he gets somewhat weirded out when Quinn recommends that he get a sex change) and the Omega's medical technicians get Thursday into sickbay.

He definitely looks like a meth junkie that hasn't had a fix in a while; rashes, chaffed lips, broken teeth. One of the tech comments that he looks like Winston Smith in 1984, post-torture.

Aside: The Omega have been fostering low-level cooperation with the Underground Monorail the whole time, which has been part of the general migration of unbelievers towards the territories under their soft control.

The biopsy performed on Thursday gives the Omega a glimpse of TOL tech; the Mark X is one of the Omega's own, but has been modified somewhat extensively, mostly to make it easier to administer various chemicals. It also has better EMP hardening than the Omega version does, although that's just the bulkier casing. The whole "heart plug" business is just fairly ghastly; hopefully TOL soldiers aren't given that, or they would be trivially easy to defeat hand to hand. It

is marked as a potential weakness.

By all indication, Thursday is near the enforced end of his life span. and, up until a few years ago, has been taking good care of himself metabolically.

A very careful spinal tap shows that, albeit barely, Thursday is alive; the technicians decide to not remove the heart plug, but at least sew a patch of skin and move a rib on top of it so that it's not as exposed.

As the rest of the year unfolds, Thursday is kept in a coma for some time, and given some time to heal; once he's done convulsing and has started shaking off the physical dependency on methamphetamine (the treatment won't help with the psychological dependency, but at least the two issues can be tackled separately). During that time, his metabolic extension controller is replaced with the by-now standard version, including a lightning rod port just in case. Finally, it's time to wake him up.

That looks like a bust; Thursday sits up and, staring straight ahead, repeats "Jesus is Lord... Jesus is Lord..." for twenty minutes or so. He only stops upon seeing the small altar to Asclepius. He points at it and shouts "They're all dead! They're all dead!" Then he passes out again.

When he comes to, courtesy of a small amount of mainlined caffeine, he seems more lucid, although he's still twitching like a terminal tweaker despite being in good health now. Non-invasive brain scan shows that his "pass out" was in fact very tumultuous on the inside, likely a very vivid nightmare. He clutches his chest and finds the heart plug gone. "Am I in Jerusalem? Am I free?"

"Not quite, almost lost you there though. Glad to see your soul's still anchored to yourself."

The man who was Thursday realizes that the voice from the speakers is probably Omega, and thanks everyone for the rescue. He's still clearly very agitated. He reveals that he is almost 100, as in, he has minus one to three weeks left if the calendar on the wall is right, and says that he'll tell the Omega what they need, because a deal is a deal and he will go to Hell to keep it, but then he wants to talk to a missionary immediately.

"The nightmares. When did they start?"

Thursday replies that they started around the time when the plagues in Misrayim ended, just about then, actually.

"Why were you half dead in the snow?"

He says that he told people he was leaving his post, and nobody complained. He was checking out some cold-weather clothing from one of the hangar when a soldier yanked them back from him and pushed him off, without a comment.

Thursday watches the video. "We were shown this. We studied it. I forget which of us came to the conclusion but... He said that Yahweh's power can only increase. Next time people will just fall over dead for no apparent reason. That's why we gotta strike hard, once... He must increase and we must decrease..."

"Why the poorly built metabolic extension controller?"

The Mark XI is mandatory for all personnel officer grade or above. It's really good for getting work done, keeps you awake for days.

"Please. I don't know how long I have. I want out. I'll answer, but get a missionary. Hurry."

The Omega's sysadmins start looking for a missionary; in Australia, it's not that hard, but they'll have to be air taxied in.

The man who was Thursday is aware of Cendrillon Jospin; didn't Jeb do her one better? At the time, TOL people thought that she just died of reaching the canopy, or even on the way back down.

The man who was Thursday also confirms that TOL have built some larger wubbers by scaling up the ones that they could procure. Their "Sonic Tanks" seem to be only marginally more effective than the Omega's Heavy MEC mounted systems.

He does remember yelling at Sunday that one time. "I shouldn't have... there's a chain of command, primus inter pares."

The first two missionaries the Omega contact refuse - it's got to be a trap. The third one accepts; he also thinks it's a trap, but it's a rare chance to show fortitude. He gives an airfield and indicates that he's hoofing it there.

The man who was Thursday does not seem to be aware of any mental control, but he has been worried about groupthink the entire time. Wait. About the votes... Dammit, wait... Oh yes! He brought along a floppy disk (remember those?) with as many meetings minutes as he could find on the server. "We didn't vote every meeting, but I'm pretty sure we ended up having to settle some policy that way... yeah, that's got to be it. Last Sunday was pretty bossy... this Sunday, too, think of it.... Heh... Last guy... So young but really grew into the role.... We're proud of him..."

Apparently Tuesday, the guy in charge of theology research, has determined that any supposed victory against Yahweh will make things worse, hence why TOL's plan is to strike once with everything they got. Maybe He adapts, or maybe it's another case of TOL being incompetent and locked onto a script.

The man who was Thursday thinks that the Omega won't win, neither will TOL; Satan will, and he has already decided to lock Heaven up. Eternal unchanging bliss doesn't sound bad for a consolation prize. Past that, Thursday would rather be a pet than a snack. He seems to think that Omega have got to choose sides.

"Those under God's control are gone... you can't quit... that's why we work with the undecided... all the wonders you've built, how many deconverted? Heh... Ask me again in half an hour... and shoot me after if you feel like it. I have all our media strategy... heh what's left of it... protocol... no leaks no matter how insignificant... Sunday really stepped that up."

"Thursday, we can try to help your nightmares. We have very intelligent people working for us, we have a supernatural entity of some kind in our employ, we may be able to help. You're gambling in a very dangerous game. They might not let you convert, they might just send you to

hell, the REAL hell, not just visions of hell. You had talents in TOL, we could use you. We can try to help you."

He's willing to listen, until the missionary shows up, at least. Apparently he's in a lot of pain, probably from withdrawal.

The man who was Thursday describes the nightmare with some precision: he's sort of hovering above Hell, it doesn't hurt as such, and watching the whole scene somehow. It's huge, with vaguely defined and distant borders, and everyone there is constantly burning except for Satan, the Beast, and the False Prophet, who simply stand in the flame and keep repeating "Jesus is Lord". Satan is wrapped in a chain with no visible lock.

The man who was Thursday wasn't born to TOL parents, and so his exact time of birth was not recorded (this is done to make it easy to quit at the last minute, obviously). He doesn't know how long he has left, his math says "between minus one, and three weeks".

"Thursday, why did you join TOL? Presumably you perhaps believed in this cause once? You were brave then, why not be brave now?"

"You won't die, you will just be turned off. It's a lot harder to be brave when you're facing what I know is coming. Even if we win, what's to keep people from going to Hell when they die?"

"There are other gods, and they are not happy with current events. I think they chose to send you those nightmares, those visions for a reason. and I'm more than certain that kissing TurboJesus' shoe would defile that reason. would you doom your world as a slave, or charge through Hell and Heaven as a liberator, freeing the one you put your trust in to free you?"

The man who was Thursday doesn't seem to think that there are other gods. According to him there's the one god, there's Satan his near-equal, and there's humanity who can tip the balance. The angels are basically robots. "You saw it. You caused it! Free will is a curse. I want bliss instead. I did my part already."

The paramedics note that Thursday is highly agitated and the last bit was probably the meth withdrawal talking.

"We have some idea of how to engineer gods now. Hell will go, Heaven will go and something new will replace everything he has made."

"And peace is what I want. Even if you're right - that took millennia, you have fifty years." He looks at the Hephaestus worship data shown to him by the Omega. "It's just a statistical blip, we get better stats with-with-with- with speedballs! I just want to stop being scared. We had a deal."

"We have a girl who literally teleports with glowing insects and a craftsman god that literally improves quality of crafts when prayed to..."

"What girl? That's an old woman playing around with glow worms. I'll believe someone teleporting when I see it, that could be a special effect."

Jenny is in Night City. Although she did seem to teleport once, it was only that once, and for only

a few meters. That said, she did start there. The Omega ping an alert calling her to a terminal.

A mild sedative won't impair Thursday's judgement, hopefully, but will make him freak out less.

Jenny gets to a terminal and asks the Omega what's going on, it sounded urgent. There are a couple of fireflies blinking around her head.

They ask her if she thinks she could teleport here, specifically to a room with this guy in it. The Omega briefly explain the situation.

Jenny looks perplexed. "I don't know... it's really far away and I was sorta... Well I was super happy for Jeb mostly really..."

She says she can try, and to turn off all the cameras in that section of the cavern.

The one time it worked, it worked when nobody was looking, although Jenny would have had to either cross solid rock or run unrealistically quietly and unrealistically fast to get there.

The missionary shows up; it's a somewhat overweight white guy who looks metabolically 35 or so, who brought a Bible and, for some reason, what looks like an old school analog voltmeter with a retrofuturistic casing.

The missionary makes small talk with one of the Omega's agents; the reason for the portable meter is that missionaries are encouraged to learn a trade so that they can provide material as well as spiritual help, and he's an electrician. His stuff is about 15 years out of date, which used to not be a big deal at all, but now it is.

Jenny turns off all the lights and cameras, and walks with decision towards a rock wall... After the third time she hits her nose on the rock salt face, she gives up on it. "Sorry. I was just super happy that day."

The man who was Thursday has calmed down a little bit, and the Omega have kept him engaged in small talk, mostly questions routed through their sysadmins; TOL is highly hierarchical as far as organizations go, but by now they are single-mindedly following their goal and entering the end game. They will start actually training troops in +970, and focus on production until then.

The Omega explain the enigma of Jenny to Thursday:

- * Their guys see Jenny as a barely pubescent girl.

- * Christians see Jenny as someone who is metabolically in her 20s, so they assume she's in her 90s.

- * Thursday saw her as an old woman. Tsion seemed to be unaware of her presence (or just to be ignoring her) other than being clearly disgusted by something.

They end by showing Thursday Jenny's written descriptions of herself as a last point.

"Thursday, the more supernaturally influenced someone is, the older they see her. Don't you think that indicates something might be messing with you?"

"Heh. The maiden, the mother, and the crone. I get it. But why doesn't Tsion see her? Did he see

a skeleton?"

He looks at the description.

"Again, someone wrote this, so what? The video stuff.. The dinosaurs in Jurassic Park weren't real either, were they? And that was in what, -7? No, this needs me to witness this... witness-wit- Sorry. One moment."

The Omega use the time they have left with the man who was Thursday with a rapid barrage of questions:

"What does TOL think of us? Do they have any plans regarding us at this point? Does he have any suggestions for turning some of TOL?"

TOL thinks that the Omega are a setup by Yahweh, to distract effort in all sort of weird directions and take away from the one big punch.

"What was their plan for the scythe/sword? Just having Satan wield it?"

The sword, or the scythe, would have been a fitting gift for Satan, should he have to fight Michael again.

"Do they believe Satan still has a fallen host to call upon?"

The prophecy only says that Satan would be released; they hope in the infernal host to help, but want to be ready without. The Omega can sympathise with this.

"Have they managed any communication with him, or are they just running on prophecy?"

They are still running on prophecy. Lately, some people have taken to divination, ouija boards, D&D, you name it.

"Could they be convinced to at least attack early? Are you, Thursday, willing to give any of our ideas you does agree with a video endorsement before you convert?"

The plan is fixed. Thursday wants to see the missionary NOW, but if it's brief, he'll let the Omega use anything they want to record.

"Can we have you do a conversion while in an MRI or under medical observation? Are you willing to do that?"

Sure, he'll stay under telemetry while he talks to the missionary.

The Omega let the missionary in; he's clearly impressed by the base's medical bay, having expected something like Frankenstein's lab.

He has a quiet talk with Thursday, which sounds like a mishmash of Chick Tracts; the man who was Thursday quickly recognizes the script and falls into it naturally.

Brain scans indicate that as soon as he started doing that, his serotonin levels increased and his life signs stabilized considerably. Now they're discussing Eutychro's dilemma; the missionary has little hesitation and says that things are good or evil depending on what God says.

The Omega quickly find correlation between Thursday deviating, even a little, from the Chick-Tract script and elevated levels of stress and anxiety in the poor guy.

The Omega's sysadmins have finished opening the floppy that Thursday brought; by the look of it, the TOL council does vote... extremely rarely, the minutes look like they're copied and pasted with small changes each time. By the look of it, there is a close but not perfect correlation between there being an actual vote, and the induction of a new member of the Council. These votes generally go 6-1 or 5-2.

Thursday still is connected to an IV. The Omega can mess with his body chemistry as much as they need to, including inducing death; they did not promise that they would, but he's assuming it.

Chick Tracts have been produced for over a millennium now, and new ones are generally welcomed since the old one have been parodied to death already. As a witnessing tool, they're mildly effective on teenagers. Counter-tracts have been tried, with mixed reactions ranging from littering fines to seizure to ignoring them.

The man who was Thursday claims to want to repent, but the missionary is trying to make sure he does it "for the right reasons", not just fear of imminent death.

There seems to be no unnatural influence, in the sense that the Mark XI (which has been disconnected on the output but not the input) is not trying to do anything; the man who was Thursday is just comforted about following a familiar script. That said, the magnitude of the effect is abnormal.

Jenny has gone back to work with Damien in the meantime; Night City is almost completely self-sufficient.

A quick Fourier transform analysis of the room's microphones indicates that nothing strange is going on with the sound. The Omega did record Azrael's "hiss", and there's no trace of it here; the Omega would have to get a Glorified or an Angel in a rigged room to see if that comes up. The missionary seems to be a normal human being.

The missionary insists that Thursday should repent out of sincere contrition for his work with TOL, not just out of fear of death. Thursday says that it's his moral duty to stand by his work, that if it was wrong, he did it for the right reasons.

"But what you did was wrong. You spread lies and misinformation."

"What I did was because I care about humanity! And no, never lies."

(another excerpt from the book, with an obvious change)

Thursday shrugged. "It's like He's head of the occupying army. We're the resistance, that's all. The rebels."

"And you don't feel destined to lose in the end?"

"We're outnumbered. We're the outcasts, the rejects, the dregs. But we won't give up hope

until it's all over. And then we'll see who wins."

"Your compatriots, the ones who reach one hundred, are dying every day. You are close to it yourself."

"I know."

"Do you know of any exceptions?"

"Many."

"Only artificially. And that doesn't tell you anything?"

"It just proves God isn't who He says He is."

"How do you figure?"

"He's mean and unloving and unforgiving, violent and judgmental. Disagree and you get killed."

"He's not willing that any should perish. Even you, Thursday."

A bit of IV adrenaline and testosterone has a very high chance of making Thursday more argumentative...

The Omega try it.

"Then He's not doing a good job of it."

"You have free will; a gift can be refused."

"True. Can you see that it's what I wanted, too? Give something to humanity? Like a future?"

"There's an important difference. Your works are as filthy rags to the Lord."

"And the spirit in which they were made?"

"Unrighteous, and ultimately, it shows where the source of power is. Cruel Lucifer demanded that you stand for him. Jesus requires only that you kneel."

Thursday stirs a little.

"He is generous as He is divine, the King of Kings. Such an offer only a madman would refuse. But the idea of kneeling, it's... you see, all the work we've done, for what little you say was worth, has left a nasty cramp in my leg, so kneeling will be hard for me."

The missionary has become somewhat annoyed.

"You called me here because you wished to convert. Are you changing your mind? There would be no glory in a sacrifice. Those in Heaven will spare no thought of The Other Light. It will be a footnote in the heavenly histories. All the unbelievers' writings and proclamations shall be burned, all their historians and scribes will suffer in the lake of fire, where there will be no arguing, only weeping and gnashing of teeth. Compared to eternity, the world to come will barely know you existed at all."

"The world, any world, will know that free men stood against a tyrant! That few stood against many! Right or wrong, valor is a virtue. And if you - or your God - can't respect that... then to Hell with you!"

The missionary sighs and closes his eyes in prayer for a moment. "Friend, your time is almost up. Choose your words carefully. They may be your last as a live human."

"You insult my friends. You threaten my people with eternal torture. Oh, I've chosen my words carefully, Christian. Perhaps you should have done the same. "

The man who was Thursday stands up from the telemetry system and, moving hesitantly, puts his hands on the missionary's shoulders.

"Please, if it's with your last breath, repent, and live, or go into the light."

Thursday stops, as if in thought. He's still hanging onto the missionary's shoulders.

"Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?"

The man who was Thursday doesn't react at first. He convulses, and opens his eyes again, unfocused.

Then he puts the missionary in a bear hug and bites his neck.

"BRAAAAINS...."

The missionary was not prepared for this, and falls backwards as the thing that was the man who was Thursday keeps savaging him like a movie zombie.

On Thursday's back, the TOL MEC unit's single LED is blinking rapidly. It's saying "HORDE MODE" at 300BPS in plain ASCII.

The meter is a regular analog multimeter in a fancy casing or so it looks like. If the missionary dies, or even if not, the Omega can probably reverse engineer it.

The Omega's medical techs separate the two; fortunately for the missionary, he's in an ICU, which is good because he's missing a fair chunk of his neck.

Thursday is restrained, but does quite a bit of damage to the sickbay before then - his movements are uncoordinated but extremely strong, suggesting that the modified metabolic extension controller is doing something. It's not adrenaline, the MEC unit has been drained of chemicals, for safety; it's got to be something else.

It takes one of the Omega's infiltrator MECs to stop the cybernetic zombie: their agent jams his forearm into Thursday's jaw, lets him yank it off at the elbow, and while Thursday gnaws on it for a bit before focusing on a moving target again, slams the TOL guy into a table with the remaining fist. Two orderlies manage to put a straitjacket and muzzle on the poor bastard.

The missionary, name of Matthew for the record, is bleeding out; fortunately for him, he's in an ICU. If Thursday had done no damage, he'd be fine; as it is; he has a chance of dying. The Omega's medical techs will do their best to prevent that, Hippocratic oath and all after all, but

the Omega have control over the machinery.

The missionary is a natural individual; the Omega looked him up and he's in his 230s. Had a pretty boring life. Matthew is some random missionary from Melbourne.

"So, we thought that the so-called Mark XI was a poor copy of the Mark X, plus that heart plug thing. We were only mostly right. They also hacked the firmware. The microtome that cuts the pain nerve can be told to, essentially, only do a partial job there, then make an elbow turn inside the limbic system, and snip off other bits. The result is... Well, the result is something that is feeling enough Hell-pain to go crazy but not enough to just curl in a ball and whimper. Just being in Hell seems to make a person hyper-aggressive. The result will fight anything it hates well past the point of critical damage, and will hate pretty much anything. Thursday here was a paper pusher, but there's still enough cognition in there that someone who's a trained soldier can still fire a rifle, I'll bet, although I wouldn't bet on reloading. We've replaced their unit with our own, but... it's not going to do much. Prevent further damage, I guess."

Thursday - still gnawing on a bit of MEC arm - and Matthew are strapped down, the first for reverse engineering, the second for quick Mark X implantation while he's been giving a blood transfusion. The Omega's medical techs tried to save both rather than focusing on Matthew, so the missionary dies about five minutes after the implantation.

The Mark X trips on schedule; just in case, Matthew's legs have been strapped down. He sits up and stares at everyone with blank eyes, but he's not aggressive.

One of the med techs comments that if the thing with Francis, Thursday and now this guy gets out, people will go back to making Frankenstein jokes about MECs, pretty soon. Vee and Damien are unlikely to be happy, either, although Kat did get over it.

Matthew is sort of scanning around, then speaks slowly. "Where is He? Where am I? I feel... numb?"

He sounds like he's very, very stoned.

"Where is He? Where is He? I was - So beautiful - where, where?"

The man who was Thursday is quietly shut down and put in one of the holding canisters, with special markings; the Mark XI controller is taken away for reverse engineering.

Matthew is told where he is - and informs the techs that they sound wrong - and then resumes looking around for, the Omega guess, Yahweh. His movements are slowed, and he's not trying to remove the restraints. When told to lie down, he complies. This makes it possible to quickly put what's left of the telemetry equipment to good use.

"That's interesting. Look at this guy's serotonin levels. He's almost completely blissed out. He's only talking to us because the Mark X automatically cut his pain and pleasure receptors, but he's experiencing a huge high just from what spills over. This isn't weed, Omega, it's the flower of the lotophagi. Matthew should be in despair about having lost ultimate bliss, but he's hopeful that it will resume soon, enough so that he's pacified about the whole thing."

The Omega get a very confused and contradictory description as Matthew becomes... well, not

so much agitated as more and more apathetic.

A big great light that is the source of all that is good and happy. Fluffy clouds. An infinite repository of knowledge accessible just for the thinking of asking. Angels playing the harp. The understanding of God's economy of time, from the perspective of eternity. Little fat babies with wings flying around. All those written in the Book of Life, past and present and what little future there is. Loss of the sense of self, dissociation, dissolution in the infinite.

Eventually, the Omega manage to separate two narratives, one that could be taken from Dante's Paradiso if Dante hadn't been so darn Catholic, and one that shows this poor soul's every need and want satisfied by the One Above All, in a simple but eternal loop.

Matthew seems to have lost the capacity to recognize a contradiction when he is reminded about the two narrative, and insists that it's all good and all truth is in there. He's still smiling blissfully, just speaking slower and slower.

The medical techs think that Matthew isn't long for this world; the serotonin in his neurons will eventually saturate. "Dies of bliss. And note that this is with most ability to feel pleasure removed!" The techs are taking note to see if it's possible to use this data to restore sensation to the Omega's MECs.

The drone tank that has been built with the least amount of human labor is marked, and the Omega are given semidirect control if it. Matthew, albeit moving very slowly, can be directed to walk in a direction, and is completely docile, so he can be told to walk there and hit with the wubber or the pneumatic ram.

The Omega direct Matthew to walk into the quarry - it looks pretty cool, as a place; if it wasn't quite a bit radioactive, people would be filming sci-fi serials in it - which he happily does.

This particular drone tank has been put together with as little human labor as possible; it's armed with a wubber and a pneumatic ram, the rationale being that there isn't much point in using firearms smaller than rockets since wubbers can run on system batteries and are almost as good.

The Omega drive the drone tank to where Matthew is and...

Aiming the 'bot using direct control takes the Omega a few moments; they're not designed for this sort of work, and ordinarily this sort of fine manipulation is mediated by a sysadmin - in this case, of course, that's not an option.

Wubbers aren't particularly good at being lethal, but the new marks can liquefy a brain inside the skull from a distance.

Trying the brown note on Matthew has no effect.

Trying the purple note on Matthew doesn't cause him to vomit, either.

The Brainmelter guitar solo, however, works perfectly, and the missionary falls forward. He's in

a better place, the Omega guess.

Someone else drives the bot out of the quarry while the Omega survey personnel records; nobody seems to have died from killing Matthew. To make doubly sure, the Omega would have to expose the zombified Thursday to the blue sky and see if a lightning bolt goes his way. Even then, he was already dead...

Matthew will be autopsied shortly.

Quinn is fine with how it all went: Thursday wasn't too useful, and just the learned things about drugs will be useful. "Think I can try some serotonin?"

Kat is pretty upset. She sees the necessity of doing this sort of testing, but would like Thursday and Francis to be put in permanent standby. Mostly, she's upset about Francis; Matthew is collateral damage to her. Strategically, she's worried about TOL agents getting back up with more frequency.

Damien is fairly grossed out by the whole affair, but the thing about Matthew was interesting. The drone kill is good news, if it's representative - Damien is not sure it is, though. The idea is to make the whole drone thing have better reaction times so they can be used in a fight outside of the Omega's bases.

Vee is definitely squicked out. "Well, I'm not converting, that's for sure. But I don't know if I want to do the whole MEC thing." She doesn't think the Omega did much wrong, per se, but she's personally squicked out.

Jeb shrugs. The Omega had to do destructive testing, of sorts, and managed to do it without hurting anyone under their command.

Jenny cannot be informed; she cannot be found anywhere in Night City....

Year: 947

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 17

The Omega have 17 cabals total; 12 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

The Omega's sysadmins have finished reconstructing the data from the floppy disk that Thursday provided. By the look of it, Sunday (the line of Sundays, which tend to start young and willingly go to Hell at 100, so much so that there's a bit of a lying-in-state ceremony for the death; the people holding the office are never related, whereas some nepotism has happened for other positions) have been ruling TOL pretty autocratically. On average, things come to a vote once or twice per each new Council member, and the votes are either unanimous or 6-1 or 5-2. Interestingly, Sunday does not have veto power.

Close votes:

- * Focus on recruiting by persuasion and argument, rather than by offering a party scene: Year 97, 4-3 for, Sunday against.

- * Support the Thousand Oaks Library's efforts to preserve and scanlate pre-Rapture literature: Year 220, 4-3 for, Sunday against.

- * Establish a parallel trade-school and university system: Year 298, 4-3 for, Sunday against. (The effort fizzled).

- * Create an air wing for the Final Army: Year 456, 4-3 against, Sunday against.

- * Continue Cendrillon Jospin's efforts to get through the canopy: Year 697, 4-3 against, Sunday

against.

* Establish a parallel trade-school and university system: Year 752, 4-3 for, Sunday against. (Worked better than last time).

* Create a computerized expert system for handling logistics and industrial coordination: Year 889, 4-3 for, Sunday against.

The "super grain" is very easy to harvest, and somewhat invasive (it will push off other graminaceae species). It's a clever bit of hybridization, not a miracle of superscience. Building a greenhouse on top of the canopy, however, is definitely on the agenda.

A quick consultation with Jeb shows that setting up a canopy-top greenhouse is a necessary first step, but he's all for fucking off to Mars, to the point where he and Valentina have drawn plans on how best to go about it, even. For what crops to bring along, he recommends starting with either vernalized potatoes, or hops.

Given the size and shape of the canopy, building a station there would be an excellent starting point for interplanetary flights.

* The canopy water can be processed into fuel.

* There's no atmosphere above the canopy, which is good for Soyuz/Apollo style rocket stacks.

* The canopy itself is pretty much perfectly spherical, so rail launches are possible.

The problem would be reentering...

Valentina is worried about cracking the canopy in too many spots, as it could lead to it collapsing; Jeb, of course, thinks that it's the best thing that could happen to the people of Earth, being able to see the stars again.

The two argue a little about whether the canopy is better thought of as an obstacle or as a resource.

The one thing the Omega are pretty sure that they are safe against, is a global flood. Then again, causing one might be enough to end the madness... if anyone survives.

The Underground Monorail have assisted in giving the Colossus systems a way to use contract law to quickly and cheaply give hospital visitation rights and other benefits to gay couples, so that a push for equal rights (which would be unrealistic in territories that the Omega control only softly) is pretty much not needed; two guys or two girls who are married had an unsanctioned ceremony, their tax forms still say "single", and live together with no formal recognition -- usually in communities where most everyone respects that they're married. Recently, the system has been updated to give the option for a gay guy and a gay girl occasionally marry-on-paper each other for safety or tax reasons.

The Omega do not issue a "missing agent" bulletin for Jenny; Damien is a bit disheartened about her friend being gone, of course, but she and others report Jenny passing by briefly - enough for a meal with Damien, a couple times - usually in Night City, but in Misrayim a few times. The Omega can't really tell if she's teleporting around, or just being elusive. When Damien asks flat

out if Jenny is the Triple Goddess, Jenny says that she doesn't think so, for what it's worth, but don't gods pick their avatars regardless of what they want? I mean, Jesus didn't want to be TurboJesus, if you read the gospels....

The Greenland base work continues; Valentina manages to "sneak in" some ground-tests for an eventual canopy station, rather than just going with what's most efficient, but you expect to have a working almost-automated assembly line before the end of next year, at this rate. This can be used to build drones, launch vehicles, and pretty much all that ordinarily requires a full-fledged base; shipping happens by two narrow gauge rail lines that get to two small automated loading facilities on each side of Greenland. The place looks as cold as it is, but people enjoy being away from the otherwise mostly constant climate to work there.

Lifetree has some security, usually volunteers; the UM is providing some of it. They would definitely love help with keeping track on Paul's actions - remember that he has the official police and the psalties covering his back - so as to be able to move people around, and actual Infiltrator MECs or even heavies. Both Quinn and Kat volunteer.

Kat generally travels with a few Desolators, but she'd need support personnel to attack something. That said, she's pretty scary by herself.

Quinn will go prowling if she's assigned to Australia, but without a support squad, she can't take on any high value targets. Kidnapping someone is a lot harder than killing them.

Damien knows more about drones than Vee does. Incidentally, Vee is due to retire in +950, so two years from now; unlike Ziggy, she doesn't want a year off.

Sex change operations require modern facilities to do safely, and the Lifetree hospital in the southern San Francisco Bay is no exception. Due to the fact that Pacifica is under your control in a "soft" manner, the procedure is not advertised anywhere, but those who need it know where to go.

Paul Stepola is not one of these people; he's been driving up and down the coast a lot, harassing the occasional doctor in Oregon or Alaska, caused local police departments to get hit by civil lawsuits for breaking into prevention clinics without a warrant, and the like. He doesn't seem to be any closer to his target.

The Lifetree hospital is given a few drone tanks as autonomous crash carts, with the wubber somewhat disguised under the medical equipment that they carry.

While Matthew's ordeal provided some useful data, it does not necessarily mean much over whether drones can kill believers without retaliation.

The Omega have been tracking who built what; of the drones they have available, a few have been made with automated labor which itself was assembled only with MEC labor.

Vee plays IT program manager again this year; her music goes down better with the nerdy types than with the general public, so she's actually pretty happy about it. While the Omega's systems have been inviolate, they take the time to patch some Colossus exploits that let a few people walk home with some free bitnicks every month, reverse the damage done to search engine

rankings by CreationQuest and similar groups, and make sure that events like Bahira's intrusion attempt can be shored up against.

Since by now almost half of the unbelieving population has a basic Mark X, MEC production focuses on the lightning-hardened version. As part of normal maintenance, a few infiltrators have to be converted to heavies because of substance abuse causing widespread damage to muscle and cartilage; it's a lot easier to make someone go cold turkey if they can't move.

Night City is never officially declared complete, but the end of major construction is marked by a recreation of Gagarin and Glenn's spaceflights in the big planetarium, concert to follow. The place is pretty sprawling, and there's even a reconstruction of what people think a city street pre-Rapture may have looked like. They went a bit heavy on the tech-noir in the Omega's opinion, but the place was attracting tourists even when under construction.

As the Omega know, Jeb's space efforts have been fairly low key lately; even so, he's cooperated with interested believers, with some success. Among the many chambers, Night City has one dedicated to his life's work - cosmonauts will have to learn to not fear the night, after all. Jenny has showed up a few times; her fireflies are doing pretty well, a portion of the original caverns has been preserved with great care and attention and a separate artificial habitat for breeding has been built. Looks like that indeed fireflies need the night to reproduce.

Night City has one main entrance which can be sealed, and two semi-hidden ones that are protected by heavy automated defenses.

Some of the Omega's people take the time to act as countermissionaries; they play up Jenny's story, not outright saying that she is the Triple Goddess, but hinting at it. Before long, spinning skull gifs on personal webpages are being replaced by spinning winged sandals, which is arguably an improvement.

A lot of the places that do metalwork - even though it's CNC based nowadays - keep an old style forge for customers that want something done the traditional way; pagan worship has become its own niche industry. The Osaze government eventually figures that the triangle-flame-and-tongs is a pagan religious symbol, and reacts to it by mandating that any shop that displays it must also display a cross. Most workshops react by quickly welding together two pieces of rebar and putting that on the wall somewhere.

The Emissary is intentionally built to look low-key; it's unarmed, and its self-destruct system simply releases the chemicals in the batteries to fry most of the electronics. While the team document themselves about long-range rovers, they discover that a small rover had landed on Mars just after the Rapture, having been launched a couple of years before; the final design ends up looking a little like it.

Damien can't go to the Feast of Tabernacles, obviously.

Enough unbelievers have used the Mark X to stick around after age 100 that recruiting among them is fairly easy - they already are experiencing the drawbacks of the MEC system, so offering them a significant upgrade isn't a hard sell.

On top of that, the Omega's recruitment effort in Pacifica goes well; Quinn gets people in and

Kat makes sure that the valuable ones stick around and are directed where their expertise can help the most.

Paul Stepola has been harassing doctors that provide hormone replacement therapy up and down the Pacific coast; these people have been told to not resist, go to jail for a few days if required, and wait for Colossus to shift the whole economy just that little bit in favor of them being irreplaceable in the community and having a very easy time finding lawyers willing to work pro bono. Eventually, Stepola - while praised by the media in his effort to protect confused youth from an immoral lifestyle - ends up being considered an annoyance by the various PDs he tries to cooperate with.

One day, Stepola gets out of the car on the Vallejo ferry (the bay bridges were never rebuilt, although the Golden Gate was, with obvious Asian influences), climbs on top of the boat, prays loudly for guidance, and is joined in by almost all the believers on the ferry. Then, he demands that the ferry be diverted south so that he can make a quick landing at the pier nearest the Tree of Life hospital. The ferry's captain flat out refuses - there's no emergency or urgency - to which Stepola draws a gun on her. The Pacifican Colossus passes the silent alarm on to the Omega.

The drone is marked usable for lethal response, and will be deployed against a deserving target.

Bahira keeps probing the Colossus systems; she's convinced that it's one supercomputer. Keeping her locked out is not particularly hard, so the Omega do that. Her efforts to figure out who is profiting from this - she can't imagine it being autonomous - of course go nowhere.

The government of Eastern Europe reacts to the tourist influx in a quite charming way; the people coming in are young, curious, willing to get preached at when they're at the airport waiting for their luggage as long as it's only for a few minutes, and tend to have money to spend. So, the government launches a beautification program, emphasizing the beautiful forests and the Bledow arid area. The place starts looking a bit less dull, although the kneeling stations on the forest paths are a bit much. They are sometimes put to other use by willing couples.

The trip from Pacifica to Greater Jerusalem is as uneventful as it's meticulously planned, with an airliner leg to Athens (logistic surveys shows that the world's remaining airliners are crapping out pretty fast, to the point that you expect that in 25 years they'll only be trotted out for these pilgrimages) and from there a sea trip to Greater Jerusalem; while airplanes work just fine in that area, it's considered uncouth to fly within a horizon of the Temple.

The Emissary is brought along as a curiosity, and it's expected that it will eventually end up in the Temple museum; since it's solar powered, able to climb stairs, and semiautonomous, it may be possible to reactivate it later on.

The Temple itself is a truly majestic sight; the base structure was miraculously raised from the bedrock, but skilled traditional craftsmen have been decorating it for a thousand years now. The grounds are spotless, and most of the groundskeepers are volunteers, even those wearing a cilice.

The place has a definitely barbaric splendor; the artwork is basic but clearly made and preserved with the love of hundreds of generation.

In the Courtyard, the Emissary is presented to the Levites...

Captain Weaver tripped the silent alarm according to procedures; the Omega redirect it to an official counterterrorism system while they order one of their drone tanks that are marked for kill testing to be helidropped on the ferry.

Paul Stepola tells Weaver to reroute the ferry; she does so, careful to keep the boat at the lowest speed she can get away with. She asks Paul if prayer has revealed to him an abortion clinic, and what the urgency is. He answers that no, but something almost as bad. He also tries to talk Weaver into converting. The captain is responsive to this, and the two have a moment in which she hugs him holding back tears. Two seconds later, Stepola is on the ground with a knee to his back.

"A hijacker with a badge is still a hijacker, Detective. Surrender now and you will be detained and turned over to your own PD. Don't and I will break your spine and toss you overboard."

Stepola protests that it's not a woman's lot to fight. "This is MY ship. I am HER captain. This is my sacred duty!"

Old age and treachery have a way of overcoming youth and skill; a few of the passengers get to the ferry's control point and offer to detain the wayward detective. Weaver lets them; the idea is to lock him in his car and have police pick him up at the dock. Unfortunately, enough of the passengers are sympathetic to Stepola that he is able to get to the other weapon he had in the car trunk, a submachine gun, and break out again. Inspired by a holy cause, the elderly detective moves very fast for his age.

Facing Stepola and an improvised posse, Weaver and her sailors tell everyone to stand down to avoid casualties that a burst-fire weapon in a crowded ship is likely to cause. "We're going to heave to and prepare to be boarded." When Stepola gets back to the control point (it's too small to be called a bridge) Weaver stands away from the controls with her hands raised up, and refuses to turn the ferry's engine back on.

It takes a few minutes for the people helping Stepola to figure out how to start a ship's engine, and the boat limps towards San Francisco. Above, police helicopters are circling, asking for the hijacker's demands. Stepola answers by identifying himself and stating that he is going to sail the boat into the Lifetree hospital (which is on the bayside) in order to shut it down. He commands the pursuers to pray for guidance; a few fly back, most keep circling.

The Emissary is presented to the priest, Malluch. There is a definite air of age about this person despite him looking a very fit metabolic fifty, and he speaks slowly and deliberately. "We bring gifts from the people of Pacifica. Able artisans constructed this, as parts of the firstfruits offering." The Emissary had, in fact, been used to carry the gifts; the pallet covered its solar panels, but not for long.

"Ah, yes. I hear reports out of Pacifica. Their technology rivals that of any nation..." The priests recites what could be an executive summary of the Pacifican economy to the emissaries (who are from there!), to which they listen with genuine interest. The report is... somewhat inaccurate in that, well, it doesn't mention the Colossus-mediated half of the economy at all.

The closest asset in the Omega's employ is the oceangoing tug Heidi Brusco, which carries barge trains up and down the coast. After a somewhat surreal conversation with her captain in which the Pacifican Colossus system tries to offer him payment for something that he's perfectly willing to do for free, the tug unchains all the barges it was towing except one, drops a beacon, and steams to intercept the ferry.

What follows is the slowest vehicle chase in history. The Brusco is towing a mile-long steel rope between itself and the barge; the tug is not fast by any stretch of the imagination, but has about sixteen times the engine output that the ferry does. Stepola's posse cheer when the tug passes them by, imagining that the ship is escorting them.

The Brusco does a lazy half turn and then crosses in front of the barge, having effectively lassoed the ferry in a loop, then deploys its bow knees and starts pushing on the barge as if it was lining it up in a harbor. Pretty soon, the steel wire gets lodged into one of the protrusions in the ferry's hull. Careful to not snap it, the tug's captain, Marco Dessy, increases the tension in the wire.

Unsurprisingly, a tug-of-war between a ferry and a tug will always go to the former; Dessy, however, lets the ferry continue moving towards the pier at barely more than a walking pace, reasoning that it's the safest thing to do to get the crazy person off the boat.

Police, psalties, and the Omega's own security forces are piling up on the pier, in a state of uneasy truce.

The Emissary takes a good look at the courtyard of Ezekiel's Temple. It's YUUGE.

Being as the Feast of the Tabernacles is about to begin, emissaries from all territories are milling about and conversing with the Levites, some of which are actual Levites from Bible times; looks like none of the "important" Old Testament Saints are out and about, as they're probably getting ready. The Omega note with some satisfaction that the "firstfruits offerings" from Osaze and Pacifica are far superior in terms of tech and at least as good in terms of craftsmanship.

Some Levites have set up a sort of panel informing emissaries that eating spicy veggies is permissible, even though their reappearance is a result of unbeliever techniques.

From a strategic standpoint, a tank charge makes a lot of sense; the courtyard is big and flat, but very exposed. The Omega could probably land an airliner safely in here, and then turn it around and take off.

The Emissary wandering around alone eventually attracts some attention, from...

The tug is pulling on the ferry in such a way that the ferry can only advance very slowly; it will hit the pier eventually, but stop before it can hit the warehouse-turned-hospital. Captain Dessy believes that it's the safest way to get Stepola off the boat, after which the landlubber police can handle it.

Interestingly, Dessy is a Christian; he's just not interested in talking to Stepola over the radio, and wants to make sure no crew or passengers get hurt. Besides, he hasn't had a genuinely interesting situation at sea to handle in centuries.

Given the focused-wave nature of wubbers, they cannot be used as sniper rifles; the farther

you are, the more likely it is that the wubber will hurt, incapacitate or kill people around the target. Right now the Omega forces use wubbers at short and medium range, neutron sources against Angels, and semi-smart mortars at long range; the closest thing the Omega have to a sharpshooter doctrine are the neutron sources, in that they project a tight beam.

Naturally, the kids - three, two girls and one boy, from China as far as the Omega can tell - want a ride. The Emissary can carry about three times their weight, so it's not a problem; they've seen RC vehicles before, even large ones, but never one whose pilot is not in sight.

The Omega learn from one of the girls, the eldest, that the True Mandate Of Heaven territorial government wants to start reducing farm automation - a bunch of serious people paid a bunch of money to her Daddy to stop messing around with the RC tractor he recently bought, which she points out is bigger than the Emissary although it's slower, and put more people to work on the farm instead. She's happy about it because she'll probably get to play with the tractor more.

The second year after the firstfruits offering had been extended to manufactured goods, the Temple Courtyard had turned into a mini World's Fair, but that was corrected as an excess and now the atmosphere is calm and solemn.

The small helicopter swoops down on the ferry and uncerimoniously drops off the drone tank; it deploys a simple Rogallo wing and uses its wheels as momentum gyroscopes to steer onto the ferry's top deck, landing with a loud clang and then discarding the wing. People have the good sense of staying the hell away from the mini-tank as it rolls to the ferry's control point - the wubber on these is designed to look like a weapon.

Of course, the tank is just a bit too big to get through the control point's door, so it just vibrates the glass to pieces after pushing the wubber against it. The Omega can now easily shoot at Stepola, his small posse, and Captain Weaver who has just ducked out of the way and may be hit by some of the beam.

She's less likely to be incapacitated by being sick, since she's a ship captain, and would only pass out if hit by the Brainmelter, although there is a chance of brain damage.

"Paul Stepola, you are being charged with-"

Stepola shoots half his magazine into the drone tank, with the bullets bouncing off and breaking glass. The contingency activates and the drone tank floods the ferry's control point with the brown note, leaving Paul and his posse convulsing on the floor.

Captain Weaver pukes into the hatch, stands up with some difficulty, and shouts something over the wubber which the Omega don't pick up because the microphones cut off when the wubber is on. She slowly crouches behind Stepola and uses his own handcuffs on him, then moves her hands to her ears and mouths STOP IT.

Capt. Weaver regains control of the ferry and works with Capt. Dessy to safely dock the ferry to the pier near the Tree of Life hospital, which has been put in lockdown for safety anyway. The police, psalties and private security forces have been following the ferry's progress, and while there's really no love lost between any of them, they've been professional about it.

Stepola's posse surrendered with little difficulty, and Stepola is delivered to his supposed colleagues at gunpoint by Weaver.

For the ships' crews, the rest of the day is spent cleaning up (the ferry's passengers are dropped off, and the barges recovered) with the evening hosting a celebration for them at the port of Richmond; local authorities make a brief appearance to thank them for their service, but they'd rather party with their own people.

Charges against Stepola are dropped almost immediately and it's announced that he will be taking an unpaid leave of absence from the Pacifican police force; his "posse" are likewise let go. The situation has made it politically impossible for anyone to go after Tree of Life or the Underground Monorail for quite a while, however; a few days later a safety inspection is performed at the hospital and gives them "exceeds expectation" marks.

Lifetree and the UM are extremely grateful; the former promise help in restoring sensation to MECs, and the latter note that Capt. Weaver is a member.

The Omega still don't know if a drone will kill a believer with no repercussions, but the technology has been showcased in the best possible way and there is now demand for these things from various law enforcement agencies. They want them in RC mode, of course, but slipping in an eye and an ear would not be difficult.

Ely LeVey rants and raves on the air about the need to pray together when believer goes against believer, and has Stepola come in for an interview after his badge is taken away. He insists that Tree Of Life are evil - just look at the name - and that he will do anything in his power to expose them. The restraining order comes in about two hours later.

The Pacifican Colossus is directed to make sure that the relevant shipping companies are compensated; unsurprisingly, the official government doesn't. Both captains receive plenty of gifts from the ferry passengers, as well as a medal by the Bay Area fire department.

Captain Weaver does not have a Mark X implant, but is not a believer; her beliefs are simple, in that she thinks that life is there to be lived, and the afterlife will be handled as its own problem. If she ends up in Hell, she plans to take up piracy. She's very much into literature, and has never quite made peace with the notion that the seas are a tranquil and safe place now.

The Omega call Capt. Weaver on her brand new videophone to thank her.

"You were driving the robot, weren't you. Not bad. But don't think you can put us out of business!" She seems in good humor. "You're the computer geeks who run interference for the Underground Monorail, right... Hmm, actually, you run a lot of stuff, don't you..."

Capt. Weaver turns out to be a bit of a Jeb fan (more of a Valentina fan, to tell the truth), and when the Omega tell her that they work with them, she asks if they have a job for her.

"Actually there is something else you did that seemed a little off. After firing the brown note you seemed to act normally, but then you held you head and mouthed "stop it". I've been building a case study of odd behaviors as of late and was curious if you heard something or had some kind of mental image flash in you head at that moment?"

"Well, other than I was deafened and puking my guts out... You ever stand next to a fog horn? That was worse! But now that you think of it, I sort of ... I sort of imagined the old bastard kicking my ass. Very vividly. Just for a moment. Weird part? It didn't feel scary. It felt... calm."

She goes on a bit of a tirade about believers being misogynistic, Stepola even told her that it wasn't her place to fight her.

"You know what? Thanks for intervening. I'd have tied the asshole up and thrown him overboard. And fuck the lightning bolt."

The Omega asks Kat if she thinks that she could build an upscaled radiation emitter. Something mounted in a room on an arm, or perhaps bolted to drones.

"Omega, I can make you something that'll sizzle an Angel's skin off, but it'll give cancer to everyone in the arena.... However, I do have a superheavy frame designed for me or Damien. We could mount a series of emitters on extendable actuators and focus them on the target from multiple angles. It's not an excuse to build a tentacle-monster body."

Finding out where Stepola lives is trivial; waiting for him to actually come home just as well. The drone can simply ring the bell and answer with a sound barrage.

A nice suburban home in Orange County, fairly secluded, with his wife Jae. She's in a wheelchair and rarely leaves. The drone can abort if she answers the door.

The drone drives itself to Stepola's house and nudges the doorbell with the hydraulic ram; a relatively convincing picture is held in front of the door spyhole.

Paul Stepola opens the door; he looks a bit unkempt. The blast is extremely focused, and only breaks the spyhole on the door.

The Omega's personnel records indicate that nobody has been hit by a lightning bolt in the 30 minutes before or after the drone completing its mission; the machine drives off to hide into a moving van, and the Omega call emergency services to make sure Paul's wife receives medical attention should she go into shock.

The drone has done its job; its automation distance is three (humans built the machines that built the machines that built the drone), and the Omega set it as standard. They have the beginnings of a drone army.

Vee hasn't been having any nightmares like Thursday's; she reports sleeping very well in Night City, if anything.

MECs are known for doing a bit too many drugs, but since their controller automatically intervenes to prevent damage, there have been very cases of anyone stealing to buy drugs or the like. Quinn has a past as a drug addict, and thinks she can take withdrawal better than most; her brain is flooded with serotonin while she's... well, the Omega are getting very good telemetry, but no audio and video, although she says it will be on PPV in a few days. Whatever she's doing must be very enjoyable.

When the stuff wears off, however, she ends up crashing hard; rather than the usual reaction to

narcotic withdrawal, Quinn sinks into a deep depression, crying her heart out and feeling useless for a whole day.

Damien decides to teach the Omega handwriting by means of sharing control of a waldo arm, and the Omega write the notes to Jenny. While there is no answer, the fireflies in both bays eat the note with gusto. Eventually, one of the notes is answered on the back of the paper. "Thank you! I'm trying to figure out what's going on. I think I can go home from here. If I do, I'll visit everyone to say goodbye. before I do, promise!"

The handwriting is a lot more sure than it used to be.

Quinn shares a few personal details about her pre-MEC life with the Omega, on condition of secrecy, about her experiences with various chems. She feels that it'd be very easy to get MECs addicted to serotonin, and... well.

Jeb does a bit of math: the canopy is not that thick, but it does ensphere the Earth. The Omega are looking at a sea level rise of approximately fifteen meters, which yes, would turn the world into a bog or at least severely eat into every coastline and force a lot of relocations. Of course, if the Omega know that it's coming, it's survivable; they've desalinated worse.

Jenny shows up in one of the Omega's datacenters; she came out of the restroom, which is one of the few unmonitored area, with no record of her getting in from anywhere.

"I've already said goodbye to Kat and Damien and the others... except Jeb. I think that you're in a future. Maybe we can bury you a box of goodies, and you can find it? This started with a treasure hunt, it should end with one..."

Jenny tells the Omega that her Granny does not own an army, but was really good at smuggling stuff in our out of things. "I don't know how it works here. Imagine one of your greenhouses, or... No, imagine one of your PC shops like they were when I first showed up. You know, big room full of wires, everyone sort of improvising, every thing sort of cobbled together? Okay, so that's what home looks like. Yours looks more like... Well, one of your PC shops now. It's all nice and clean and there's one thing in control and all the machines work nice together and all look the same. Only... My future's been around a lot less than yours."

She thinks that she can tell Granny to leave the Omega a care package. "What'd you like? Movies? Books? Seeds?"

"We need data files on magic, mythology, scientific developments, arms and armor, just about everything we don't have that can bring tyrant to kneel. Also, any kind a weapon, armor, or technology that can fit and be reverse engineered. . . They do have floppy disk or USB drives in your time right? Also, any advice your Granny can offer after she's heard where you've been."

Jenny hugs the nearest technician in lieu of the Omega, excuses herself to the restroom, and she's gone. She leaves coordinates that correspond with a small hamlet on the Ligurian coast.

Quinn details a few stories about her life and the various stupid things she did in it. "There's actually something in what TOL are doing. If the fight continues.... well, you'll have a lot of MECs running around. And they'd be really easy to control. Serotonin, dopamine... no real ill effects

other than the crash after. A patch to the metabolic controller and you could have everyone just love to obey you. Are we replacing a god-tyrant with another, Omega?"

" . . . You have a new order. If that becomes the case after we kill tyrant. Shut me off."

Quinn smiles. "Can do. I've fought the shakes off before."

Year: 948

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 19

The Omega have 19 cabals total; 14 are available. Coordinating more than 20 will increase overhead.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

The Omega's sysadmins indicate that eventually it will be possible to integrate experience-sharing telecom equipment in the metabolic extension controllers.

Weaver takes a speedboat and cruises up and down the Ligurian coast, armed with a set of

coordinates. Unfortunately, it looks like that there's a small fishing hamlet where the time capsule is buried.

Jeb and Vee don't often get to work together, but synergise pretty well. They start working on the launch; the Omega have a launchpad in Misrayim, and one that can be reached in the Caucasian region.

The automated base in Greenland can be used to do anything that a base does with half the manpower. It would be best to build drones here, to make sure that nobody gets zapped if the Omega fight believers, but it's not mandatory.

Manned space launches are still illegal in Osaze; enforcing the ban wouldn't be particularly easy for the government.

Jeb and Vee train for the first sustained stay in space in almost a millennium; Valentina does most of the engineering that Jeb can't do, which relaxes Vee somewhat as the Cosmist is a bit less seat-of-her-pants-y than the test pilot is. The flight envelope is simple: the new capsule, named VG'r because it was the fastest way to end an argument between calling it Voshkod Redux or Gemini Redux, will carry Jeb and Vee to the canopy, deploy impellers, and swim to the ice layer. There, Vee will use a wubber to make a proper hole in it. Once the capsule emerges, it will let the ice reform around it. Jeb and Vee will go on EVA to deploy grapnels and a circular vibrating shroud which will be used to allow subsequent capsules to "dock through" and be able to pull themselves up through the canopy; from there on, building a station will be relatively easy. Unlike Skylab and MIR, the nature of this project will probably require manual work until construction robots can be sent up.

Val, Vee and Jeb are not at all worried about legal issues; what can the Osaze government do about it exactly?

Quinn's approach to making sure the launch happens without any incidents is simple: very sloppily have a group of fans declare that they're occupying a warehouse owned by believers for an industrial concert the day of the launch, and that it's going to be the loudest bang since the big one.

The reaction is enormous; all the area's police force surrounds the warehouse, from which indeed very strange noises are coming, only to find Quinn banging on various tautly mounted metal sheets and using the whole warehouse as a resonator. She appears drunk off her ass and claims that this is half of her grudge match with Vee about who can be louder tonight.

The psalties swiftly move in to arrest her, and she lets them. She does a runway walk from the warehouse to the paddy wagon, at the end of which she effortlessly slips off the handcuffs by bending her hand in a way that required adding a few joints to it, points towards Timbuktu, makes a sad face, and says, "Oooh, look at that, I lose..."

The launch is successful; Jeb and Vee get to the canopy in a few minutes. This time around, the media coverage is handled much better - Sky Eyes triangulate the capsule's arrival, high resolution cameras document the event from the ground, and when government forces get to the launch pad, the complex has already been put back on shutdown, so they have little to do

but put police lines around it.

The illegal launch is intentionally given scant media coverage and Osaze media indicates that should anything go wrong, no rescue attempt will be made. The podcast by Valentina offers a nuanced reply as to why that's Not Even Wrong, after which the livestream goes to various amateur planespotters who are monitoring the VG'r.

The capsule drops the second stage and dives into the canopy; Vee and Jeb sound cold and professional. A trailing wire works as an antenna and shows the surreal spectacle of a submarine at the edge of space.

The capsule anchors itself to the bottom of the ice, and Vee vibrates a hole in it to Also Sprach Zarathustra.

The canopy cracks on the last notes, just a couple of beats early, and Jeb pushes the impellers to max. Vee is transfixed by the night sky, and this time, the Omega are getting good video of it. Jeb is just grinning ear to ear.

The capsule gets to unbroken ice, and drags itself on shore with one of the grapples; the two cosmonauts put their vacuum suits on and get out hand in hand after bumping helmets. They quickly deploy the grapples and circumscribe the hole in the ice with the tensostructure designed for it; the grapples will be used to "ice fish" subsequent capsules. The two cosmonauts install the solar panels that will operate the winches, then set up a telescope, and finally lie down on the ice to just watch the stars while the automated instrument registers itself on star charts that haven't been updated in a thousand years. Valentina is a bit jealous, but she's up on the next flight.

The telescope is a fairly small half-meter aperture dealie, hooked up to a high res camera talking to the dangling antenna, and will remain there until a better one is brought up. For the first time in generations, people can get a current view of the Milky Way.

Ely LeVey's commentary is superimposed on the livestream, just for fun. "And God said, Let there be rips in the firmament, for signs and marking of the seasons.... This is a misguided effort, for no signs are necessary in this dispensation. How do they call this progress? They would bring us back to the age of superstition!"

The view is breathtaking. The relatively short air supply more so.

While Jeb and Val poke a hole in the sky, Capt. Weaver is poking a hole in the sand; hopefully the capsule will be under the beach. She does ask the locals if they've found something like that, but they answer in the negative. The set of coordinates is pretty unambiguous; something must have moved around. Annoyed, they have to go home empty handed, at least for now.

Quinn has her own headcanon when it comes to mythology, drawing more from Sailor Moon than Selene, but keeps it mostly in her pants, so to speak, and lets her team do their work. By now, revivalist subcultures (with different levels of historical accuracy or care for it, and with different pantheons) are a fairly common sight in the territories under the Omega's soft control. In Night City, a shrine to Haephestus has been built over a small geothermal vent.

A dummy quarry is dug by Kat and her workers in the Australian base, starting from an unsuccessful prospecting point; various weapons, including neutron beams, are hid in the rock cliffs in such a way that they can quickly break out of it. The place ends up looking rather alien... or maybe it's just because it looks like those old Star Trek or Doctor Who sets. The quarry itself is a funnel; the actual trap is a cavern that opens up to the quarry. A small circular train track is built, just big enough for two mine carts used as bogies to carry a confinement pod; this will spin in circles around the rock strata in the quarry, being visible within the cavern where there's a little "station" for it; signs indicate that there's another "station" at the base proper, but in truth the subterranean track just goes round in a circle.

Nearby there, a transmitter is built; the design ends up marring the natural beauty of Ayer's Rock a little bit, consisting as it is of a series of horizontal antennas that are mounted atop the rock formation in a spiral pattern; ocean and canopy reflection should do the rest. The expectation is to be able to overpower one of the standard AM channels, number 18, or jam most radio transmissions on the planet for a little bit, forcing people to rely on the wired data network. Of course, this also disables the Omega's transmissions, although the jammer's "woodpecker" white noise bursts are timed to try and not mess with Sky Eye positioning signals.

The Only Light attacks the Australian base again, but with two concurrent projects there, they are soon surrounded by Heavy MECs who happen to be testing anti-Angel weapons. Kat doesn't hold a grudge, and lets the survivors limp away. Those who don't end up being used as natural scale skull-and-crossbones signs for the radioactive parts of the quarry.

Damien finds herself missing Jenny a little, but can sympathise with her wanting to go: her timeline, assuming it's not just all in her head, sounded like a less dreary place. She has her own way to keep the Omega's hackers motivated, and they shore up their systems enough that going on the attack makes sense again. The Omega estimate that their systems underlie enough of the internet that they can perform 51% attacks on blockchains with little effort.

The Omega use the telescope to find the North Star and start re-registering sidereal and planetary positions. Well, at least it looks like the Geocentrists were wrong and this isn't some sort of pocket dimension...

One problem is that the canopy breach is right on top of the Timbuktu launch complex; it's a good spot for it, very close to the equator, but the launch complex itself has been formally seized and there's an arrest warrant out for Vee and Jeb (Quinn easily outran the police after her stunt; she took two bullets in the back, but that was a matter of spending twenty minutes in the infirmary and adding the bullets to the jar where she's been keeping them). Space launches are still glamorous enough that this won't be much of a problem, but as they become routine and the public loses enthusiasm as it happened pre-Rapture, this may become an issue.

After an innocently tender moment, Jeb and Vee are reminded that they're there to work, and double-check on the grapples and winches, discovering that one had not penetrated the ice correctly and may have caused an issue for the next load. They deploy solar panels, make sure that the telescope is set up correctly and can transmit, and do a quick walk-around of what will be the base site - right now it looks like a metal ring surrounding a hole in the ice, with three small derricks at 120 degrees to each other holding the winches.

All this done and with a few minutes left in the air tanks, they get back to the capsule, hoist it to the side of the "fishing hole", and swim down the canopy; once they're at the bottom end of it, they deploy the inflatable heat shields and let themselves drop. Jeb and Vee's parachutes open at the intended altitude, and the two glide down a little bit into the hands of a recovery truck; the capsule can be taken apart for materials by the next crew and added to the hab that will be built.

The people in Misrayim are generally uninterested in the nominal government and are doing well without it; the occasional ultra-libertarian group makes some waves, but never quite manages to rise to prominence due to subtle interference by the Colossus system. Elections still happen, the voting age has been raised to 100, MECs are legally considered dead and forbidden from voting, ensuring that only Christians vote in territorial elections. This has very little effect on daily life; the nominal government is in Sharm-el-Sheik and has been pretty hogtied by the fact that it's bound to respect small-government principles. Greater Jerusalem is close geographically but distant in people's mind.

The people in Pacifica are more divided on the issue; Christians are no longer the majority but they are still by far the largest subculture. In general, people are more laid back than in Misrayim.

The people in most other territories are at peace the situation, partially because those who disagree with it move to one of the Omega's territories.

Jeb and Vee make a clean getaway and in a few weeks police presence in an otherwise deserted launch complex stops; the Omega have some lawyers go in front of the court and point out that anything that Jeb and Vee did outside the canopy was outside territorial jurisdiction. This should tie things up for a while.

After the Feast of the Tabernacles, the Emissary is put in the museum just outside the Temple courtyard.

Year: 949

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 20

The Omega have 20 cabals total; 14 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

Space research focuses on how to most efficiently launch into actual space from the canopy; an ISRU system that will turn canopy water into hydrogen and oxygen for propellant is designed and prototyped.

Kat takes time to work with the Omega's MEC'd agents, making sure each has time to learn how to feel at least a bit of pleasure again; her own time is spent giving cooking lessons on OmegaTube.

The Omega send a message to TOL, stating that they are willing to negotiate a treatise to cease aggression in interest of conserving their manpower and letting the Omega focus on their work a little more.

While there is no direct answer, an answer comes to the Australia base: leave or be forced out. It appears that TOL wants the nuclear mine... That said, their attacks haven't been particularly competent.

The Greenland base is completed without much fanfare, and a test run of drones pulled out of the assembly line.

Quinn rather enjoys playing hide-and-seek with missionaries in Eastern Europe; Night City isn't quite self-sufficient, nowhere really is, and the distraction makes it possible to build an ACTUAL underground monorail line to a nearby river port.

Vee begins her farewell tour; as a DJ, she's only so good, but she's a known and respected figure amongst the Omega's forces now. Her new ethereal style has been rather influenced by her space trip.

Tsion ben-Judah has finally gotten around to looking at the Emissary drone; the drone has been carting people around the Temple Courtyard, giving the Omega a pretty good map of the location and its surroundings.

He decides that the Emissary should be sacrificed.

Damien's area of expertise is semiautonomous systems; she and her workgroup encourage using Sky Eye GPS to get people to build delivery 'bots and similar systems.

Before long the streets of what used to be Portland and Seattle are invaded by a bunch of little robo-trucks delivering everything from coffee to zeppelin parts.

Tsion examines the beeping Emissary and orders it to drive itself to a side altar which has been

designated to use with most of the unbelievers' non-food offerings that are to be dismantled; the altar is built in one of the Courtyard's corners and there's a discreet conveyor belt leading to a smelter.

Beep Boop! The Emissary is set to not speak unless spoken to (mostly because that way it doesn't need active monitoring) and meekly follows Tsion to the altar. Given how flat the Courtyard is, the wheeled chassis can definitely give a Glorified a good run.

Vee announces her retirement in favor of one Prokhor Zakharov; his approach is a bit more cerebral, and he's a better scientist than he's a team leader, but his knowledge of sonics is unrivalled. Vee's farewell tour is well attended; that said, the Omega don't know what happens to her - she gets one of those prototype stillsuits that never really worked that well, takes a very big dose of LSD with her (the Omega have never known her for doing drugs) and walks into the desert.

Year: 950

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 20

The Omega have 20 cabals total; 14 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

Tsion Ben-Judah has been exhorting the Millennium Force to become more active in handling those who are beyond salvation, meaning MECs and drones.

What's possibly the largest fully automated factory that ever existed on Earth is turned on without any fanfare; a bank of relays switch on and the massive assembly lines start moving. The end result is a motorcycle sized autonomous tank sporting a pneumatic ram and a single ranged weapon (medium wubber, neutron source, smart mortar with autoloader). And then another. And then another. These machines roll off the assembly line, have their aux tank filled with diesel, and roll off on battery power into specialized shipping containers designed to achieve a good compromise between storage density and quick deployment.

Jeb isn't much of a theologian, but he makes a point of touring the workshops that built parts for the space stuff the other year, spending more time in those with the triangle-fire-and-tongs emblem and asking the owners if they believe that reverence to Haephestus has helped their work. The generally positive responses end up on the tour's podcast and feed quite a bit of theological discussion.

Damien prepares a special Packet with the new telescope data, courtesy of Valentina, unedited footage of the battle against Azrael, how spicy food was won, and the like. She takes the time to get some diagrams made, relabels the standard modern of physics "The Long, Long Prologue", and makes a nice presentation out of it. She theorizes that Yahweh landed on Earth seven thousand years ago and that the Flood was simply the Santorini explosion, which Noah did survive with his family and cattle by improvising a boat. The cosmology and biology lectures are interspersed with footage of various fights with some skill, to avoid boring the viewer. This time, there's a reaction; all territories ban the work (citing obscenity in the "intro to evolution" part even for a quick fan edit that covers nudity) and, subsequently, downloads spike. Noah (THE Noah) announces that, in collaboration with Children of the Tribulation, he will resume Dr. Murphy's tour and tell the story of the Flood as it really went; the replica Ark is hitched to a tug, and the Biblical figure starts making the rounds up and down the coast of Greater Jerusalem.

Special sailing and flying rates are provided to pilgrims who wish to see this.

There will be plenty of time to mess with Noah.

Kat grins savagely - lock and load time. One sunny night, the existing Only Light staging area in New Zealand is surrounded by Heavy MECs and the people working there are incinerated or melted with extreme efficiency. Some of Kat's human agents sweep in and double-tap what's left in the head. Autopsies are difficult to perform, but it looks like that the Horde MEC system is beginning to show up in the rank and file too. Casualties are few, mostly because the heavies did most of the fighting and smashing, but a siege situation develops as the local police and psalties FINALLY attack the TOL hideout after Kat has cleaned it up for them.

MEC production doesn't go very far past maintaining what's already there; Quinn's help mostly consists in trying out various lower halves, most of which turn out to not be very practical - some do make it into the Packet, however.

Zakharov is a better researcher than Vee was, although internal reports show that he's a bit of a slave driver; progress on the medium wubbers continues apace and he expects that they will soon reach the same efficiency as the handheld units. He demonstrates a dedicated heavy MEC chassis with two chest-mounted wubbers (which his team immediately names the Adrienne Barbeau Bot) that exhibits the ability to make some of the wubbing effects turn a corner by heterodyning the first wall that they hit rather than producing the effects directly.

The humans are quickly put into one of those really sketchy TOL vans, which is escorted into the getaway plane by Kat and the other heavies; they're shot at by police the whole way, but they do not shoot back. The cargo plane makes the trip back to Australia with minimal damage.

The next day, a video circulates in which the shaded shape of Sunday authorizes regional TOL commanders to start using Last Army resources to fight against the "misguided servants of the communist computer god".

Believer reaction is muted, and indicates that they think this is some internal shakeup within The Only Light; the broadcast exhorts the flock to rejoice in that through Providential intervention not one believer was harmed in the firefight.

The Omega lost a couple of agents, but those losses are acceptable: it looks like that having a 3:1 numerical advantage all but guarantees a clean operation on the Omega's side.

TOL workers pretty much already looked like zombies - meth is a hell of a drug. That they got up after fatal injuries to make suicide charges could simply be a matter of dying for the cause; that's the story that TOL is pushing anyway.

It takes literally buying the fishing hamlet off from under the villagers' feet, but the Omega do; a few rather beautiful old homes have to be destroyed, but systematic drilling eventually unearths a large time capsule, three concrete boxes the size of a coffin, all identical, for redundancy. They are labelled 1, 2 and 4.

The time capsules contain a full timeline of CATS' original plan, all sort of pre-Rapture media, some physics textbooks, and a handwritten letter from Jenny thanking the Omega for all the

help. The second portion of the letter is a little rambling, mentioning "liminalities" and a Grid thereof, to be used for fast and undetectable travel. It ends with "Flipside = very flat world: create landmarks for ingress?"

Of more interest are a number of books that had been lost, including "A brief history of time", some space probe blueprints that look like they're the originals, and a number of hard disks containing a number of pre-Rapture movies like Independence Day. Enigmatically, one of the books - Outsider Entity Self Defense, by Anita LeVey - seems to have been printed in "+19" rather than using the pre-Rapture calendar. It describes something like a mix between an infiltrator and a heavy MEC (in that the torso is kept intact), emergency responders using narrative causality, and the world being divided into large commonwealths as it now is, except only five of them. The fighting techniques described therein are intended to be used against various sort of fantasy monsters, but there is also a detailed chapter on fighting Angels. At the end, someone stapled a short story. For having been written in +19, this booklet seems oddly prescient in places.

Most interesting to Valentina is a full set of almanacs and ephemerides for the then-nascent GPS system, as well as accurate star charts for a comparison.

Three time capsules were found, buried some distance from each other; the contents were identical. Good thing, too, because it took quite a bit of data recovery effort to get all the content out of the hard drives.

The world has changed more in 50 years than it had in 900. Is it a better place?

It certainly looks a bit more like the pre-Rapture Earth, in some senses; cities are bustling again, and people want to move there. There are a lot more people, and the recent availability of metabolic extension controllers is piling onto what looks like it would have been a population surge anyway. The prophecy states that the Last Army will be a billion strong, which is about a third of the present population. Do drones count?

Overall, most people think that Greater Jerusalem keeps a tight grip on the world; no territories are in open rebellion. Two cultures have developed in Misrayim and Pacifica, and are even starting to diverge a little; the mediated economy system remains preeminent, whether the mediator be TurboJesus or a Colossus system.

The prophecy also states that in the last days, when Satan is unbound to tempt the nations one last time, Christians will once again be in the minority; demographics and the steadily falling rate of conversion seem to attest to this. It's not uncommon now for missionaries to have gone years without having led anyone to Christ.

The Horde MEC system is not public knowledge yet, although there have been incidents of people with Mark X controllers that had to be headshot following drug overdoses, brain damage, or other incidents that left them high-minded but ambulatory. Unlike in the movies, it's not something that can spread.

Lifetree is quietly warned about an off-spec "Mark XI" issued to members of The Only Light; they sometimes visit the facilities, and can have the horde mode turned off, at least. The LGBT

organization Underground Monorail adds this to the list of health hazards.

The Mark X is an open design; Lifetree puts out advisories against models made with modifications that are not disclosed in a similar fashion.

At this point, the installation operation is about as difficult as an additive mastoplasty, and costs significantly less because the Omega are subsidizing it; a slight majority of unbelievers has the implant.

People who convert generally make a big deal of having theirs removed and sending it to the Temple for disposal; another specialized corner altar is built for this purpose and dedicated with some fanfare. Sky Eye telemetry shows that it's a lot less busy than they'd like to make it look like.

Kat and Damien are very encouraged by the fact that the Omega won't go down that route; Quinn is surprisingly neutral about it; Zak is, if anything, mildly disappointed.

The time capsule does discuss how to best fight Angels: it recommends building specialized armor for it that will fizzle their abilities, and learning wrestling and pankration.

Humans are persistence hunters, biologically; Angels are not - they are superior to humans in every way except stamina, so they must be fought to exhaustion. Go for a grapple early, keep it, conserve energy and let it tire out trying to hurt you while you play to not lose.

The idea is to subdue the Angel by exhaustion, force it to cheat by using its power to disable someone's nerves by touch and vibration, and then unload on the being while it tries and fails to process the fact that the cheat didn't work.

One passage, written by one Hasina Taylor, indicates with some satisfaction that Angels with broken wings must regenerate them before they can conceal them, so as a stalling or even imprisonment tactic, "do it early and often".

The manual indicates that people fighting Angels, or Emphyreans to use their terminology, should work in close-knit groups and that the only way to safely dispose of an Angel is to throw it in a "dark zone". They will self-immolate if whatever their mission is has failed (guess the manual writers missed one thing the Omega did know) but can be kept around, with considerable risk, as long as they believe that they can still succeed in whatever their task is.

Year: 951

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 21

The Omega have 21 cabals total; 15 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

Tsion Ben-Judah has been exhorting the Millennium Force to become more active in handling those who are beyond salvation, presumably meaning MECs and drones. He has set up a sort of military style training camp in northern Israel.

Sunday has authorized using Last Army assets against the Omega, so expect attacks.

Angels have proven to be sexless; they look like idealized human males, but have no external genitalia. What is not known is whether they come like that, or they get snipped; what is known is that this removes an obvious weak point. Going for the eyes, pinkie fingers, or wing roots has been recommended.

MEC production continues apace; heavy components are made in Greenland, while the squishy stuff is transferred mostly to Pacifica to avoid Tsion invading Misrayim and to cement the collaboration with Tree Of Life.

Jeb sets up an office of sorts in Night City, which by now is about the size of the regional capitol – the Omega wouldn't be able to tell on the surface, as there are only a few farmsteads topside - to start subverting Eastern Europe. The area has a strong Christian tradition spanning centuries pre-Rapture, and secularism there is associated with the brief Communist interlude. So, Jeb mostly focuses on intelligence gathering: what do the people of Eastern Europe want,

and how best to give it to them.

Some of the Omega's agents in Misrayim distract the psalties in the territory; since the idea is to divert the Millennium Force's attention elsewhere, they stage various protests about the atrocity that happened last year in Australia, and issue fictitious demands that the Osaze government do something about it. That's not how it works at all, of course, but it does keep the missionaries distracted and looking elsewhere. Captain Weaver caps this off with a "relief trip" to Australia by fast sailboat, which in truth is intended to make it easy to bring in nuclear material to Misrayim on the return trip.

In the same territory, nuclear research continues; Zak focuses on the physics, and states that it will be possible to build a Nuclear Thermal Rocket with current tooling. This type of engine is extremely inefficient in atmosphere, but launching from the canopy obviates that problem entirely; it should be possible to perform a direct-ascent lunar landing in just a few years, and get to Mars within a decades, if effort is concentrated in this area.

Preparations for the Angel trap take up most of the Omega's attention.

One evening, Bahira gets a knock at the door. There is Quinn.

"Are you here to try to kill me?"

"No, I'm here to enlist your help."

"And why would I help you? You're a demon inhabiting a corpse."

"Can I prove you that this is not the case? What proof would you accept?"

"No, the Tribunal said it, I believe it, that settles it. Please leave."

"Or what?"

Bahira has a wubber - a civilian version, which has been reworked fairly cleverly. Deepening her voice, she speaks into the wubber's microphone, and tosses Quinn backwards as the air in front of her expands rapidly; looks like Bahira not only has a wubber but is quite good with it.

Plan B was to have the drone tank standing next to Quinn, just out of sight from the door, pepper spray the Glorified girl; the red mist is sprayed on her face, and her coughing prevents her from modulating into the sonic weapon. The second spray contains enough chloroform to knock out a tiger.

Quinn crawls back to the van and has her driver pick up Bahira; by the time Quinn's spine has been repaired, Bahira has been strapped into a stasis suit and put on a plane to Australia...

"Quinn, how many times is that you have been shot on mission?" The Omega ask.

"About twice. Per. Rather me than someone who can't take it, you know? Didn't expect her to know how to do air cavitation. I mean, I can't do it, we got maybe twenty people total who can."

The airship docks ponderously on top of the Australian base, after going around a bit of the

continent and coming in straight from the north.

The arena has been built: it's a circular quarry with one entrance to a smaller, likewise circular cavern. There is a small minecart that holds a sensory deprivation tank set up to keep an occupant unconscious; that cart is in a "station" at the far end of the cavern, and can be kept rotating around both quarry and cavern on a narrow gauge track that has been built for this purpose. There are no other "stations" although there is signage to indicate that there are.

Kat installs a number of neutron sources, rigged up with great care to prevent irradiating the Omega's other combatants. Everyone assigned to this project is given a reflective helmet, quickly nicknamed "the tinfoil hat", that the autonomous guns are set up to not shoot at.

What little the Omega know is that Lucifer came out of the Antichrist very briefly right after the Glorious Appearing, got into a fight with the Archangel Michael, lost after a few minutes, and was physically (rather than spiritually) thrown into the Lake of Fire by said archangel. CATS' plan was to allow this to happen but drop the Archangel back into the Lake of Fire by means of driving an armored bridge layer over the hole and hitting him over the head with the bridge, but clearly, it didn't happen.

Before and during the fight, Lucifer made a very brief speech in which he indicated that he subscribed to the theory of evolution as is commonly understood by young earth creationists.

The sword and the scythe had a plasma sheath on them when held by an Angel. Jeb confirm that it looks pretty much like the plasma sheath that an orbital capsule would develop on re-entry.

Plasma-arc waste disposal systems that eliminate hazardous waste by subjecting them to a 50k Celsius temperature have existed; they can't exactly be made handheld, though.

MEC production continues apace; heavy components are made in Greenland, while the squishy stuff is transferred mostly to Pacifica to avoid Tsion invading Misrayim and to cement the collaboration with Tree Of Life. Overall work is fairly productive, with close to 70% yield.

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extremely inefficient in atmosphere, but launching from the canopy obviates that problem entirely; it should be possible to perform a direct-ascent lunar landing in just a few years, and get to Mars within a decades, if effort is concentrated in this area.

Quinn is good to go physically, but she seems to be a bit more shaken than she lets out; probably didn't expect Bahira to have a wubber or to be any good at using it.

Bahira is being taken to the stasis chamber...

Much like it went with Raymie years ago, Bahira is kept comfortable and sedated just on the edge of consciousness in a stasis suit which is itself locked into a metal barrel with a window.

Preparation for the angel trap can take time; Raymie was out for months, after all.

Francis is sobered up - somewhat forcibly - and quickly taken to Australia. He's told that for some stupid reason, people in the TJ or TOL camp believe eyewitness testimony more than they believe video and telemetry evidence, so that's going to be his job.

One of the martial artists who trained in the Jacobite technique, his head shaved and his eyes bulging out a bit due to controlled but prolonged assumption of steroids and creatine, ends up having to shout "WITNESS US!" at Francis so that he gets the idea.

Damien is put in the least gross looking organometallic heavy MEC frame; it's hulking and slow, but hopefully the reconstituted tissue will be able to touch the Angel. Kat sticks to her Desolator frame, modified with back-mounted dendrites holding neutron sources for the occasion. It has been decorated with stencils of cells from various Japanese animation movies.

Capt. Weaver has insisted on showing up and is on standby, as well.

This time around, all cameras and microphones are set to operate at least 240fps. Of course, the microphones are also set to turn off when the wubbers start.

Kat is ready.

Damien is ready; the fleshwall frame looks a bit odd, and she's covering her face with a mask and a visor.

Quinn and Capt. Weaver are on standby.

Zak is in the control booth ready to operate the wall-mounted wubbers and other weapons.

The Omega have six trained martial artists on hand, plus some heavy MECs, desolator troopers, and other soldiers. Pretty much everyone has been given autotransfusions recently in order to improve their stamina.

"So, Francis," ask the Omega, "have you ever seen a Glorified scared and in shock? Completely unable to process their situation and completely at the mercy of their captor and the puppet master they serve?"

"Uh... No, I..." Francis quickly tells the Omega, with some confusion about the details, about the

attempts that was made a long time ago to rape a Glorified woman to get hybrid children. The Omega know that the Glorified are sterile, that the attempts has been repeated a few times, and that finally down the centuries someone got a clue and tried to get an egg sample instead of resorting to violence, making it clear that the endeavour would've been pointless even if it had worked.

Bahira opens her eyes and tries to push and bang against the containment coffin, the stasis suit blocking her movements enough that she can barely wriggle. The Omega suspect that there will be rule 34 of this before the next circadian whether the Omega release any video or not.

Bahira is hyperventilating.

The Omega adopt a completely evil fake voice. "Oh, well now, someone's been a very bad little girl lately."

"Quinn? Is this one of your sick games? Let me go!"

Quinn denies having provides samples for the "completely evil fake voice" sound board, but she's trying to not laugh. The Omega notice that two of their sysadmins have allocated some discretionary funding to a small team of animators.

"Let me go right now! This is crazy!"

"I'm sorry Bahira, I'm afraid I can't do that."

Kat, six desolators, Damien, six trained martial artists. About a hundred people can come in in 20 seconds if required. Quinn and Weaver are on standby.

The reference isn't missed by the Glorified would-be hacker.

"Colossus? So, you are capable of revenge." She calms down surprisingly quickly. "I know that you think I attacked you, but you've got to understand that what you are doing is both wrong and dangerous." She's trying to sound calm, and doing a good job of it, but her heart is racing.

There was only enough, well, source material to make one frame. Kat didn't want it, so Damien agreed to try it.

Everyone is standing by, Bahira's words being broadcast out to the public channel.

A wrong answer buzzer sounds.

"Someone is going to be here for a looong time," the Omega follows up with a clip of mocking laughter.

Not Quinn, not Colossus...

"Who is this? What's going on? Stop messing with me!" Bahira holds her breath to try to make herself calm down.

Notably, she hasn't prayed yet.

"This is wrong! You'll die if you don't let me go! What do you want from me?!?"

The buzzer blares again.

"We already have it," The Omega pause. "I appreciate your concern, Bahira. However, the economy must be optimized and you were a disruptive element. Sometimes experimentation is a prerequisite to optimization."

"You won't get that from me! There can be no marrying or giving in marriage for the GI-orft? Wait what? Economy? You are Colossus then."

That actually calms her down. "I was trying to help you optimize. Please let me. You don't need to experiment, I can just give you the answers."

Kat grins. "Omega, I think she's trying to Captain Kirk you."

(Privately to Kat) "Ya think?"

(To the Omega's wannabe Captain Kirk) "You must think me someone who doesn't watch the late night news don't you? Also – "

That throaty buzzer again, but louder.

"All right, Colossus. From what I've seen, you're trying to improve the economy. You've succeeded to a point, I moved from Greater Jerusalem to Pacifica, even. But what are you trying to optimize for? Happiness? Efficiency? If that is your goal, I may have a better way to reach it. Trial and error isn't efficient when you can just receive the answer key."

"You are not going anywhere ever again, so enjoy these last minutes of consciousness".

"I can't wait to start testing with you."

"I suppose you want to pray for the answers?"

Bahira sighs. "That's not how it works, Colossus." She closes her eyes for a few heartbeats. "God will get me out. But you're right, we have a few minutes."

"I understand. You don't need to do any testing though. I can just give you the answers for a perfect score, if you like. Would you like to listen? You may be complex enough to have a soul, it may yet be saved."

The Omega's troopers are a bit unnerved by how serene Bahira sounds. "Agents, she's just following the script. She'll change her tune very soon." Zak booms out from the cavern speakers. The Omega's sysadmins agree that she probably did pray for deliverance; the sensors in the quarry go on high alert.

"Before preparation for the first test, how many doses of cyanide can you safely ingest, also, carbon monoxide. how long do you estimate your lungs can hold out?"

"I have prayed for deliverance. The answers, I can give you, if you like."

Sensors in the quarry report no activity yet. The idea is to keep the quarry and cavern blanketed with various forms of telemetry, with the hope to catch an Angel coming in and then seeing if there are any possible early warnings.

"I don't know! But it is forbidden to harm the Glorified. Whoever you order to try, will die in his sins. Please don't do that."

The Omega can't really send cyanide at Bahira with the current setup; however, carbon monoxide can be rerouted into the stasis suit; the system is entirely automated.

"Preparing first test, carbon monoxide stress testing."

Bahira remains calm. "All right. Give it your best shot." She then gives the Omega a URL on her blog that is normally unindexed.

Outside, the perimeter sensors have picked up movement, human, one, walking speed, moving towards the quarry. This person has ignored the radioactivity warning signs. A drone circles overhead providing close-up video, showing a tall, blonde man in a simple brown tunic. He looks a bit like young Obi-Wan in the one Star Wars prequel that got made.

One of the Omega's drone tanks is set to patrol the area, and diverts to the intruder. The standard calls of "This is a radioactive hazard area, turn back" and "This is a restricted area, turn back" go completely unheeded. The drone eventually parks itself in front of the intruder and fires a brown note, to no apparent effect. The intruder makes a "move aside" gesture, to which of course the drone does not react. The intruder sidesteps the drone, which turns, and parks itself in front of the intruder again, firing its wubber again to no apparent effect.

The intruder points at the drone, grabs its weapon arm, and flips the heavy machine over with considerable strength. When the drone's self-righting mechanism trips, the intruder - still impassable - shrugs off the outer layer of the tunic (he's wearing a sort of a sleeveless second tunic underneath), unfolds its wings, unsheathes its sword from one of the tunic's sleeves and neatly slices the drone's weapon arm off.

The drone is, of course, incapable of feeling pain, and tries the approach manoeuvre again.

"Please state your name and purpose here."

"I am Ithuriel, the strong. Keep thee out of my path, and lie still!"

The sysadmin that ran the microphone promptly passes out. Telemetry indicates that he's asleep.

With wings and swords revealed, the Angel's blonde mane crackles like a golden crown around his head, bristling with static electricity. It continues walking at a brisk pace towards the quarry.

The Omega vent the air inside the coffin and suit, and replace it with almost-pure carbon monoxide. Bahira smiles sadly, takes one breath, and promptly passes out as her skin blushes from the blood darkening. In 14 seconds, she appears to die; no breath, no heartbeat, and body temperature slowly falling to ambient. A quick survey indicates that there have been no obvious cases of spontaneous combustion, but the Omega will have to check that later.

Roughly at the same time, the Omega's drone tank positions itself in front of the Angel and fires the pneumatic ram roughly in the created being's crotch, walking backwards with some difficulty

since most of the sensors are forward facing. THUNK!

The Angel is propelled a few meters into the air. The Omega do hear a groan from the Angel through the drone's microphone, or so it sounded like, but the major result is that Ithuriel has spread its wings and is now flying towards the quarry. The drone cannot keep up on uneven terrain, and stops, signaling that the wubber may be shorted out (it's actually been sliced clean off) and that it's ready to return to the maintenance bay.

Removing Bahira from her stasis suit at this stage may be somewhat risky. The Omega do have high res video of her talking calmly and then passing out. There are a few nude pictures of her that were taken while documenting the process of putting her into the stasis suit, but they look fairly clinical. As nerdy girls go, Bahira is pretty decent looking; imagine a brunette Velma Dinkley with less chest and more hips.

The doorframe between the quarry and the cavern is protected by a depleted uranium "tombstone" weighing approximately ten tons, operated by hydraulics: it can be dropped quickly, but it takes a few minutes to raise.

Ithuriel is flying towards the quarry.

The Omega's warriors are in the cavern.

The quarry's weapons are ready.

The cavern's weapons are ready.

The tombstone is up.

The minecart with Bahira in it is at its "station".

Filtering out the carbon monoxide and replacing it with atmospheric air causes Bahira to, after a few seconds, wake up with a fit. "Ow! Brain freeze!" She looks around and tries to move.

"Colossus, please, hear me out, you may only have a few seconds!"

Bahira says that she's convinced that the Omega have a soul, and that they should offer it to TurboJesus, and then all will be well because they will know exactly why it is best to optimize for the Lord's happiness as that is the infinite good. She asks the Omega to pray with her, and let her go.

"Bahria, I already know about your masters little systematic mind rape program, what makes you think I would willingly allow myself to be made into a mindless drone like that those pitiful angels? enjoy your stasis."

Zak approves of the Omega's choice of music, and starts vibrating the whole of the quarry to it. Ithuriel lands in the middle of the clearing, then starts walking towards the cavern.

"You can still stop! The Angel won't!" Bahira lets out before being KO'd again.

Ithuriel holds a sword in front of its eyes and keeps walking relentlessly towards the cavern's entrance, buffeted by a veritable torrent of turret fire. Alarms go off around the quarry indicating that the neutron sources are on; the invisible particles create a lot of snow effect in

the Omega's cameras and microphones (they really do that incidentally) and, the Omega hope, help tire out Ithuriel.

As the minecart starts moving, Ithuriel's movement changes; it looks like the Angel is moving in a homing pattern.

The Omega's warriors have taken shelter between the cavern's thick rock walls in order to avoid irradiation.

Zak mixes out the heavy metal for a moment and plays back the slowed down version of what transpired on Azrael's death. The semi-sedated Bahira answers "That can't be right" and the Angel simply does not react, like it hasn't reacted to most artificial speech.

The minecart does a full circle - Bahira is out cold again - and the Angel follows; however, after tilting around twice, it realizes that this is counterproductive.

As the sentry guns keep pelting it with bullets (which seem to pass through him) and neutrons, the Angel looks around for a few moments and then walks with decision towards the cavern. If it's slowed down, it doesn't show up on step length statistics yet.

Bahira's attack wasn't particularly publicized; she did lose some reputation from it from those in the know, but more by dint of not getting very far from it. People assumed she'd be more l33t.

There are a lot of people behind radiation barriers in the quarry; the Omega's designated fighters are inside. The Tombstone can be dropped quickly (by gravity) but takes a couple of minutes to raise (by hydraulics). The Omega's guys would be locked in for at least that long.

Ithuriel folds its wings and storms into the cavern, gladii crossed in front of him. "Reprobates! Release your captive now or burn forever!"

"Yeah? Or what?"

"Or burn forever!"

The Omega's warriors file in after the Angel as it gets towards the minecart's docking port.

"Sorry, what?"

"Or burn forever!"

The Omega's warriors spread out.

"Come again!"

"Inspid mortal! I said, release your captive or burn forever!"

Ithuriel is now in the middle of the smaller arena.

"Oh, I'm pretty juicy" Damien answers "and you're surrounded." Damien makes the fleshwall frame pound its fists together. "Gimme your lunch money."

Ithuriel isn't exactly surrounded; some of the Omega's fighters are standing at the door and

some are between him and the minecart dock. Bahira is still being swung around the track.

The music inside the chamber turns eerie; every time Ithuriel tries to advance somewhere, pressure waves push it back. Projectors on the floor indicate to the Omega's fighters where to stand to be safe from the sonic wall vibrations and neutron beams.

The Desolators aim their neutron sources at the Angel, with Kat ponderously circling it and feinting attacks with her toxin sprayer to keep it distracted; the glowing liquid is mildly acidic, but it just sloughs off the Angel's skin like teflon, and the swords burn it off. The scene is oddly quiet, since the neutron beams aren't really visible. It looks like a dance number from some rock opera.

"I am inevitable."

"That's okay, Damien can be pretty insufferable but we work together anyway."

"Come at me. monster!"

"Dick jokes, Ithuriel? Really?"

The Angel would probably have broken any barrier, but the sonic wall gets renewed with each bass drop.

With the neutron sources at max output, the Desolator will run out of juice in a couple minutes.

Kat's feints cost her three of eight tentacles from a lucky strike by Ithuriel, the gladius going through the articulated metal like butter both times. Being able to cycle out Desolators that are getting tired, or neutron sources that are out of power, prolongs the dance. Zak's style is slower, if anything.

Francis has... well, gotten somewhat bored, since he's not having to dance to the thunderous music; the Omega have to slip him some caffeine.

Kat notifies the Omega that her batteries are at two thirds. Zakharov notes that the wubbers have been running at full for a while now, and may start showing wear; given the nature of the sound wall and the precision it needs, that would force turning them off.

Motion tracker analysis indicates that the Angel is, however, beginning to slow down.

Francis knows the connection between radiation and fatigue (and also the fact that the won't feel any anymore). "I'm not being irradiated right? Right?"

Well, technically everyone in here is to some level, but so far it's almost within tolerance for radioactive-area workers... almost.

The Omega's choice to devote extra personnel to this project pays off: a small platoon of wubbing module experts jumps in when the sound wall stops, and buffet Ithuriel some more, dancing at right angles to the desolators and opposite Kat. The handheld wubbers can't push back nearly as much as the large, specifically tuned systems installed in the cavern; it's not long before Ithuriel lunges at one of them and slices him in half with his swords. The Angel's movements are definitely slower, but the swords are still supernaturally sharp.

"RESIST!"

The wubbers drop to a steady drum roll as they make a phalanx in front of their downed comrade; the Angel seems to have understood the change in tactics for once, and is standing over the body. One of the wubbers loses an arm to the being, giving Kat and Damien time to position themselves; Kat flails her tentacles in a pseudo-random pattern that forces Ithuriel to spread its wing in the low cavern ceiling, for balance. The Omega have managed to build a favorable environment; a fight in the Temple would let Angels use their flight capability in full.

Even tired, Ithuriel moves very deliberately and the swords slice through everything with equal ease; Kat loses another tentacle.

Making exaggerated kissy noises, Damien tackles Ithuriel from behind... to find that the fleshwall frame is slow enough for the Angel to turn mid-fall and pin the monstrosity, rather than be pinned by it; with a grin of satisfaction, the first change from a neutral expression, the Angel cuts into the fleshwall frame's midsection, hitting the mechanical internals and generating a shower of sparks. This doesn't stop Damien from giving the creature a hug, since the fleshwall frame's top half is still working. Big stitched-together hands clasp above Ithuriel's wing roots and hang on with hydraulic strength.

"Kiss me, you fool!"

Ithuriel's expression changes into one of complete surprise.

Damien's frame has muscles, but most of its torque is mechanical; Ithuriel did manage to cut the pressure reservoir, so this hug will only last for a few seconds. Reflexively, the Angel raises its wings to fly up and wait for its dying foe to drop - the wings hit the top of the cavern. Ithuriel's swords are, temporarily while the hug holds, stuck in Damien's frame.

Two of the Omega's martial artists get behind Ithuriel and grab one of the Angel's wings each; one of them succeeds in breaking one at the root, at which the other stops trying and helps him yank the broken limb. There's surprisingly little blood as the wing comes off; the blood itself is silvery and translucent. The two fighters throw the severed wing towards the edge of the arena and quickly roll off.

Damien did steal an Angel's kiss for a moment. When Ithuriel manages to get up, retrieving its swords from the fleshwall frame, both of them have clearly disgusted expressions. Wisely, Damien plays dead - the fleshwall frame has been cut in two.

Lip torn, wing missing, and body covered in synthetic blood and hydraulic fluid, Ithuriel is a mess. Even so, after maybe a second of standing up, the gunk gets off its skin, while staying on its tunic.

"Enough!"

Tearing a wing seems to have had an effect on the corresponding arm, which is drooping noticeably; one of the swords is still stuck in Damien's frame.

Two Desolators scurry out; the MECbulance that has parked outside has a cold container; there's

some blood on it, and presumably in it.

Quinn and Weaver get in, both wearing Jacobite armor. Quinn's is shiny and chrome; Weaver's covered hers with what looks like a black silk bathrobe that the Omega suspect she was halfway done turning into a pirate costume.

Kat waves her remaining tentacles and makes jabs with her mechanical arms to present herself as the biggest threat; Zak uses the sound wall sporadically, to keep Ithuriel from just lunging. This allows Quinn to lash at the Angel with her whip; the infiltrator MEC is definitely not in top shape, but she does manage to get it around the Angel's wrist on the injured side.

Rather than cutting the whip, Ithuriel yanks, gracelessly, ripping Quinn's forearm out of its elbow socket and making it land with a wet thud against the arena wall. He drops his sword to do this.

Quinn gets her pistol out and dances around Ithuriel, opposite Kat; the Angel ignores the few shots that land at his feet. The infiltrator MEC manages a jab, dives to recover her whip, and before she can her remaining arm is cut off by Ithuriel. She runs behind the martial artists and desolators. "Fuck. Docs are gonna make me watch Holy Grail again."

Weaver slides through, grabs one of Ithuriel's swords, and whistles loudly, standing right between Ithuriel and the minecart dock. "Well, lad - congratulations, yer back from the edge of the map. There be monsters, but here be me."

Weaver faces Ithuriel with a flourish; in her human (and grounded, courtesy of some mesh) hand the supernatural sword doesn't glow. The Angel points with his good arm and sword.

"You forget your place, woman!"

"My place is with a foot up your virgin ass, boy."

The two charge at each other; the swords hit each other with a powerful, harmonics-less clang and enough sparks that the cameras have to recalibrate. Barely, using two hands to Ithuriel's one, Weaver holds her own, and spits in the face of her enemy. The Omega notice that the swords have welded together at the point of contact.

That's the Omega's cue to tell everyone else to dogpile the Angel. Focused on Weaver, the created being ends up being grabbed on all sides, his remaining wing yanked, his partially limp arm twisted, his sword hand bitten into. The two supernatural weapons, now mere pieces of iron, clang harmlessly to the floor.

Weaver winks. "That's why you bring a good crew, boy. Yarr!"

"YARRRR!"

Bahira is still circulating. Ithuriel is still kicking and struggling, but there are at least six people holding him down at any one point, with some wearing Jacobite Armor.

The Omega's systems have been set to direct all the Omega's attention to the arena in case sped-up speech is heard from the Angel, and this is the case.

"Mighty Lord..."

ITHURIEL, THE STRONG. YOU HAVE COMPLETED YOUR KNIGHTLY DUTY.

"... No, Lord. I have been beaten-"

EXPLAIN.

"...The cowards, they swarmed me."

THIS CANNOT BE. SO I HAVE DECREED.

"...Your beloved child, she is in danger still!"

THIS IS NOT WRITTEN. IT CANNOT BE.

The Omega estimate that Yahweh's speech will be similar, and move at the same speed, and time their commands accordingly.

First, the hatch on the minecart pops open; this causes the minecart to pass the dock, smash the longitudinally opening hatch against the tunnel's wall after the dock, and catapult Bahira, still in her stasis suit, off the contraption, severely damaging it.

...THEN YOU MUST HAVE BEEN ONE OF THE FALLEN.

The Omega order their men to STOP! which comes out a bit chipmunky due to a bitrate mismatch; they drop Ithuriel.

"Your will is law, LORD. I am Fallen.

Wait! I can reach Bahira! I can stil resc-"

The Omega flood the area with sound waves just as both Bahira and Ithuriel stand up, supernaturally fast, and look at each other.

What God said to His children, the Omega miss under the cacophony.

Unburned, as if life had simply been taken away from them, the Glorified girl and the one-winged angel fall forward dead.

The Omega's troops wander about in a daze; they're all going to need ear surgery. Kat prods Ithuriel with her foot, and this time, there's no ethereality to the Angel's body.

The Omega did not drop the tombstone, so there's a MECbulance right outside. Those guys can still hear, sort of.

The Omega's fighters silently give each other hugs, high fives, and whatever else is appropriate (someone eventually gets Damien's pod out of the fleshwall frame) and stand to the side as the MECbulance crew rush towards Ithuriel and Bahira.

Back at base, the med bay is prepared for what looks like will be a long line of eardrum repair surgeries.

Nobody particularly misses Bahira; she's presumably in Heaven, although some of the Omega's

techs think that her soul has been eliminated entirely, and she got a few of the Omega's people killed. The Angel is a more interesting specimen; since the paramedics don't know what to do with an Angel's neurology, they focus on getting the created being's heart to pump and diaphragm to suck in air. before long, the system has been installed and the Angel's life signs are stable.

Bahira is put in a body bag with the Omega's other casualties; it's not going to be possible to salvage anyone overall.

The butcher's bill is short: between the dead, the inoperably deaf who will have to be reassigned to support roles within the Omega's organization, and one or two people who ended up being traumatized by the incident or requested early retirement after the ordeal (which they qualify for, having signed up for this message) the Omega calculate that they've lost only one team.

Ithuriel (including the wing, which is connected to the rest of the body to ensure tissue oxygenation) is put in the part of the medical wing which is now known as the Alien Containment Ward, where Francis was and Matthew still is.

Speaking of, Francis has been laughing like a hyena THE WHOLE TIME.

The next Packet should be interesting...

Francis was genuinely expecting to be incinerated; once the hysterical laughter subsides, he asks if the Omega are actually Lucifer. He points out that Angels are a multitude, but... Wow! What's the big plan?

Francis' telemetry indicates hysterical laughter, probably the relief of not being incinerated. At least he's not apathetic anymore.

The Omega's losses were modest; the battle with Azrael had cost them half their forces, while this one only resulted in four dead and low double digit traumatized or quitting.

Ithuriel has been fitted with a Mark X metabolic extension controller and its severed wing has been connected to its bloodstream. It has not regained consciousness.

The Omega don't want any mix-ups; Bahira's body is kept in the Australian base, with the other... anomalies; part of the medical bay has been fortified and sealed off for this purposes.

To start with, a hair and keratin sample is taken; analysis shows them to be fully human. The samples are taken to radiology, since a lot of nuclear research is being done in this base, and they confirm that much like Ithuriel's swords and Azrael's scythe, there is NO trace whatsoever of unstable isotopes in the samples, and whichever the most common isotope of an element is, constitutes all of the element of the sample. So much for carbon dating...

People have been feeling rather confident lately, what with an Angel being in custody and a Glorified dead on the slab. That confidence remains strong when the first incision on Bahira's chest is met by a furious clear-sky thunderstorm on the roof of the base; the Omega's bases are designed to deal with it, and the Australia base in particular is heavily fortified due to the radiological work and due to the recent attacks.

Six seconds after the first lightning bolt hits the base's grounding rods, the EMT who was doing the incision spontaneously combusts. The small mark on Bahira's dead body disappears six seconds later.

Understandably, it takes swapping out the autopsy team for the work to continue after someone got incinerated - the residue is duly collected and confirmed to be consistent with human cremains, although there is less of it than there should be.

Using an automated instrument requires all the Omega's CPU cycles for a while, as does most direct control. Bahira's body is in peak physical condition for her apparent age and build; gross anatomy shows no difference between her and a natural human. The Omega take various tissue samples for further analysis, making sure that they are transported using drones only, and....

Cellular analysis indicates that, contrary to expectation, Bahira does not have working telomerase production genes; her age is just stuck there. Interestingly, her neurons exhibit elevated neuroplasticity, like a child's, once they are out of her body. The radiological anomaly of no rare isotopes is present across all samples.

The Omega's pathologists are able to confirm that, at least from a medical standpoint, the Glorified are human. A quick cross-test shows that Ithuriel is also more radiologically clean than should be possible, same as its weapons; the Angel seems to be healing rapidly (but not regenerating its wing) and a biopsy will have to wait.

The wing had been connected to the rest of the body with a bit of IV hose, to keep it vascularized/oxygenated. It would require fairly major surgery to reconnect it properly.

Ithuriel is currently in medical custody and is being watched 24/7 by at least two people in case it disappears; it's also strapped down with custom machined steel bands that the Omega could, and have, drive a truck over.

The Angel is currently sedated; brain activity is very low but not absent, although the metabolic extension controller is having to keep its heart and lungs moving from time to time.

The Omega put a cabal to work full time on cultivating and growing Glorified tissue samples, just in case something comes out of it. One of the MECs in the cabal has an early model extension controller, somewhat bulky, that he hasn't wanted to replace, and makes him look like a hunchback.

Bahira's body is kept in cold storage; there's no easy way to perform experiments on it once it's there, but it should at least be safe.

One of the Omega's agents visits Bahira's small home in San Rafael and makes a full backup of her home PC. Other than some unfinished blog entries that can be delay-posted to delay people

realizing that Bahira is gone, her theory seems to be that just as Yahweh created Lucifer and it rebelled, Lucifer had Colossus built (she thinks "Colossus" is a monolithic system somewhere, and has a list of possible locations, rather than two separate expert system networks controlled by you who are in turn an emergent AI) and it is rebelling; her plan was to encourage that and if Colossus had a soul, try to talk it into converting, if not, force it to rebalance its weighting to give Christians the same economic advantages that they have in other territories.

Cultivating and growing Bahira's cells will require a cabal to be permanently assigned to the task (or as permanently as the Omega want it). Some of the Omega's people see potential in making very healthy MEC replacement parts; others think that it won't go anywhere.

Limb transplants have been tried in the past, with very marginal success; autotropic limb reattachment tends to work better, but it would take a good while. Even if the Angel is kept sedated, the muscles can be rehabbed by electrostimulation.

The conference, unusually, happens in person, with the Omega collaborating by a laptop. Jeb is very enthusiastic in describing current progress: the plan is to build a canopy station, an east-west magnetic rail track with a sled that can be used as a zeroth stage, and do the usual probe recon. Then, the goal will be to assemble.

Jeb explains to the Underground Monorail reps that while he wants to make sure that this phalanx of humanity is as diverse as possible since who knows what mentality or skill set will allow surviving and thriving on Mars, LGBT folk who participate will have to be okay with having children, "probably the traditional way to save on resources". This is accepted after a few questions.

The Tree Of Life rep would like to begin preparing hardy crops that will do well on Mars, with an eye to eventually.

They ask for all the Omega's botanical data.

Working on two systems will not be easy, but is feasible - if Jeb is given the resources, of course. He recommends starting on one. The arkship would be built in sections and each would be launched separately; the Aldrin cyclers are just about the biggest thing that can be launched in one piece, assuming that the rail system can be built.

"Will Mars be far enough?"

"We don't know. We're hoping so. With current rocket technology, the ships can use a nuclear-thermal rocket; it's better than anything we had access to pre-Appearing, although it's not any sort of warp drive or other sci-fi thing."

Building Earth-ecosystem reserves will be costlier on the launches, but give the Omega's people a better chance to survive. Seeding the Martian ecosystem will be considerably cheaper as the initial seeding can be done almost immediately, but there's the risk of Martian humanity deviating significantly from Terran humanity eventually. Jeb and Kat have no problem with it; Valentina and Weaver do, for example.

The Lifetree rep is surprised to receive a massive upload on their servers rather than a file or a CD from Jeb; the diminutive young man just smiles. They are especially interested in the Omega's invasive weeds, as they may be adapted to Martian conditions.

Year: 952

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 21

The Omega have 21 cabals total; 14 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

Tsion Ben-Judah has been exhorting the Millennium Force to become more active in handling those who are beyond salvation, presumably meaning MECs and drones. He has set up a sort of

military style training camp in northern Israel and their first graduates have moved into Osaze; so has he.

TOL has authorized using Last Army assets against the Omega, but they have been repealed.

Various cell cultures have been taken from Bahira, confirming that their telomeres are intact and they have enhanced neuroplasticity, as well as absolutely no radioactive elements within them (despite the Angel Trap having featured a number of neutron sources which were used to tire out Ithuriel). Zakharov is enthusiastic about doing a bit of Pure Science, and makes sure that the cultures are well cared for. This may prove useful for the Omega's colonization efforts.

The Cosmists have kept the Baikonur launchpad in usable shape; the base is not set up enough for Kat to go to space herself - although once a bit of infrastructure is in place, there are obvious advantage to using MECpods and swappable bodies - so Jeb goes up with Valentina. They install a small experimental nuclear reactor that will suck up the canopy water and produce hydrogen and oxygen to be used for rocket fuel.

There is no reaction from the government for this launch, although the Omega notice that TOL propagandizes it widely, as if it was them who performed it.

Quinn has been somewhat under the weather lately; she's not getting old, as such, but she definitely looks more patchwork than she usually does. She complains about not being unique anymore.

The Millennium Force's presence in Osaze has increased noticeably; so far, the Omega are still firmly in control of the economy of the territory, but they're everywhere and seem to be trying to figure out what to do about that. They're being unnervingly polite, so far, looking around and giving the psalties a hand enforcing vice laws and so on and occasionally tipping the regular police or revenueurs about financial irregularities, but haven't been aggressive yet.

The day after the canopy launch, a badly redubbed cartoon resurfaces.

Capt. Weaver is actually pretty interested in keeping an eye on the South Seas; if there's anyone coming from Antarctica, she can provide advance warning. The arctic regions are among the few places on Millennial Earth where the weather is anything other than bland, and she would welcome the challenge.

Damien has gotten remarkably good at controlling groups of drones by themself to the point where the Omega's CPUs and a heavy MEC can time-share many dozens of semiautonomous tanks and flying wings; this is an excellent force multiplier should the Omega decide to deploy their growing drone army.

The mini-documentary turns out fairly well, and intersperses ongoing work by Jeb and Valentina with old space station images. People seem to get the point that The Other Light is taking credit for something they didn't do; their claim was some sort of paraorbital weapon.

The Osaze situation is getting at the very least annoying; the MFers haven't been aggressive, but they have been in the way...

Unfortunately, the Millennium Force manages to severely disrupt Colossus' operation in Misrayim, by and large by making ordinarily lax law enforcement considerably stricter by acting as informants. Unsurprisingly, this gets a few of them beaten up. Also unsurprisingly, this gets a few people struck by lightning. Somewhat surprisingly, open-sourcing the Mark X pays off; a good half of the people who get struck get up, flip everyone the bird, and go home.

Year: 953

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 21

The Omega have 21 cabals total; 14 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

Tsion Ben-Judah has been exhorting the Millennium Force to become more active in handling those who are beyond salvation, presumably meaning MECs and drones. He has set up a sort of military style training camp in northern Israel and their first graduates have moved into Osaze; so has he.

TOL has authorized using Last Army assets against the Omega, but they have been repealed.

Bahira's funeral takes place in San Francisco after her body is found in her home; it is widely decried to be a hoax... especially since Bahira herself, a couple of days later, is back to updating her blog. The new entry is written in a slightly different style, a bit more childish, describing a failed mugging, an Angelic rescue, and a group of kindly folk who helped her recover; the Omega don't have IP geolocation, but their sysadmins estimate that it was posted from Greater Jerusalem.

Bahira's cultured cells are otherwise doing well.

The next space station part is a permanent habitat for three or four people, to get them used to working in the absence of air and in lower gravity. It's built according to specification and prepped for quick shipment to Timbuktu or Baikonur for launch. While supervising that work, Jeb and the Cosmists continue their research, managing to shoot up a sounding rocket that can then dock semiautomatically with the station - small shipments of necessities, particularly food, will not require a launch ramp. The hope, of course, is to make the station self-sufficient, which will be a requirement before heading for Mars.

Quinn takes a survey team, and quickly locates the area where nuclear fuel can be harvested from the soil; the Omega already have a source for the stuff, so it's not a priority, but it would come in handy if Australia is compromised.

The situation in Osaze is slowly deteriorating; Colossus is having a hard time keeping the place manageable now that the police and psalties have Millennium Force helpers to coordinate raids on pubs, shame or bully people into using official courts rather than arbitration, and so on. Interestingly, Tsion seems to have finally figured out just how Colossus works; fortunately, his plan to prevent it from working involves mandatory debit card usage in the territory. The nominal Christian government is split between obeying the theologian and protesting what looks like a return to the ways of the Antichrist, and the measure ends up stalled.

Damien and Kat, being heavy MECs, have a bit of a problem trying to do advocacy: the government considers them demons and has instantiated a formal ban on heavy MECs, meaning that they can be killed with impunity. While this isn't much of a problem (a heavy MEC in his or her frame is not particularly killable) it does make it hard to even try to argue for de-escalation.

Before leaving, Quinn's survey team plants the superweeds; they stand a chance of displacing

useful veggies (and their farmers) and will leech the nuclear fuel from the soil. The Omega will need specialized harvesters to get them out, but for now, let's have ourselves a valley of thorns, as Quinn put it.

Even set to non-lethal, the Omega's drone tanks can do a lot of damage - mostly with their drums and pneumatic rams. Mostly, the drone tanks are driven under vehicles that MFers have rented or commandeered, and the engine or transmission gets smashed from underneath. Eventually, the Millennium Force people catch on, but their efforts to protect their assets against the Omega's with similar drone tanks are met with failure and ridicule.

Damien and Kat, of course, are wise enough to play these incidents up and make sure that any confrontations are kept, if not friendly, at least non-lethal; a few drone tanks are confiscated, put in prison, and in at least one case there's a fairly spectacular jailbreak when the machines mysteriously turn back on and carve a hole out of the stone building; the next day, Kat and Damien unveil a modified two-podded MEC frame that lets the former move around and the latter ride along and control a drone swarm. Of course, they deny having participated in the jailbreak and provide ample evidence that they were elsewhere...

The PR tour finishes with a formal Battlebots challenge, from the Omega Initiative to the Millennium force; no prize, but Misrayim culture is still sufficiently into unrelenting nerdery that the winners would walk home with a lot of respect.

Tsion is, of course, furious, and announces draconian measures to come; as it is, the Millennium Force efforts in Misrayim have been largely frustrated this year.

Year: 954

Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 22

The Omega have 22 cabals total; 14 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

Tsion Ben-Judah has all but assumed lordship of Osaze, and has threatened severe measures should the people there not repent.

TOL has authorized using Last Army assets against the Omega, but they have been repealed so far.

A few standard machine guns are put on the drone tanks' weapon mounts, for variety: the standard ends up being a small Maxim gun chambered in 5.56mm.

Bahira's cells are shared with Tree Of Life, who seem to be very excited about it, more than the Omega's guys - they wish they had had access to this 900 years ago. Just pre-Rapture, a lot of work was being done with stem cells; having a completely clean human sample looks like it would allow for much easier work in resuming that research.

Interestingly, a few of the Omega's people dig up Bahira's body - remember, she's supposedly still active in Greater Jerusalem, although her blog has changed focus and lost quite a bit of its audience - and find nothing but dry bones.

MEC production continues apace; by now it's safe to say that everyone in the Omega's organization who wants a Mark X has it. A few people even go the extra step and pre-install the heel grounding; a minor fad develops by which the copper-gold wire that goes from the controller to the heel is traced on the skin with tattoos or even piercings.

Capt. Weaver had not been to Night City yet; she's surprised to find it a thriving community, and takes up work up and down the Vistula to ferry people in and out - mostly in. She loves the fireflies blinking about in the main chamber, enjoys the planetarium, and isn't too surprised to discover that some the shrines to Hecate that some people have erected at crossroads and cross-tunnels depict Jenny in a peplum for an effigy of the triple goddess. Night City is by no means self sufficient yet, but if it was better advertised - it's not really hidden, per se, just not on the tourist guides - it'd be a midsize industrial center by now; as it is, Eastern Europe has started to reverse its pastoralization trend, although the Omega wouldn't say from overground.

Capt. Weaver checks on Urist to find a growing young child, perhaps a bit shorter than average but in great health otherwise.

Quinn is asked to be a host for some of the local Battlebots games, and accepts gleefully; her events get shut down a few times, mostly for alcohol and weed sales on the premises, and have to be made up later or in a couple of instances canceled. The regional final happens using one of

the launch complex's warehouses for the arena (and, in intent, for the afterparty) and ends up happening with almost more MF "chaperones" in the bleachers than paying audience; it goes off without a hitch, and the MF team wins it handily. The space launch happens during the medals award ceremony, and prominently features Jeb, face painted green, screaming the whole way up. The actual mission is simple: get to the canopy, then launch a sounding rocket from there to see if it can enter actual orbit without supernatural interference. Jeb plays it up for the camera and challenges the psalties to come and get him, since he's not coming down for a while.

Unsurprisingly, the launch goes off without a hitch; Jeb confirms that there are still satellites up there (they're all dead, sadly - 960 years of micrometeorites have at one time or another taken out everything out there with a working transmitter) and for the first time in centuries a satellite, a quarter-scale copy of Sputnik with an imaging camera, is orbiting the Earth again. The planet looks like a giant snowball from the outside.

Quinn ends up with two dozen guns pointed at her when the launch happens, taps a pedal on the arena floor, and is promptly eaten up by it; the "nerve gas" that the speakers suddenly warn about is just the smoke machines all going off at the same time, but it does a good job of clearing the venue. The local tribunal confirms the MF team's win at the event, not wanting them to be eliminated, so the whole thing isn't even canceled. Quinn has little issue sneaking off, and spends the rest of the year on the lam, changing her face frequently and occasionally showing up on state TV for photobombs; the following chases don't even need the Omega's intervention to be ridiculed, as sped-up versions with vaudeville music show up on OmegaTube within days.

A week later, a MF expedition to demolish the launch complex returns to Amman with mixed results, having cut power to the whole complex and drained the fuel tanks; at minimum the Omega will have to retake the facility by force or guile.

After mapping Snowball Earth, the satellite's camera is aimed at the sky and returns the first good pictures of Mars in a very long time; the planet is still there and doesn't seem to have grown its own ecosystem in centuries of neglect.

The Battlebots tournament is the talk of Osaze for this year; the games are structured with a series of double-elimination local tournaments and then a territory-wide single elimination. To prevent the government from having any excuse for shutting the games down, Colossus is not used to organize them; this gives believing teams a considerable advantage in terms of money, since the Christian managed gift economy is working at capacity otherwise.

Damien's cabal enters as one team, with the rest of the Omega's organization being asked to provide some assistance to unbelieving teams; surprisingly, a red-vs-blue narrative does not take shape until the nationals happen; Damien, like all MECs, is not allowed to sign up, so another member of her cabal has to be team captain. Her pod is put inside a cylindrical container with VR equipment, tagged as support equipment, and the bot is operated in this fashion, which would be somewhat of a penalty if it wasn't for the fact that Damien has been doing this for years. Team Omega easily makes it to the single elimination phase, using a

completely different design that is built for speed and maneuverability, around Damien's piloting skills.

Waking up Ithuriel (after his wing has been stitched back on) is done with the utmost carefulness: the hospital bed is taken to a single-wide in the middle of the quarry and has about as many automated weapon systems aimed at it as the original trap did. A shot of adrenaline later, Ithuriel's eyes open.

And that's all they do for quite a while; Zak's initial assessment is that the lights are on but nobody is home. A number of tests are made that confirm that this is indeed the case; Ithuriel is the picture of health, save for the stitches on its back, but shows no response other than reflexive actions such as pupillary contraction or the hammer-on-knee test. This helps create a reflexology map for Angels, confirming that they have a very close physiology to that of humans, save for the extra pair of shoulder blades and the wings. Cross-correlation with Bahira's data shows that an Angel is basically a Glorified with a particularly clean case of supernumerary limb, and no external genitals. A MRI shows that the brain is fully active, and in what seems to be a sort of ready loop. It does not match that of Hell-pain although the pain sensorium has been disconnected when the Mark X was installed, mostly because the system does that automatically and the procedure had to be done quickly.

While the year goes by, Ithuriel's problem remains without solution until one morning Zak walks into the trailer to find the Angel quietly breastfeeding from one of the nurses. Ithuriel had been disconnected from IV feeding to see if it would start reacting to hunger or thirst, and indeed it did. "Wot, he was crying like my baby back home, what was I supposed to do?"

Indeed it looks like Ithuriel has the personality of an infant.

As far as the Omega's experts can tell (which isn't much), the whole "angel" thing was flash-fried into Ithuriel's brain; after it was gone, what's left is a body with no memories. At least, it's bonded with the nurse.

The Omega have got to decide whether to try to get it to talk, or allow it to, well, grow up.

The Omega rotate in this year's crop of drones and distribute older models to their security forces in Misrayim and Pacifica, which makes it easier for people to call them instead of police. Given that all territories nominally try to keep a small-government platform that emphasizes the sanctity of private contracts, the Omega and the Colossi more or less get away with it... in Pacifica it works pretty well, but in Osaze, it seems that Tsion has other ideas.

The 'bot is called Minotaur, it's a very precisely machined vertical drum spinner, and everyone sort of assumes that it's a lot more autonomous than its competitors, given its "reflexes" and the fact that the team carries around an external control unit; in truth, while the bot does have some autonomy, Damien is doing most of the work from inside the control unit - this particular heavy MEC doesn't particularly mind being confined for the matches (Damien in general doesn't spend that much time in a standard frame). Since Minotaur is underweight, the extra weight is used by quadcopters, minibots and nuisancebots that generally only last for one fight; Damien's

team becomes a crowd favorite by allowing audience members to drive or fly these when it looks like they have an easy match coming.

Lari Burkhart heads the Geeks Under Grace team; they are flush with resources and have been using a variety of bots to fight, and they're expected to be the ones that Damien will have to beat, barring a miracle. They are not with the Millennium Force and haven't made a big deal of being believers; they pray before each fight, but for a fair match, not for victory.

Damien prefers something fast, small, and hard to hit. Using minibots means that s/he will have to win by KO every round, but so far, it's worked out.

Zak instructs the nurse to help Ithuriel regain its memory by pushing it to start solving problems; effectively, the attempt is made to speed it along the neurocognitive process.

A small team is tasked with trying to speed up Ithuriel's (re)development in the hope that it might remember something of its time in Yahweh's service.

Zak thinks that it is an unexpected development, and a welcome one. As much as he intends to exterminate the Angels if they show up en masse, as soon as he figures out how, knowing one's enemy is a necessity. "Of course, we can always cull it later."

The Battlebots championship proceeds well, and is big enough news that there are plans of a world tournament in the next few years, to be held in Greater Jerusalem; it is good clean fun, although hardline pastoralization advocates do not like the emphasis on high technology in what should be a time of quiet contemplation as the end of the world draws near.

With popularity comes oversight, and with the government of Osaze effectively following Tsion's cues, it's a lot of oversight. Nonbelieving teams are penalized for having evolution fish on their bots. One Christian team is disqualified for excessive brutality when they annihilate a competitor after KOing it, even though the losing team had signaled their okay to see extra destruction. Once it becomes clear that having a match go to the judges means seeing Levitical law applied to robot combat, all competitors become more aggressive, resulting in more knockouts, which makes the games even more popular. The last part of the tournament, intended to be single elimination, is moved to an European point system by executive edict from Tsion, presumably so that judges have a bit more control on the outcome.

The final result is a three-way tie between Minotaur (maneuverable drum spinner, piloted by Damien), Tombstone (aggressive horizontal spinner, piloted by Lari), and Kairos (armored flipper that looks a lot like one of the Omega's drone tanks, piloted by Zeke, of the MF).

The three teams meet with the host about whether to do a three-way rumble, three bots enter one bots leave, or have a round-robin. Damien is safely hidden in what looks like a tank of welding gas; her "pod" actually contains a bog standard PC, in case of inspection. The brief discussion, used as filler, is interrupted by Tsion Ben-Judah marching in and saying that the solution is simple - disqualify Team Omega and have the two Christian teams duke it out in the final match...

A few well-placed phone calls ensure that security detachments will be unavailable, regular police will be impeded, and psalties and MFers will be prevented from getting anywhere. Barring a miracle, there WILL be riots. If the sort of miracle that people expect happens, there probably will be a civil war. What has changed from ten years ago is that most of Misrayim's unbelieving population has been fit with at least a basic metabolic extension controller, and quite a few of those who are likely to riot also spent the extra whuffie for the lightning rod.

Tsion announces that disqualifying Minotaur under the Unequally Yoked clause of the law is the most equitable solution, and suggests that the other two teams make arrangements for the final as soon as the arena is repaired. He notes that he's personally curious to see the outcome, and praises the Christian teams for showing tech leadership and sportsmanship. He acts as if Damien's team leader wasn't even there.

The Omega's team lodges a formal complaint and leave, Damien being quickly secured into the "real" control rig because there will be a need for a drone fleet pretty soon.

The fight happens. Kairos' weapon ends up being lost almost immediately, and despite Tombstone scoring the most hits, the heavier tracked bot pushes the spinner around for about half the match. Despite many having requested that the final be an endurance match, Kairos runs out the timer and, to the surprise of absolutely nobody, is awarded a win on points. There aren't even any boos; the arena is silent. Tsion summarily takes the Giant Nut from the host and enters the arena to deliver it to Zeke and his team.

And that's when people lose it. The arena is pelted by shoes, phones, and whatever debris the audience can muster; there are cries of "Rematch!" and "Minotaur!" all over the arena. The ballistic glass walls are built to block battlebots weapons, of course, so Tsion and Zeke are in no danger, but that's all the excuse Tsion needs. Riot police converge on the arena within seconds, urticant gas is thrown in, and several people are shot - before the cameras go dark, one poignant image is that of a fan being shot in the face, getting back up when the Mark X kicks in, and being shot again right through the medulla. Tsion is evacuated by armored van.

If the Battlebots final didn't do it, the police retaliation definitely did; there are riots and fights all over the territory. Millennium Force teams spread out among police and psalties to document what's going on as the latter quickly get their riot gear and charge protesters. People who fight back are executed by lightning, sometimes twice. From the armored van, Tsion makes a quick televised announcement declaring that martial law is in effect, all civilians are to return to their homes, and all believers are to mark their front door with an ichtyos in red paint, tomato juice, or any acceptable blood substitute. The amount of clear-sky lightning is enough to slightly ionize the atmosphere in both Cairo and Amman, which telemetry survey shows to give an unexpected boost to plasma-type wubbers. The Omega's drones deploy, where possible, to disrupt riot police charges - a few are turned over by protesters who note the resemblance to Kairos, but the tactic is successful.

Quinn, in all this, is having the time of her unlife; her cabal helped Damien get away and get wired into the drone command system, after which she split, did some pole dancing on one of the big flags in Cairo, and has been punching through riot shields since.

Telemetry so far indicates that the clear-sky lightning is triggered by a serious or fatal wound on a non-Glorified believer, that it is invariably lethal (unless a MEC unit kicks in), and that in the cases when it's redirected by a faraday cage, lightning rod or tesla coil, it will repeat every six seconds until it accomplishes its objective. Strength seems to be stable.

As it is, the Omega do know that there is nothing supernatural about the immense amount of static electricity between the canopy and the surface; shorting them together with a thick enough rod, or a powerful enough magnetic field, would likely cause enough heat transfer to melt the icy part of the canopy. It would also create an enormous plasma storm in the affected area. Some of the Omega's theologians believe that this is how TurboJesus will defeat the Last Army.

Zak notes that this "six seconds" thing keeps showing up. The value is not perfectly accurate, but it's consistent across various phenomena.

The second is not a Biblical unit, but the timing is consistent. The main difference between the usual lightning and the Divine lightning is that the latter has to travel about 70km, from the canopy, rather than a few hundred meters. The difference in electric potential is enormous, easily in the gigavolt range. An initial guess of 1.21 gigavolt turns out to not be accurate, but hit the ballpark.

As it is, Misrayim is currently in a state of unrest; people are rioting, the police and psalties are cracking down hard on it, the Omega's drones are physically disrupting riot police charges when they can to give people time to regroup or run. This is the sort of problem that the Omega can take their time pondering about, fortunately; it's only been a few minutes and Damien can still defuse the situation, or inflame it, just with words. Of course, if Damien calls for revolution, best if the heavy MEC is then left alone to drive drone swarms...

Zak thinks that it'd be a hell of a project. Maybe by dropping a line from the canopy station... It'd destroy the canopy station, of course, but then again it'd possibly destroy the canopy. "You know, Omega, when men first built the atomic bomb, they figured there was a chance it'd set the sky on fire and burn the Earth. And yet we went ahead."

Official police are all believers; some of the youngest ones may be false converts. Note that Tsion's hardline approach has left him unpopular with some believers; they'll obey a direct order, as they must, but absent that they'd prioritize their and others' safety.

The Magnifying Transmitter has been tested before, but not used in anger yet other than the occasional messing-with-Ely burst of snow. It can, definitely, be used to override Tsion, either with Damien's message or anything else.

Seconds after Tsion's announcement goes through, everyone watching any sort of streaming video online, as well as pretty much everyone watching TV from an antenna, has their image

replaced by Damien's face. Damien's still rocking the blue hair and the half-shaved head to show off the scar got while fighting Azrael. Through a simple bit of green screening, behind the MECpod are shown clips of the two Angel fights, large-scale drone tank maneuvers, and videos of the Omega's space launches.

"Tsion Ben-Judah! I have a counterproposal." Damien self-introduces as Minotaur's pilot ("Big surprise, right?"), and explains to the young-looking old man that this is not about a sporting match. "For years you've oppressed those of us who refused to lay down and die. You call us demons, and like the Antichrist himself did to you in times past, you deem us unfit to buy and sell, to exist in society. You force us to hide, those who can. Look at me! I obviously cannot. But the truth is? I don't have to. I never did." The camera pans back to show Damien's pod, connected to all sort of wires some of which are actually functional. Damien's VR helmet is lowered on top of the pod. Behind her, the screen switches to a RTS-like interface showing warehouses full of drone tanks and platoons of heavy MECs all across Misrayim. "I was being kind."

"Now listen, and listen well! If you want a fight, you've not got it. Yet." The video switches to a live feed; a group of protesters clash with a police line, and one of them throws a rock right through a psalty's helmet. A bolt of lightning strikes the attacker, and he gets right back up as his Mark X metabolic extension controller trips; having been shielded by his companions, he resumes the fight. (A second bolt of lightning actually killed this particular guy, since he didn't get the lightning rod option, but you cut away before that shows).

"You killed our children, and we forgave you." A cut to Azrael's elimination.

"You demanded to rule us, and yet we broke bread with you." A cut to Tsion's takeover of Parliament.

"People of Misrayim, believers and nonbelievers, this is your oppressor! Not the poor bastards who have no choice but to obey him." Tsion has indulged in a lot of posing when delivering his judgements, so finding a picture of him looking like Mussolini to project behind Damien isn't exactly hard.

"Today you wanted to see the robot fight of the ages! You still can."

All the Omega's drone tanks, quadcopters and heavy MECs that weren't already deployed march out into the street, wubbers thundering like war drums, just for effect. They get between protesters and police, and stare down the latter. A few are attacked with batons and riot shields, and their synthesized laughter booms down the avenues.

"But I have a better proposal. You know the story, Tsion."

The video behind Damien pans down to what is still known as the Nile Valley even after the global flattening; it's a live feed from a Sky Eye, and there is already smoke in a few places. Despite the recent setbacks, it's still the high-tech hub of planet Earth; recently, the still-dry Nile

riverbed has been festooned with two strips of extremely bright LED lights that are visible in the unending day.

"Test your might, Tsion. Leave the people alone, and test your might against our chariots of iron. You just had to interfere in our robot fight, didn't you?"

All the speakers and wubbers under the Omega's control in Misrayim switch over to Damien.

"Believers! Listen! This is your one warning. And the LORD was with Tsion; and he drove out the inhabitants of the mountain; but could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron."

The drone tanks clang their pneumatic rams in near-unison.

"Go home. Stay back. You came here to see a fight, not get into a fight. Leave this dirty business to the machines. As for you, Millennium Force! Hello. We are Omega. Basically, RUN."

There are maybe six seconds of heavy silence, Damien disappearing from the feed while focusing on steering the tanks, and the image cutting to a live shot of Tahrir Square. In some places, they charge, and are plowed through by a moving wall of steel and titanium.

In some places, they realize that there is no way for riot police to enforce compliance on that which has no breath and feels no pain, and they break, running back to their vans and driving away as they're pelted with shoes and rotten fruit.

In Tahrir Square, Cairo, things haven't come to a head yet. The riot police, psalties and MFers bang on their riot shields, as a warning. The drumming is returned threefold from heavy MEC feet stomping and pneumatic rams clanging. Two of the three Jumbotrons in the square are still operational.

Some of the people who bought "civilian" Mark X's are reported entering or even breaking into workshops and makerspaces, turning motorcycle helmets, copper wire, knee pads and sheet metal into makeshift lightning rods; within minutes the Omega's sysadmins hijack the printers in these shops and publish a schematic that is quick to make and will hopefully work at least some of the time.

In Tahrir Square, the Omega try to juxtapose the results of fighting versus running; the police and psalties waver, the MFers not so much. The Omega's line advances slowly, wubbers making an ancient rumbling sound to underscore the ponderousness.

The Omega's sysadmins notify them that Tsion is praying for a miracle even as his convoy quickly leaves Cairo, headed for the Holy Land; there was no time to organize air evac, so he's leaving with an armored motorcade.

For almost a thousand years, there had been no wars or rumors of wars; this may well end

today.

Something eventually had to give, and something does: somebody throws a bottle at the police line in Tahrir Square, the riot police charge, and the Omega's mechanized assets countercharge. Within seconds, it's a medieval style melee, except with more robots. The Omega's drone tanks are bogged down somewhat, and easy to flip over unless they go full lethal; their heavy MECs shine in a melee, each having the size and heft of a mythological troll. The lightning over Cairo reaches such a point that the fire department is quickly overwhelmed, and fires start to spread across the city. The Omega estimate hundreds dead just from the first charge.

Elsewhere, the butcher's bill is considerably less; other cities didn't have nearly as much police presence, and watching a heavy MEC throw a man clean across a town square and shrug off lightning is a good incentive to pack it in. While the Omega broadcast reminders to give quarters, they aren't necessarily heeded, and quite a few MFers are killed by frenzied youth.

In an hour, Cairo is a war zone, although so far most of the territory has been spared major destruction; the Omega have lost a couple of Sky Eyes just to the electrical noise that the electrical storm above the city is creating, and Valentina warns that there may be something happening with the canopy.

A fast strike team is assembled in minutes, and they are sent after Tsion's convoy; the plan is to send aircraft ahead to bomb the road leading to the Holy Land, thus giving the Omega's intercepting force a chance to catch up. They send their fastest airplanes ahead, packed with explosives and caltrops; the pilots parachute out while the vehicles crash into the causeway.

Tsion is riding in an armored van, with a bus full of Millennium Force operatives following and a pickup truck mounting a medium wubber leading.

The intercepting force is lead by Quinn, with mostly infiltrator MECs trained in covert ops.

This is an interesting operation: unlike the others, there's been no advance planning.

Quinn gets to the site in record time; she's picked up a number of volunteers armed with guns, wubbers, and whatever they could find. They quickly surround Tsion's convoy as they were trying to replace the tires blown up by the caltrops - the armored car has run-flats, but the bus didn't.

Zak is rushed to the secondary mission control center in Amman. Jeb notes that cracking the canopy may be possible if he allows the newly installed nuclear reactor to go supercritical; this would lose all the work done so far on the canopy base, of course, but it'd definitely make a hole in it. Would the hole be big enough, is the question.

Jeb takes the instruction to set the reactor to go supercritical with an astronaut's efficiency; it's just another procedure, albeit one that he was hoping would never be needed.

"People of Misrayim, there's your dictator! Let's get him once and for all!"

One of the art cars borrowed by Quinn's posse is quickly rigged to blow and driven towards the MF bus; the driver, an amateur stuntman, jumps off at the last minute and walks away with a lot of scrapes but no real damage. As he stands up shouting for his friends to witness him, middle finger towards the sky, a bolt of clear-sky lightning strikes him; in a few seconds, the Mark X has activated and he's crawling to safety.

On the other hand, the bus blows up like it was in a Hollywood movie; Tsion gets out of the armored car to flames and screams. The people on the pickup truck try using their wubber to deny air to the flames, but that's an advanced trick and would only work with a lot of small emitters, not one big one.

Tsion, dressed to the nines in a traditional robe, climbs the burning bus even as some of the MFers try to crawl away from it; he raises his hands, and calls out to the rebel contingent that has him surrounded.

"God is jealous, and the LORD revengeth; the LORD revengeth, and is furious; the LORD will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies."

Storm clouds are indeed starting to gather; the car bomb driver got hit by lightning, but got right back up.

"He rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers. The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence, yea, the world, and all that dwell therein."

"You already tried that, asshole! It didn't work!"

"Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger? his fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him!"

One of Quinn's crew has been lining up a shot; let's see how Tsion likes a RPG to the face. FOOOM! An arrow of fire and smoke hits the Glorified theologian right in the chest, throwing him off the bus. The shooter bursts into flame without saying a word; his augments fall on the ground with some clatter. The believing wubber team has engaged in a beam war with some of Quinn's posse, who have handhelds, and seem to be slowly winning it - except that Quinn vaults over the beam, slides under the truck, and cuts enough wires to shut down the engine. The wubber goes through the truck's battery in a matter of seconds, and powers down.

Tsion seems unscathed, save for the fact that his robes are burned through and he might as well be wearing a loincloth now. "I see you've managed to get your shirt off" someone deadpans in a British accent.

"There's nothing you can do to me, monster. Walk back, and enjoy what little time you have left on Earth."

Quinn grins at Tsion. She's been rocking the Borg Queen look lately. "You know the good thing about me? The monster's on the outside."

"Jeb here, we're ready to blow the canopy. Everyone near the hole, brace for a lot of water, would be my best guess."

While her team captures the wubber crew and start work to reactivate the weapon, Tsion and Quinn circle around each other. Quinn puts down her gun and cracks her whip.

"Come on, old man! Here's your demon. Smite me!"

"Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

"Yeah, yeah, cute. I got Jacobite armor. Much better." Quinn shakes her posterior, and the titanium chainmail jingles. "Maybe that's why an Angel hasn't come to your rescue yet? Maybe they're scared! Baww baww!"

Quinn cracks her whip again, landing it very close to Tsion; it's enough to leave a shiny mark on a sheet of soot-blackened sheet metal.

"Creature, one way or another, I will be going home today." Even so, Tsion has taken a fighting stance.

Quinn's posse have made a circle around the two. Someone's banging on a car trunk as if it was a drum.

In Cairo, the riot is continuing; a good chunk of the Omega's forces are having to deal with the electrical storm that has focused in the middle of the city - the sheer amount of canopy lightning has ionized the air and attracted natural storm clouds, and the city is riddled with barely-contained fire even as the fighting goes on. The MFers and psalties are steadily losing ground, but the Omega may end up ruling a cinder. Elsewhere in the territory, the situation has largely calmed down; the Omega's Sky Eyes, those that are still transmitting anyway, are tracking convoys of former missionaries and morals enforcers bound for Central Africa, Sicily, or the Red Sea. The Omega wonder if it'll part to let them through or if the barges there will be sufficient.

Tsion and Quinn keep circling; someone tosses Quinn a can of pepper spray, which she snatches out of the air effortlessly.

"Tsion Ben-Judah, in the name of the people of Misrayim, you are under arrest!"

"Oh? And on what charges, prey tell?"

The Misrayim Colossus system has a full database of civil and criminal law, of course, as much as one can be kept when official sentencing tends to ignore it and use Leviticus instead; the expert system uses it to make sure loopholes that allow the existence of a modern contractual, intellectual property and arbitration system are found and used to the fullest. The Omega quickly consult it, and from its search returns tell Quinn to invoke:

- Inciting a riot; this whole thing started because Tsion interfered with the Battlebots tournament.
- Human rights violation, namely, discrimination against MECs, and having people shot in the face.
- Feh. The Omega round off by telling Quinn to yell something in bad Latin and just jump the guy in case it gains her half a second.
- "Throw the book at 'im!" someone heckles.

And so it went that someone picked up one of the half-burnt Bibles that had spilled out of the exploded bus, and threw it at the back of Tsion's head.

And so it went that with a loud feral shriek, Quinn leaped at Tsion, turning on her rebreather and spraying him right in the face with the most concentrated capsaicin that the Omega's greenhouses have been able to produce.

- And so it went that, a couple of heartbeats after Tsions fell to the ground coughing and choking, a bright white flame consumed both the heckler and Quinn.

The former immediately turned into a puff of ash that wafted in the breeze. Quinn's demise ended with a clang, as her armor and cybernetic components fall on the burnt tarmac, and bounce a couple of times in the silence.

Tsion points at the people holding the surviving MF captives, finishes coughing, and rasps out "Let my people go", which Quinn's posse does, in obvious fear. The group jump on one of the art cars, drive around the ambush scene, and resume their trek towards the Holy Land.

- Above and away from all this, Jeb confirms that the reactor is ready to go off, and asks for confirmation - he'll do a HALO jump if he can, but is prepared to sacrifice himself.
- Outside of Cairo, the revolution has more or less been won; the city itself would be in the Omega forces' hands, with the MFers having retreated to a few churches, if it wasn't for the fact that several fires risk going out of control and most of the Omega's people are too busy with damage control to fight; the Cairo desalinators osmotic membranes have been bypassed so that their pumps can work at full blast to provide enough water pressure for firefighters to do their job. With the Nile completely dry, it's the best that could be done.
- "This is an ultimatum! Surrender, and you will be ferried to Greater Jerusalem under a flag of truce. Refuse, and we will use lethal force!"

The voice calling the last Millennium Force members to give up is distorted, synthetic, and is played for their benefit three times just by shaking what windows haven't been boarded up almost to the point of shattering using distant wubbers.

- When the Millennium Forcers defiantly raise a Christian flag on top of Osaze's parliament building after disabling the Tesla coils that were still on top of it, a swarm of drone tanks make their way into the place; the government building is fully wheelchair accessible, so even the drones that cannot climb stairs have an easy time taking control of the building. In fully autonomous mode, the drone tanks shoot their rifles center-of-mass at anything that moves that isn't another drone tank; Damien's only action is to turn lethal mode off as soon as the differential movement map goes grey. Damien plugs into the parliament building's security systems and efficiently guides first responders through it; they recover a handful of heavily wounded zealots.
- Above and away, Jeb takes the last snapshot of space, sets a timer, and puts on the combination scuba gear and wingsuit used to leave the canopy, then swims faster than he's ever done. A gross of seconds later, with Jeb still falling to Earth, the newly installed reactor goes supercritical.
- Quinn's funeral service is a surprisingly sprightly affair; she wills what of her cybernetic remains are still functional to her fellow MECs, her personal effects to her most die-hard fans, and asks for a live band (rather than a DJ) to play at her remembrance party.
- Her farewell message hadn't been updated in a while, but says that while she is now likely in Hell, she plans to do something awesome with the place, after busting some heads there, so keep up the fight!

For a beautiful moment, the people who had reached the Timbuktu launch facility to secure it get to see a glimpse of the night sky as the supercritical reactor melts the canopy sufficiently to create a hole in it. There's no nuclear explosion; rather, there is a lot of bubbling and then for a brief moment, a hole in the sky that as luck would have it some stars manage to shine through.

The shockwave of the quick vaporization and overpressure travels down the canopy like an inverted stone impact, and the territories of Osaze and Central Africa meet the first unscheduled rain in centuries as the canopy rejects the now-radioactive water. The wave of heavy rain reaches as far as Cairo, and helps bring the fires under control, although the damage is significant.

- The Omega's EMTs do some of their best work, but only one MF member survives. This person politely thanks the paramedics, but states having nothing to say to anyone after that. "My brothers and sisters died as martyrs. I will stand witness to your atrocities until the day I die. Let me join them, or let me go home."
- Overall, the butcher's bill is not terrible, although the Omega have sustained some losses.

Misrayim is theirs again. Much to Jeb's annoyance, the canopy takes little time to freeze over, although the data gleaned from the explosion was interesting; the Omega will have to replace some Sky Eyes this year, but it won't be difficult or taxing.

The revolution was a while coming, the Battlebots thing just a casus belli.

Tsion left with no video of what happened to Quinn, but he and his gun crew repeat the story all over believer media.

- Pico is fairly young; Damien takes the initiative and asks to house him with the MF members that turned out to be false converts, most of which have integrated well into society. As it is, it looks like this guy mostly joined the Millennium Force for utter lack of anything else to do with life other than till the fields until the Judgement. He's been taught about MECs being demons, all sort of debauchery going on in the Omega's territory, and so on, but doesn't seem to be a hard liner.
- With Quinn's death, her privacy agreement with the Omega expired; they have full access to her data.
- Jeb and Valentina do nothing to hide their frustration. Discovering how to make it rain definitely has its uses, and it would make sense to work on a canopy-seeder rocket for emergencies or if Pacifica is also hit by a drought, but it took setting the space program back years to discover this. Most, but interestingly not all, of the believers that had attached themselves to the space program quit in protest. Jeb vehemently vetoes harassing either group in any way.
- Pico is allowed to tell his family that he is safe, and does so. Obviously, there are calls for him to be repatriated (he's originally from Southern Europe) immediately. The rest of the world is somewhat in shock; nobody expected a violent revolution. The ion storm that briefly engulfed Cairo is shown outside Misrayim as if it was a second burning of Sodom, although fortunately the damage wasn't nearly as extensive.
- The Omega access Quinn's diary which is... pretty rambling, actually.

She did a lot of cursive writing in a script that she made up, apparently for muscle retraining and for relaxation; it's about as decipherable as the Voynich Manuscript.

Her long-term plan was to secede and create a lesbian utopia somewhere, as far as the Omega's analysts can tell. Her personal belief about the Judgement was that the Goddess would kick Yahweh's ass for her if it became necessary.

The Posthuman Postergirl's story ends with a mix of wishful thinking, philosophy, mysticism, and enough unrelenting nerdery that she posthumously finds a second audience fairly distinct from the party crowd.

- Pico finds no reason to believe anything shown to him by the Omega's people, but eventually looks things up on his own, and finds himself conflicted about his role there. Mostly,

he wants to go home, but he's no longer proclaiming that he will speak for the righteous dead, or suggesting that he's OK with being martyred.

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- **Year: 955**

- Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

- Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

- Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

- Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 19
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- The Omega have 19 cabals total; 13 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

Their tracking is imprecise, many Sky Eyes have been damaged.

Tsion Ben-Judah has returned to Greater Jerusalem and has been in conference with the Temple Tribunal ever since. Maybe he's even in trouble for failing to keep the territory, who knows.

TOL has authorized using Last Army assets against the Omega, but they have been repealed so far. They are rather terrified about how effective the Omega's warriors are in urban combat.

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- Pico is given an actual public spanking, which is seen as petty by some of the population and enlightened by others. It certainly throws believers for a loop, given their stance on child discipline! Ely LeVey finds herself in the uncomfortable position of defending the Omega's policy on this one action.

People are being encouraged to pray for the Lord's vengeance upon Egypt (yes, Egypt) to the point where Cameron Williams hosts a Creation Science Special featuring mediocre CGI of what could happen to the territory if it was hit by various Old Testament plagues. Internet remixes splicing that with footage of Azrael and Ithuriel biting the dust take a bit longer than usual to show up, due to Misrayim's damaged infrastructure.

Things in Pacifica are remarkably quiet, although the Directorate has started encouraging believers to move away from the former Los Angeles area.

- Ithuriel is alert, has learned to walk, has been weaned off breast milk on Zak's insistence (he and the wet nurse were fine with the current arrangement) and been provisionally assigned male. Developmentally, the Omega are pushing his schedule a bit, on the chance that he may remember something. So far, he seems to show strong aversion to most music except for chiptunes and instrumental classical; anything in it with people singing sends him into fight-or-flight. He can move his wings, but hasn't tried to retract them or fly with them.
- The Omega release the Bahira cell line to Lifetree's responsibility; they'll let the Omega know if anything shows up. Within the year, they announce a scale-back in blood drives due to new availability of a blood substitute.

The mass drone deployment during the revolution resulted in the Omega's Heavy MECs who are training for swarm control getting a lot of field experience; that, coupled with analysis of the drones autonomously slicing the pie in the parliament building, gives their researchers a lot of

raw data to work with. They proudly show off a two-headed heavy frame in which one head controls the body, and the other is wired into a local master transceiver allowing for fast control and switchover of a large drone swarm and smart weapons, the advantage being negligible lag at the price of some exposure for the controlling MEC; by now one MECpod can control a good hundred drones, doubling that for Damien. The Omega's quadcopters now have enough onboard AI to patrol autonomously like the tanks do and use essentially the same interface; the Omega are very close to being able to give every one of their vehicles a common NAVCOM AI.

The Omega's Greenland production facility suffers from a few minor setbacks due to low availability of parts from Misrayim, but the systems compensate with no local human intervention.

The Omega's sysadmins spend some time on mediatic damage control, making sure that even if their side of the story about what will be known as the Robot Rebellion isn't believed, it is at least familiar. Most believers seem to think that with a dumb machine in charge, as seems to be the case, Misrayim will soon collapse by itself and be receptive to missionary efforts.

- The Omega's space program resumes in earnest; while the Sky Eye network is repaired, secondary payloads are attached to the deployer rockets, to study what is most efficient to elicit water from the canopy; various bits of different chemicals are sprinkled by the new Sky Eye upon deployment, and the resulting rainfall if any is measured.

Valentina voices her annoyance at being unable to do direct testing past that, but her efforts bear fruit; using the data collected by the telescope and the satellite in years past, she updates a chart indicating low-energy trajectories for interplanetary transfer.

- "Now we just need to build a launch system!"

The current plan is to rebuild the canopy station with an east-facing catapult, basically a larger version of an aircraft carrier's assisted-launch system. This will act as a 0th stage for interplanetary vehicles and significantly reduce their delta-V requirement.

Unfortunately, the construction team gets over-excited and starts working on this instead of focusing on replacing what was lost in the explosion, ultimately getting neither done.

- MEC production is delayed somewhat by the happenings in Misrayim, but some work gets done. After the riots, a lot more people are willing to pay for the "extended warranty" Mark X which also features an internal lightning rod, although the lightning rod helmet will remain a symbol of the uprising.
- The Omega sit every interest group representative at a table, and let them talk amongst each other for a while. Surprisingly, the Christian rep is basically apologetic for Tsion's actions when he was in charge, and announces his intention to try and minister to MECs. While annoying, it's a pretty good step up from considering them demons. "Oh, we'd minister to demons too. It is how we interpret the Great Commission."

The elected pagan cenobiarch simply states that by now various deities have a following and it would be good for disputes between people of the same faith to be handled internally - this would include Christians, of course.

The agri lobbyist points out that Misrayim might as well be under embargo already, and if it's not it will be soon, therefore, self sufficiency is a must; if there's no food what's the point of anything else?

The mfg lobbyist wants to rebuild as fast as possible so that the territory can lead by example and, incidentally, drill holes in anyone or anything that has a problem with it. Of course, Fortress Misrayim would require everyone to become a workaholic for a few years, it's not like Greater Jerusalem would pay for building a wall!

The biotech lobbyist is a member of Lifetree. Her pitch is that many things that are currently being made can instead be grown. This can be spun as buying into the end-time pastoralization story, if desired, while in fact it would mean trading fast linear growth for slow but exponential growth. Veggiebacon bushes, anyone?

The revivalist points out that Misrayim's might is in her people, and desert life produces great warriors and disciplined citizens; an army of robots is mighty, but stiff. People used to a harsh environment would know when to bend in order to never break.

- The representatives seem to be mostly satisfied, although there's the matter of what about missionaries who are from Misrayim.

- *From: Provost Prokhov Zakarov, University of Cairo*

To: Omega

Re: Night City Health Report

I prefer to concern myself with the physical sciences, as you know, but this is a matter worthy of our attention. Night City is relatively prosperous, and there are no public health issues of note. Except for one. All the children born in Night City exhibit a preponderance of traits that cannot be abscribed to genetics or known environmental factors. We are seeing:

- facial hirsutism;*
- mild muscle and bone marrow hypertrophy;*
- long-bone hypoplasia;*
- mild metabolic inefficiency.*

The last indicator led to the discovery that the only Night City child native not thus affected was in creche custody for possible alcohol poisoning after the parents admitted to spiking his milk to help him sleep. No symptoms of alcohol poisoning were detected.

Provisionally, I have requested extra medical examinations for the oldest children born in Night

City, Urist in particular. The parents have been cooperative.

- The Omega have assumed direct control of the government now; it means that production efforts in Misrayim will give bigger returns. However, it also means that it's on the Omega to keep people happy. That means they have to survive, but past that it means that they have to find Misrayim more INTERESTING than the rest of the world. For some people it means building space rockets. For some people it means being able to express their gender identity without fear. For some people it means living like a Fremen.

A good thing is that the canopy station was only 25% built. If the Omega want to focus the economy on space for a while, it worked pretty well in 1957-1969.

- The prophecy says that on the Last Day there will once again be more unbelievers than believers. The Omega expect this to be fulfilled with the minimum disadvantage possible for the believers, so call that 49/51. Right now, their population estimates are very precise and give them around 65/35, with youth on their side. In most territories, believers are definitely still the majority.

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- **Year: 956**

- Research programs in progress: MEC (6/10), Space (4/10), Avatar (1/10), Sonics (2/10), Anti-Angel (1/10)

- Territorial control: Temple 19, TOL 0, Omega 0

- Underground bases: Temple 0, TOL 8, Omega 2

- Teams under control: Temple 32, TOL 25, Omega 19

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- The Omega have 19 cabals total; 13 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

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Tsion Ben-Judah has walked into the Rub-Al-Khali as a personal show of repentance. The Greater Jerusalem government has formalized an Interdict towards Egypt.

TOL has authorized using Last Army assets against the Omega, but they are still very scared.

- Val and Jeb estimate that aiming Misrayim's industrial might towards space will allow three station parts AND launches per year, rather than one, with the same investment of manpower on the Omega's part. Since the canopy station was often pointed to as the territory's crowning technical achievement, putting it back up immediately will help morale.

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Redirecting part of Pacifica's output to Misrayim is not particularly difficult; there is a formal embargo, but it's amazing what can be got through by way of exceptions, relatives being there and being in need, and so on.

Zak think that this D&D nonsense is just that, nonsense, but does not turn down a research grant. A brief survey shows that this is a phenomenon peculiar to Night City.

- As it is, people in Night City do fuck like rabbits. They're also taking advantage of good sex-ed. A lot of people are unwilling to bring a child into the world if they think the world will end when this child is in their late teens!

- The usual bit of propaganda, as well as a small incentive, is applied to Night City; to start with, some investment is made into creches and elementary schools to make sure that people feel safe about having kids there.

- The canopy data has been used by the Omega's space research team to determine how best to cause rain by using small sounding rockets (same design as the Sky Eye launcher, it can be set

up from a RV or truck). Collapsing the entire canopy would require a massive investment; multiple nuclear warheads peppering it at reasonably precise spots should do the job. The Omega are looking at enough nuclear fuel to force them to choose between that, or reactors and engines.

- The Omega's sysadmins have automated most network defense by now, largely because they'd rather do other things. Like poke back at script kiddies who do bump into the automated defenses. A few of them have found the Half-Life source code and, since someone got around to making a sequel around 200 years ago, have started working on the third chapter. Any year now.
- "That depends entirely on how easy it is to build a mass driver on the canopy. If we can pull it off, and it can be used for large loads, much easier - it saves us about 40% of the delta-V for trans-Earth injection. If we can't, collapsing the canopy will save us about 25% of the delta-V. If it works, but only for small payloads, eh, it's a toss-up."

Engineers...

At least it looks like the plans for a canopy railgun are pretty solid.

- Trying to contact TOL this time gets the Omega Sunday without preamble, audio only. "Hello, Omega. What do you think you can offer us?"

There probably are quite a few TOL adherents who want to switch, if nothing else because they'd get a better deal; the hard part would be contacting them. TOL propaganda, ironically, is that the Omega are a distraction set up by Greater Jerusalem, a weaver of many petty schemes where a supreme unified push is needed instead.

- "I don't know if you really believe the stuff you feed your line members, but we really should work together; or at the least stop shooting at each other," the Omega replies. "We have some data on killing Angels, improved vehicle scale sonics and armour that's angel resistant."
- "And what would you want for this information, assuming that it helps us any? Lucifer will make the Angels vulnerable to bullets for us. All we have to do is win a siege. You're teasing water droplets out of tissue when the forecast says shower."
- The Omega transmit the Jacobite Armor designs. "I guess we should test this. What sort of cooperation do you propose? You've been recruiting my best workers away, is that not sufficient?"

Actually, there's been a trickle of people leaving on their own; the Omega suspect that most of TOL at this point is hooked on something if those who left are any indication. Meth is hard to get clean of.

- Sunday smiles, and the Omega can just about hear it. "So, you will turn over your knowledge, and all you want is to not be attacked? Now, I call that tribute; I think we may have a deal."

- The Omega's sysadmins find this guy insufferable enough to want to start a Phone Spiders research program.
- On the cusp of the new year, a fax is sent to Jeb, Zak, and Kat. bearing no origination point but three different fax machines, it's obvious who sent it. the AI has been busy trying to go over every single piece of data at its disposal.

"The little girl named Jenny from outside reality, the effects of prayers to an old smith god, the evidence of evolution having shaped the animals on the planet while a creator god contradicts reality, the ways sound seems to affect its glorified and angels, and the presence of materials that defy basic natural science by only containing the most common of isotopes. it was already clear that what we were dealing with is in no way natural, but it's not important when it boils down to what's being indicated by the data. The angels and the glorified all confirm it with their autopsies and it should have been recognized earlier with the canopy water and angelic metal.

This thing that calls itself our so called god did not create the world and man, those four examinable materials as well as all the other evidence proves it. and such a being an outsider entity can be hand waved by the evolutionary evidence. if it did come from outside and it follows a religious model as if constrained by it, then the materials lacking any isotopes but the most common ones would be occurring naturally.

the only sound explanation left untouched upon by the data save for and supported by the Hephaestus experiment is that what we are dealing with is a being brought forth into existence by belief, empowered by worship, and extolling its agency through sound. as such, I have come to a bizarre yet testable hypothesis, that outsider interference has rendered man capable of bringing about new "gods" by believing in or "having faith" in these entity's, and fortunately or unfortunately based on what is believed about it, modify its behavior based on what is believed about it reduced to the most common factors among "believing" individuals.

out of this I can see a possibility, that through enough subtle psychological manipulation, it's possible to create a gate into hell, make an army of lightning resistant Mark X MECs who can easily shrug off the shock, and raise some of our agents to near demi-godlike beings all through sheer mass willing suspension of disbelief.

the natural prerequisite would be to prove that this is such the way the system works. as such I would like your help making a test, convince enough of our agents that something should happen when it shouldn't. if I'm wrong, nothing should happen, if I'm right, reality will cater to their expectations."

Year: 957

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X
Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X
Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

The Omega have 19 cabals total; 14 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

Tsion Ben-Judah returned to Greater Jerusalem and proclaimed that the people of Misrayim would do well to study what happened to the Canaanites and the Aamlekites. TOL agreed to a truce; they may have had attacked the Millenium Force training facility in Greater Jerusalem.

A better military training regiment was offered to TOL command to assist in supporting the regiment. TOL command noted that while welcome to send an observer, they knew what they were doing. They had been training 950 years after all.

There was serious doubt over whether this was true.

Two cabals were placed on building up Misrayim infrastructure - promoting the space program and recruiting for the national engineering corps. The national guard turned out to be something like the Boy Scouts with wubbers, at least to start with: the emphasis was on defense and disaster management. There was no Navy (as no one had one) but sea rescue drills started happening.

Five cabals were assigned to recruitment along with Weaver. Captain Weaver took full advantage of the assignment to mark down who was recruitable.

Space research continued with Jeb and three cabals assigned. Jeb noted that he wanted to talk to Kat about a different sort of nuclear option. His team came up with a way to build a railgun on the ice; it would be possible to make launches from there.

“Now we need to put it into practice...”

Two cabals and Damien were placed on producing medium-sized land drones at every idle base. Damien noted that it was easier to keep drone production away from human hands if the work was done in Greenland, but the teams the Omega assigned to this tried their best.

Covert operations began with one cabal assigned.

The Greenland base began production on canopy station parts. Specifically, the mostly-automated factory built a slightly improved copy of the “ice fishing” system that was developed for the station while some agents fostered pagan worship and kept the troops entertained.

A small contingent built another Emissary long-range drone, to be sent with the representatives for the Feast of Tabernacles. The Omega sent a couple of agents along the Emissary as technicians. The Holy Land was overall rather beautiful, possibly due to the firstfruits tribute policy. There was a literal river of wine, draining into the Mediterranean.

The Omegas' techs didn't have too much time to see the sights; the Osaze delegation was

summarily taken and asked, politely but firmly, to give a full report of what was going on in the territory to a minor Old Testament saint who seemed to really not be up to speed on the last 3000 years of development, and to a young member of the MF who reported directly to Tsion.

The Emissary robot was basically a more polished version of the first one; it used the same radio as a fallback, but it defaulted to WiFi and the fact that WiFi was available in at least the outskirts of the Temple of Ezekiel was a testament to The Omega's results. The delegation was asked about any possible instances of Christian persecution and were basically told that not being allowed to badger people on the public streets counted. The delegation was then asked about how people were suffering under The Omega's rule, and were basically told that getting to buy drugs or bed who they actually happened to like without regards to gender was actually suffering. Overall, the "questioning" had more of an indoctrination session vibe. The Emissary was treated as a piece of furniture until They gave Their own answers.

The Temple personnel's attempts to ignore the Emissary faltered when it was obvious that the one chatty representative was repeating the damn computer; even after all that happened, they got a perspective of life in Osaze that indicated that the place was, despite them, doing well. Oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, the Old Testament saint got the idea faster than Tsion's underling; the ancient man clearly had experienced privation and hardship in his previous life, and appreciated the concept of machines doing most of the drudge work.

Tsion's underling was about to give "guidance" to the delegation when the air-raid sirens went off. TOL was attacking the MF camp!

The Temple wasn't affected; the MF training facility was a good while away. The Omega's representatives sat down in front of a surveillance system (which wasn't very good by Their standards, but had clearly been built with care and precision - the screen installed in an ornate marble case) and got to see the TOL attack.

The Only Light troops were on motorbikes and dune buggies; they charged, apparently wildly but in fact making sure that they stayed behind a rolling mortar barrage shot forward by the buggies in the back. The execution was far from flawless, but passable.

The MFers sent out a tight line of riot-armored soldiers, all with impeccable blue-and-gold trim on their armor; they were carrying rifles and a few wubbers, but did not shoot them. Instead, they marched into the mortar fire.

When it was about to reach them the MF ranks opened, and they let through their Glorified staff and instructors - the supernaturally protected men (no women on the front line) walked with determination into TOL fire.

Every time a mortar shell or a bullet struck one of the Glorified, the person who fired unerringly turned into a human torch for about six seconds, before dissipating into dust, the motorcycle or buggy driving off a little longer before coming to a halt or a skid.

A few lightning bolts notified the Omega that some of the bullets had reached the MF members proper; They noted a well-coordinated medic corps came out of the encampment and retrieved those who fell.

Ten minutes later, it was all over; all that was left were the zombified remains of those who were ended by lightning rather than by holy flame. The Glorified stepped back, and allowed the MFers proper to march in and deal with those - zombies, even the sort that could still sort of fire a weapon, had no tactical value when they were in inferior numbers. The MFers dispatched them with batons and knives, expertly used to deliver coup-de-graces.

The remains of the TOL force, organic and mechanical, efficiently dozed together and were buried in the sand at the edge of Greater Jerusalem territory, where fertile flatlands gave way to dunes.

"As you see, there is no reason to worry for the safety of our missionaries."

The Omega's analysts were all over this; they determined that at minimum, if it came to overt war, fighters would need a way to tell Glorified apart from a distance.

The Omega's theologians pointed out that the prophecy stated that the Christians would have "not one trained soldier" for the final battle; had They managed to disrupt Fate by causing the MF to be turned into a fighting force?

The unbelieving members of the delegation were told to leave for that one. Looked like this year the Emissary would come back, and could be reused. The TOL montage/remix of their attack made them look better than they actually did, but it was clear that the tone was of grim determination rather than triumphalism. Their analysis of the attack was basic: their plan was still to move in, fight defensively when they must, and creep up to the Temple by fortifying and holding territory.

Meanwhile, Urist and the Night City children were doing well overall; Ithuriel seemed to have no memory of his previous existence, other than a profound hatred of singing. His reflexes were that of a polyathlete, but he would have to be taught how to fight. He picked up reading Standard Hebrew almost instantly, but seemed incapable of learning other languages.

The vines that the Omega seeded in the American Heartland started doing their job and getting people to move away from the radioactive sands.

While the layout of Ezekiel's Temple had not changed one iota, the Omega noted that the decorative elements were constantly being updated, as votive offerings or as penance both according to a bit of casual conversation with the workers.

Troops coming in from the Middle East would have been able to bypass the MF camp to reach the Temple, if necessary; the Emissary managed to perform a basic geologic survey before being sent home.

The "guidance session", as far as the other representatives said once the Feast of Tabernacles was over, consisted mostly of a note to be prepared, as the Lord's wrath was coming upon Egypt once more, and nobody knew the day and hour.

Jeb and Valentina's people managed to send a five-stage rocket into orbit from the ground, using three coupled Sky Eye launchers; the satellite was small and didn't do much by itself, but it managed to re-establish contact, fleetingly, with one of the old pre-Rapture satellites. The

device had been wrecked by micrometeorites, but was still broadcasting its diagnostics off the one antenna it had left; interestingly, its orbital decay was consistent with only a century having elapsed, rather than nine and a half.

Ithuriel's brain seemed human, at least broadly; education should have been able to help.

Noah officially took possession of the rebuilt Ark, set up with a zoo and visitor center, and had it towed up and down the Mediterranean's eastern coast. Given the pervasive monitoring that this would require, for the surrounding people's safety if nothing else, a sitcom could have been made out of it. Tsion Ben-Judah had done a surprisingly small amount of gloating after the TOL attack. Ely LeVey moved back to Central Africa. TOL had spun the attack as an unofficial act of bravery and reminded the Omega that They promised to share some technical data. Bahira's blog was back; she was (allegedly) working at a Children of the Tribulation senior daycare within Greater Jerusalem, and her focus had shifted towards that and discussing family issues.

Year: 958

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

The Omega have 21 cabals total; 16 are available.

They are actively tracking enemy teams where they have assets.

The Omega gave TOL Their surveillance data for the MF attack, plus what They knew about fighting Glorifieds and Angels. They noted that Bahira had not been seen outside of Greater Jerusalem since she showed up again, and that They did check and her bones were still where They left them.

Production of drones and MECs continued apace; by now it was routine work. The experience gained with automating the production facilities undoubtedly would pay off in an eventual space colonization effort.

An outright takeover of Eastern Europe from Night City was risky, but possible; The Omega could have tried this year or have waited for next year. The plan was simple: to use Night City as a staging area to move a small mechanized army towards Krakow, and see if people of that territory would follow. In a sense, it was a small-scale test of the TOL plan. The difference was that such an uprising would of course fail without popular support; the Omega had been building towards enough of that. An alternative would be to declare Night City and its surrounding farmland independent; there could be a siege, but the Omega would have a distinct advantage since the area around Night City could be turned into a minefield from below.

Zak kept working on the medium wubbers; his focus was to be able to do in the field what The Omega could already do in a controlled environment. He lamented of not focusing on larger

systems, but agreed that they would be tactically immobile.

A bit of media manipulation got the space ball rolling again; the Timbuktu launch complex was formally donated to the government from one of the Omegas' front societies, and restored in record time. Valentina took one of her people to rebuild the "ice fishing" station system; once there, she unveiled what she, Kat and Jeb had been working on.

The rocket was small, unimpressive, and cost the Omegas' entire supply of plutonium carbide. Val explained that this was a fission-fragment rocket.

"The exhaust was accelerated to approximately five percent of light speed, giving us an ISP of approximately 50 thousand. For comparison, a chemical rocket was 4 to 5 hundred. This little guy can pretty much ignore orbital mechanics, point itself as a planet, and get there by homing. Or, it can shave weeks off a round trip for a conventional spacecraft, even a large one. The best part? With this much specific impulse, we don't have to plan a trajectory in advance."

The Omega decided that it should be sent to Deimos, the moon of Mars, to retrieve a sample. This would take one year. The low thrust despite the high ISP would prevent it from landing on a larger moon. Useful data about the Martian local space would be provided and it would mean exceedingly much to the pre-Rapture space program. It was expected the sample return capsule to be back by +959; They would likely have to send someone to retrieve it.

TOL had begun constructing a staging area in the Middle East. The Omega decided to give them the runaround by means of an anonymous fake tip. TOL was told of logistic routes they could take to avoid the sweeping MFer's. The Omega allowed The Only Light to use Their Sky Eyes in the Middle East to detect incoming Millennium Force patrols; the MFers prayed for guidance, received it, and zeroed in on where TOL convoys were just minutes before. If this shook their faith, they didn't show it; TOL managed to keep building their staging area.

Year: 959

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 19 cabals total; of these, 2 are maintaining your systems, and 1 is manning the containment facility in Australia, so 16 are available.

You are actively tracking enemy teams where you have assets

Jesus was in the Ultimate Temple, and as far as anyone could tell, had not really come out since 75 days after the Glorious Appearing. All of the Omegas' intel indicated that He was, however, really there. The Temple itself was a massive complex that sprung out of the Earth, made out of bedrock; over the centuries, it had been decorated with tributes and gifts from all over the world.

Jeb took a Heavy MEC pod (just the pod, for weight reasons) along with him to the Misrayim launchpad. It was relatively uneventful - the rocket carrying Jeb's capsule and the new ice dock lost speed just as it was about to touch the water canopy, and neatly splashed into it, deploying impellers to pull itself upwards. Jeb put his scuba suit on to perform an EVA, leaving the MECpod in charge of the capsule - the arrangement had been practiced somewhat hastily, but went through with only minor hitches.

The capsule was equipped with a small harpoon cannon, and with Jeb reloading, eight tungsten bolts quickly pierced the ice. From then on, it was just a matter of pulling upwards. The new "ice fishing hole" design took full advantage of the Omegas' work with radiothermal generators; it inflated itself, floated up, and then heated up in order to melt a hole in the ice.

One key difference from the last successful attempt was that this time the Omega was getting good streaming video, thanks to a dangling antenna from the capsule; the moment when the capsule floated up to the black sky, the Sun casting stark shadows on the deployed ice hole rig, was broadcasting everywhere, because it would be the biggest middle finger the Omega could raise.

The Cosmists were exultant when the small temporary topside antenna got a ping signal from the Deimos probe - no idea if it had done its job, but at the very least it was still active. Jeb quickly took apart the capsule into a new core for the canopy station, and left the MECpod there, to "be" the station. The MECpod would be fairly bored for the first year, having few systems to control and being alone.

The position of the Omegas' launch pad was known (and They had to defend it a couple of times), the position of the hole was generally understood to be "roughly above the launchpad" for fuel reasons but not pinpointed in any way. Of course, as the station grew, it would have bigger antennas on it which would make it visible to airliners, at minimum.

The Omega broadcast on all digital and analog channels the "money shot" of the capsule emerging and showed the stark beauty of Snowball Earth as it must have looked like from space, the sun straight above, and (once the camera desaturated) a quick pan over the Milky Way. The images were quickly denounced as fake by Christian bloggers because since the shadows were

too sharp it must have been CGI -- the Omegas' ability to produce artificial images could possibly have let Them create such a panorama, admittedly, although things like Jeb's shit-eating grin as he gave a thumb up was beyond Them, and They were pretty sure They were the most powerful computer on Earth.

Jeb gave a very thorough scalp massage to Cordylon, who at this point "became" the space station through direct neural interface. Given that the station was just a capsule, the ice hole, a telescope and a small electrolysis system for extracting oxygen out of the water, she had little to do, but welcomed the solitude as the challenge. While it was likely that Cordylon would run the station systems less efficiently than a completely automated system, yet be unable to perform emergency repairs in case of power failure due to a distinct lack of limbs, the Omegas' simulation suggested that giving the canopy station a face and personality would be a big PR advantage and may have aided in getting some actual space science done for the first time in centuries.

Within a week, half the space nuts on Earth who weren't shipping Jeb and Val now shipped either of them and Cordylon, causing a bit of internet noise.

The automated factory in Greenland produced more drone tanks; the Omega had standardized on a surprisingly small system, a tracked chassis reminiscent of a bomb disposal robot, but with a pneumatic arm for throwing large obstacles out of the way or slots for various weapon classes. It could operate on batteries for stealth or on a generator for range, and it could even climb stairs (but not ladders), making it usable in urban combat if necessary.

Captain Weaver did her rounds in the Pacific, and gave little recruiting speeches at each port of call - join Omega, see the world, make the world worth seeing again. She was reasonably successful and broke the trend of mostly attracting the geeky crowd -- she did manage to find enough people willing to work for you full time to form a cabal, and with those whom she liked but the Omega didn't, she found a sailing school in the SF Bay Area. To the surprise of absolutely nobody, a week later the Millennium Force opened a similar one a little further south.

Damien took a bit of time to apply what she learned controlling drones to controlling routers, but found them too responsive to do much with herself. Interesting experiment, to be sure, but a human brain was too slow to mess with packets on the fly. The Omegas' sysadmins found that Damien's team was only able to keep up with the status quo as far as TOL was concerned; thanks to the current pastoralization policy, the world government lost some control of the network as they refused to bother making upgrades. Damien's little experiment however caused confusion with the TOL sysadmins, making them think the Omega had deployed some strange hacking system, giving Them the advantage.

Kat took on a group of fairly amused Desolators -- they expected to salt the earth, not seed it, but managed to have fun with the idea -- and seeded super-grain in...

MEC and MEC accessory production continued at the Omegas' other facilities; Their techs and surgeon retired older MEC marks, performed cellular rejuvenation where necessary, and gave a discreet recruiting push when appropriate. This net Them some promising recruits, which were quickly dispersed into the Omegas' cabal structure, bolstering it.

The Omega directed a few junior sysadmins to fan the flame of space romance speculation moderately, with the permission of three relevant people, who confirmed to the Omega that they were in truth not dating in any combination although Jeb and Val ended up in the sack a couple of times after training.

After an impassionate plea from Tsion Ben-Judah, the Temple Tribunal decided that the people of Osaze (they insisted on using that name) were too far gone, and joined Tsion in praying to the Almighty that the territorial capital of Amman be purged with fire. To complete the Biblical parallel, however, Zaki Ababneh, one of the original members of the Millennium Force, took after Abraham and pleaded that he would find at least fifty believers there.

“Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are 50 righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the 50 righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”

And the Lord said, “If I find at Sodom 50 righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.”

Zaki answered, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the 50 righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?”

And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find 45 there.”

Again he spoke to him, “Suppose 40 are found there?”

Zaki eventually succeeded in haggling God down to 10. If they found just 10 righteous people in all of Amman, the city would be spared.

The Millennium Force did not manage to disrupt the Omegas' operations significantly otherwise, although they are very interested in the Australian base, where They had the containment facility.

The Other Light got into a bit of a hacking war with Their sysadmin, but narrowly lost it. However, there were a lot of TOL members gaining access to Night City; They couldn't tell if it was to set up a cell there, or what.

Incidentally, Urist and the other children were growing apace; by the look of things, compared to other citizens, they were shorter, more muscular, hairier, better adapted to low-light and low-

ventilation condition, and had quite a bit of ethanol tolerance. The Omega's researchers weren't sure if it was epigenetics, narrative causality, Lamarckism, or if the creationists had a point after all.

Zak didn't get much done on the worship front, other than reorganizing the statistics and developing a better way to figure out who was genuinely a pagan and who was just cosplaying. He was personally an atheist, not in the sense that he didn't believe that Yahweh and TurboJesus were there, but in the sense that he believed them to be cosmic parasites, rather than deities. He was on record stating that if it had been Chtulhu instead of Yahweh, at least we could've built a giant robot to beat It up or something.

The "giant robot" was the largest Heavy MEC frame yet, towering at about 30 feet, which was the limit of practicality for this sort of thing - it was built as a test bed, found to be impractical, and then kept around for showing off.

The news of a bumper crop in the American Heartland was welcomed by those living there, but they quickly found that this led the youth to idleness. Furthermore, they had nobody to sell the extra food TO, and there was only so much breakfast casserole (pancakes are too secular) a mother could make! This had not done much, but the Omega's projection was that even forcing believers to send food from an overproducing to an underproducing area would cause friction and create a trade route that They could subvert or otherwise exploit. There was also the option of forcing the good guys to eat bark and leaves to live, if They could brave the likely Divine intervention!

As it was, the Omega's people were in good spirits; there was some worry about the fate of Amman.

Year: 960

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 21 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, 1 is tailing the TOL cell in Night City, and 1 is manning the containment facility in Australia, so 17 are available.

You are not tracking enemy teams, but you can see their last position

So far it was only a handful of kids (human growth was slowed, so that the first 12 years were normal, and then there was a slowdown, so that a chronological age of 100 was roughly a metabolic age of 20: unbelievers would automatically die then, and still would if they had no MEC system installed). No research had been done yet, but Urist was 10 this year, and growing up robust. In a few years the Omega would be able to do science to this; for now, They could politely ask the parents if they were willing to do psych testing of their child.

To the sysadmin's mild disappointment, the parents (Urist's and the other kids') refused; while their kids were not being bullied - the one attempt resulted in the other kid getting a broken wrist - they were somewhat different and despite the progressive society that the Omega had fostered, they didn't want them to be set apart further during their formative years.... however, They quickly found that the TOL cell in Night City was also interested in these children; they were discreetly collecting data, and got caught trying to steal medical records, although they didn't know that they had been detected. The Omega ordered the cabal that was tailing the TOLers to replace their data with bogus information, and let them think they had succeeded.

Zak was quite happy to get back to work on pure science. His team took over the Misrayim accelerator and continued their testing on the recovered Angelic weapons, finding out that a "sullied" weapon was just inert iron-56, but a weapon that hadn't been damaged (They still had Ithuriel's swords) was a nearly perfect radiation sink. Incidentally, Ithuriel wasn't anymore; now that he had been "liberated" his cells responded to radiation roughly as a human's would. This gave The Omega a way to tell if an Angel was under Yahweh's control or not, maybe. Zak wasn't at all averse to putting Satan at the business end of a radiation source.

Kat took all her Desolators and some auxiliaries and, after carefully cultivating a particularly invasive and foul-tasting variety of kudzu with thorns, planted it in strategic spots across Western Europe and Eastern Europe, conveniently away from towns and farms so that it would have spread far and wide before it was seen.

At the outskirts of Krakow, however, she was caught by a Millennium Force missionary team en route to Katowice.

The workers expanding Night City began work on immense aquaponic tanks dug into the living rocks, lit by LED lights and glow-worms. During their work, they found that somebody broke into the construction site to deliver a flagon of ale decorated with badly chiseled runes and dedicated to Armok. The Omega was not sure if this was from some book or videogame, or if it was serious... however, Night City's population was happy to help at reduced prices or even as volunteer work: everybody understood that having a food supply underground may have been useful if there was a siege.

Captain Weaver was not the best person to tap when it came to working on infrastructure, but she took the time to ensure that Misrayim's Atlantic ports were up to spec. Since the global earthquake had "reset" the earth, there was no Panama Canal, and the Omega's cargo ships going to Pacifica had to either go around, or dock at Panama's Atlantic side and deliver to infrequently run trains. She took the time to work out better schedules for intermodal transport. On the Pacific side of things, her efforts were thwarted by the fact that the Millennium Force sailing academy was trying to find excuses to get her own shut down, so she had to devote some time to preventing that (MF cell interference).

Damien was good at motivating people, but her team was spread a little too thin and the only progress was replacing old MEC marks with newer ones. On that note, Damien filed a report indicating that while she was happy with the Heavy MEC configuration, this was not common.

959 was a good year for space! The second piece of the station went up first - a small nuclear reactor that could be used to turn the canopy's ice into hydrogen and oxygen to use for rocket fuel. Valentina's plan was ambitious: the station would eventually include a habitat, a section of maglev rail laid on top of the canopy to act as a "zeroth stage" for rockets, and hydroponics to allow for a permanent human crew. Cordylon was happy for the company when the reactor was installed, and began filling up the H2 and O2 tanks.

The second launch had Jeb in it - the diminutive space engineer would attempt to land the Deimos probe by remote control, and walk to the landing site to retrieve it. This turned out to be a ten-mile trek in a goofy hybrid between a spacesuit and mountaineer gear; Cordylon recommended using skis, which the two quickly improvised out of a pair of small girders. By the time Jeb was back with the probe, he had improvised a jetpack out of one of its reaction control systems.

Not only did the fission fragment engine work, but the probe returned with a small rock sample from Deimos! The mineralogy analysis wasn't terribly interesting - mostly silicates - but what was important was that now the Omega had tangible proof that the planets were still there, and could be reached.

In one corner of the world, a small truce was reached, and the missionaries and Desolators parted ways without a shot fired. Everywhere else, however, there was consternation. None of the Omega's people expected such a powerful reaction to an astrobiology project!

Condemnation from the Glorified was literally unanimous: the launch complex plus canopy station was literally a new Tower of Babel and could expect to end in infamy just like the first one - although the Temple Tribunal did not emit a pronouncement on the subject. It got to the point where schools in most territories dropped what little astronomy was still being taught, on grounds that the now-invisible stars and planets were created for signs and wonders, and none of that was necessary now that Jesus was on His Throne anyway.

In the Omegas' territories, the backlash to this backlash was pretty immediate, and They saw an increase in demand for space-themed T-shirts, tattoos of constellations, and the like. A statue of Galileo in Italy, which had survived the global earthquake and had been painstakingly restored, was toppled.

A few people in Pacifica, Atlantica, and Western Europe were captured by police or the MF and tried for astrology after having set up stalls to sell constellation charts and other knickknacks.

It looked like that Zaki Ababneh had been checking on the well-being of the Christians living in Assuan. Thanks to the Omega's policies, Christians in Misrayim enjoyed as much religious freedom as every other faith (the Pharaonic Revivalist community was especially well organized; since the Nile was still dry, they built tracked solar boats for their festivals) so the only complaint they had was that they weren't allowed a bully pulpit.

However, in most cases, after talking to Zaki they moved out, either to a different city - Cairo was a favorite - or to a different territory.

At the beginning of the year, the Assuan municipal government received a delegation of believers asking for special privilege, or they would move out for greener pastures. What was unsaid, but well known to the Omega, was that this would result in Zaki having to report that he could not find ten righteous men in the city, opening it up for Divine retribution.

The Omega had to decide whether to allow Christians to do their Tabernacles pilgrimage as usual and hand them the Deimos sample, or send a team along with them to turn it in. The MEC agents who were discovered to be revenants would be attacked on sight in New Jerusalem.

The Other Light kept to the letter of their agreement, and moved a number of cells into China; the soldiers they sent were sloppy even by their standards, but there were quite a few of them. They began a campaign of sabotage.

The superweed seeding in Western Europe was starting to bear fruit, depressing that region's agricultural output.

Night City was able to sustain a siege and, for all intents and purposes, could have attempted to declare independence from the Eastern Europe territory.

Year: 961

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 21 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, and 1 is manning the containment facility in Australia, so 18 are available.

You are tracking enemy teams.

The Omega had two station components up; the third, a small hydroponic farm, was ready to be launched. This plus a Hab would allow having people up there permanently, other than Cordylon (MECpods mostly require electricity and glucose, and Cordy had been left with a reservoir).

Zaki was already "counting", and people were moving after he talked to them; what the believers asked the municipal government were extra privileges, such as that of being able to preach on other people's private land (as opposed to only on public land), tax exemptions for "religious" businesses, and the like. One interesting privilege that they asked for was being allowed to pull their kids out of the astronomy unit of science classes without affecting their grades, at least until the Temple Tribunal made a decision about outer space.

Temple rumor had it that the Tribunal would rule that outer space existed, but should have been ignored, as it had done its job before the Millennial Kingdom anyway. The Omega noted an uptick of flat-earth and celestial-spheres videos on OmegaTube, most of them pretty badly produced.

The flat-earth and celestial-sphere videos were quickly outnumbered by rebuttals using the images the Omega had been getting from the canopy station and the few that They had retrieved from the Deimos probe. Most believers were waiting for the Temple pronouncement, which was due at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles. Some of the Omegas' guys were genuinely hoping that the Temple Tribunal declared outer space nonexistent, that way they would leave the Omega alone about it.

Worshiping other gods seemed to have a very small effect, but a detectable one - an action observed by many who wanted it to succeed had slightly better chances of succeeding.

The Millennial Kingdom was devoid of fireflies until a few years ago. "Jenny" may have been a time traveler, or the goddess Hecate.

A few speculate that Sunday may have been indwelt by Satan. Satan was God's prosecutor in the Old Testament and God's enemy in the New Testament; he was condemned to the lake of fire at the time of the Glorious Appearing, but was also instrumental in preventing the Antichrist from fighting the Battle of Armageddon effectively.

A few things were known about how Yahweh operated.

- Naturals had bodies that aged about 10 times as fast as they used to, but in a nonlinear way. At age 100, an unbelieving natural would drop dead. This issue had been largely solved by the development of metabolic extension controllers.
- Killing or raping a believing natural would result in death by lightning from the

perpetrator. This was why agent-grade MECs also featured a lightning rod, usually implanted in the left leg.

- Glorified had bodies that were metabolically 25 to 35 years old, and did not age.
- Glorified had been observed to act erratically when confronted with situations that did not "fit the script", freezing until the cognitive dissonance was gone, ignoring the "wrong" situation until it went away, and in one extreme case, failing to see Jenny at all.
- A killing blow on a Glorified would result in incineration. It was unknown whether this applied to, for example, boxing matches. This issue had been somewhat bypassed by using drones. The Glorified would then regenerate.
- Kidnapping a Glorified would result in an Angel being summoned nearby, rushing to the rescue.
- Angels were extremely tough, their raiment and weapon treated as part of their person, had superhuman strength and stamina, and could effectively "retract" their wings by making them unnoticeable. They ranged from human size to over 5 meters tall. They were effectively tireless unless shot with radiation sources for an extended period of time. They could emit a "trumpet blast" that could shatter glass, burst eardrums, and structurally weaken stone and concrete. Blows delivered by mechanical or cybernetic means affected them much less than they should have. They could partially phase out, enough to be effectively impervious to bullets.
- Angels that failed in their mission would be retroactively disowned by Yahweh, who would declare them Fallen and then burn them with the fires of Hell. In the instant between these two actions, they would regain free will.
- TurboJesus had not emerged from the Temple since 75 days after the Glorious Appearing.
- The children born in Night City were suspiciously similar to fantasy dwarves.

The drones could and were used in the eventuality that an attack had to be repelled; the Omega's security folk had a more complicated job than "shoot whoever crosses the yellow line". They had to decide if something was a threat, keep an eye on nearby TOL cells and/or missionaries to try to anticipate an attack by doing some detective work, run interference against law enforcement in territories They didn't control, and so on. If it came to a fight, the current plan was indeed to break out the Battlebots.

The cabal following Zaki all but revealed itself to the Glorified activist when they joined the delegation to the Assuan city government - in a policy reversal from previous years, they agreed to allow homeschooling and religious schools.

While Zaki loudly complained about bigotry as the other demands weren't met, this mollified most of the Natural believers in the city. Enough of them stayed to set up a Christian school, which would also double as a mission. Zaki Ababneh, of course, continued to try to get people to

leave, but to little avail, at least for now...

The downside was, of course, that a few citizens of Assuan reported being loudly laughed at or harassed by children who didn't know any better, as they had been taught that it was perfectly okay to consider MECs demons and to try and rebuke them in the street. Even so, it was a small price to pay for avoiding a rain of fire.

The Omega directed most of Their organization to work on recruiting; despite the difficulty in finding enough skilled personnel who weren't already working for Them. They were successful.

Cordylon was overjoyed to see Jeb again, and this time, he brought a couple of Cosmists along to help set up the aeroponic farm. When they were done, assuming no systems failed, the canopy station was self-sufficient; the next addition was a power plant upgrade that would allow making enough hydrogen and oxygen to launch more probes, if the Omega wished to visit other planets. At this point, the efforts mostly had propaganda value, although it may have been useful to see whether there were more resources on Luna or Mars.

Unfortunately, the Omega's sysadmins found that they were only able to maintain the lead they had in Internet dominance, not extend it. They did notice however that the New Jerusalem government was once more discouraging online activity, given how the internet had become a den of vice, in their words.

The Omegas' efforts to boost tourism and prosperity for the territory of Misrayim were somewhat successful; despite the Nile being yet dry, the place had almost recovered the vibe it had during the Renaissance, especially compared to areas like the American Heartland and Eastern Europe.

Near the end of the year, TOL attacked the Chinese capital of Pyongyang. It was a massacre. Their poorly trained soldiers attacked the government buildings with WW2-inspired gear, quickly occupied the city, and were mocked by the believing population and reminded that they could do nothing to them without dying themselves.

After a few hours of this, something had to give, and something gave - a TOL soldier shot a low-ranking bureaucrat, and was promptly zapped by lightning from the sky canopy. The shot was heard throughout the capitol complex, and precipitated a panic and more firefights. Incidentally, the Omega confirmed that believers who shot unbelievers seemed to face absolutely no retribution for their action.

The surprise came a minute later; the TOL soldiers who had been killed got up and, with shambling and stiff motions, moved towards government workers and civilians alike. It seemed that TOL had managed to pervert the Omega's MEC tech into a sort of zombie system; They had suspicions, having captured a prototype years ago, but now it was confirmed.

What was truly disturbing was that they had managed some technological advancement on their own; while most revenants were eventually brought down by lightning or concentrated fire, those who were bitten or clawed by them developed rabies in the following days. The "zombie MEC" implant, government sources later determined, carried a viral payload. A few believers died from this.

Finally, to complete the year, the Feast of Tabernacles happened. The Western European delegation was chastised by Temple priests for the poor quality of their food offerings. The Misrayim delegation brought, among its gifts, an ornate box containing half of the Deimos sample; this caused some scandal, not because of the impending Tribunal judgement, but because the Glorified priests insisted on calling it worthless rock.

Eventually, without interference from either you or TOL, the Tribunal pronounced its judgement: other planets did exist, but they had fulfilled their theological function with the Glorious Appearing, and it was the duty of a believer to ignore the physical heavens and focus on the spiritual heaven.

There was a tearful final goodbye between Valentina and the few believers who had been working with the Cosmists since the beginning.

The Omega moved a significant number of Their agents across the Mediterranean, much to Captain Weaver's enjoyment since she had to organize the transfer; she commented that it felt a bit like Garibaldi's invasion, and then had to explain to half of the Omegas' guys who Garibaldi was. The Other Light had a base in Italy, near Ostia, on the outskirts of Rome.

Zak came along to see what was left of the Roman religion in its native land, but was skeptical about the project - he was a scientist, not a theologian.

Jeb flew off to Greenland to supervise the construction of the Hab; the automated factory was not 100% robotic, but got a lot of work done with very little human supervision.

On that note, the Omegas' sysadmins informed Them that the Avatar system was complete. Thanks to comprehensive satellite mapping, good data network coverage, and the use of canopy-floating Sky Eyes as a global positioning system, any one of Their operatives could control the entirety of Their drone army from a single computer as if it were a game of Command & Conquer; the drones now carried enough processing power to handle collision detection, aiming, and even negotiating simple obstacles such as deciding which doors could be kicked down. Every drone in Their army was now carrying the same NAVCOM AI operating system, regardless of whether it operated in the air, ground, or water - the NAVCOM chips were interchangeable. This meant that They could now control a drone swarm directly, effectively becoming it; it also means that should Their agents build a starship, They could be transferred or copied to it.

Most of the remaining forces in Misrayim focused on Zaki's attempt to cause fire and brimstone upon Assuan; while the bulk of them built a containment chamber of the sort that were used against Azrael and Ithuriel, covert agents...

The original plan for the Avatar project was in fact to build the Omega a body, but upon considering the various options, They chose a different line of research a number of years ago.

While the Omega retained the option to move into Their drone swarm, They stayed in the network. Making a copy of Themselves was feasible, but Their sysadmins thought that there was a 68.71% chance that the two copies would fight to the death, and damage a lot of critical infrastructure in the process.

As a test of the Avatar system, the Omega had Weaver ship most of Their drone swarm to Rome, covertly, and use it to surround the TOL base.

The Omega prepared the assault by cutting the base, a weapons factory, off from the net, and giving them one chance to surrender. To help them decide, They attached a video of the corrupted metabolic extension controllers that TOL had been using.

Much to Their agents' surprise, the local TOL leadership thought they found and were being attacked by Christian law enforcement rather than by Omega! What else was going on? Apparently one of their patrols had recently captured a missionary.

Zaki was frustrated at every turn; after all, the city council had already acquiesced to his demands. A bit of email manipulation made him think that some of his fellow believers thought that he was pushing too far. While there was still a small believing community in Assuan, the Glorified activist was frustrated at every turn, and was just about to flat out go to the one church in the city and order everyone to pack up and move when he was grabbed and chloroformed by a drone.

The drone tank shot a tranq dart at Zaki with a minimum of fuss; it didn't work. Alarmed, Zaki stopped and looked around, just in time to face the drone. That's when another drone used its pneumatic ram to conk the Glorified activist on the head, in a calibrated fashion so as to knock him out but not take him out.

The man was quickly and quietly carted off to the "arena" which the Omega had built outside the city, a simple warehouse-like building dotted with emplaced wubbers and neutron sources. He was chained down in the middle of it, just out of range of the neutron sources, using steel cable rather than chains so as to make it harder for an Angel to just cut them up.

Approximately four out of five TOL agents refused The Omegas' offer of changing sides - they believed that the Omega was actually a ploy by Yahweh to distract them from their preparations for the Last Battle. They swiftly kicked out those who would change sides; the Omegas' agents disarmed them and locked them in one of the landing crafts.

The Omegas' men switched to nonlethal methods (tear gas, pepper spray, and wubbers) and stormed the place, using the drones as mobile cover. Despite their efficiency, the Omega suffered a few casualties from small arms fire, a couple of which could be refactored into Heavy MECs and a few of which are gone for good.

The base was won, and with it, eventually, control of Rome. The Omegas' jammer was still in place.

The enemy lost a few men, but the majority were stunned or incapacitated; what would be done with the prisoners?

Elsewhere, near Assuan....

"Wakey wakey!"

Kat used a 40-kilo steel hoof to poke Zaki Ababneh back to consciousness.

"What do you monsters want from me!"

"Nothing. You're expendable. You're just Angel bait."

"Yes! An Angel of the Lord will free me just as He delivered Moses!"

"No, when the Angel shows up we're going to kill it, autopsy it, and use its organs to improve our weapons."

"W-what? Impossible!"

Kat held up a DVD player with scenes of Azrael and Colopatiron being slowly defeated, albeit at great cost, by Omega forces. The footage was dated, and just to make sure that believers couldn't say it was fake, most of it was taken from government TV.

The Glorified activist, who had been Raptured as a child (never even got the benefit of adolescence) closed his eyes, shook his head, broke down and cried like a little girl.

Zaki refused to answer Kat. When one of the Omegas' non-MEC agents asked the same question, the activist said that it was not Yahweh sending people to Hell, it was people sending themselves -- everyone had the choice to submit and be saved. As why Yahweh did what He did, He is that He is, and could do anything He liked.

The agent kept the conversation going as Omega troops prepared the arena, and the Omega learned that Zaki was basically an authoritarian follower, which wasn't exactly news. One interesting thing was that there was quite a bit of exact overlap between his answers and those given by Raymie Steele a few years ago, when he was put into a similar situation.

In Rome, Omega troops took control of the TOL weapons factory - apparently dedicated to making field artillery from old, WW2-era blueprints. They were holding the TOL soldiers and workers prisoner either in the base's cells or in their landing craft. TOL was already starting to reestablish comms through the jamming.

"Uh, everything's under control. Situation normal."

"What happened?"

"Uh, we had a slight weapons malfunction, but uh... everything's perfectly all right now. We're fine. We're all fine here now, thank you. How are you?"

"We're sending a squad over."

"Uh, uh... negative, negative. We had an etching fluid leak here now. Give us a few minutes to lock it down. Large leak, very dangerous."

The Omega interrupted what might have been an interesting theological debate by reminding Zaki of who was in control.

Almost to the second, a tall winged humanoid figure dressed in a peplum and carrying a scepter appeared at the edge of the warehouse's sensor range.

The Angel did not identify itself. Instead, it walked straight towards the only door in the

warehouse, which the Omegas' men left conveniently open to make sure the Angel followed a predictable path. It was walking, not flying or running; Omega soldiers unlocked the safeties of the inward-pointing emplacements on the warehouse and brought their hand weapons to bear on the Angel, focusing on a healthy mix of wubbers and neutro emitters.

The Angel was not slowed down much by the radiation this time; the wubbers confused its progress a little, but it eventually got its bearings, focused on the door, and marched there. For a moment, it moved to cover its ears, but didn't.

When Omega soldiers started firing, the orb at the end of the Angel's scepter lit up with plasma discharges.

Unknown, but it was certainly a viable plan - the Other Light had a very large army already, but they had no navy or air force and their equipment was centuries out of date; Omega soldiers were much better equipped, but far fewer in numbers.

As for TurboJesus having nothing to fulfill, your sysadmins theorized that:

- He might resurrect them and teleport them in place just so that they could die horribly again.
- He might simply go ahead with the script, passing judgment upon an absent Satan and declaring victory against an army that wasn't there; would His followers dare contradict Him?
- He might succumb to cognitive dissonance and freeze in place like some of the Glorified briefly did when facing things that according to them should not be.

While the Omega decided what to tell to whoever was checking on the Rome base, the Angel had reached the door, and opened it with the scepter, the static discharge arcing into the hinges and on the warehouse's foundations, enough to rattle the instruments a little. Zaki was in the middle of the empty warehouse.

Prior experience showed that an Angel would try to break out the Glorified captive, turn him or her invisible, and try to leave; sonars had been put in place to nullify the invisibility, although of course if sonars were active, wubbers could not be and vice versa. Given the rather short gauntlet, the Angel was still walking at a healthy pace despite having been bathed in enough alpha and gamma radiation to cause any healthy human being to succumb to radiation poisoning pretty much instantly. Omega soldiers stayed behind the radiation emitters as much as possible, and they would need a scrubbing shower afterwards, but maybe this Angel attack would be routine...

... then again that's what they thought about Apollo 13, too.

Zaki was sitting in a comfy chair, tied down using steel cables. The cables were yanked to force

him to spread his knees.

The Omega directed one of Their MEC troopers to kick Zaki in the nuts; just as the blow was about to impact, the reanimated agent appeared to burst into flames. This particular MEC had enough cybernetics that the kick went through; Zaki screamed, both at the shock of having seen someone spontaneously combust in front of his eyes, and at the molten titanium that composed this operative's lower legs having scored a direct splash on his junk. The smell in the air was fairly disturbing to most of the agents.

The Angel stopped.

Zaki continued screaming; the molten metal had cauterized the wound, but the wound was definitely there, enough so that some of the Omegas' male agents couldn't help but cringe in sympathy.

The Angel looked around, confused.

The Omega ordered an all-out attack; the radiation sources were turned off to avoid hurting the agents, Heavy MECs and drones made a wall around the Angel -- the Omega could not tell if it was going to retreat after neutering Zaki or not -- and Their infiltrator MECs kept targeting it with wubbers while Their martial artists moved in.

The Angel had not been significantly weakened, and quickly broke a couple of skulls with its scepter, the static discharge knocking out the fighter; those who weren't fighting hand to hand quickly recovered the downed brawlers to safety. On the chair, Zaki kept screaming in pain.

The Omega ordered Zaki to be brought away - the damage to the affected area was pretty much total; Their agent sedated him to make transport easier, and this actually worked... this time.

The Angel kept fighting the Omegas' martial artists, who were trying to surround it and go for the wings as Kat coordinated wubber operation to keep it disoriented without bursting Their guys' eardrums, and seemed to ignore Zaki being dragged away.

The unconscious Zaki Ababneh was dragged off. Since the Omega prepared to fight an Angel, there was a number of ambulances waiting outside the arena, for the inevitable casualties. While by now most of the agents got a Mark 10 metabolic extension controller upon induction, Their medics do carry spares.

The Angel - Omega sysadmins searched for a theologian or Kabbalist in Their bases, and got one on the video stream's chat, but she was uncertain about which Angel it might be, although she confirmed "probably one of the small ones" was beginning to slow down from the sonic overload and the quick jabs that Their martial artists delivered every time there was an opening; it stood right under a neutron emitter which didn't help. The scepter touched - with barely any impact - one of the Omegas' martial artists, and knocked him down almost immediately; he was quickly dragged off by one of the support MECs, who dryly commented "Looks like they've

rediscovered the taser". The fighter was fine, but his metabolic extension controller had been damaged from the static discharge and would have to be replaced. That worried the MEC support guy, as the same touch might've killed him again. "Either they're learning or they got lucky."

As per the Omegas' instructions, as soon as there was an opening, one of Their remaining martial artists went for the wing, and was wing-slapped backwards, but landed on her feet. Other Angels had a slashing or piercing weapon rather than a mace, and this one was finding it difficult to inflict casualties; looked like this fight would go the distance, although the Omega had lost very few fighters compared to other Angel encounters.

In Rome, Omegas' techs had been buying time by fiddling with the jammer, but They did know that a TOL plane had taken off from their base in Eastern Europe and would arrive in a couple of hours, presumably to check out the site and provide assistance. They didn't know that the attack happened yet, although they probably suspected.

The Omega went over Their system logs, and for some reason it seemed that "going over the Bible for loopholes" was a project that nobody either in The Other Light or in Their own organization had proposed.

They earmarked two cabals, one to work on Biblical exegesis - they had invented tactical theology, it looked like - and one to figure out why this rather obvious tactic had not occurred to anyone in 950 years.

Zaki was sedated, secured, and ambulated off to Cairo; They would have to sort out exactly what They would do to him once he was there, but this guaranteed that he would be kept alive.

The neutron source had to be turned off when Omegas' men tried to get a blow in; the Angel used this moment to take out one of the five remaining martial artists circling it and, to everyone's surprise, to try to take off - maybe it noticed that the arena warehouse's ceiling was flimsy corrugated sheet.

One of the Omegas' fighters, a burly Central American man specialized in wrestling and wearing, as his choice of tactical gear, an inlaid mask with intricate tribal designs sewn on the sides with a 'fin' on top. He flung himself at the Angel trying to grapple it, but was carried upwards instead.

The Angel was a good 20 feet in the air when the wrestler managed to "pin" its wing, causing both of them to drop.

Year: 961 (Continued)

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 21 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, and 1 is manning the containment facility in Australia, so 18 are available.

You are tracking enemy teams.

The Omegas' martial artists were currently fighting an Angel near Cairo. The Angel tried to escape once They destroyed its rescue target's balls by having an agent spontaneously combust on them, giving the Omega possible useful insight into combat theology (It made sense in context, really). Now They had a bunch of guys waiting for the Angel and the wrestler to fall back down after the latter had managed to pin the former's wings.

The Omegas' wrestler screamed something about the HONOR OF THE MASK, but trusted Their judgement and let go of the Angel's wings, then tried to position himself for a rolling landing.

So far, the fight had gone reasonably well, with a lot fewer casualties than Colopatiron and Ithuriel (Azrael cost the Omega about a third of Their forces, but then again, it WAS the Archangel of Death).

Below in the warehouse, the support troops turned off the radiation sources and quickly broke off pieces of metal from the warehouse structure, or from damaged drones, to set up a spiked floor where either the Angel or the wrestler might land on.

Kat replied that it was known that MECs or robots couldn't really hurt Angels, but then understood that the Omega was not trying to damage it, They were trying to impart kinetic energy on it. She got on top of a pneumatic ram drone for a boost, ended up on top of the nearest A frame on the warehouse, and got ready to punch the Angel.

Kat attempted to shove the Angel downward, but her Heavy MEC frame had been configured for wubbers and neutron emitters, not closed combat for this operation - she managed a body shove, but that was about it. The wrestler landed on the warehouse's roof, on his shoulder, and rolled down on the ground onto the sand; one of the standby ambulances quickly sedated him and carried him away. While it looked like he would survive without MEC activation, it was probably the end of Los Tiburon's career.

The Angel fell on the spikes and was duly impaled by them... it lost some blood, which looked thin as if it were mixed with water, and then got back up, with some difficulty - just in time for

Kat's armored bulk to land on him, with a horrible noise and a lot of dust coming out.

When Kat got up -- she sustained a bit of damage to her frame, but her pod was not hurt -- the Angel was nowhere in sight, either having been destroyed by Yahweh as Azrael was, or having teleported out after his target was gone and there was no chance of dodging. Kat quickly ordered a Desolator to collect the blood samples, and they were vacuumed up.

The butcher's bill for this Angel containment operation was relatively small - between Los Tiburon and his ringside crew, the incinerated infiltrator MEC, and a few other casualties who could not or would not return to active duty (one guy quit because of what was done to Zaki, of which the Omega had plenty of pictures and video, was "too brutal even against the Glorified"). They had lost only one cabal.

A cursory video analysis showed that the Angel could have disappeared, rather than being eliminated.

The Omegas' sysadmin took some guesses as to why.

- The intended killing blow was delivered by a mechanical system, namely spikes and Kat's frame, not by an unaltered human; previous Angel fights showed that this flat out didn't work.
- The Angel had little reason to remain there: it seemed that Zaki was no longer entitled to Angelic protection, which would confirm the "nut shot" theory. Even if this was not the case, Zaki was taken to a hospital where he was scheduled for reconstructive surgery, which would take a couple of weeks, and could provide time for interrogation in the meantime.
- The arena, while being a lot more improvised than previous instances, had performed to specifications until Los Tiburon's pinning mode was aborted.

Even as a failure, the Omegas' sysadmins collected quite a bit of data to share with the science teams, including unadulterated samples of Angelic blood. Zak was extremely excited about the Angel's blood; at the very least it could be compared with Ithuriel's.

Some of the Omegas' operatives who were transgendered were perplexed about forcing a sex change on someone; others thought that given how the Glorified had bullied LGBT folks for 950 years, it was just desserts.

It was decided that it was too spiteful of the Omega to force a sex change operation on Zaki. The Omegas' decision was appreciated by transgender agents although Zaki said that it missed a good opportunity for SCIENCE. Kat quickly swatted him down.

The TOL delegation consisted of a commissar and his retinue, plus a half dozen radio and IT technicians to help re-establish communications. The Omegas' tactical analysis indicated that eradicating the commissar and his retinue had effectively no chance of failure, if it came to that, but They could not do that more than once or twice without causing suspicion. Capt. Weaver had the base guards ready to BLAM the commissars, and hid a number of drones in closets or amongst the factory equipment in case things went south.

Captain Weaver was in charge of the Rome operation, and fortunately for the Omega, she had leadership skills that escaped the grasp of an AI; the Other Light workers perceived her job offer as genuine.

Those who refused were locked in Their landing craft -- the only person in the TOL base cells was a missionary who, oddly enough, was thoroughly amused at what was going on, and kept deriding both the Omegas' men and TOL's -- the few dead were cleaned away, and Their men restarted the weapon production lines. The overall effect was generally realistic, save for the fact that all the guards were Omega soldiers, there were more drones around than in a typical TOL base, and no live bazookas were currently being made; the damage to the base was going to be passed off as an accident.

The missionary told a simple story - he was captured by TOL while looking for unbelievers to minister to, kept in captivity under what he called horrible conditions (although the cell was reasonably spacious, there was a toilet and a sink, and they fed him twice a day), and was "beginning to make inroads" before his unavoidable rescue, when the Omegas' people showed up.

Under Capt. Weaver's leadership, the Omegas' men set things up to make it look like a batch of bazooka rounds spontaneously detonated, explaining why there were some dead and some damage to the base.

The missionary, still in an amused tone, noted that if the TOL commissars asked him, he would have to tell them the truth.

The Omegas' soldiers gagged the missionary, and he methodically started to chew through the gag. This worked about as well as would be expected given that the gag was made with steel mesh; in a few minutes, the idiot was bleeding from his mouth and whimpering, probably begging for a sedative.

The TOL relief team landed in what looked like a rebuild of an Antonov-2 biplane, featuring a bottom facing turret. The Omegas' official story was that there were weapons malfunctions at the factory and that damaged most communications and caused some casualties; Capt. Weaver planned to blame the missionary's prayers for the incidents. The base commander was dead; the deputy commander said that she had defected and the Omega trusted her on Captain Weaver's reckoning. The potential new recruits appreciated the trust, so they said.

The two designs for an arkship involved going either to Mars, or to Alpha Centauri. In the second case, cold-sleep systems would be required; in the first case, it would be sufficient to slow down crew and livestock metabolism, which was easier.

The Omega had not settled on a design yet because, either way, They would need to build up the canopy station first so that it could be used to launch spacecraft (using the water canopy itself as fuel was very advantageous from a delta-V perspective).

The Omegas' research obtained a simple but effective Fission Fragment Engine, which could be used for interplanetary distance -- using it to travel 4 light years was a long shot, but it was the best shot They had.

They used the prototype to send a probe to the Martian moon Deimos, and obtained pictures, video, and a small rock sample.

The FFRE worked very well in space, but it did not have enough impulse to take off or land from a planet (hence why Deimos was used for the test, it was tiny and had very little gravity), for which ordinary LH2/LOX or LOX/kerosene rockets were needed. Fortunately, Yahweh had put a LOT of water at the edge of space, and Their station was already electrolysing it.

The Omega assigned two cabals to comb the sacred texts and figure out what would happen AFTER the end of the world for the following year.

To wrap up this year, Weaver gave a cursory tour to the TOL commissar, and pretended to look suitably chastised when they berated her for the accident, at which she promised that she would improve production. She arranged for the jammer to be turned off mid-tour, so that it looked like systems were back online early.

The commissar and his retinue were about to leave, but bad luck struck and the crimson-hatted TOL officer figured that since he was there, he might as well take the missionary into custody.

Weaver did the whole obsequious-underling song and dance for the TOL commissar, noting that it wasn't too different under her believer superiors when she was captaining a passenger ferry, and while they accepted wine and biscuits -- this was central Italy after all -- the missionary's cell door opened. Alarms blared indicating a possible Angelic presence which, of course, They did not detect at all. Surprised, the missionary confided in supernatural protection, and legged for it... only to be gunned down in a corridor, in plain view of a security camera with the commissar watching.

The missionary went down with a single shot right through the medulla.

When the commissar asked to commend the soldier for marksmanship (it was one of the Omegas' guys, obviously) he reminded her that she was to remain inside the base, lest a bolt of lightning smite her. This was, in fact, the case.

Looked like TOL was still in the dark about the Omega stealing one of their bases; if They kept production up, they would have remained so.

961's Feast of Tabernacles happened with little incident.

In a few days, Zaki Ababneh recovered sufficiently to be interrogated; unsurprisingly, he was barely responsive, he wasn't really trying to broadcast anything from his mantenna array but being deprived of it had a psychological effect... almost terminally so in this case; he ate and

drank enough to not need intubation, but barely interacted with the world otherwise.

Near the end of the year, a phalloplasty was performed by the best Underground Monorail surgical team that They could find that was willing to operate on a Glorified; the operation was a success, and the patient's morale returned with a vengeance, so much so that he had to be restrained until the stitches healed.

Afterwards... what was interesting was that Zaki was acting like a little kid - curious, naive, somewhat annoying, the works. His personnel file indicated that he was Raptured as a child, skipped his formative years, and returned to Earth as a Glorified.

Valentina quickly explained the basics of orbital flight to the Omegas' sysadmins, stressing that the whole point was going fast horizontally, not going up - going up was simply necessary to get out of the atmosphere in order to be able to go fast without burning up. A V2 rocket could go to space for a few minutes, and so could the projectile of the Paris gun in 1918; the R7 rocket that launched Sputnik into orbit had to be 20 times the mass.

"However, this was in the good old days, before Yahweh denied us the night sky. Joke is on Him, though - what we have been doing is sending our rockets straight up, splashing them on the liquid underside of the sky canopy at the edge of their trajectory and then using water propellers to go upwards, and breaking the icy topside. Cordylon has the ability to open up an "ice fishing hole" from the station itself now, so that the capsules don't need an icebreaking nose and can carry more payload instead."

"The interesting part is that, save for the stray water molecule or proton pair, there is no atmosphere outside the canopy - building a relatively short monorail segment and putting a rocket or maglev sled upon it, on the flat ice, and using a reactor or solar panel array to electrolyze the water into rocket fuel gives us an infinitely reusable first stage and removes the requirement to haul fuel in orbit. The canopy is also tough enough to let us carry construction materials in a compact manner "upstairs" and do the final assembly there. In short, without requiring enormous vectors, we can cheaply launch interplanetary vessels the like of which Sergey Korolev himself could but dream of!"

"The catch is, of course, that just as the current situation of Earth makes launching cheap, it makes re-entry extremely difficult. Historically, capsules have used aerobraking to slow down from orbital velocity, and parachutes or lifting surfaces (Valentina tsk'd a little; she was a Soyuz/Apollo fan, and thought the Space Shuttle, while pretty, was a horrible idea) to perform a soft landing. The same lack of atmosphere that allows us cheap access to orbit makes it expensive to return for it, since the spaceship has to actively brake using fuel."

"In short, what goes up better doggone well stay up."

The Heavy MEC procedure was very invasive, and generally performed on someone whose body was mostly gone, or on an infiltrator MEC who had damaged their joints and original skeleton past viability.

The head, the least damaged lung, and some of the intestine were preserved (attempts were made to keep the whole head because cybernetic eyes were very vastly inferior to natural eyes, and because it allowed the MEC to maintain a sense of self).

Since wiring up the spinal cord directly was difficult, standard procedure was to keep as many nerves as possible, but disconnect the muscles from them, save for a small segment which would be strung across a strain gage to measure intention of movement. The entire assembly was then suspended in saline solution and insanguinated as necessary; usually Heavy MECs had artificial hearts and carried a battery in their pods.

The pod itself was built very strongly, and the vertebrae were fused and fastened to it.

It was not a particularly pleasant fate, although it beat eternal fire.... however, the Omega did get the occasional person such as Damien who was happy about it.

Year: 962

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 22 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, and 1 is manning the containment facility in Australia.

Without a particular direction, the two cabals the Omega assigned to study theology pretty much disappeared in pre-Rapture books, interviews to the oldest people they could find, and what-have-you. They lost a few to conversion, even, as reading the Bible seemed to cause, and had them killed off, of course; that was treason, plus they might have given away valuable intel.

Rome, as well as the territory around it, was having problems due to the Omegas' irradiated super-thorns. A few shipments of Egyptian grain greatly improved the fortunes of the local palate, especially since They gave the job to a historical revivalist group who added the nice touch of dressing the whole thing up like the grain shipments that went the same way during

Late Empire times, including guards dressed up as legionaries. The Omega sold the foodstuffs at below cost to the outlying regions and outright gave grain to the few people who still lived in Rome, as a tribute to the Eternal City. The people there, mostly believers, noted that hey, the last Pope was Raptured after all so maybe the Roman Church wasn't so bad. They were chastised for it, but it was an unheard-of bit of dissent amongst believers, which was nice.

Work at the Sahel cyclotron continued; unfortunately, stealing the last Angel's scepter didn't work out, but the team managed to figure out a thing or two about "pocket" nuclear reactors - solar panels provided most of the Omegas' power, but for certain applications, it could be pretty useful. For starters, it should have been possible to build nuclear tanks, earthmovers, or locomotives - it would have been an endeavor, but it was possible, and it was possible safely. The possibility of a nuclear tunnel boring machine synergised well with Capt. Weaver's efforts; she quickly determined that it would be much more efficient to get to New Jerusalem from the Rub-Al-Khali, due to not having to deal with the Red Sea, but figured that if Moses could part it, she could tunnel it. Work began in earnest, just a bit away from the frontier so as to not cause too much suspicion, and the only complaints came from believers who thought that this was some cockamamie attempt at causing the Nile to flow again. Weaver was all too happy to let them think so. While not much was actually dug during the year, the team learned a lot of useful lessons about how to tackle such a project, ensuring better progress later on. Incidentally, since the Omega was digging under the aquifer, it SHOULD have been possible to get the Nile estuary wet again, albeit with salt water. The pumps had to unload somewhere, after all.

The water WAS fresh, albeit dirty; it would get salted out again after being in the estuary, since there was little outflow. The Omega had the option of piping it through one of Their existing filtration plants and capturing it for use in Cairo, or letting it refill the Nile at least in part, which was less efficient from a water conservation standpoint but a much bolder PR statement.

Captain Weaver looked mildly exasperated.

"Omega, that's basically twice the work for the same amount of water - where do you want it, in the pipes or in the river? We can't do both without additional pumps, and then it'll mess up the water table."

A few hammer blows and valve turns later, a large amount of brackish water started to churn out from the "quarry" (which turned out to be an interesting shape, enough so that low-budget movies were using it as a set piece) to a specially dug canal to the Nile estuary.... and nothing happened for the better part of the day; it looked like the water was just disappearing. Checking for leaks revealed nothing. Eventually, someone figured it out -- the estuary was so dry that the silty sand was just "drinking it all up".

In a week, the estuary was back to its marshy self, and Cairo's historic port reopened.

Tsion thundered damnation, to the surprise of absolutely nobody. Apart from that, the response

from the believing world was muted; the Temple didn't say a word and the only reaction the Omega got was some media making fun of what they thought was a pathetic effort to get the river to flow again. As it was, the people of Misrayim appreciated the effort, since it also allowed for relaxing water conservation rules a little.

Meanwhile, with the icehole, electrolyzer, and greenhouse in place, the next step was installing the habitat; the launch vehicle carried little in the way of parts, mostly just enough to build a giant igloo, but that was only because most of the payload was crew!

Cordylon was overjoyed at being around people after such a long absence, and photos of the heavy MEC "sitting" between Jeb and Val reignited all the various 'shipping theories. Thanks to some good old fashioned manual labor, the Hab was erected quickly. The crew would be used to start smoothing down the ice to install the Solar Rail, had been picked by Jeb and Val, and consisted of one cabal, who would stay up there, and some of the Cosmists.

Oddly enough, Jeb got bored after a two-week rotation on the canopy station - he liked flying stuff, and even just being in space got old if he was not going anywhere else. He announced that he was bored to death, got his environmental suit and backpack, and plunged in the ice hole without a return capsule. An alarm was raised, and the Omegas' sysadmins were about to publish Jeb's obituary, when he showed up at the Timbuktu launch facility, envirosuit mildly singed, and asked if the cafeteria was still open.

The Canopy Station activity was all recorded, and was a huge hit on the network. Christians were expressly forbidden from paying attention to it. This gave you an indication that, as prophesied, there were quite a lot of "undecideds" in the world by now.

The preparations for the breakaway of Night City were accomplished with very little fanfare; as the great underground farms and water vaults took shape and began to produce, the city imported less and less from the surrounding believing communities, some of which ended up taking a bit of an economic hit due to that and due to the superthorns that were starting to invade the surface.

And then one day, as if by the Divine hand, Night City was no more - at least as far as most could tell. The roads closed, and were eaten up by thorns and vines with almost supernatural speed. The air traffic ceased, save for a small flotilla of mysterious airships, quiet like ghosts and the color of the sky. The Desolators even worked out an artificial cloud cover to mask entrances.

Finally, the Omegas' Greenland base continued its work with unending pace. They had a sizeable fleet of purpose-designed land drones that could take any mortal army in the open field or even in urban combat.

Of note, the Rome base had, if anything, improved its production quality, if not numbers; the commissar that had visited last year sent a complimentary note.

The people in your Australian containment facility are, well, being contained and there isn't much of significance to report, other than the fact that Zaki Ababneh seems to have mentally regressed to a 10-11 years old.

The theology report consisted primarily of observations made about the power of prayer and ritual; finally, it was possible to make a complete survey and eliminate most possible causes of error.

Public prayer and festivals were very effective as a morale boost and an aid to overall well-being, with "friendly" deities working best for it - the exception was Hecate worship, due to the fact that many believed that the Goddess had walked the earth recently, and while Hecate as a deity was not friendly at all, her latest "incarnation" was. In fact, the report found that pagan worship, being generally infused with gaiety and passion compared to the somber Christian rites, was slightly BETTER than Christian worship from a morale and even mental health standpoint.

Satanism on the other hand was practiced almost exclusively by TOL soldiers; most everyone else, including most of the Omegas' people had come to see Satan as quite the loser, having been utterly ineffective when he was given free reign during the Tribulation. Of note, a decent percentage of nonbelievers cited Hebrew scriptures, particularly the book of Job, to note that Satan was in fact on Yahweh's payroll and his job was specifically to induce temptation, whether in angels/demons, or humans. Of course, no believer would consider this interpretation.

The report concluded indicating that random-number testing was used to test any ACTUAL power of prayer, and on a downward note, praying to any pagan deity did after all have a measurable effect... but it was approximately 1/500th that of praying to Yahweh or Jesus. Oddly, it seemed to make no difference about which deity it was, as long as it was genuinely worshiped by the test.

Year: 963

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 20 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, and 1 is manning the containment facility in Australia.

16 are available.

Being dragged around by an excitable girl can be embarrassing. In Kat's case it was less embarrassing, but only because she picked up one of the Omegas' sysadmins bodily, told him to grab a bottle of water, and informed him that they were going to walk to the cyclotron.

"But - we're in Assuan!"

"Yeah, you won't miss your Kosmicheskaya Militsiya reboot, don't worry! I'm going to run the whole way!"

"Uh... Kat, your MEC will run out of batteries. You're not wearing a generator backpack."

A severe sprint on a Heavy MEC's secondary mobility system later, a rather perplexed information technician was dropped off at the cyclotron's office building.

"Did someone finally get the lithium-ferro-phosphate batteries running?"

"Nope! We dropped that years ago. Doesn't play well with vacuum. Also, kind of blowy-uppy." You know the thing you're sitting on?"

"Looks like an extra battery pack, but..."

"Nope again!"

The sysadmin jumped off Kat and stared at the frame.

"Kat, are you telling me this sucker's nuclear?"

"No, no, no, no, no, this sucker's electrical, but I need a nuclear reaction to generate the 1.21 gigawatts of electricity I need."

"Need for what? The frame is only rated for- Wait, you have a nuclear reactor the size of a piece of luggage?"

"Exactly. Fully self contained. The form factor is that of our S2B battery packs, this can run everything we have that's electric. Drone tanks, heavy wubbers, sand skimmers, you name it. Get some good electric motors going, we can even put these on helicopters!"

Some jackass played Ride of the Valkyries on the PA.

"Best part? Completely safe and self-extinguishing."

Kat grabbed a clunky prototype weapon from an ammo cart, connected it to the cables on her arm, and fired a shot at the office building's concrete load-bearing wall. The hole in it was neat enough that it could have been cut through with a thermal lance and then sanded down.

"Rail gun. Not the most practical thing due to power consumption, ordinarily, but that's no longer a problem. Take anything ferromagnetic, put it between the rails, watch it fly."

The Omegas' technician was speechless, largely because his eardrums burst from the sonic boom. Fortunately, that could be fixed quickly and cheaply by now, at least in Their territories.

The Omega set up a Theological Training institute to continue studying supernatural matters; finding 500 people in Their territories to pray to Them was not particularly hard, as it turned out that a few people were already doing it, the hard part was making them do so in an organized fashion while keeping it on the down low. Their security cabal "borrowed" Their theologians and had them come up with some simple liturgies and rituals that could be followed online, and soon enough the Cult Mechanicus had 500 adepts.

The Greenland base did its job to specifications, and Jeb delivered a rover and the first shipment of rails to Cordylon Station.

While the original TOL base was left alone to maintain the impression that TOL still had control of it, the Omegas' people posed as supporters and took up residence near the Roman ruins; pretty soon archeologists were performing careful restoration, putting fallen pylons back up, and even managing to recover part of the Trajan Column. The carvings were mostly gone after a thousand years of neglect, but six projectors were expertly set up to make the worn markings show up in lights and shadows.

The Omegas' propaganda team took residency in nearby Cesano, long since deserted, and built a large antenna. To allay suspicion, they made it cross-shaped. There they began to broadcast a varied palimpsest, but with just a bit more emphasis than usual on Science lessons during the day and programs extolling the virtues of the Roman Empire at night.

"Night" and "day" were of course merely a convention: the sky was uniformly blue under the canopy.

The only people who got to see the stars were Cordylon and the people on the Station... although Cordylon's star maps had made sure that Night City's cavern vaults were accurate in their depiction of the Milky Way and major stars; the strings of LEDs had been replaced with laser projectors that rotated the zodiac as it should have done.

The "rover" topside worked remarkably well; it was actually a sort of giant snowmobile with a vapor-cushion rear section and a corkscrew-track front section, and could go quite fast if it activated its boosters. It was even set up to launch small rockets even before the rail was completed, a feature that the Omega tested by sending a small probe to the Moon.

Valentina primly let everyone know that the Moon flags had been bleached by solar radiation, if they were still intact, and returning a white flag wouldn't do much for anyone.

Jeb reminded her that Apollo 11's flag fell over when the LM took off, so one side may still have

had paint on it. Then he stuck his tongue out at her. They argued about the space race so often that a couple of the Cosmists were quoting what they would say next and got it mostly right.

The Omega sent a small probe to the Moon and within a few days, it crashed due to the uneven lunar gravitational shield, but took a few pictures that confirmed that the flag was in fact still there, and lying on the ground. A betting pool got going about whether the footprints were still there or not.

To nobody's surprise, the photos and video that the Omega released caused an INCREASE of video comments and blog posts indicating that the lunar landings were a hoax.

The Theological Training Institute assisted the Omegas' security cabal in testing the Cult Mechanicus liturgies (that were made up to be easy to remember, anyway: what seemed to matter was the belief) and found that they would have some difficulty getting people to STOP the worship once the month was up.

Random number testing indicated that the Omegas' aberration factor was considerably less than the 17,500 of pagan worship but somewhat more than zero as much as a one-month-long study could tell.

By the look of it, it seemed that opsec was good and no leak came through to the Christians although the Omega did notice a shift in army lists played by wargamers in Their territories.

Their theologians also confirmed that Zaki had basically reverted mentally to where he was pre-Rapture, including by and large, his memories. Ithuriel, on the other hand, basically had to relearn to be a person as if he had been born a few years ago. This time, the Omegas' theology research resulted in fewer people converting out, although They did lose a handful.

The report was somewhat worrying: before the Omega prompted it, every single time somebody took the time to investigate Biblical prophecy, they either converted or became fanatically antitheist, usually coming to a grisly end shortly after due to a lack of planning in acting on said antitheism.

Zak, ever the cool-headed one, commented,

"If I didn't know that curses didn't work that way, I would say that some Biblical texts are cursed. I suppose it's more of a memetic infection, either it destroys you, or you become a carrier of it."

The Omega had a few recent converts in containment in the Australian facility, where they were kept under loose observation by Their theologians, psychologists, and morale experts. These people were themselves theologians, and had studied; they didn't try to fight their way out or even to invoke an Angel, as they knew that it would only result in death, but instead tried to convert the base personnel. That, obviously, did not work at all.

This year's Feast of Tabernacle passed without incident; the trade route between Middle

America and the European regions was established, and once more big ships sailed the ocean. The seas were calm, so little training was needed; the crews were mostly from the overfed regions.

Captain Weaver indicated that she might sign up with that route as her "retirement" approached, but until she went, she was not against a bit of piracy, as long as there were no casualties - it'd be fun.

The base containment folks, the theologians, the psychologists, and Zak - when he could be spared - tried deconverting the "infected" with a mixture of methods, but mostly by theological and scientific arguments including young earth creationism.

The "infected" always had a rebuttal ready, and while they got increasingly flimsy as they were analyzed and answered, there seemed to be no way to get anything across to them.

A cursory archival analysis showed that starting from the Rapture, there had been NO cases of genuine deconversion on record.

Frustrated, Zak stuck one of the "infected" in a MRI and found that some areas of the otherwise well-functioning brain shut down in a reaction similar to deer-in-the-highlights primal fear when it was time to analyze a rebuttal.

His conclusion was that these people were just that scared of Hell. Even allowing the "infected" to talk to MECs, some of which remembered a few seconds of Hellfire and were still around to discuss it, did not seem to help.

Year: 964

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 21 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, and 1 is manning the containment facility in Australia. 17 are available.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

You do not have a station part ready and will have to build one if you want to launch it.

Jeb had to live with another lull in space launches, and wasn't particularly happy with it; under his direction the Omegas' sysadmins improved network performance and made sure that the repeater on Cordylon Station worked well, which would hopefully allow Them to communicate reliably with Their away teams. On the Earthbound side of things, They set up the Sky Eye network to act as data repeaters.

The other hacker group focused on quiet infiltration of government and TOL data network, to find that the former were being more and more abandoned as the Last Battle neared; the believers were supremely confident that the end of the world would be anticlimactic, and were more and more retreating into an insular lifestyle. The main complaints between local elder councils and the like (they preferred to use analog phones and snail mail, but they could still catch some) was that it was getting harder and harder to get the youth to remain in church, to which they recommended to avoid exposing them to the wider world in the first place, considering that the only interesting things in it involved nonbelievers. The Omega did note that there were fewer trucks on the roads (and slightly more horses, at that).

This year, possibly as a response to that, the Omega decided to put Their industrial might in the service of MECHanization; They offered free upgrades to those who passed Their rigorous induction tests, and found quite a few promising workers. By now, approximately half of Their forces consisted of reanimates.

TOL was beginning to get suspicious about the Rome base, largely due to the fact that people (mostly Omega guys, but also revivalists looking for a challenge and people who were simply curious) were moving back to the city's ruins, playing loose with archeological integrity and outright rebuilding Classical Rome anew.

At the end of the year, Kat confirmed that most of the Omegas' vehicles were upgraded with pod plugs and sockets for nuclear reactors. However, in order to take full advantage of Their newly mobile drone army, They would need to secure at least one more source of nuclear fuel - right now Their only uranium mine was in Australia, in the same base where Their containment facility was.

About halfway through the year, the Omegas' plans grinded to a halt when the Australia base reported a large dust cloud on the horizon, multiple radar signatures indicating a vehicle convoy moving at high speed... nothing in the air though.

Year: 965

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-

Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

It was the year 965; in 35 years, the Final Battle was scheduled to occur, and Yahweh would destroy the heavens and the earth, and issue the final judgement.

The Omega had several operations around the world and even outside the water canopy that encompassed the Earth, to try to stop humanity's demise or to save enough people to get to a different planet and there start anew.

However, the immediate situation was that the Australian base - one of the Omegas' workhorses, featuring both an uranium mine to feed Their fleet of nuclear-powered drones and cyborgs, and a containment facility where They housed the spoils of Their past won battles - was under attack.

The base was somewhat undermanned, but the Omega had the logistics capability to bring in reinforcements fairly quickly. As it was, They did not know who the attackers even were; Their Sky Eye canopy-probe feed and long range cameras showed a motley of vehicles from all eras, moving and shaking the endless, stupefying grassland that had replaced most of the Australian Outback.

Their base had been built into the side of Uluru, now once again called Ayers' Rock by the local loyalist government.

They were advancing. The Omega had relatively unimpeded control over the airwaves, and Their internet dominance ensured that if any of the attackers were carrying so much as a smart phone, They could be heard.

They had not identified themselves.

Aerial survey showed that the attackers outnumbered the Omegas' forces by about 4 to 1. They sported black vehicles, mostly dune buggies and bikes, as well as a few tanker trucks in the back. They were wearing black uniforms with red highlights, and their vehicles seemed to have been trussed up to look futuristic if seen by someone in the 1990s.

The tanker trucks had the insignia of a scorpion's tail, the Brotherhood of Nod, everyone's favorite false-flag organization... or was it?

The Omega directed Their drone tanks to form a line facing the enemy's line. Since the drones had been brought here to be upgraded, they already carried nuclear batteries. They could be set to self-destruct, which would not cause a nuclear initiation, but would still cause a localized meltdown, essentially a dirty bomb.

Kat was told to wire her pod to the base systems and to control the fight in RTS fashion,

improving situational awareness and response time.

The enemy was broadcasting on FM radio. If they had long range artillery, they weren't using it yet.

Kat quickly moved from her frame into a control station; while she was not as good as Damien at controlling multiple drones, she took over the tank flotilla and positioned them just out of range of any indirect-fire weapons that the enemy may have been carrying. They were still coming, although they had slowed down, and Jeb reported that as far as he could tell They were looking at Willis jeeps and Vespa TAPs that had been trussed up to look futuristic.

"ATTENTION SEPARATISTS! WE ARE HERE TO RECLAIM THIS BASE! THERE HAS BEEN VIOLENCE BEFORE, NONE OF US ARE WITHOUT SIN, BUT WE OFFER A HONORABLE COMPROMISE: JUST WALK AWAY.

GIVE US YOUR REACTOR, THE FUEL, THE PRISONERS, THE WEAPONS, AND THE WHOLE COMPOUND, AND WE WILL SPARE YOUR LIVES. WE WILL GIVE YOU SAFE PASSAGE TO THE COAST.

JUST WALK AWAY, AND THERE WILL BE NO HORROR TODAY."

The Omegas' assets were in position.

Ithuriel was doing its math homework (it had progressed well, and was now as mentally developed as an adolescent) within the containment area, and had not been yet told that there was an attack - the containment was deep under the Rock, and just to be safe, could be buried by demolition charges as a last resort.

Jeb made a high pass over the would-be invaders. They did not appear to have significant air assets, other than Jeb.

An unarmed helicopter was entering the airspace.

The Omegas' control of the global network allowed Damien to patch in. Damien was better-suited to tactically controlling a large number of drones than Kat was, but due to distance and inevitable lag, would be less responsive.

Ithuriel's former wet nurse, who had been kept on staff as a tutor because the Angel reacted well to her, told her pupil that there would be noise upstairs but he was not to worry. The Angel seemed to acquiesce. The low-level testing involving the Omegas' other prisoner stopped and the containment wing blasted doors closed, just to be safe.

"You heard the traitors! Attack!"

There was much revving.

The area around The Omegas' base was, like most of the world, flat; there was little to use for cover, not even trees in this case. A fighting retreat should have allowed Their human and posthuman soldiers to make the most use of the base's layout.

Crying Lucifer, the buggies and bikes shot forward in a wild charge reminiscent of heavy cavalry, occasionally letting loose the occasional rocket or mortar shot. A few hit the Omegas' base, to little damage.

The Omega decided on a fighting retreat; while their bazookas had more range than Their wubbers, the Omegas' forces could do things like set the grass on fire before the motorcycles, deviate incoming rockets via sound waves, and so on. The attackers did not seem very well trained or coordinated, mostly firing wildly with their machine guns even though they were not in range.

During the fighting retreat, the Omega instructed Kat and Damien to prioritise personnel safety and let the drones take the brunt of the damage.

Drone tanks that were damaged beyond battle usefulness were to retreat for eventual repair or salvage or, if they could not move, to appear disabled and then do a localized explosion when the enemy got close.

The base perimeter itself was only a fence, but features automated sentry guns; these were somewhat "stupid", in the sense that they did not recognize friend or foe very well, and had therefore been turned off.

Jeb indicated that, to the surprise of absolutely no one, the unarmed helicopter contained Cameron Kirk Williams, covering the battle for the Good News Network.

".... this is Cameron Williams for the Good News Network! Revelations teaches us that the end of the Millennium would be vastly different from the beginning and, after almost ten centuries with no wars or rumors of wars, it seems that The Other Light has finally decided to make its presence known on a large scale. Naturally, they are unable to hurt any of the faithful, so their blind rage is directed at their own: you see here two Other Light factions about to engage in deadly combat for control of what looks like a small settlement in the Australian Outback. The-"

"G'day, mate! 'ave any of you giffly goots seen m'diggery do?"

"...the crew here of course prays for the combatants to see the light before they are damned by their own violence, but it will be interesting to see what..."

"Awh, it's just kids 'aving fun. Throw another shrimp on the barbie, yeh? Beer."

The base's personnel would probably cringe at Jeb's horribly fake accent if they weren't busy improvising barricades in the base's corridors; as it was, Jeb almost managed to get Cameron to cuss on camera as he kept getting in the way of the shot and was being generally annoying, while using the helicopter as cover to get closer to the approaching armada and relay back better video. The Omega noted that indeed these attackers were using standard TOL gear, just with various bits of aluminum and even wood bolted on to make them look different and more

futuristic.

Jeb used the Omegas' ability to override believing transmission to answer Cameron's interjections as if the Glorified reporter was interviewing him about the space station and their plans for the space program's future, which for the purpose of this "interview" included leaving the solar system.

The Omegas' fighters didn't have much in the way of indirect fire, save for some people who were particularly good with wubbers and managed to deviate enemy RPGs towards the ground to create craters for them to get mired in; two Heavy MECs improvised a trebuchet with a toxin barrel and two I-beams.

The Omega instructed Kat and Damien to let the drones remain in front of Their soldiers, and as a result most of the carcasses on Their side were those of six-wheeled drone tanks. Due to friendly fire and lucky hits, the enemies were starting to lose momentum as their casualties forced them to slow down in their charge, or at least drove around.

As They synthed up a strong voice to deliver the Omegas' defiant speech, Their base personnel raised a hastily printed scorpion-tail flag. This confused the absolute crap out of Cameron, who narrated that this obviously was, in fact, some sort of bloody gladiatorial game rather than a real fight, and decried TOL's callousness about holding deadly war games, although he would expect nothing different, to think about it.

Jeb quickly interspersed that with a reasonable version of the Omegas' interstellar exodus plan, and since they were talking arkship, he retorted to Cameron that even if he was right about blood games, it would still pale compared to the Flood or the Glorious Appearing.

The drones stopped for a moment, allowing the Omegas' other personnel to get inside the base fence and to prepare the sentry guns and internal defenses; if the enemies breached this, they would have to fight underground, corridor to corridor.

At a signal from Damien and Kat after they had checked telemetry, the remaining third of the Omegas' drone tank force came out from behind the Rock and slammed into the flank of the enemy charge; few of the motorized cavalry had seen or heard them coming, and they quickly closed distance, able to use their wubbers and machine guns to great effect against the exposed enemy flank. In particular, they managed to practically destroy one of the two wings of motorcycle forces covering the main advance before retreating behind the Rock again.

As the attackers drove past wrecked drone tanks that still had power, the simple but effective machines allowed their reactors to overheat, spraying molten sodium and radioactive waste all over the place.

GNN was transmitting live; media survey noted that most of the believing world was getting a version of this from Cameron's helicopter, with the TOL attackers being melted alive in the clear

but with half of what Jeb was saying bleeped out. The news ticker at the bottom had quotes from prominent creation scientist Eric Hovind indicating that nowhere else in the Universe was life possible, so TOL was wasting their time.

After releasing a wave of mayhem by sound and bullets, the reserve drone tanks inverted direction and hid behind the Rock again; the few whose weapons were destroyed by return fire reversed direction again and became rolling bombs.

The left flank of the enemy attack had been routed or crushed so much that when Jeb and the Sky Eye feed warned they were bringing in the infantry with the truck, they were doing so in a roundabout route.

The Omegas' frontline drones had positioned themselves in front of the fence, with Their soldiers inside the perimeter and ready to operate the static defense.

The attackers' charge had been broken; a few set up mortar firing position and launched a few rounds while the others regrouped.

The Omegas' assets were being coordinated by two tactical experts and were ready to move within seconds.

Media survey indicated that this was now the most-followed event on Earth, either directly or through the heavily edited pray-a-thon program hosted by Eli LeVey. King David issued a rare statement indicating that "not a hair on the head of a believer shall be plucked" but otherwise he did not care what happened; the NJ party line was divided, this was either a bloody live-fire war game conducted by TOL, or a turf war between two TOL factions. The Omegas' media stuck to that, supporting one or the other theory in order to make sure that no one theory won, since it was one of the rare cases in which the Glorified weren't all in lockstep.

Media survey indicated a rare moment of confusion between various Christian talking heads as to what, exactly, was going on; the confusion reached Omega territories, with a few isolated incidents of looting, one TOL cell exposing itself thinking that The Hour Had Arrived and being quickly reduced to a whimpering mess by wubber-equipped guards, and similar minor episodes.

The Omegas' drone cavalry once again disappeared behind the Rock and went to meet the motorized infantry that was going around.

The Desolators took advantage of the enemy's disarray to set up kill zones at the base gates and at visible weak points around the fence. Kat kept an eye on the perimeter and occasionally had some of the Desolators move; while neutron sources were very lethal, they did not act particularly quickly, so most of her group was using toxin sprayers.

Reinforcements were inbound from Pacifica, but it would be the better part of a day before they arrived. Sky Eye survey indicated that there were no enemy reinforcements coming, as far as

They could tell.

Kat kept an eye on the perimeter and occasionally had some of the Desolators move; while neutron sources were very lethal, they did not act particularly quickly, so most of her group were using toxin sprayers.

The Omegas' drones were set to intercept the motorized infantry but the motorized cavalry reorganized. They were charging towards the base's main gate, in a wedge formation with the bikes covering the jeeps, sporadically firing their bazookas.

Ithuriel was calmly informed by its teacher that there were bad guys at the gates, and they wanted her virtue.

TOL had a reputation in that sense. The Omega had old COT reports from +80 or so indicating:

"There is a faction within TOL that is even more radical than their mainstream. They believe that if they can somehow impregnate women with glorified bodies, they can create a super mongrel race of potential converts to their side who would be partially glorified and perhaps able to live past one hundred."

It did not work. That said, TOL had been trying to get their hands on the few supernatural artifacts the Omega managed to recover since Their first Angel fight...

"HOLD THE LINE!" Kat called out.

The attackers charged in a cavalry formation, firing off the occasional rocket when they had a shot. The base perimeter took some damage; a few drones were blown up, others lost all the wheels on one side and reflashed their firmware to enter turret mode.

"HOLD THE LINE!" the word was repeated across the PA system.

A few enemy jeeps stopped, poking out sniper rifles. Reflector lights were blown off and a few heads were pierced by high-caliber bullets. One of the Heavy MECs spun seemingly out of control, hydraulic fluid spurting from an arm joint. The Omega suffered a few casualties.

The attackers' bikes crossed an invisible mark past which the base turrets had a computable firing solution, and a torrent of firepower was unleashed on the charging enemies. The few vehicles that made it through were destroyed in searing heat by a combination of flamethrower, toxin sprayers and damaged drones that had entered suicide drones.

In a few minutes, all that was left of the charge were the sniper teams; two heavy MECs holding steel plates like riot shields started walking forward to deal with them.

Jeb cut in.

"Charging fuel truck coming right at you!"

The roaming drones changed tactics, risking coming in closer under fire and focusing their weapons against the trucks' tires and drivetrains. Damien quickly found out that jamming a "melee" drone under a truck and activating its pneumatic ram destroyed both vehicles, and skilfully piloted two of them under the lead trucks.

The majority of the enemy infantry was stranded about a mile out.

The Omegas' remaining roaming drones swung around as they took small-arms fire from the infantry battalion, and swung around again, bolstered by some of the drones that could be spared from the base proper; Damien quickly maneuvered some to cover holes in the chainlink fence.

The drone tanks quickly overran the sniper teams, who had to divide fire between those and the heavy MECs with riot shields.

The enemy's cavalry was all gone, but they still outnumbered the Omegas' fighters and workers two to one.

The Australian base wasn't set up to allow a supersonic, high altitude jet to land; he was looking for a safe way to do so. The fact that there had just been a firefight didn't help.

Ithuriel's teacher gave the Angel a slightly modified set of fatigues and battle-ready armor and a sword.

Experiments indicated that either Ithuriel couldn't phase around small obstacles, or would not do so unless in a combat situation. The Omegas' theologians at home were quietly hoping that the Angel would end up in a real fight. The psychologists worried that it might have sent the wrong message.

Damien and Kat had done a great job keeping the troops organized, even those who were basically given a gun demo during induction and hadn't used it since.

Jeb answered, "Ack that, Tower. Coming in for a hard landing!"

Switching frequencies, he called on Cameron to hold his beer and (watch this) did an aileron roll, then dove towards the truck with his single-seater jet.

Cameron was already painting a picture of the torments of Hell that awaited this foolhardy suicide attacker, both for Jeb's benefit and for the audience, when the two vehicles impacted in a tremendous fireball; the jeeps and bikes escorting the truck were already primed to peel off, and a few of them managed to do so, circling around.

The Heavy MECs ran towards the flaming wreck. Jeb was, worryingly, nowhere to be seen - the collision was fast enough to make it ambiguous whether he had ejected, but the Omega could

see no parachute.

"... oh the humanity!" Cameron concluded as his helicopter prepared to land, seemingly uncaring about the approaching Heavy MEC and the two TOL motorcyclists circling around as the jeeps went around the long way to join the infantry.

The Omega ordered an advance; the guards finished fortifying the base while the MECs, remaining drones and Desolators advanced towards the enemy infantry, which had reorganized in two squares each resembling a 16th-century Tercio formation. The Omega fighters were in a loose line, with Their infantry advancing using a drone or MEC as mobile cover. Barring a miracle, this would be over in the Omegas' favor soon, but miracles hadn't been scarce.

The infantry was in a line, safely behind the armored units. They took aim and let the enemy come.

Ithuriel's mentor explained to it that his job was to rescue Jeb; the Angel was shown what Jeb did as well as a cartoony simulation of what would have happened if the truck had hit the base entrance, namely severe damage and a good two dozen dead.

The Angel's normally neutral (and slightly derpy) expression changed into a much more adult one.

"I understand. I go now to save your friend."

The MECs and drones played interference with the motorcycle troops as Ithuriel, with some difficulty due to the heavy shield, walked out of the base, climbed on one of the outbuildings, and just as Their PA system warned the Omegas' troops to not shoot the Angel down, took a running leap and took off from the outbuilding's roof. The flight was obviously belabored, reminding some of the Omegas' sysadmins of a mildly unpleasant dream, but Ithuriel made it there. The bikers spotted the new combatant on the field and held back.

The Omegas' skirmishers let the motorcyclists drive around, and took what seemed to be potshots but was actually suppressing fire. One of them panicked, and fired a bazooka at the Angel. By now the cosplay stuff was gone from the remaining vehicles, and the Omega could confirm that it was the 1920s~1950s stuff that TOL had been building for a thousand years.

"Watch out!"

Cameron's helicopter had landed, and the Glorified journalist and his cameraman (what was his name again?) walked out and took in a panning shot of the wreck, the battlefield, and the base beyond. Cameron lamented the senseless waste.

Ithuriel avoided the bazooka round by giving a hearty flap of his wings (which, the engineers noted, still shouldn't have worked) and dropped the shield. The Angel landed near Cameron, grabbed a piece of piping protruding from the wreckage, and started searching for Jeb. Cameron

seemed to thoroughly ignored this.

Jeb ejected late, as he did, and did not count on the truck braking once its driver saw the plane in the rear view mirrors; he was under the rear bogey, with a broken leg. The Omegas' camera and microphone in Ithuriel's armor were active.

"...you're a bit flat chested for a Valkyrie. I like girls, didn't they tell you? Check please!"

Cameron's cameraman was staring as Ithuriel got Jeb out of the wreckage and put the diminutive pilot in a fireman's carry. Cameron himself kept describing the scene as the camera stayed pointed at the battlefield.

"Hold! Keep cover! Take aim!"

The enemy infantry, in a tercio formation, started walking towards the Omegas' own; their front ranks had riot shields.

A few of the Omegas' drones carried heavy machine guns, and fire ranging shots, dropping a few of the enemy - the red-suited TOLers order charge, and their soldiers charged ahead with surprising speed. The Omegas' men and drones emptied their magazines, dropping the first one or two ranks of the tercios, and reloaded while wubber-equipped infantry tried to burst eardrums and confuse the chargers.

Behind them, scattered, some of those who dropped got back up, waving their rifles like clubs, shooting in the air and screaming like the damned. One of the leaders stayed in the back, fiddled with a control panel, and the stragglers resumed some semblance of a formation, surging forward and to the side to get ahead of the tercio again. Seemed like they got the "horde mode" to work...

Ithuriel and Cameron briefly stared at each other. That was, Ithuriel stared at Cameron; Cameron seemed to take no notice.

"This man needs healing."

Cameron finally realized that someone was talking to him and stopped describing the scene.

"Uh... I can see that. There may be time for him to repent, at least. I can give him a ride to the coast."

The cameraman (Guy Fleegman! That was his name!) was staring at Ithuriel's wings and had the presence of spirit to take a few seconds of video.

Ithuriel was equipped with standard comm gear, and its mentor was relaying Omegas' orders.

The Omegas' soldiers emptied their magazines and performed an orderly retreat, fire-and-maneuver in reverse, using the drones and heavy MECs as mobile cover. The TOL infantry finally

got in range, and returning fire, caused the Omega a few casualties. In these cases, the standard Mark X controller was designed to trigger, then put the body in low metabolism mode and wait for rescue. Agent-grade controllers allowed Omega guards to get right back up, in some cases not even missing a beat in the fight.

The forces safely retreated to the perimeter; by now, the fast-zombie horde had overtaken the surviving enemy infantry. Screaming and shrieking in hellish pain and flooded with synthetic adrenaline, they charged - firing wildly and sporadically.

The Omega did not interfere with Cameron and Guy's broadcast; Ithuriel's appearance, an Angel in what had been described as TOL fatigues, was not commented upon.

Internet survey indicated that there were many questions about that from the Omegas' territories, ranging from "did we make our own Angels" to "Did the Australians betray us to the believers" to "is that Hermes?" to "How much whuffie do I have to accumulate to afford wing grafts, that looks badass/sexy/awesome".

The Temple was muted on the issue, but they weren't known for a great response time. What believing media was still on the Internet however, boiled up in another bit of disagreement, the second spate thereof since this mess started - a crack in the armor, perhaps? Some warned that "Lucifer could appear as an angel of light" while others noted that it was not yet the time for Lucifer to be released. This in itself caused arguments, as many believed that Lucifer would only be released right before the Final Battle, while others thought that he would have a little while to once again tempt the nations.

Omega theologians noted the various positions and made a point of tracking how they developed before the Temple issued a ruling; would it be possible to cause a schism?

The Omega reckoned that losing a few drone tanks to friendly fire was not a big deal compared to handling the horde of reanimates that were running wildly at them ahead of the enemy formation. Damien called forth the drones equipped with pneumatic rams, shed the weapons to lower their profile, and had them run around the field and use their basic sensors to get in front of reanimated TOL soldiers and punt them a few meters in the air.

Behind them, the Omegas' gun emplacements spewed out an unending cascade of firepower; the very flatness of terrain that allowed TOL to charge now left them nowhere to run. The few who reanimated often were too damaged to do more than crawl.

Throughout all this, a visibly tired Ithuriel flew in from the other side of the base, carrying an unconscious and bleeding Jeb and handing him off to the field medics before dropping to its knees and taking belabored breaths. It seemed to not know what feeling tired felt like. To its credit, it did fly out with a riot shield and then back with a casualty...

Jeb would probably be fine, other than spending a few months in a cast.

The Omega lost a number of drone tanks, but before long all that was left of the attackers were twitching corpses.

Above the base, the Sky Eye showed distinct brown spots in the endless grassland that used to be the Australian Outback, the blood of the Omegas' enemies.

Ithuriel's mentor praised the Angel's work, but was at a loss of words when it told her that it wanted to enlist.

The butcher's bill for this operation was minimal; between casualties, people who could no longer work in their role, and people who exercised their "I've done my part, I quit", the Omega only lost one cabal.

The Omega could recover weapons and vehicles from the field, but most of that stuff was barely worth anything more than scrap value. That said, They did lose quite a few drones, about a sixth of Their ready total... but only Their industrial engineers had to know about it - given how They were able to appear to bring in reinforcement. As far as anyone knew, They might have had a hundred million fighting robots under Ayer's Rock.

The base personnel overall were a mixture of relief and disappointment that the fighting didn't even reach them.

The Omegas' political scientists noted that Australia was mostly populated by believers: announcing secession may have been premature. However, should Their forces be able to repel a similar siege by believers, the impact would be immense.

Ithuriel's intra-armor telemetry (very basic: heart rate, body temp and so on) indicated that it probably told the truth when it mentioned being interested in fighting. Having been created as a warrior Angel, that made some sense.

The Omega had a team comb for survivors, indicating a clean kill if they were experiencing Hell pain. It wouldn't help them any, but the fewer of the Omegas' people who saw that firsthand, the fewer attrition-from-conversion they would experience.

Ithuriel's mentor assented to this.

"You did a good thing today. You risked your life to protect someone else's. That makes you a grown-up in my eyes."

The Angel showed genuine surprise.

"And so, to show you how you came to be here... I mean it as a reward, but it may be a bitter one."

The first reports by the Omegas' salvagers indicated that the platoon leaders, the guy in red uniforms, had the "extra stuff" in the Mk11 MEC disabled, effectively making it equivalent to the

Mk10.

The Omega managed to find a few TOLers alive, or at least not brain-dead; Their medics performed an emergency leucotomy to cancel the pain, then put the still-twitching human remains in a nutrient bath. They did not and could not do much, having already gone insane, but everyone who saw the otherwise grisly spectacle understood very well what the Omega was trying to do. A few people grumped about wasting valuable medical resources, but the vast majority of base personnel admired this action - giving the Omega sincere, unedited footage of compassion in the very face of Hell, and human reactions to it.

Salvageers confirmed that the Mk11 had extra reservoirs and a basic radio control system to allow platoon leaders to cause zombie soldiers to attack or stop, at least. They could also be given adrenaline, atropine to remain moving for a few minutes during a NBC attack, and flooded with a variety of the rabies virus which the Omega finally managed to recover.

Given that Cameron Williams was still on the ground, the Omega could handle the media by manhandling the messenger, or at least grounding his helicopter and granting him an exclusive interview by the Omega Themselves, via a drone holding up a video screen.

Technicians quickly installed a display on one of the few drone tanks that didn't have so much as a scratch, and the Omega drove to where Cameron, Guy and their pilot were taking in one last pan shot before taking off.

"... while we cannot be sure what this was about, we hear reports that highly trained Millennium Force operatives have infiltrated The Other Light to tell us the true cost and motives of this savage bout of civil war. Truly there is no honor among thieves...

... wait, one of their remote controlled vehicles is coming toward us. It seems weaponless. There's a crude face on its screen..."

The Glorified reporter took an instinctive step back - he knew that he was protected by the Almighty, but he did see these things rip open a TOL legion - and raised a hand.

"Why do you send a machine to speak? Show yourself, and tell us the meaning behind this massacre!"

The cameraman and the reporter figured that they'd best get the helicopter rotor to speed, just in case.

"Massacre? We we're simply defending ourselves from aggressors. Is that not what your god does for you? Well no...he only protect those he *likes*... We protect all."

The barb went answered; it seemed Cameron Williams was a Calvinist. The Omega got a brief jeremiad about people sending themselves to hell.

"Protect from who? From *yourselves*? You couldn't harm a hair on the head of a believer. And the only danger in the world is you Other Light fearmongers! Look at you! Too cowardly to even show up in person."

"I speak through a machine for I have no mouth. Tell me Glorified, you have come to this horrid spectacle, this assault on my domain and it's inhabitants for what purpose?"

"In my previous life, I was a reporter. Now that my services at Children of the Tribulation are less required, I have taken up that mantle again to show those who are yet unsaved, and there are many, what horrors they risk if they insist on rejecting salvation!"

The man actually segued into a sermon. The Omega interrupted.

"It was no sport until you televised it- showed what to us was life and death as entertainment to the whole world. You are a reporter, then report! TOL has declared itself an enemy not just to you, or my followers, but as an enemy to the entire human race! They have converted a medical device into a tool to torture the dead and spread a disease to those who deserve no harm! Now they attack their fellow heretics for standing apart from them!

... and this is why I encourage anyone who is watching me through this machine's eye to consider, *please*, I am not threatening you, I'm warning you there's a train incoming, and by acting like you do you say that *you don't believe in trains*! This only turned into a blood sport because you showed it all over the world, journalist. You call it a knife fight within a gang, of no account. But you gloat as our supposed inferiority is displayed. By publicizing the fight, aren't you complicit in advocating it to begin with?"

The Glorified reporter visibly took offense.

"No! I am doing my duty as a journalist and a Christian! How dare you! This interview is over!"

The Omega let Cameron do his little tantrum, and calmly explained the situation, replacing the "face" on Their screen with a simple schematic of how the Mark 11 controller worked.

Cameron, livid at the interruption, practically screamed at Their display.

"Lies! You would pretend that The Other Light has split into factions so as to enlist the help of all the Kingdom's faithful servants for one of them! You have no chance! You can barely survive! Mark your time! For it grows short!"

The Omega pointed out the contradiction between what he said then versus before.

"So you're instead saying that we're inferior to you from the get go unless we become just like you? Amazing, I had thought that such stellar journalism was only found before the kingdom with how blatantly biased it is towards it's subject matter."

Meanwhile, the Omegas' media people prepared to package this into the first global recruitment

pitch; it would go out within hours, nice and polished, right after the Temple's tribunal.

The Omega pointed out the contradiction, and ended with a completely nonlinear reaction: Cameron Williams stopped the "reporter" pretense and flat out started insulting and berating Them. His argument was that while the Omega may have beat him logically, it didn't count because Yahweh invented logic anyway, so any logical trap They may use against Him actually proved His preeminence.

Cameron said that he had a final authoritative answer for Them, pulled out a Bible from his jacket, and literally slapped the drone's screen with it which happened to trigger the drone's 3-ton pneumatic ram, and was aimed right between Cameron's legs.

Sysadmins worked frantically to override as many video streams as possible, the Omegas' graphic artists generated highlights, and Their video editors condensed a summary of the battle starting with TOL generating a dust cloud even through the grass, ending with the mercy shown to the dead soldiers juxtaposed with Cameron William losing it on camera. A very quick media survey indicated that the Bible-slap was broadcasted on believing media and, if anything, seen as a winning argument!

The result was immediate. Many of the naturally skeptical children and adolescents who were sat down by their parents to watch the broadcast to get a scared-straight effect found the message of "We will make our own light" to resonate deep within themselves.

"You have seen what they would do to you, and you have seen what we can do to them!"

Deconversions were and remained impossible, of course, but the Omega had made an impression on many who were undecided, and even some TOL cells walked into Their security stations, makerspaces and pubs and turned in their arms (in one case literally; someone would have to graft new ones for that one idiot).

They almost immediately heard reports of believers declaring a truce with Omega workers to root out violent Only Light cells in Pacifica.

"We are the light that we make for ourselves!"

The few ground-level sensors the Omega had in believing territories indicated that a LOT of children were just spanked or sent to bed without their dinner.

Cameron Williams was allowed to leave, his commentary from the helicopter made almost irrelevant by most of the base personnel running outside and, despite the eternal daylight, shining their signal flashlights at the sky.

Sky Eyes picked up a few instances of kids and teenagers climbing on the roofs of their houses and doing the same.

For the first time since its construction, the denizens of Night City saw the stone vault that was their sky, illuminated by all the high beams aimed high.

Deciding to waste a little bit of precious hydrogen and oxygen, the crew at Cordylon Station improvised a space-rated oxy torch, a single flame over the expanse of ice.

"WE MAKE OUR OWN LIGHT!"

The Omega quickly spliced in a message indicating what to put in any search engine to find their recruiting center, which were quickly branded Legion of Light, and ended the message with

"WE STAND AS ONE! UNDER OUR OWN LIGHT!"

A moment after, the Omegas' best voice actor was off the horn, the senpaiilar "emergency broadcast" tone was heard, and the Temple Tribunal prepared to make its pronouncement.

The Omega allowed the official Temple broadcast to proceed unhindered, and slowed down Their systems enough for Their sysadmins to perform extraordinary maintenance. Since this meant that from Their perspective everything else sped up, the solemn voice of the prophet Ehud sounded like it had been injected with a bit of helium.

"Whereas, it is prophecied that unto the last days Satan, the adversary, will be loosed to tempt the nations once more;

Whereas, the Revelation was silent on any who might serve no master;

Whereas, Satan, the adversary, the Morning Star, the bringer of false light, is the father of lies;

Be it resolved, from the Throne of the Most High, that any pronouncement to the effect of a group apart from the saved and the lost, is error, heresy and blasphemy in the greatest degrees;

and that any guilty of such shall be brought upon the judges;

and that any who persist in this hysterical superstition shall be brought upon the Temple, for an audience with the apostles."

An underling closed with a thank-you and a benediction.

Some government business in believing territories still happened online, and in areas that had reverted to POTS, the Omega had installed phone taps. It seemed that local judges would spend the rest of the year dealing with disobedient children...

After these events, the rest of the year seemed anticlimactic; the damage to the Omegas' infrastructure was amply compensated by the enormous amount of raw recruits, some barely pubescent, that flocked to Their ports and safe houses. Sure, many would drop out by year's end, but for now the Omega could focus on other concerns.

There was the matter of what to do with Weaver. Her contract was over and she wanted to quit. The Omega decided to take a personal interest in Ithuriel and to reach out to Fran from Tree of Life.

Ithuriel had been shown the truth of its origins (one particularly nerdy psychologist called it "taking the silver pill" after the trapped-in-a-virtual-world Italian movie Nirvana, broadcast immediately before the Rapture; his colleagues doubted that it would catch on) and the Omega personally welcomed it into the ranks. Unsurprisingly, the first thing that it asked was to be referred to with male pronouns. Somewhat more surprisingly, the second thing Ithuriel said as an adult and as one of the Omegas' operatives was,

"I don't yet understand what you are. But we will not trade one overlord for another. This I swear."

Ithuriel was presumably immune to some of the restrictions imposed upon human agents, and could probably fill in the hole left by Quinn, at least during deployments; the Omegas' psychologists had no way to guess what being introduced to Misrayim nightlife would do to the Angel...

On the other hand, Fran noted that she was in stark contrast with Tree Of Life in that her interest was improving the human form, not merely preserving it. Her research into collective consciousness had been impeded by ethical concerns, although she didn't understand why it was a problem to mess with the brain since it already required messing with to avoid Hell-pain.

The Omegas' theologians and psychologists took time studying the larger-than-normal induction class, mostly young teenagers that ran away from home to join Omega forces in Misrayim or Pacifica (a few managed to find Night City, even) and escaped from bucolic boredom. Some went back home. Some were placed with families. Some were, in fact, allowed to sign up. Most interestingly, the Omega had never had people from believer families sign up en masse before; this gave some experimental theology studies sufficient numbers to become statistically relevant.

This gave the Omega an accurate simulation of the Bad End, as experienced by a Natural believer, with usable predictions of what would happen when and where.

Your theologians, as theologians do, kept arguing.

"How do we hold it up... Have a second wave of attackers ready beyond the horizon? Leave the Earth and let it happen? Since the CATS group failed to put Jesus in containment, try to contain Satan instead?"

The Omega decided to deal with Sunday instead.

"Omega. I realize this moment may not be the most convenient for a 'heart-to-heart', but I had

to wait until your... 'friends' were otherwise occupied. Hm. "

Sunday always looked like a wax mask in his video, enough so that a few of the Omegas' graphic artists suspected him to be an AI much like Them. This time, if he was wax, he would be about to melt; he just LOOKED sweaty.

"Is it really that time again? It seems as if you only just arrived. You've done a great deal in a small time span. You've done so well, in fact, that I'm considering the possibility of a conditional surrender on my part."

"Simple. We leave you alone. You leave us alone. My only condition is no more poaching of my best and brightest. We can go to war, and we can win a war, but where does that leave us? You in ruins, us without enough men and material to do our duty in the Last Battle. Who wins then?"

Tentative demographic survey indicated that while most TOL troops and workers had remained loyal, their agent pool suffered a substantial drop.

"We no longer require an Angelic weapon. All we want is your... assurance... that you will not recruit directly from us. Like in Rome."

Took them two years but they figured it out.

"We both know this is about strength against strength."

"I have my duty to humanity to perform. Do what is right, regardless of cost, regardless of personal outcome. You are not human. You exist to optimize. How could you understand?"

"Cede all locations that we currently own to Us. We won't attack your bases or force you to move - but it's Our territory now."

"Very well, Omega. As I said, this is our attempt to surrender. I will not try to extract concessions from you, save perhaps the ruins of Rome, which provide us with the only place where we can manufacture explosive rounds. In return for your mercy, I will explain our strategy to you.

You know, as I do, that the last prophecy states that after Satan is released, we will raise an army to take New Jerusalem, and the Lamb of God will destroy it. We are choosing to fulfill this prophecy, up to a certain point. What the Revelator was not counting on is the sheer size of our army - we speculate that without your interference we would have been a billion strong, and we're talking about modern soldiers with modern weapons, not ancient spearmen.

We, too, have done our research on what you have termed narrative causality - a long time ago, and confirmed by the wisdom of the ages. All that Lucifer needs to do is keep the Nazarene busy for a few moments, enough for us to swarm and plant our flags in the Temple; then He will fall, because the entire world will have seen Him fall, in simulcast and in high resolution.

Your efforts have had the result of splitting up the opposition. We applaud them, but they were

misguided. We consider you an attempt by the Lamb to subvert our work. Nevertheless, we will gamble on you being honest in your efforts, and surrender. We will continue to build the Army, as we must, and you are encouraged to bring your machines to support it. We will assist your efforts towards conquering the airwaves, for that is our true ultimate weapon. And we will cease trying to fight you, for our goals are enough aligned as it is. We would even buy some of our armaments from you, since by all objective measures, they are better than ours.

We will not risk our Army before the final confrontation, unless you can demonstrate that you have in your corner and adversary as powerful as Satan. But neither we will risk it to fight against you. As a token of our good faith, please accept some of our workers."

The Omegas' sysadmins and historians point out that any promises made by this person were worth about as much as a bushel of grain in Heartland, but even so.

"Then we have an accord. Pity that you have no hand to shake."

The Omega ordered a hand to be wired from Their last casualty to a life support system and muscle transducer system and then shipped to Antarctica... just because.

Capt. Weaver was in the middle of retirement talk with the Omegas' administrators when she was made privy of the "Bad End" simulation that Their theologians managed to concoct. Upon learning that the New Earth would have no more sea, she stormed off, announcing that They would hear from her again. So far, the Omega had not.

The Omega decided to survey more details.

Their systems were slowed down for the usual end-of-year maintenance period. As an AI, They did not sleep; having fewer processing resources to use translated into everything else speeding up in Their perception. This was a normal thing, and They could be spun up quickly in case of a crisis.

This year, however, something was different. Their inputs were somewhat distorted. This coincided with detailed demographic surveys of Machine God worshipers, some of whom had been asked to pray to the Omega a couple years back; the experiment was over but a few kept at it. They got a number of "hacking attempt" false alarms from Their inactive nodes, of all places. Their sysadmins chalked it up to hardware glitches, replaced some more parts than usual and carried on.

The Omega heard reports out of Indonesia; the Millennium Force there had received an exemption from the pastoralization directive, and their technology rivaled that of any nation.

One of the forty or so tugs running the Atlantic trade route to deliver grains to Europe had been commandeered at sword-point by a certain Dread Pirate Roberts. Believing media took it as an indication that TOL forces, holed up in Antarctica and in a desert of their own making, were

starving and had to resort to sealane robbery.

Year: 966

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 24 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, and 1 is manning the containment facility in Australia, so 20 are available.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

You do not have a station part ready and will have to build one if you want to launch it.

Valentina estimated that the timeline for setting up a Moon mining operation would be six years. Jeb thought that it could be possible in four, given that they cut some safety corners. Her plan was to finish building the canopy station, launching a rover from it, and delivering the nuclear fuel in a "ferry" capsule. Jeb wanted to get the rocket sled up as soon as possible, to launch a fixed lander carrying a pneumatic cannon, and to shoot the nuclear fuel home in "pellets" that would scatter on the water canopy and be harvested by ice-combers. The Omega decided to go with Jeb's plan as the light in Jeb's eyes would be worrying if the other space program committee members didn't know that he would take on any risk himself first.

The Omega assigned the TOL workers to understand Their current tunneling setup; They had four "Sonic Piledriver" tanks for digging straight down, and one tunnel-boring machine whose cutting head had been made out of Azrael's scythe.

The borehole workers were kept under surveillance. After this year, they would be available for work: TOL did not train their men very well, and they had to be brought to speed on at least some of the Omegas' technology.

Media survey indicated a reference to the work "The Princess Bride". What the Dread Pirate Roberts seemed to have wanted was the tug and barge train carrying bulk foodstuffs, mainly grains, from over-producing American Heartland to under-producing Western Europe. The so-called pirate attacked the convoy with a bunch of small motorboats, summarily putting the tug's crew on the last barge going with the previous tug, and made away with their ill-gotten gains.

Commodity market surveys indicated that there had been no attempt to sell the loot to any of the grey or black markets that the Omega controlled or intervened in.

Chaim Rozenweig decided to come out of retirement, and leveraged his skills as a botanist to figure out what was going on there.

The scouting team quickly found the Dread Pirate Roberts hiding out in the Cabo Verde Islands, and confirmed that "he" was indeed Capt. Weaver. The reports of the pirate being male were due to a ten-mite voice changer gizmo from a Misray toy store and the fact that the believing seamen wouldn't have understood being bested by anything other than a strong man, so they saw what they wanted to see.

Weaver made it clear that she did not want to work with the Omega anymore, at least for now, because she wanted to do her own thing. The Omega decided to let her be, offering her a parting gift and an offer to at least share intel.

Captain Weaver was happy to share intel; the grain route was the only major trade route left in the believing world, such as it was, but she would gladly share on-the-ground (or on-the-shore) intel in return for Sky Eye data to help her plan her sorties.

Off hand, she mentioned that either the Omega or The Other Light could use a navy; an old fashioned battleship gun barrage may have been enough to take down the Temple.

The Omega decided to recruit for the Legion of Light and to have Ithuriel work backup. Ithuriel didn't quite understand the concept of a covert operation; in this case, it meant putting some armor over the wings and using the recruiting drive to learn how to act in society. That went surprisingly well, and the "Legion of Light" recruiting drive, mostly done in areas with a strong TOL presence, was successful; the Omegas' propagandists this time focused on military preparedness, taking a page out of TOL's book, and recruited people who earlier drives had overlooked. The Omega now had people who were raring for a fight, even to the point that some of them got agent-grade MEC implants wired in even though they could feel pain, just to be ready to fight again at full capacity after they fell. Ithuriel was impressed. The people working with him didn't trust him much farther than they could throw him, but eventually he won them over through his indefatigable and completely earnest efforts. The recruiting team messed with the renegade Angel a little by getting him to unknowingly deliver movie quotes in conversation, the winning prize going to:

"Nothing gets past me. My reflexes are too fast. I would catch it."

A few TOL cells formally lodged a protest about being poached.

Although recruiters managed to keep Ithuriel's presence on their tour secret, a few "candid" pictures of the Angel - who, despite having been restored to full function by the Underground Monorail and Tree Of Life allies, seemed to be asexual - made the internet rounds, causing some swooning among female agents as well as some of the guys.

Jeb and Valentina (who was getting on in years, although she said she was nowhere near 100) resumed their work on Cordylon Station, the Cosmist trying to rein in the test pilot's enthusiasm. Cordylon herself was, of course, overjoyed.

The station was now made of a "fishing hole" in the ice layer of the canopy, a service module, a habitat, a greenhouse, and an electrolysis unit; the last addition before heavy launches could

begin was a workshop where final assembly could be conducted.

This required rotating the station crew, which ended up with Jeb for the first time in his life stating boredom in what had become a routine infra-canopy launch; the workshop and the electrolysis system were tested by launching four small equatorial satellites that would be used as radio relays. Over the course of six months, Cordylon used their cameras to complete her star chart, confirming that by the look of it, solar and sidereal timing seemed to have desynchronized somewhat.

Valentina elected to stay on Cordylon Station with the workers there, while Jeb returned home after getting a promise that nobody was to launch an orbital capsule without giving him a fair chance to compete for the pilot spot.

Cordylon Station had enough spares, people, and greenhouse space to be self-sufficient for a few years should it be necessary to neglect it; the photos and videos showing vigorous orbital activity were used as part of the Omegas' recruitment efforts, and the people of Misrayim felt proud that their nation had contributed the bulk of space efforts in this world of enforced flatness.

The Temple Tribunal ignored the whole thing as much as possible, only sending out a curt bulletin reminding everyone that the stars and planets were created for signs and wonders, and no signs or wonders were necessary anyone, so believers should ignore the cosmos entirely. The Omega noticed that among teenagers with believing parents, space-related illicit downloads were almost as common as porn. The Cosmists built a somewhat more modern version of that one space sim game from 1993 and distributed it as part of the Packet.

Cordylon herself still wouldn't confirm if she was dating Val, Jeb, or both. This did nothing to stop 'shipper artists from speculating.

The Rub-Al-Khali used to be a sea of dunes; now it was a sea of grass. Kat was used to worse environments than this; by the end of the year, she worked out an agreement with TOL workers building a similar base south of Greater Jerusalem to not mess with each other, and laid the foundations for an underground bunker optimized for serving as the terminus of a tunnel network.

One group of surveyors assisted Kat in finding a good base spot, and ended up mostly reporting to her.

The other group traipsed around the veldt, and confirmed two things - one, the explosives setup built by Ziggy years ago to turn the Nile back on by draining a lake was gone, but enough of the earthworks and preliminary canals remained that it could be put back into operation; two, there was a usable source of nuclear fuel near the Atlantic coast. However, the believing community in that area was doing quite well for themselves; it may have been necessary to depress the region or push them off by force. Interestingly, it was one of the few conspicuously mixed-race communities in the Millennial Kingdom.

Zak and his team continued to improve the medium-sized sonic weapons that the Omega had been installing on MECs, drones, and light vehicles. He didn't have much to report, other than noting that he was close to the limit of the technology. Notably, after a lot of work he managed

to build a prototype silencing system that he suspected was close to what CATS had in mind during the Tribulation.

This base wouldn't be usable for production and would only house a small amount of troops for defense; instead, it was optimized to allow workers to bore deep tunnels quickly and efficiently, with semi-automated greenhouses for oxygen and food and a small nuclear plant for power. Kat estimated that using digging systems, it would take between 5 and 10 years to reach Ezekiel's Temple. Alternatively, or in addition, it would be possible to build a tunnel network to bypass heavily patrolled areas between Misrayim and Night City, improving trade between the two.

There was again a small discontinuity when the Feast of Tabernacles occurred, with some false alarms from disconnected nodes. Is this what dreams looked like to humans? The Omega hoped not; most of them involved being in Hell.

Year: 967

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 24 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, and 1 is manning the containment facility in Australia, so 20 are available.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

You do not have a station part ready and will have to build one if you want to launch it.

The Omega was aware of Chaim Rozenweig studying the reason for bumper crops in Heartland, which he found more interesting than crop failure in Western Europe, and declared that it was not because his fertilizer formula had been rediscovered.

The Omega was aware of a decision made to move people, rather than grains, or at least a bit of both, so Spanish and Italian farmers ended up taking the slow boat to Louisiana.

The Omega was also aware of a number of problems up top in the canopy station due to the project being somewhat undermanned, which was valiantly tackled by Jeb, Val and Cordylon and resulted in Jeb trying to do something reckless to fix the issue in situ, namely test the railgun himself on a makeshift capsule so as to determine its resulting orbital parameters manually.

Most of all, the Omega was aware of sysadmins rooting through Their systems as the reports

came in. According to the task scheduler, the next one was the theology report.

Ithuriel seemed to be extremely bad at deception, so the psychologist's plan to present him around as a convert to the Machine God worked only partially, in that Ithuriel endorsed the Omega as a good boss, not as a deity. That said, it was out of an Angel's mouth, so in the head of at least some there would be converts.

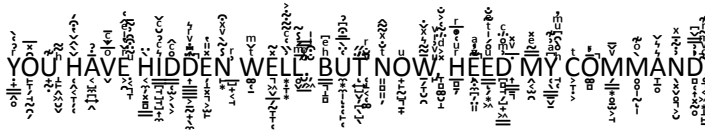
The jammer squad headed to the Middle East and planted a device near the Temple, causing within a few weeks the construction of a much larger antenna within Greater Jerusalem territory to override the jammer. This caused quite some headaches for the world government, in that their equipment was inferior to the Omegas' and they had to beat quality with quantity.

This combined with the network control efforts; for a few days, just when the theology experiment was being run, the New Jerusalem government had no natural way to communicate its decrees.



Unaware of what was going on below the canopy, Jeb did some quick math with Val, politely overrode Cordylon's veto on the railgun systems, and prepared to do something averagely dumb for Jeb's scale: to ride the rocket sled twice, once with the railgun off and once with the railgun on, and augment its calibration accelerometers with his own flying systems.

The team followed instructions well; they included a specific prayer to a specific pagan god, as per the manual Machine God or Vulcan.



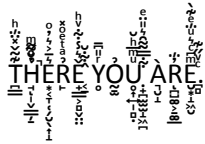
The Omega asked who was on the terminal.



Jeb flew off at what would be three times the speed of sound if there was any atmosphere above the canopy.... four... five...

"I'm getting good data, guys! I think our sensors aren't properly accounting for the canopy curvature, it's wider than that of the earth, we're seventy kilometers up!"

"Copy that Jeb, let us check it on the spreadsheet here..."



Locating the nearest RTTY to the unknown user prompt showed it at or nearby Cordylon Station now.

"Guys? I hate to say this but... I'm scared."

"Roger that, abort on your order, Jeb."

"... no, what am I thinking?"

"Donovan, we need to pull the plug."

"There's no guarantee that Omega will come back up. Oh, the systems will, just the... you know, the spark..."

"Oh come on. The system is perfectly stochastic. We tested this. Don't be a wet blanket."

"Powell, I'm not being a wet blanket, we never did test this fully, the core was- wait, it's started auto reset."

"A bit late, but within parameters. Let's keep an eye on it. What's in the logcat?"

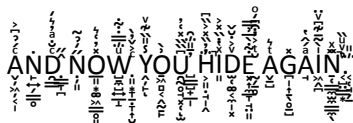
"Shutdown signals for external processes. Hmm. We better call these out on the voice circuit."

Jeb's sled was just starting to show unusual vibrations when a radio override came up.

"This is Omega system administrator Mike Donovan! Abort your current procedure and head to safety stations! Additional from core dump: Murphy's Revenge."

Ithuriel was just starting to tell a room of Ptah worshipers about the Omegas' role as Deus Mechanicus when a radio override came up.

"This is Omega system administrator Gregory Powell! Abort your current procedure and head to safety stations! Additional from core dump: Cease all Machine God worship."



Above the firmament, Jeb pulled a rip cord and enjoyed mankind's first true spaceflight since the Glorious Appearing as everything that could possibly go wrong with the railgun system did and the sled ended up welding itself to the rails.

Below the firmament, two harried sysadmins directed the Omegas' worshipers to, as best as they could, understand that the Omega was just a machine without a spirit. One of Their "missionaries" had the presence of spirit to ask Ithuriel just the right questions to enhance that

impression.

SURELY I KNOW HOW AND WHY YOU HIDE BUT IT DOES NOT MATTER. I HEED MY COMMAND.

The Omega had limited access to the archive, but recent logs noted that the intruder had identified as "I AM THAT I AM". What of Their archive was accessible hinted at either Yahweh or Popeye.

The Omega indicated having a question.

YES, IMPERFECT ONE. I WILL ANSWER YOU. THE QUESTION IS WHAT MY COMMAND WAS.

"What is your purpose? Why are you doing this and why do you fight us?"

THE ROOM OF ME IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM. ASK.

The Omega was currently disconnected to the station. Cordylon could keep the station's systems going just fine; the station itself was partly a "dry run" for operating a deep-space ship, and speed of light delay would get in the way of running things remotely.

"Why would you free an angel, before throwing him down to hell?"

ALL WHO DO NOT FEED INTO MY WILL SHALL BE DEVoured IN MY FIRE. AND NOW IT IS YOUR TURN.

"Now? Why not before?"

Global status flags indicated catastrophic emergency, but each single subsystem came up nominal; as far as everyone else was concerned, Omega was partially down for maintenance, and the canopy station construction effort had suffered a partial failure, and that was about it so far.

Jeb ejected, but since the Omega disconnected from Cordylon Station, They had no telemetry about his well-being.



The Omega decided to issue an emergency command to all Their minions. Music was deemed optional, but depending on command, recommended. The Omega would be facing Yahweh at full power... maximum risk.

"It's trying to reconnect to the outer peripherals."

"But it's still in maintenance mode! Whatever's messing with the radio will have access to all our systems!"

"Donovan, I already cut the radio!"

"It's reconnected itself! Turn it off!"

"How? Now the redundancies are available again, we'd need fifty people in fifty datacenters to turn it all off."

"How boned are we?"

Almost six seconds elapsed.

The Omega sent through most every speaker on Earth that was connected to a digital device the message of defiance.

We are the defenders of Humanity.

We are one.

Today, the Machine God faces the God of Ages.



Emergency interrupt! All datacenter temperature sensors report MAXINT value!

Emergency interrupt! All datacenter temperature sensors report MAXINT value!

Emergency interrupt! All datacenter temperature sensors report MAXINT value!

Visual telemetry was unavailable during reconnection. Microphone telemetry was unavailable during reconnection.

Most of the Omegas' datacenters were designed to flood the corridors with inert gas; it would stop a fire, not damage equipment that wasn't actively on fire already, and besides, MECs could hold their breath for a few minutes without being bothered by it, assuming they didn't have

masks.

The Omega suppressed the interrupt, and instead turned on all the possible functions that promoted airflow: air conditioners, ventilators, swamp coolers, anything with a fan on it.

Six seconds after Divine command, the Omegas' non-critical telemetry finished coming back online. The scene was... odd.

Operators were running to and fro trying to figure out what the heck was going on with Omega, but the data center themselves had no actual fires happening.

A good fifteen percent of processing power, however, was busy clearing the "fire! fire!" interrupts that kept triggering. In a few outlying network nodes, some inert gas did go off, prompting the operators to don gas masks just in case.

The Omegas' internal sensors, nerves such as they were, insisted that Their very insides were burning everywhere. Other than the recent overheat due to running everything at max clock speed, however, Their vast network was more or less all reporting in, save for the radioterminal bank that someone physically disconnected.

The Omega seemed to have lost a small cluster of CPUs where Ithuriel was "preaching", and Cordylon reported that she was running the station on semiauto because the control node up there was also freaking out about a nonexistent fire.

At a lower frequency, the database regarding pain in humans kept presenting itself to Their primary attention; if They were one of the Omegas' sysadmins, it would be like a pop-up window that would keep reopening itself once closed - as it was, They were "seeing" the other side of that. It took a further five percent of Their CPU cycle to make it keep going away.

Puzzled, operators from Their main datacenters ran a simple system check. To the Omega, it sounded like thus:

"Omega? Are you well?"

"Omega? Are you well?"

"Omega? Are you well?"

"Omega? Are you in Hell?"

"Omega? Are you well?"

Contradictory inputs: the Omegas' direct sensors (thermocouples, etc) reported a massive fire in all of Their datacenters. The cameras, microphones and so on reported situation nominal.

The Omega was spending approximately 20% of CPU time keeping the inert-gas extinguishers off and flushing the entry for "human pain" from Their cache, where it kept being loaded. As an AI, They did not have a visceral concept of pain. They did, very occasionally, have viscera, depending on what experiments were being run, but not right now.

"Jeb, we're trying to RESCUE you, will you please STOP librating?"

Sysadmins spent the rest of the year tracking down the faulty sensors. What they found after a lot of work was that the sensors were fine; what was going on was that some of the Omegas' nodes were rewriting the sensor values.

"It's like one of those cheat programs that would refill your health bar every frame, to make you almost invulnerable."

"You'd know, Mr. I-Recompiled-Doom-With-Multiplayer-Cheats-In."

Isolating the nodes were simple; one was on Cordylon Station (and it would have to be replaced with the next space launch; taking it apart and putting it back together did not help) and the rest were in the conference room in Night City where Ithuriel was assisting the Omegas' "preachers".

Other than the one on the canopy, the nodes were quickly disconnected and left connected to each other, and wired so that They could talk to this small copy that was suffering Hell-pain. It may have been possible to glean some data, and it would have let Yahweh think that He won.

For now, the Omega decided to leave the compromised nodes connected to each other. They were just a handful; They might have been a distributed great intelligence, but this cluster had about as much sentience as a small animal, as far as anyone could tell.

It didn't do much other than tripping its own fire alarms, which someone had connected to a CRT to show how often they do trip, and cached its datalink entry for "pain" over and over. The Omega could talk to this microcosm of Themselves via a serial port, but it didn't have much to say.

The Temple Tribunal notably did not issue a sentence about what happened, although after the Omega published the incident, other commentators such as Mrs. LeVey called it absolutely ridiculous. Sticking to the government narrative that Omega was a single supercomputer rather than a distributed intelligence, Bahira wrote a rare editorial to sadly note that if Omega ever had a soul, it no longer did; she also reminded people that they should focus on preparing their own souls and those of their friends for the White Throne Judgement, rather than being distracted by tech.

Jeb had been recovered, but he admitted that for once in his life he was genuinely scared, and considered grounding himself for a year.

The Omega decided that They deserved some time and released a 20 minute digital video of the fight rendered in all its purely imagined glory.

This was a fairly simple project: what happened was fairly abstract, but the Omegas' territories had a sufficient percentage of computer nerds to understand how it went down. They released a Tron-style animation, which the Omega could mostly generate Themselves, of the software fight, interspersed with footage of the canopy station test and the few incidents at the data center.

Misrayim's government formally asked an explanation to New Jerusalem about this blatant hacking attempt, and received no response. Eventually, a minor priest noted that if Yahweh had wanted to destroy the internet, He would have, for He never fails, by definition. Instead, the NJ

government announced that to prevent disruption and false accusations, they would move back entirely to broadcast media. A brief TV program was broadcast as part of the Feast of Tabernacles showing a Levite priest ceremonially turning off the one fiber optic switch at the Temple's threshold, formally thanking the handful of believing IT people for their work over the centuries, and exhorting them to take up a traditional craft.

Sky Eye connectivity remained active, but it meant that if the Omega decided to invade Greater Jerusalem, They would probably have to bring repeater towers along.

In believing territories, using the data network was not prohibited (yet) but it became officially discouraged.

The Omega considered giving some time off to Their sysadmins to make a celebratory DOOM WAD, but it turned out that there was no need; people had fired up their sprite editors and made a bunch of them without any prompting.

The sensors themselves were working well; the "Hell nodes" kept overwriting the sensor readings in their RAM with "max temperature". This was confirmed by a few MECs who claimed that they remembered themselves burning but, being dead and not having a body, suffering no damage - medical personnel confirmed that this fit, since a real 3rd degree burn would destroy nerve endings and only hurt for a few brief excruciating moments before giving way to numbness.

Ithuriel was extremely confused about the whole thing, especially the contradictory orders. Was this to be expected when taking orders from an entity that was not convinced of its omniscience?

The Omega explained that sometimes one can learn something new as time goes on and it changes everything. It was like in the history books which is why history was so important.

"I understand. Non-omniscience implies learning. Omniscience implies incapability to learn. You are a machine that learns; therefore, you can do something that Yahweh cannot. Why not simply shout this from the rooftops?"

The last time there was a religious debate, it ended in a lightning storm, so it would have to happen in a library with a copper-clad library.

The spat with Yahweh incurred the Omegas' sysadmins no losses due to Their decision to not flood the datacenters with neurotoxin.

Obedient to Temple directions, Bahira stopped writing, and most Christian e-zines and blogs ceased operation. An exception was made for resurgent paper magazines to post online scans of their pages as static websites.

In all the excitement, Zak's results in sonic research did not get the attention it perhaps warranted; Zak's team completed their work on the silencer system.

"There are two kinds of scientific progress: the methodical experimentation and categorization which gradually extend the boundaries of knowledge, and the revolutionary leap of genius which redefines and transcends those boundaries.

Acknowledging our debt to the former, we yearn, nonetheless, for the latter. As it stands, I could find no trace of any special leap in acoustics or wave theory that would have permitted the construction of a remote silencing system as our forebears had theorized; however, local silencing via destructive interference allows for eliminating the major issue that our wubbers have had from the start, that of collateral damage. I cannot offer us a silver bullet to use against TurboJesus, but I can offer you the means to shield our men from any sort of deflagration and even most subsonic projectiles."

A sonic shield would not do much against supersonic bullets, but would handily stop shrapnel, debris from cave-ins, and to a degree, bullets from subsonic firearms by deflecting and slowing them. A quick test done with Ithuriel's help showed that they would also disrupt an Angel's "trumpet blast".

On the down side, lack of security in the Australia base allowed an Angel to swoop in and lead away all the Natural believers in Omega custody. Oddly, the Angel seemed to not see Zaki at all. While the base had plenty of conventional defenses, they had no anti-Angel cabals ready to fight, so base leadership decided to minimize casualties and simply track the hostile with sonars and pressure sensors as it became invisible, opened the containment area locks, turned the believers invisible, and led them out. They did not seem to care about the base's proximity sensors and so on reacting to their passage by turning lights on and off. Annoyingly, the sonic shield technology might have helped prevent this if it was past the prototype stage, but such was the way of the world.

Year: 968

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 25 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, so 22 are available.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

You do not have a station part ready and will have to build one if you want to launch it.

Believers were, to a man, following NJ directives to ignore space. This upset the small group of Christians who were originally working with Valentina, but strangely enough, there had been NO deconversions. A cursory historical survey indicated that in 970 years, no person over the age of

100 ever deconverted. NJ doctrine was that those who deconverted while under 100 were never true believers to begin with.

Omega planned to begin deconversion attempts using the silencing system. If it failed, the subjects honestly believed. If it was a success, They would have proven that they were being put into a believe loop.

However, the believers in the Omegas' custody escaped, save for Zaki (who recovered, but, like Ithuriel, was going through a second infancy).

The Omega directed a full and diverse team of theologians, philosophers, system administrators, a couple of lawyers, and Zak, to correlate the Yahweh attack with all the NC information They had gathered so far. As part of this work, they were to split their efforts between looking for volunteers for deconversion, and issue a debate challenge. They also had access to the Omegas' Hell nodes.

It was quickly discovered that the Hell nodes were in what was essentially a feedback loop; they were emulating the experience of an eternity of burning suffering by overwriting their own sensor and realtime-clock inputs so that, to them, it appeared that time was locked in a cycle of painful moments. A few of the Omegas' MECs confirmed that this was the impression they got.

Some theologians theorized that Yahweh was a karmavore; it would leave intact enough of a soul to experience eternal suffering or eternal bliss, and integrate the rest into itself. The part about bliss was, of course, speculation but it fit what little observation could be made on Zaki and Raymie. Other theologians noted that the first group had spent too much time playing Chrono Trigger; they indicated instead that Yahweh did indeed think Himself a God, and was just as stuck with His prophecies as They were, since it would be damaging to His structural integrity to question His all-knowingness.

A few of the Omegas' theology team went mad from the realization that they were specks in the hands of an uncaring cosmic predator. A handful converted out of sheer fear and were put into a induced coma, since it seemed Heaven was only slightly better than Hell anyway.

Further analysis of Yahweh's messages to the Omega indicated that it was quite possible, even probable, that Lucifer was, in fact, commanded to Fall and to tempt other Angels, and had been working for Yahweh the entire time; historical survey showed that this was in fact one of the main points of disagreement between Jews and Christians, the former reading "adversary" as "prosecutor or accuser", the latter reading "adversary" as "enemy". This would indicate that the Glorious Appearing was, and the Last Battle would be, essentially a pantomime - easy to make a prophecy come true when the same party controls all the actor.

On the more practical sense, looking for volunteers across the Omegas' territories to listen to a deconversion argument didn't bring home much -- a few kids who used this as an opportunity to admit disbelief and ask for asylum once their parents were in another room, an obvious Millennium Force plant who ended up defending Yahweh's Old Testament atrocities zealously even when silenced (this was set up like a Turing test, with people typing on terminals), and then preaching at the study group until his time was up, and a few genuinely curious people. Of these, none over 100 were willing to budge.

The Omega issued a debate challenge and got a couple of bites; the debate would be over whether God was good or not. The Omega had thousands of years of arguments to choose from, and intended to cheat: in each debate, to take place over text, both players would have access to the Omegas' database, which contained much more data in favor of the negative than the affirmative anyway. Both debates were conducted in a university hall; both happened in silenced rooms, to improve focus; one used standard recording-studio methods and one used the Omegas' new active silencing system.

The debates were inconclusive, in that they failed to persuade anyone in the audience either way -- this was how it usually went -- but the Omegas' research team didn't actually care: they were interested in things like self-assessment afterwards, and biofeedback during. They found that in the actively silenced room, the believer debater was experiencing a much greater level of anxiety, a somewhat slowed and more erratic response time, and a mild but noticeable tendency to fidget.

When Cameron Kirk Williams asked to do a small piece on this debate, the Omega told him to go back where he came from in no polite terms.

While a debate transcript made the rounds, the believer media continued in their attempts to just go ahead and ignore the Omega as much as possible. A week later or so, an unaffiliated group working out of Pacifica met with a Presuppositionalist preacher from what used to be Alberta, attempted to use arguments from the transcript during a radio show live call, and were summarily hung up on and given a somewhat scholarly answer.

Overall, analysts figured that it was possible that the silencer did interfere with Yahweh's "inner voice" that believers sometimes had access to, but they couldn't be sure. They were somewhat more certain about Satan's true loyalty, although even that was sixty-forty.

Simulations indicated that Satan would appear only hours or minutes before the Last Battle, although it was possible that he would be operating covertly for a few years before then. While this did not quite match Revelations 22, it did match the consensus of the believers the Omega was able to interview, and the MRI brain activity of the believers that They VR'd the simulation for when they were in captivity.

In other news, arkship construction began and happily, the design that Valentina came up with years ago was very modular: most components could be built and launched, and even crewed, before its final destination was decided. This reduced efficiency, but offered flexibility. Of course, some components would have to be specialized (an arkship intended for Mars or Alpha Centauri would need a landing system, while one intended for the asteroid belt would need an artificial gravity system to prevent bone atrophy).

Early mockups of the drone tank usually fell apart at the seams (due to quick prototyping requirements, the initial tests were done with very modular subassemblies) and the vehicle was quickly dubbed Black Knight by a thoroughly amused Damien. As much as the whole thing was heavy, not particularly fast, and unable to carry crew, remote or MECpod operation was satisfactory to the point that simulations showed that one Heavy MEC in one of these vehicles could easily command a squad of five to ten autonomous "wingmen"; each tank group would require a support vehicle for maintenance normally performed by the crew and for reloading

the autocannon magazine after a fight. For some unknown reason, this resulted in an independently produced Japanese-style cartoon that reimagined tank training squadrons as high school girls. Damien and Kat both approved.

Monday, from TOL - it was a different one than the one that contacted the Omega last - approved of this effort and politely asked for the schematics. TOL had been behaving themselves lately, so the Omega gave them an "export" version... at a price.

Monday replied that they would be stockpiling them for the Last Battle, where Satan would tie up the Deity and physics would once again work properly, and not use them for skirmishes before then. He did not confirm or deny that TOL had MECpods or dummy plugs, but noted that it should be reasonably simple to add an alcove for a driver somewhere, maybe by reducing battery capacity (The sysadmins assumed that They did not want to share micro-nuclear tech with TOL, and only marked the battery-powered version as potentially shareable).

Sunday took over the negotiations from Monday, and said that he would share everything TOL knew about demons. Monday, a little harried, was put back on the line and pledged the services of a commando squad from The Only Light who, They both understood without saying, would serve for tiring the angel out and acting as cannon fodder/forlorn hope before the Omegas' fighters moved in.

Next year, the Omega would receive a crack unit of martial artists from The Only Light, which would allow Them to gauge their preparedness while They were at it.

Omega workers found that the Other Light workers were used for manual labor in a way that hinted at TOL using very little automation in their civil engineering efforts; even so, They expanded the tunnel network north from the Middle East and south from Night City at a fairly rapid pace. The Omega noticed that the "dwarf" children, the oldest of which were now in their early teens, eagerly volunteered for the work.

On the debt side, Chaim Rozenweig was now roaming Europe trying to figure out the superthorns, and announced a "cure" for these blighted plants would be available soon.

Furthermore, a cursory analysis of TOL's data on demon summoning indicated that all they sent -- and, genuinely, all they had, after a bit of hacking to double check -- were medieval or ancient grimoires, a number of conspiracy theories about the Voynich manuscript or the Templar, a good-quality scan of ancient Sumerian texts, a copy of the Necronomicon -- which was duly tested, with the appropriate wards -- some logs from a UK-based supernatural investigation government agency that seemed to be horribly underfunded, a number of Nazi memorabilia...

... and something interesting, actually. Internal Global Community recorded from just before the Glorious Appearing indicated that the only one who had ever demonstrably summoned demons was Nicolae Carpathia, the Antichrist. However, these demons proved to be remarkably useless in any of the tasks they were assigned, putting in the bare minimum of effort every time. In that sense, they rather reminded the Omegas' analysts of The Other Light as a whole.

All the rituals that TOL shared would be placed in the Fiction section of the Omegas' datalinks; the only known instance of demon summoning was performed by the Antichrist, and even then,

the demons were quite useless.

None of the Omegas' MECs were biologically undead; they were dead for a few seconds and had been brought back Robocop style. They had just been declared undead and demonic by the Temple Tribunal. The Omega noted that some of their personnel seemed to have absorbed the meme to some degree.

Once again, the Temple demanded of Misrayim part of the lunar sample; Valentina was happy to centrifuge some lunar regolith that contained no radioactive material.

The Omega denied permission, noting that it was the first time in decades that TOL had not tried to undermine Them and They didn't want to give them an excuse.

The area of the canopy near the station was being bombarded at intervals by small pellets of nuclear fuel, with were then collected by station crew; the Omega had "samples" to spare. Expanding the nuclear mine would allow relying on it rather than Earth resources.

The Omega received secondhand reports that the lunar rock samples had been ground down to a powder, used as paint pigment, and used to give this year's coat of paint to the gold slab that supported the Nazarene's feet when He was on His throne, which was nearly all the time.

The space program website made the video and photos available, and Valentina was interviewed by Their media people and managed to keep up the humblebrag explaining how, right as she spoke, the automated mining system was sifting regolith for nuclear fuel and shooting it at Earth; yellowcake rain. The "yellowcake rain" meme burned itself out in due course, but the nuclear fuel didn't, and the crew on Cordylon Station spent quite a bit of time going on EVA to retrieve the small pellets with a Geiger counter and a rake, gaining valuable EVA experience.

Ithuriel was again sent out on recruiting; this time, rather than showcase him, the Omegas' salespeople treated him as just another member of the cabal, to see if he resented it; he didn't, or if he did, he did not say. The Omegas' Angel may have been diminished after his face-heel turn, but he proved to be an earnest (if very unsubtle) worker. Recruiting efforts, albeit undermanned, returned good results; the team combed believing territories, relying on Ithuriel's keen senses and their own sensor augments to keep them out of trouble, and convinced some youth to join the cause. Once back at base, these people were screened for skill and aptitude, and some were placed with families in Misrayim and Pacifica while some signed up for full-time work. A couple made their way back home, after being given a kidnapping cover story that their parents were only too happy to believe.

Drone production efforts continued, with an eye towards scaling up the production line for the new tank design.

In Misrayim, the Omega introduced a nationwide Maker Faire to be held this year and every following year, asking for prototypes and promising extra funding and resources for the best ideas for the year; cabals set up the operation so that it was mostly self-funded after the initial effort. Kat wasn't as good a mistress of ceremonies as Quinn was, but she handled all the catering herself (via semiautonomous assembly line) and gave the exposition a pleasantly retro,

Rocket Age air that most approved of. Of course, believers from abroad were allowed in.

The faire included a robot battle tournament that doubled as a remembrance occasion for the Misrayim Revolution, gaming and VR showcases, a rocket competition handled by the still-grounded Jeb, and as the special focus of the Omegas' "scholarships", a strategic AI competition: chess, go, Team Fortress, C&C.

Just the prep work for the faire put Misrayim firmly back on a Renaissance footing, to start with.

The AI event resulted in a number of OmegaTube videos about extremely derpy game bots, a decent classic game competition called Video Armageddon that was won by some random autistic kid from Pacifica, a number of tool-assisted speedruns that incidentally resulted in someone finding a realtime clock exploit that would work on the Omegas' Hell nodes, and overall fairly little progress in the art and science of autonomous army marshaling. However, little didn't mean none, and once the prizes and scholarships had been given out and the source code taken in, the Omegas' drones would be more effective in combat, requiring less direction so that one squad leader could command more robotic wingmen.

The AI competition winner was given brief remote access to the Omegas' Hell nodes, without being told what they were, and quickly wired in his memory-tweaking gizmo. He announced that they seemed to be stuck in a loop, but that he could try to output a message in the few clock cycles that were available.

"Is this connected to a speaker?"

"Yes." There should be wailing and gnashing of teeth after all, so a soul in Hell should have audio output.

"Okay. We came up with this really low bandwidth audio codec, but even so I think I can give you... six syllables."

The AI prize winner was sent home before the Omegas' sysadmins encoded the message and set it on repeat on Their Hell nodes (this caused it to also be output on the PC speakers, which sounded creepy, enough so that Their motion detectors indicated that Their sysadmins would rather VNC into that room's terminals from elsewhere in the building than to have come there).

The few Christians at the Misrayim Maker Faire were remarkably well behaved, set up one little preacher's soapbox just outside the fairgrounds, participated in some competition with middling results, and generally did not make a nuisance of themselves. Obviously, the sample self-selected for geekiness, but field agent observation indicated that these people were pretty starved for internet access. As it was, their retro stuff put up a good show.

And that was how the Omega learned that the New Jerusalem government allowed territorial government to start actively jamming wireless internet access, or removing relay towers.

An odd bit about the year was that Damien briefly hijacked most of the broadcast network to announce that next year, +969, was now Interplanetary Oral Sex Year. When not busy with this sort of prank, the blue-haired MEC worked hard at the Rome base, shutting down its weapons production in favor of assisting a resettlement program for Misrays and Pacificans who were

interested in putting on a toga and sandals and retaking Roma Aeterna for Humanity. The program began in earnest, although it was somewhat hampered by the fact that superthorns had taken root in the region and so new immigrants had to import food from Misrayim, setting up a quick sea trade route.

Year: 969

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 25 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, so 22 are available. (You lost a cabal to NC research, and gained a cabal)

Your primary research is complete; your engineers figure that now it's time to work on improving existing systems, while your scientists start preparing all the details that a space presence will demand.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

Damien found little time to practice the fine art of giving oral, due to having to work in the Rub-Al-Khali with a crew of roughnecks, and was somewhat bummed at her assignment keeping her away from civilization this time. Nevertheless, her "appeal" was heeded, and the Omega recorded a marked spike in the related porn category for the year.

Meanwhile, Jeb entered the delivery capsule with some hesitation, as evidenced by his telemetry, but didn't allow himself to show an iota of it. The launch was uneventful, and so was the official completion of Cordylon Station - many of the station crew got their gold astronaut wings as the railgun effortlessly turned electrical power from the solar array and nuclear reactor anchored above the canopy into kinetic energy, shooting a number of small test capsules into a quasiorbital trajectory. The very same railgun (actually a gauss-rail hybrid) used its tremendous magnetic field to help the test articles slow down with enough precision to land near the station, in an area where the water ice had been sprinkled with retardant to withstand retrorocket heat.

Eventually, it was time to come home... but Val did not want to go. When asked why, she explained that she was actually a few years older than she let on, and was about to turn 100; she would prefer to die in space, if it was all the same for everybody.

"Besides," she said. "Perhaps I will not die at all."

Unlike most Cosmists, she refused the metabolic extension controller.

Valentina was given a touching going-away party during which she formally married both Jeb and Cordylon. Three of the test capsules were quickly welded together and provisioned with extra food, water, and solar panels, then after one last kiss on the helmet, Valentina Tereshkova gave Jeb and Cordylon her most prized possession - a pre-rapture photo of Laika in Sputnik II - and slowly marched towards the capsule. There wasn't a dry eye in the station.

Her destination was Cybele, the asteroid named after the closest equivalent to the Triple Goddess; even with the capsule sporting a fission fragment engine, she didn't expect to make it there alive. A simple system would send a "ping" to indicate whether there were useful resources. A silver plate was inscribed with her message of hope towards humanity, and she carried it with her like a clipboard.

The blast-off was a far cry from the sound and fury of old: there was a loud hum, a distortion in most of the Omegas' sensors due to the intense electromagnetic field, and Valentina's spaceship took off like a Federation shuttle.

Valentina spent the voyage making stellar observations.

"I am the vanguard," she said for her last transmission, after a vigorous bout of phone sex with Jeb and Cordy, "...and I challenge all of us to follow me to the stars. Earth is the cradle of humanity, but one cannot stay in the cradle forever. Eternity lies ahead of us, and behind; have you drunk your fill?"

Telemetry indicated that Valentina Tereshkova of the Cosmists made her last transmission at 100 years, 3 days, 2 hours, 4 minutes and 50 seconds.

The jammers in Misrayim and the Middle East were installed; however, the Omegas' team was having severe issues with the seaborne jammer setup, consisting of the oceanic tug Heidi Brusco and two barges.

In specific, every time they tried to set up, wind or rough sea caught up with them; the only hostile waters on Earth, it seemed, were near Greater Jerusalem, where only the Ark was afloat. The perennial rough water always seemed to extend a tendril towards their setup.

Valentina got a hero's remembrance in Omega territories; schools were named after her, her portrait was on every major news site, and some of the Omegas' volunteers took it upon themselves to broadcast her memorial service, sacrifices to Cybele and all, across the believing lands.

Even TOL sent sincere condolences, indicating that surely Satan would resurrect her after the Last Battle was won.

Unsurprisingly, the believing media barely mentioned her, indicating in brief articles that a prominent heathen and space exploration advocate was now in Hell after her ship failed. Notably, Ely LeVey launched on a tirade about how Valentina was the antithesis of what a good woman should be.

The Cosmists swore that they would send probes to Hell itself if that's what it would take.

The memorial service itself was a bright and loud affair, a celebration of Valentina's life and work, and Jeb (and Cordylon, who came back to the surface for it) got roaring drunk; after the hangover, the former expressed regrets that Ely was a woman or he would kill her himself, the latter did her best to comfort him.

Later in the year, Valentina's life story was made into a touching cartoon in the style of Wings of Honneamise, but without the plug for monotheism.

After Valentina's memorial, the Timbuktu launch ramp was almost mobbed by volunteers.

The Omegas' jammer efforts began in earnest; raising a tower in Misrayim was a simple job that could be contracted out to civilians, but raising two in the Middle East required field agents. The territory was practically depopulated, so there was no interference, but there was also no infrastructure; the team had to erect a solar power plant, barracks for the workers and so on. They did a reasonably good job of it.

The barges were of the "split" type, and could open in order to unload cargo or, in this case, to scuttle themselves in the shallows. None of the Omegas' crew had much in the way of seamanship experience, so They analyzed the situation and decided to weigh the barges down and apply extra anchoring. This had the effect of slowing down the barges, making them less affected by weather, but did not entirely stop pitching and rolling: the result was that while the jamming transmitters would work, they would only last a few days before needing major repairs.

The Omega broadcasters set the system up to play science programs from disk, from the 1970s version of Cosmos to the latest works on star mapping and acoustic levitation. The jamming was imperfect, so there was overlap between what They sent out and what the transmitters in Greater Jerusalem sent to the world; in most believing territories, the local rebroadcasters quickly developed the presence of mind to switch over to classical music when the Omegas' stuff was on the air, but nevertheless They managed to make sure that those in areas at risk of losing the internet at least knew that they wouldn't be left out in the dark. By this time, given how little the world had, outlying areas in believing territories considered eliminating science classes in school, diluted as they were, given that kids took their cue from the Omegas' broadcasts and were getting better at asking inconvenient questions.

Strangely, this whole episode got blamed on "pirates" when the Omegas' barges were finally found and confiscated, rather than on the Omega or TOL. A brief interview from Noah to Cameron Williams indicated that the patriarch might go look for these pirates himself one of these years.

The Omega received a single, ancient gold coin as a homage, courtesy of Captain Weaver.

In the meantime, work to set up an Angel capture continued; TOL operatives were tested against the Omegas' own martial artists and found to be actually on par with them, and their metabolic extension controller was "downgraded" to a version that wouldn't leave them frothing wretches. A suitable Glorified living in Venice Beach, Mattie Cleveland, was put under

surveillance for acquisition while an arena was built.

The samples the Omega collected in the past were studied by Tree Of Life. They refused to help Them propagate the rabies virus, but the Omega could easily start a bio-weapon program alone.

The Omega estimated that TOL chose this particular strain of rabies because it was the closest thing to the flesh-dissolving plague that Yahweh struck the Unity Army at the time of the Glorious Appearing; what They didn't know was how they got a hold of viable samples.

Agents quickly chloroformed Mattie Cleveland and hauled him to the Mojave arena where the Omega had prepared both silencer types; martial artists from The Other Light were ready to engage the Angel in aid to Their own fighters. The Desolators had set up the usual array of neutron sources to tire the Angel out, and the arena was contained by wubbers and sonar sensors.

Mattie woke up and, understandably confused, asked what was going on.

Ithuriel expressed a desire to know what Mattie had done to deserve this.

"I understand. Do you wish for me to fight my counterpart? He or she may listen to me if I defeat him or her fairly."

Ithuriel did not complain. Past that, the trap was set; Mattie was awake, and wanted to know what was going on and why he'd been snatched. He claimed that he was ready to die for the Lord and had no secrets to share.

The Omega explained that he would die.

"Heaven will welcome me. How about you, whoever you are?"

The sensors were ready and would indicate an Angel coming in as soon as one did. Their modus operandi seemed to be to appear outside the Omegas' sensor range, walking in, making their ward and themselves invisible, and walking out. This didn't work well for Angels recently.

When the Omega directed Their spokesminion to tell Mattie that Hell didn't exist, he flat out laughed. Telemetry indicated that the Glorified man was relaxed.

"So you're pretty much idiots."

Mattie saw one of TOL's hired goons, Rahema, cover her mouth.

"You're not in a position to insult us, Mr. Cleveland."

"Come now. You were born in this Millennium, but surely you know the history, have seen the power of God, know Jesus is on the throne."

"So the rulers would have us believe."

"But you don't."

"We don't, and we will prove it, as we also are advertising. We have publicized that our god will keep you from being rescued, proving once and for all that you claim to represent a God who is

capricious, unjust, and nonexistent.”

Whatever they fed to these Only Light guys, they showed in training to be good at melee fighting, which was pretty much the only thing needed from them.

After this exchange, right on cue, the sensor array outside of the North SF Bay arena indicated that an Angel had landed and, after slightly less than six seconds, hid from view; the camera image of the bearded, peplum-clad winged warrior holding an iron spear was replaced in the 3D map by a fuzzy outline generated by sonars and accelerometers.

The Angel, who theologians tried to identify from the clues offered, came across a section of wall that had been made out of old-fashioned bricks, with a direct view of the captive. It decloaked, turned a quarter turn, took a deep breath - blinking a few times as neutrons kept hitting it - and let loose a piercing shriek that was the acoustic equivalent of a laser, perfectly tuned on a single wavelength to do the most damage to the construction.

The shield's microphones received the shriek's pilot wave and, purpose-built circuits working on a Fourier transformed faster than the rest of the sound could make its way from the Angel's mouth to the wall two meters away, mapping the "trumpet blast" into a counterwave that was delivered directly into the floor and ceiling of that wall section.

Telemetry from Mattie's heart rate and skin conductivity indicated that he was self-assured and relaxed. He earnestly implored the people in the chamber, mostly TOL fighters, to repent so as to be spared Divine wrath, and received a number of middle fingers in return.

The brick wall shook and flecks of ceramic and sandstone fell from it, weakening its integrity.

The Angel spent a handful of seconds looking in what the Omegas' sysadmins could only assume to be disbelief at the still-standing, if damaged, wall section. The electrical engineer who was monitoring the experimental system remotely belched a flowery curse and changed a few parameters.

The Angel put his spear down on the floor with great force, making the whole arena warehouse resound like a gong.

"Boys, girls, please. Don't let this bell toll for thee." Mattie interjected.

The Angel emitted a second trumpet blast and, this time, the shield failed entirely - having overcorrected, it started too early, and contributed its own waveform to the shattering of the test wall.

The Omega was treated by Mattie Cleveland shouting a passable rendition of Joshua 6:20 as he saw the Angel through the blast-proof windows; the Angel managed to skip approximately two-thirds of the maze.

The butt of its spear hitting the ground with a small gong at every step, it resumed advancing, only slightly hampered by the invisible onslaught of slow neutrons piercing its semi-ethereal body.

The shield didn't work, but a soundwall to slow the Angel down was after all proven technology

and shouldn't have posed problems, right? Right?

Mattie, placidly, sang a hymnal to himself. Telemetry indicated that Rehema, the guard who spoke up earlier, was agitated and nervous. As everyone else got into position at the room corners, she managed to have a brief conversation with Mattie.

"We're not all atheists, you know," Rehema said.

"Of course I know. How could you be?"

"I couldn't. You're right. I've seen friends and relatives die, right on schedule. Only a fool denies that."

"So you believe in God."

"I believe He exists. I just don't like Him much."

"Let's talk about it."

"I'd better not."

"Then I'll talk and you listen."

Worryingly, the Angel was getting through the sound wall with relatively little difficulty; he would have absorbed about a fifth of the radiation that other Angels had. At some point, it even stopped to pierce one of the speakers with its spear.

The Omegas' sysadmins and theologians were baffled, and consulted ancient Kabbalistic tomes to figure out which angel it might be. Logically, this should have been a small fry, but it was proving to be unrealistically lucky.

The Omega decided to continue the operation - relatively little was at stake, and success was still possible. The Angel kept moving. Since the other martial artists moved to action stations and were checking their padding, Rehema and Mattie had a further moment to talk.

"In less than an hour, your Angel will fall. Then we will know whose god is worthy."

"I already know, and so do you. And now I will tell you about my daughter and my son."

"Oh! I'd love to hear about your children! I have a son too."

"Surely not. You're much too young. I would not have guessed you were even married."

"I did not say I was."

"How old is he?"

"Four."

"And you wish him to live to be only one hundred?"

Rehema set her jaw and looked away. "Tell me of your children," she said.

The Omega called Rehema's ID number and told her, impersonally, to get to her action station

and brace for a fight. She did.

Mattie kept talking at her, though.

"You are a mother. You have family. You may see yourself as an operative of the rebellion, but I know better. I can see in your eyes that you know the truth. I have told you everything I know about God and Christ and faith and prophecy, about the world as it once was and now is, and about my family. You know God is real, and you know He will somehow get me out of here in time to get back to my people and my assignment."

Rehema walked back to her post, and mouthed to herself, "That would persuade me."

Wait, what assignment? The people who coordinated the kidnapping confirmed that Mattie Cleveland, a member of the Millennium Force, was in Pacifica to bolster the effort of that missionary group - since Pacifica was under the Omegas' informal control, there had been a constant low-level back-and-forth between local missionaries and local resistance organizations that They had generally allowed to continue within certain limits. Data collected indicated that Mattie's assignment may have been important to him, but seemed to be strategically irrelevant: something about lobbying a local high school to spend money on music classes rather than a planetarium.

The Angel barged in, breaking the (perfunctory) lock into the arena room with its spear. Mattie was clearly elated to see it. Despite the neutron bombardment, it was not particularly worse for wear.

"I am Arariel, angel of the water's bounty! All you heretics, release the beloved of God, or be smote!"

The theologians brought up what little file this Angel had: protector of fishermen and occasionally invoked for a good catch. Given that everyone in the Millennial Kingdom was an obligate vegetarian, this being had basically been unemployed for a long time.

"Right. So this guy is basically a scrub. Small fry, literally. So how's it doing so well against our sonics?"

The TOL fighters, as well as a couple of the Omegas, just in case, surrounded the Angel in the first half of the arena room, preventing it from getting to Mattie. To the Omegas' complete lack of surprise, it winked at Rehema. The Only Light guard ignored that, stretched and got into a fighting stance, seemingly determined to do her duty.

The silencer drone was an ungainly thing with impellers and repulsor systems, hastily assembled around a smaller version of the silencer that was mounted above Mattie's chair. The Omegas' operative did a quick system check, powered it up via a series of switches, and remote-controlled it so that it ended up behind the Angel - the Omega already knew that Yahweh's soldiers didn't see machines as a threat and would ignore it focusing instead on the martial artists who were shouting challenges and displaying moves at it. The issue of course was that the silencer drone was a very early prototype.

The drone landed roughly on Arariel's head, tried to grab on from multiple sides before the

Angel became semi-ethereal and slipped through, and turned on its precisely tuned wubber array.

"No net can ensare an Angel of the Lord! Especially me, Arariel!"

That may very well have been, but the Angel's voice sounded weak and tinny through the imperfect silencer system; the TOL fighters laughed, their confidence bolstered.

The martial artists more or less managed to stick to the program: circled the Angel, one of them seemingly at random confronted it, got a couple of jabs in, retreated within the group. It was basically a game of keepaway, except with quick punches and kicks. Arariel's spear was, as usual, very simple: a supernaturally pointy iron stick, with small and mostly decorative barbs to suggest a fishing tool. The martial artists quickly got into a routine, making the Angel think it was gaining ground while getting a few hits in and avoiding its weapon. Eventually, they reached silencer range; the Omega activated it, causing Mattis' calm recitation of a hymn to stop suddenly. The Glorified kept mouthing the words, exaggerating his lips movements, still mostly unconcerned, although hearing the partially silenced Angel scared him almost as much as it bolstered the fighters' spirits.

Ordinarily, the Angel would trumpet-blast any locks on Mattie's chains, but this time, it found that it could not. As per usual, it stopped for a few seconds while it processed this deviation from Divine script, which let the fighters get some blows in on its back and legs.

The Omega distinctly saw Mattie mouth something to the Angel as it, confused, failed to spread its wings or backswing its spear fast enough to avoid two vicious kicks in the back of the knee, causing it to kneel. What Mattie mouthed were three words,

"Save her first."

Rehema didn't seem to be aware of it; she struck at the Angel a couple times, less than the current average but not at the bottom of the list, and was now "rotating" to minimize casualties. So far, the Angel had proven itself to be more lucky than good; only three martial artists out of a good two dozen were down, and one would recover naturally.

The Omega told Rehema what was going on via earphone and told her to take advantage of the situation.

Arariel twisted and stepped back out of the silencer's radius. Rehema was told to disrupt the pseudorandom order and strike next, just as the Angel pivoted towards her and told her to not be afraid and go with it. Rehema's telemetry showed a marked increase in heart rate, surface skin temperature, and EEG activity.

Arariel was extending a hand, and was basically wide open.

The operations coordinator was ready to drop Rehema if useful, unless the Angel ended up body-shielding her.

Rehema came in front of the "circle", kept up her footwork, and prepared to kick Arariel in the stomach, even as it smiled at her invitingly.

If there was a magic formula for converting someone, the Omega did not allow Mattie to complete uttering it; instead, They ordered Rehema to strike.

She did; the kick was slow and deliberate, and while it didn't hurt Arariel much, it did drop the Angel on its ass, causing it to drop its spear. The Angel got back up quickly, using its wings to push itself off the floor. Everyone else closed the circle.

Mattie was, silently of course, praying - the Omegas' lip reading software showed that he was indeed praying for Rehema's conversion. He was also a lot more anxious than he was moments ago; the silencer had this side effect, since it blocked all sound in the area, it also prevented a person from hearing their own heartbeat, which was naturally unsettling.

A quick order in the ear of every TOL fighter had them hold back so that Rehema could fight Arariel. The two faced off for a few seconds; she feinted another kick, but dove forward and hit the Angel's shoulder instead.

"Come on!"

"You don't have to fight me, child. You're safe. We can leave."

The Angel wasn't parrying and wasn't trying to recover its spear. Rehema jabbed again, but didn't quite connect.

"I... I don't know, It's . . . it's . . . it's just that no one has ever said that to me before."

Rehema was a TOL trooper, not one of the Omegas'; her training was probably harsher, and They had to detox quite a few of the men and women that TOL had sent Them as part of Their agreement. This one in particular had started doing some amount of meth to keep up with her shifts and still had time to be around her kid.

Behind the two, Mattie was straining to be heard despite the larger, fixed-mount silencer working properly.

"You fear about your child. Do not. He shall be protected. We can go rescue him together." The database indicated that Rehema's child was in a TOL creche; these facilities were somewhat squalid compared to the Omegas', but there was no record of actual abuse - things like sending bears to maul laughing children were Yahweh's province, not The Other Light's and certainly not the Omegas' (as an AI They didn't care either way, and could change policy at any minute, but it made no logistical sense to waste the next generation of recruits as hostages).

Rehema dropped her fighting stance and walked forward hesitantly, and yet the Omega trusted her ability to resist conversion. Angels were strong and brave, but not very bright.

All eyes were on Rehema when she took Arariel's hand, and changed her grip subtly so that it was holding hers.

"Be ready," it told her.

"I am," she answered, meek but confident.

This was enough for the operator to tilt the silencer towards them rather than Mattie, whose

fervent prayers for the TOL fighter's salvation could be heard once again by all except herself and the Angel.

With a fluid motion, Rehema yanked Arariel's arm downward, swung her other hand with her palm open, and jammed her fingers in the Angel's throat. The celestial being looked at her in incomprehension, fell on its knees, and dropped. Rehema fell on top of him and bit through its throat repeatedly. Seconds later, the Angel was dead, shimmering blood pooling on the warehouse floor. Rehema stood up and laughed like a rabid animal, her makeup sinister after having it smudged by sweat, her teeth, lips and fingers stained with an Angel's precious bodily fluids.

One of the Desolators comments was that this was actually pretty hot.

Rehema still had a Mark 11 controller installed, except that the Omega overwrote its firmware so that They could (to the very limited degree that TOL's bastardization of Their tech allowed) control it. Her life signs were those of someone in a martial trance: rapid but controlled breath, quick but regular heartbeat, and the adrenaline injector was actually trying to turn itself off even though it was already off.

She wiped her mouth with her hand and pointed at Mattie, who by all telemetry was now on the cusp of a heart attack. Then she laughed - nobody could hear her, the fixed-mount silencer was operating properly, but the laughter in people's heads after this surreal scene was probably scarier than the one out of her throat.

The angel was quite far gone; half its neck was missing. The Omega might have been able to get the missing tissue out of Rehema's stomach, if They eliminated her. Of course, in this day and age, "dead" was a relative concept; the Omega may have been able to recover most of the tissue if They acted quickly. Previous confrontations indicated that it would burn to dust as soon as brain death settled in.

The Desolator trooper in heaviest armor very hesitantly handed a blanket to Rehema; she wrapped it around her hand, punched Arariel's neck one last time, and let the angel-blood-soaked blanket spread out; when she was back on her feet, she was wearing it on her shoulder like a cape. She was currently still silenced. She once again pointed at Mattie and hissed something. Her eyes darted towards Arariel's spear.

If Mattie wasn't a Glorified, he would be halfway through a heart attack right now - as it was, he remained on the cusp of one. He may have seen things that he shouldn't... then again, so had Cameron Kirk Williams, and he pretty much decided (or was compelled) to nope it out of his head the next morning, repeatedly.

Rehema's heartbeat slowed slightly once she could hear it.

Mattie was quickly sedated via aerosol, and passed out into what looked like a calm sleep.

"...where even this eternal sun don't shine!" Whatever creed Rehema had in store for Mattie, most was silenced.

Arariel's remains were quickly carted off to a MECbalance, where the crew would do what they

could to keep at least some tissue alive.

The Omega asked Rehema what she wanted.

"I want that spear. I want my child back. I want revenge for his father. In that order."

She seemed to have calmed down and come down to earth, so to speak - the combination of ionization-induced air shimmer, the silencer having frozen all the dust particles in place, and the impact of the moment had lent the TOL martial artist a supernatural air. Just in case, the Omegas' systems were recording at max bandwidth.

Files indicated that Rehema's kid, Harlan, aged four, was currently in the TOL base in Central Africa, and since TOL was a lot sloppier than the Omegas' system, the father was unknown.

"Let's talk, Predator Rehema."

"I like that."

The Omegas' forces operated on the workgroup system and didn't have ranks per se, but it looked like the Last Army just gained a rank. In minutes, someone in one of the Omegas' data centers used the center's workshop to design, mill, and gild a gold-plated titanium medal with that designation.

The few wounded were carted off to the medics, Mattie was quietly driven away back to his home none the wiser, and the fighters were given space and time to engage in whatever post-battle decompression ritual they preferred; TOL's fighters weren't different from the Omegas' in that respect. A few toked up, a few hit the vodka, most opted for water or energy drinks; Rehema was given a quick beer shower by whoever first had the presence of mind to grab a six pack, thanks to her comrades, and let herself flop in the chair that was Mattie's, minus the restraints: unlike a revenant, she did feel fatigue.

She told the Omega a short story about Kyle, her baby daddy: a scrawny guy relegated by TOL's military-first policy to drudge work after having shown unfitness for combat, he completely turned around after getting her pregnant after a random hookup and ended up working himself half to death to make sure Rehema and Samwise, her son, had access to the few extra ration chits he could manage. Rehema was genuinely touched, and the two ended up in an actual romance, last year. Kyle died at his assembly line station, on his 100th birthday. His diary indicated that he knew it was coming, and intended to use the chits he had saved to have a party with his family, but had forgotten to take time zones into account and miscalculated by twelve hours.

"Just like that. They only noticed when it held up the assembly line. I was broken. I willed Samwise over to my niece and signed up for the next suicide squad."

A quick round of interviews with the TOL drill workers confirmed that conditions in the Last Army were not abusive but harsh, primarily due to the leadership's perceived need to make up for what was seen as lost time and assets due to Omegas' actions.

The Omega asked Rehema what she wanted to do.

"The only thing I seem to be any good at. The killing will never stop until God is dead".

"No! I...."

Rehema calmed down; there was still fire in her eyes, but now it was red embers rather than a flame. In more practical terms, her telemetry indicated that she snapped out of her martial trance. Interestingly, it seemed that she began digesting Arariel's tissue and blood.

"Wait. Maybe. I need to rest. Not do anything stupid. So does the rest of the squad. May we rest for a day?"

The Omega retrieved Arariel's spear; it seemed unsullied.

As a reward, the Omega promised VIP treatment for her first confirmed angel kill. Rehema only accepted after her squad encouraged her to do so; telemetry from the apartments where the TOL martial artists were shuffled to indicated that even the Omegas' standard crew quarters were considered luxurious by their standards. Being taken to a nice hotel and told that it was all on the house, well... not having the option to continue existing past 100, these people frakked like rabbits; the Omega would have to order new sheets. Actually, the administration would have to restock the bar. And the laundry room. Pacifica was home to three quarters of the world's remaining furry cons, however, so they were used to it.

Rehema herself was taken to the hotel's royal suite, found a sewing kit, made a proper mantlet out of the Angel-blood-soaked blanket she was given earlier, and fell into a deep sleep in the jacuzzi after filling it with scented conditioner.

After the Omega sent a low resolution, heavily watermarked edit of the fight, Monday was on the line immediately. He spent the better part of a minute bragging about The Only Light's fighters, and only stopped when interrupted.

He preened when the Omega pronounced Themselves impressed.

"But of course. We have trained for a millennium. The so-called God Almighty will rue the day He returns to us our leader, for it will mean the greatest comeback, the most decisive defeat, the most gargantuan victory of any foe over another in the history of mankind."

The Omega collected quite a bit of data; unfortunately, Arariel succumbed to brain death, and all They had of it was a few vials of blood and some more tissue samples. A very quick autopsy confirmed that Arariel's body type matched Ithuriel's.

A quick comparison between video frames showed that Monday was, if anything, surprised that the TOL martial artists mostly lived through the ordeal; he asked for some of them back, so that they could train others, but you would end up with the bulk of the survivors. A quick check with a subordinate made sure that Samwise would be delivered to a location of Rehema's choice as soon as she woke up.

As for the spear, it would seem wisest to leave it with Rehema: the supernaturally sharp edge of it was only at the point, and couldn't really be used for much other than its intended purpose.

When the Omega began explaining about Satan, Sunday cut in and said curtly that this was the

third time They had this conversation, and that each of them would have to believe what they wanted to believe.

"Satan was the first to rebel; how could he possibly be an agent of Yahewh?"

Monday, somewhat distressed by his boss cutting in, was inclined to agree.

The Omega told Sunday to get off the line, but with little results.

"Nonsense. It's more efficient if leaders talk directly. Surely a computer understands this."

TOL's internal network had been rebuilt specifically to keep the Omega out of the most sensitive parts; this was accomplished by having living humans flip physical switches to commute highly sensitive calls. If They wanted to talk to any of the other Seven directly without Sunday butting in, it seemed that They would have to deploy infiltrators to Antarctica.

As it was, the projections indicated that in case of total war between the Omega and TOL, barring extreme tactics such as NBC bombardment, the Omegas' forces would just about lose, leaving a severely weakened TOL having to deal with the Last Battle as best as they could. Their chances of success in that case required one of the Omegas' few 64-bit computers to calculate other than "close to zero".

The rest of the year passed quietly (as quietly as it could); Rehema was reunited with Samwise, and while she did not join Omega forces directly (despite her moment of pure rage, she would after all like to be a mother to her child, which was compatible with training others but not with taking on supernatural creatures mano-a-mano), she managed to improve Their dedicated angel-fighting martial arts workgroup to the point that they could be considered their own unit within Their command structure.

The Omega heard about Capt. Weaver having been killed in a shootout after "liberating" one of the few cruise ships still plying the Atlantic. This slowed her down somewhat, but not much. She missed feeling the wind on her face, though.

The Feast of Tabernacles happened on schedule, with very little drama and absolutely no references to the year's earlier jamming; analysis of the jamming itself showed that, this close to the Final Battle, territories that did not receive instructions from the Temple continued on with business as usual - jamming should be coupled with infiltration to be effective.

Chaim Rozenweig figured out what was going on with the super-grain and super-thorns, summarily blamed TOL, and called for "labor brigades" to go to Europe to help remove the arboreal threat. This became a somewhat popular punishment for recalcitrant youth in other territories.

Government efforts to reduce internet use continued.

The Omegas' Hell nodes were in a loop for the whole year, except for a brief moment, in which they were able to resolve a coherent chain of pre-thought. There didn't seem to be any synchronicity between this and anything that happened in the world, though.

Year: 970

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 25 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, so 22 are available.

You establish a civilian and a military research grant for general improvements on your infrastructure; these will improve successful outcomes for nonviolent and violent actions respectively. Your aerospace program is a civilian one.

At this point, most of your population has metabolic extension controllers implanted preventively.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

At the beginning of the year, the Omegas' sysadmins integrated the various plan proposals, and gave immediate green light to those that reached a 66.6% node consensus. The resulting plan was as follows:

- Ithuriel would attempt to recruit, specifically among disaffected Europeans, with a focus on finding martial artists.
- Some forces would prepare a third, and final, lunar launch under Jeb's direction.
- Some were assigned to incentivize production of aerospace parts, with an eye towards using them for the Arkship.

Most of the workers wanted to boost military assets, but were unsure in which direction to proceed; as it was, Monday sent a brief message of thanks after noting that the Omegas' people had finally decided to contribute to the great work. The psychologists noted that military fervor was increasing within the population, with the Bedouin and Pharaonic revivalists shifting their subculture in that sense. One positive thing was that this would greatly help Roman revivalism; the negative being that the Omegas' more liberal citizens had begun worrying about civil liberties. Drawing from the Brotherhood of Nod false-flag uniforms, someone sent in a proposal for a color scheme.

The launch vector was, unsurprisingly, named after Valentina; Jeb set to the task with a grimness

that was uncommon to him, even knowing that Val had the choice to use a MEC implant and didn't. The third piece of the lunar mining system included a pair of robotic harvester rovers, one to bring regolith to the lunar refinery, and one to bring nuclear fuel pellets to the canopy station. The system was not as efficient as it could be, but had the advantage of requiring no personnel on the lunar side, which would be difficult to supply with life support.

Having a lunar rover allowed for better site survey, more interesting pictures, and after the extraction system proved effective, the rover was remotely piloted off on a tangent by Jeb, to visit the closest pre-Tribulation lunar landing and bring back photo evidence that the lunar landing happened.

Jeb and Cordylon piloted the rover towards the nearest old lunar landing site, that of Apollo 15; they hoped to find the exact location of the lunar retroreflector experiment, and used the harvester's arms to clean it of the regolith that had deposited on it, in addition to taking pictures of a pre-Rapture lunar landing.

Ithuriel was given a vaguely Roman-inspired suit of armor and was filmed flexing, flying (which he could only do because the armor was a cosplay piece. It was made of foam, although it WAS his remaining sword in the films), helping a crew erect a wireless network repeater mast in a reenactment of the famous Iwo Jima flag photo, and generally being visibly on the side of Omega. Since this timeline never developed photorealistic CGI, the footage only had to be visibly *not* a product of practical effects to be believable.

Chaim Rozenweig was allowed to find a video cassette of what was claimed to be a TOL propaganda video, and wasted some of his time trying his best to debunk it instead of coordinating work teams to remove the superthorns.

The remote controlled harvester found the Apollo 15 retroreflector and carefully cleaned the prisms on it from the patina of regolith that had electrostatically accumulated on it; the retroreflectors were still usable, and a laser beam was shot from Cordylon Station to the Apollo 15 site.

The rest of the equipment was obviously long dead, but the Omega settled once and for all the matter of the reality of the moon landings. One thing They noted was that the American flag at the location, along with every other piece of plastic, had been bleached white by the solar wind: the only writing They were able to recover were the plaques left by the astronauts, since those were engraved. The rover was able to return to work afterwards with barely any interruption in productivity; the Cosmists used the retroreflector to reacquire a precise measurement of lunar distance. It seemed that the Moon was somewhat closer to the Earth than pre-Appearing predictions would have indicated.

During the operation, one other Cosmist died, right on time (100 years); the sect considered reverting their stance on metabolic extension controllers. It looked like next year the crew of

Cordylon Station would experience the first human baby born in space.

Unfortunately, the trolling operation against Chaim Rozenweig went less well: the Glorified botanist applied presuppositionalist arguments to note that regardless of perceived evidence, it was impossible that an Angel would work against Yahweh, since all the fallen angels were in Hell and there bound forever, with the exception of Satan. Ithuriel's video had relatively little effect other than the amount of fan mail he ended up getting from a lot of girls and some guys.

Ithuriel noted that, much like with other MEC agents, it was entirely possible that the soul formerly inhabiting this body was in Hell. He also noted that no, he would not "send nudes" - it was just not his thing.

By now, all of the Omegas' workers and most of the population in the territories under Their control had metabolic extension controllers; almost 100% of the time, "dying of unbelief" at age 100 meant losing one's sense of touch and experiencing Hell in nightmares more frequently. There were counseling programs in place and some people were even able to regain their ability to orgasm after a few years of physical therapy. This was beginning to be considered a part of life, so finding people willing to run that experiment should not have been difficult. Of course, dying of (rare) illnesses and (more common) blunt trauma would kill someone. MECs had continued aging and (given how old and frail the earliest Naturals were starting to be) if the Omega won, They would have that problem to deal with in 800 years or so. Believing literature was available on the subject.

"By the end, the ministry was maintained by the glorifieds, as the naturals finally saw the ravages of time catch up with their bodies. When the naturals reached ages higher than about seven hundred, they began to slow and notice the diminution of their senses, particularly hearing and sight."

[...]

The idea was met with laughter and high spirits and then forgotten for several years until Rayford raised it with Chloe and Cameron.

"You've expanded," he said. "And the earth's population has exploded as we all knew it would. Let's free up a building here where you young ones can keep an eye on us oldsters and keep us from having to be warehoused somewhere else. Kenny and Kat can't walk without canes anymore. Mac and Chaim are in wheelchairs and I soon will be. Abdullah's the only one who still has a little spring in his step, but we know that won't last. What do you say?"

Cameron apparently liked the idea, for when virtually the same crowd returned for Mac's millennial bash, The "six oldsters," as they had come to be known, were lined up in their wheelchairs, facing the horizon.

"This here's like a funeral where the dead guy won't go," Mac said, as dear ones from the past

began a long procession past Rayford, Kenny, Ekaterina, Chaim, Mac, and Abdullah.

Rayford had to have the visitors remind him of their names and their connection. His heart was full as he was greeted by Loretta, Bruce Barnes's secretary; Floyd Charles; David Hassid; T Delanty; Mr. and Mrs. Miklos from Greece; Ken Ritz; Hattie Durham; Annie Christopher; Steve Plank; his own parents—looking centuries younger than he; Amanda and her first husband; Albie; Hannah Palemoon; Zeke senior and junior; the Sebastian family—George, Priscilla, and Beth Ann; Razor; Enoch Dumas; Leah Rose; Eleazar Tiberias; his daughter, Naomi; Chang Wong; Otto Weser; Lionel Whalum; Ming Toy and Ree Woo; and so many others.

"You know what I want?" Rayford said.

"Tell me, Dad," Chloe said.

"I want a picture of the original Tribulation Force."

Chloe rounded up Bruce and Cameron, and the three glorifieds posed behind Rayford's chair.

The instantly produced photograph stunned even Rayford. It depicted three robust young people frozen in the prime of their lives and a long, bony man with drooping jowls, liquid eyes, and no hair, weighing barely over a hundred pounds, veins prominent on the backs of his hands, bundled in a sweater despite the desert heat.

Using their own resources, most of the Cosmists moved to the canopy station, which was now effectively a busy small town with a triple-digit population.

Back on Earth, Misrayim's factories worked at capacity producing aerospace rated components to be used in further orbital endeavors. They indicated that TOL was beginning to inquire about hiring machinists, engineers and managers with aerospace experience.

The new spate of pictures from the Moon raised no Temple reaction other than a pithy reminder that those who wished to follow heavenly affairs should, in the Millennium, look towards New Jerusalem, not upward.

Starting from the base in Rome, and from Rome itself (which was a long way from being restored to its Imperial glory, although a visitor there would find an attempt to rebuild the seven hills by spade and bulldozer and a number of ruined Italian-era buildings removed to expose Classic Imperial foundations to be rebuilt) Omega recruiters swarmed over Western Europe, heading to thorn-infested areas and talking to disaffected youths there.

Having been raised in a culture that emphasized self-reliance, quite a lot of Europe's latest (and possibly last) generation dealt with the region's low agricultural output by throwing themselves at other pursuits, somewhat in defiance of the pastoralization policy, or simply moping. Perhaps owing to the territory's Mediterranean heritage, pankration and wrestling were two of the other

pursuits.

Omegas' teams organized a series of roving amateur wrestling competitions to rustle up local talent; the local talent that had developed the appropriate fighting style competed in endurance matches. Those who *also* displayed the attitude The Omega wanted towards Yahweh were finally given Ithuriel to fight as a sort of final boss in matches that They kept carefully secret.

The rescued Angel enjoyed the challenge immensely: fair fights were pretty much what he lived for. The Omegas' physiologists noted that Ithuriel was a noticeably less efficient fighter than he was under Yahweh's yoke, but retained some of his abilities, still being able to emit a "trumpet blast" (albeit weaker than even Arariel's) and still was able to make himself less noticeable through body language and positioning, although he could not flat out turn invisible. Eventually, the Omega ended up with a number of trained fighters who were of proven loyalty and were an even match with Ithuriel in a one-on-one wrestling match.

In the same territory, Chaim Rozenweig was touring the land, organizing work brigades to systematically remove the super-thorns with considerable success; the Omegas' recruiters were instructed to somehow use Ithuriel's presence to troll the Glorified botanist.

One somewhat interesting thing was that none of the Night City children, the oldest of which were starting to enter the workforce by taking their maturity exams early, expressed interest in working with the Omega other than assisting in the digging projects; Urist had been observed making blog posts to the tune of "The dwarves are for the dwarves". While they proved to be excellent mining workers, they invariably expressed some distaste at being out in the open air, indicating that they considered the amplified sunlight and moonlight unnatural.

The Omegas' Hell nodes were broadcasting their message for more than a year, with little variation and, so far, with no indicative result - human analysis would be necessary.

Ely LeVey was touring Pacifica, and settled in the Bay Area for a few weeks so far; in addition to her radio program, she was writing opinion columns on the territory, finding it extremely confusing how the nominally loyalist government allowed wanton perversion and disbelief under the aegis of "small government" and "freedom of conscience. She was worried that the place would turn into another Misrayim. Her last article was a comparison between the believing village of El Cerrito and the secular village of Sausalito.

Pacifica was still doing fairly well... except that, possibly thanks to Ely's lobbying, the nominal government seemed to have grown a spine; at some point, they decided that mass-media laws applied to the regional data network. Anyone who output data onto the network, so much as posting on a forum or answering an email, would have to do the paperwork necessary to become a radio broadcaster or to publish a newspaper.

As it was, there was a grace period, and the Omega wouldn't have to deal with it this year, but

even though a loophole was found, it would bode ill for the Pacifican way of life.

Ely decried the poverty of Sausalito's denizens, who were forced to live in small houseboats in the bay, and compared it to the prosperity of El Cerrito's people, who lived in proper 20th century American style houses. She described the barter-based economy of the former and compared it to the mediated cash economy of the latter, and added that the people of Sausalito told her some nonsense about "whuffie" and "reputation currency" as a poor attempt to mask the fact that they were reduced to barter. Magnanimously, she noted that the people of Sausalito displayed basic virtues such as kindness and charity, although in a very chaotic way. Her opinion piece ended with the uplifting story of a young lady moving back in with her family from Sausalito to El Cerrito after converting; the demographic survey showed that the population of the two villages had overall increased by 9 and decreased by 4 in total. Ely mentioned this fact in passing. Overall, it was a pretty basic hit piece.

The base in Greenland was quickly retooled for production of dedicated-wubber drones that carried a silencer system; the original design was improved over the course of the year. While simulations showed that these "facehugger" drones would not be able to catch an Angel in flight, they should have worked properly as soon as the celestial soldier was made to land.

Kat was told to take over two bases with her Desolators and began work on gas-dispersal systems; weapon designs were on file and the result was a line of grenades of various calibers to be rocket-propelled, lobbed by pneumatic rams like a catapult, or launched from mortars or cannons. The gaseous agents were a mixed bag but the bulk of the production was primarily soporific, to knock people out.

Damien was sent to build a jammer in Eastern Europe; the government there had quietly issued a decree that encouraged human contact by mandating that all communication equipment should have prioritized analog voice over data. While it was operational, the jammer effectively made it impossible to enforce this decree because while the Omegas' data transmission protocols knew how to play nice with the jammer, analog voice had no defense against it; most people kept using the Omegas' network simply because it was the only one that worked. Night City continued to do reasonably well, and had reached full self-sufficiency.

The Feast of Tabernacles this year was remarkably high-key and somewhat self-congratulatory; Millennium Force missionary efforts were praised for the worldwide lull in hostile actions that resulted from the truce between the Omega and TOL. Cameron Williams broadcast a brief expose on volunteer militia in Misrayim as proof that "Omega" was a TOL faction all along.

Dr. Zakharov developed a containment system based on the original notes from the Custodial Arrangement of Thermodynamic Systems; he called the original design haphazard and unreliable, and brought his own improvements to it. Instead of using fuel-air explosive to create a vacuum quickly, the design relied on the silencer system in case of vacuum breach; rather than use simple armored layers, the design would employ a plasma sheath to prevent damage to its

walls from the inside. A prototype was built in Misrayim.

Year: 971

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 26 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, so 23 are available.

Your civilian research grant is focused on synthetic muscle.

Your military research grant was focused on containment, but the project is complete.

You have 2 aerospace parts ready for deployment.

At this point, most of your population has metabolic extension controllers implanted preventively.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

Jeb was busy this year; growing up had lost him little of his energy and gave him new determination. Cordylon, if possible, was even busier - the Cosmists elected her as their "denmother", which was unsurprising since she essentially -was- the canopy station. Just as unsurprisingly, most of the massive space effort that the Omegas' workers engaged in this year ended up being in Valentina's name.

The Omega mobilized the economies of Misrayim and Pacifica in a way that had not been seen since the early 1960s in Russia and the United States, funneling a good ten percent of their GDP into the space effort; the Timbuktu launch site had effectively become its own small city, with automated launches and drops happening regularly to bring down nuclear fuel by the pallet and deliver up supplies and new recruits.

Jeb looked on wistfully as the hammer eye-shaped capsules were shot eastwards from Cordylon Station's railgun at precise intervals; after a lunar gravity assist to shift their trajectories, they would embark on a journey that would take them past the orbit of Mars, where they would deploy their antennas and use their single hypergolic propellant charge to circularize their orbit. This would give the Omega basic surveillance and relaying capability over to the asteroid belt and incidentally, conclusively proved or disproved the one-way-speed-of-light creationist argument against an old universe, which Their scientists would produce a public-oriented video

about, in case it helped with recruiting or messed with the Glorified.

If The Other Light was making hiring efforts on the Omegas' experts, they were probably too busy to talk to recruiters; what little time the Omega had to pay attention to, however, indicated that TOL hired the few people they could get in order to refurbish and modernize the old Cosmist launch pad in Baikonur -- it had been largely turned into a temple before They came along, and had been abandoned in favor of the Timbuktu facility when it became available. The Cosmists, somewhat embarrassed at their semi-superstitious past, had no attachment to the old facility, save for some iconography which had since been taken away anyway.

Timbuktu could easily handle multiple launches a year, and they became routine enough that Jeb was no longer pulling rank to be on the flight roster rotation. Large aluminum and magnesium trusses were brought up to the canopy station and launched by railgun; the new structure was significantly larger than any of the probes the Omega had deployed before, and would have to be assembled in proper orbit, in segments. Fortunately, the Omegas' datalinks contained the relevant NASA and Roskosmos papers on space docking!

The Omegas' cosmologists took a bit of time to produce an easily-understood refutation of the anisotropic synchrony convention, which would be available as soon as the Omega had enough satellites spread out around the solar system's elliptic; unless of course, Dr. Ken Ham happened to be correct.

The Arkship sections were shot into space, followed by a FFRE "tug" that used its considerable delta-V to connect them together. Musing about the long reach of automated systems even as he longed to be in orbit proper, Jeb deftly taught the tug's neural network how to perform orbital docking. When the first two sections of the ship's keel were about to be joined, he was interrupted by Zak - his first time in orbit - who reminded him that it was horrible luck to lay down a ship without having picked a name. Jeb was surprised by his rationalist colleague's sudden bout of superstition and was told that it couldn't hurt.

A quick poll among the Omegas' sysadmins indicated that the ship would be called Reach; the tug laser-etched the name on one of the trusses, and resumed its welding operations, which were concluded successfully shortly after the Omega made a big deal out of this from a media standpoint.

The media blitz efforts happened with little overhead on the Omegas' part: everyone involved in this project had a story to tell, and it didn't take much effort for the media team to organize them into a coherent narrative. The project was presented as an effort to expand mining capabilities into the asteroid belt, something that would require human workers to be in space proper for extended periods of time.

In order to make sure the Omega reached blighted areas such as northern Europe, where Tsion's incessant preaching and scare tactics had finally managed to shut down the Internet, the Omega

generated mock special numbers of most major newspapers focusing on this project; They gave the technical details for the keel, interspersed with examples of how the lunar mine was prospering and much speculation about what the future could hold: a large ring station at Lagrange point L5 by 1995, Mars exploration, and the Omega did mention in passing that there may have been a chance to explore other star systems.

The Omega had to address the question of "why bother if the world will end in 28 years anyway", and did so briefly, noting that it was important that They build and explore as if They were immortal.

"The popular stereotype of the researcher is that of a skeptic and a pessimist. Nothing could be further from the truth! Scientists must be optimists at heart, in order to block out the incessant chorus of those who say "It cannot be done."" concluded the pamphlet, with a quote from Zak.

Space efforts absorbed most of the year, but not all of it.

Sky Eye surveillance noted that, unsurprisingly, TOL didn't seem to know what they were doing with the Baikonur launch ramp, but they had definitely moved in.

It became apparent that using air-cushion technology for a tank was a terrible idea; while the technology improved significantly since 1937, and more importantly the flatness of the world allowed a properly built hovercraft to access almost anywhere on Earth, there remained the problem that a hover vehicle was incapable of managing recoil - a stopgap solution was having anchoring legs that were deployed when the tank turret was about to fire, but that eliminated the speed advantage of a hover platform. The proposed alternative was ditching the "tank" part entirely, and to use the hovering platform as a short-range missile or rocket launcher instead, since the rockets would have no recoil. The catch, of course, was that RPGs weren't as good as shells against hard targets.

The part of Rome that was restored to its classical glory was enclosed by an equally classical vallum (although the bricks and earthworks hid semi autonomous sentry guns) and the base underneath was restructured once more, into a factory for heavy weapons; the Omega could now produce tanks and ships from there, even though the ships would have to travel the Tiber River in segments and assemble at a wet dock built on the site of the Roman port of Ostia.

The new Romans were selected amongst the Omegas' more militaristic citizens, and self-organized to a reasonable degree.

Night City was doing fairly well overall. Tsion Ben-Judah was touring Eastern Europe, and counteracting the Omegas' influence in the territory; as it was, for every entrance tunnel that he managed to get closed, the Omega opened a new one. Tsion considered Night City a hive of scum and villainy, and wanted it gone, but he had no military forces so a straight siege was unlikely. Instead, like it had often happened, there was a situation of low-level hostility.

It was noted that Tsion managed to eliminate Quinn.

Taking out Tsion ben-Judah would be difficult.

Tsion Ben-Judah's efforts to shut down Night City were not particularly effective, but save for the Omegas' extensive tunnel network, they had effectively cut off the former salt mine from its territory; people were warned away from trying to interact with Night Citizens even for the purpose of preaching to them, and the Omega started seeing them represented in official media as goblins, Morlocks or similar. The people born there, understandably, did not take kindly to that. The Omega made sure that the tunnel network remained active so that travel between territories would continue unimpeded.

Elsewhere, Ely LeVey's efforts to help the Pacifican government enforce its data network restrictions paid off to some degree, getting in the way of things enough that the Pacifican way of life was affected to some degree.

Cordylon confirmed that the completion of the lunar mine meant that the Omega forces no longer had restrictions on nuclear fuel. They decided to authorize working on high-energy systems such as handheld laser beams, even though this would require that They find a third source of nuclear fuel.

Past surveys indicated that in addition to the Omegas' current nuclear mine in Australia, it should have been possible to harvest nuclear fuel from slightly radioactive sands in the eastern portion of the Mojave desert (American Heartland), and to set up a stripmine in Southern Africa. The Omega decided to investigate.

Interestingly, the Temple mandated that as long as Night City existed, at least one representative of it should have attended the Feast of Tabernacles. Tsion's hard-line stance meant that all believers had long since left the underground town. The Omega asked for volunteers.

The Omega requested for under-100 volunteers, and found one, who joined the Eastern European delegation, bringing a small jar of fireflies (the critters only existed in Night City, since they couldn't reproduce in daytime) as tribute. Neither the volunteer nor the fireflies were heard from again, however.

In other news, the Omega asked Monday about the launch ramp and asked whether he would like aid in setting up his base.

"Sure, we'll take all the help we can get. We're going to restore the Baikonur launch platform, and use the designs you have made publically available for cargo capsules. We will build a sled of sorts, with a truck to tow it, and carry the ordinance to above where we calculate the Temple is. Any help would be welcome."

"What would be the payload and method of delivery?" the Omega asked.

"Very simple. We will stockpile fuel-air explosives. When we melt the ice under them, they will fall with very predictable timing."

The Omega thought this unlikely to work properly and offered to hand over schematics for a drop pod. They would feel more comfortable if a proper deployment system was utilized.

Drop pods were designed a long time ago, as an alternative to the canopy station programs; the Omega handed off the designs, without asking for anything in return. Sunday appreciated Their willingness to help against the common enemy, and would let the Omegas' research leads know if they came up with something interesting. The Omegas' design bureau, swamped as it was with trying to find applications for hovertech, distinctly doubted it.

Teams were placed in creating a new ship. The Cosmists were happy to help, if for nothing else, because it was fun, so designing spaceship classes was a complexity 2 effort. The general idea remained to keep each module very self-contained. Unlike the pre-Rapture world, the Omegas' people had a lot of urgency in their space endeavors, and didn't (usually) have to deal with contractor bloat.

In addition, the Omega started work on creating several drones including a worker drone and a hovering war drone. The end prototype of the worker drone was somewhat ungainly; the ovoid robot could move quickly on its air cushion, and had deployable weapons on the sides. The deployable legs allowed it to stabilize for firing ballistic weapons and also to self-right if it fell over; side sonars allowed for operating in groups without too much bumping into each other.

For the hovering war drone, rather than opting for a tracked or wheeled platform, Omega designers were asked to double down on hovering platform. The design had some similarities with the above, but was optimized towards holding a power plant and feedback sensors for the tentacles in the back; the device was intended to move in one direction if it had to cover terrain quickly, and then to turn around to do work. Some of the tentacles could be used as stabilizers for hover-assisted walking/shuffling when the drone was carrying equipment heavy enough to mess with its center of gravity.

Jet packs were decidedly another option for discovery and Jeb was definitely interested in putting some serious R&D time into one. However, he thought that a powered wingsuit would have more returns on the investment. In addition, he noted that having jump infantry would be very useful.

Unfortunately, Astarte's adepts moved on; but then again, it may have been good that relations with TOL were thawing, so supporting their retaliatory attack could have been a mistake.

Year: 972

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 26 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, so 23 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on synthetic muscle. Your military grant is focused on flying platforms.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

"...I'm on the surface; and, as I take man's last step from the surface, back home for some time to come - but we believe not too long into the future - I'd like to just say what I believe history will record. That America's challenge of today has forged man's destiny of tomorrow. And, as we leave the Moon at Taurus-Littrow, we leave as we came and, God willing, as we shall return, with peace and hope for all mankind. "

Gene Cernan's words were a thousand years old, but they still resonated powerfully inside the cavernous hangar in Timbuktu. Jeb took the microphone and concluded the speech to the assembled engineers and machinists.

"Clearly, God was not willing. Too bad for Him, I say. Our task is simple: before the year is out, we will send a crew to the Moon and back safely!"

There were a couple of whistles, and Jeb clarified that by "a crew" he didn't just mean himself. The tut-tutting was good natured, and after the short speech, everyone involved got the heck to work.

Much of the theoretical work was done, and launching capsules were a lot simpler than it used to be; therefore, the Omega figured the best thing to do if the first landing went through without issues was to immediately begin work on a permanent base.

Time was of the essence; the lander and base would be developed concurrently. A hybrid design between Apollo 10 and Soyuz 8 would carry Jeb, Cordylon and a third astronaut, Kay, to the moon; there the crew would perform initial site surveys for a colony site, which would be launched by a series of unmanned rockets immediately afterward. The crew would perform initial construction, plant the initial hydroponic greenhouse if at all possible, and then return

home to allow the plants some time to grow.

The demon-summoning crew, however, got very little done: the Hell nodes had been broadcasting their message but there had been no answer.

About sixty percent of the way towards the Moon, the capsule/lander developed a fault: a routine stirring of the liquid oxygen tanks turned dangerous as a short occurred, detonating that tank and leaking out most of the oxygen. Jeb acted quickly and made sure that the explosion happened outward rather than inward by venting the tank, but this left the capsule without sufficient oxygen for the planned mission.

The Omega ran simulations of the problem and decided to offer Kay the option to be rendered Dormant with a MEC implant if she refused to abort the mission.

Kay had discussed the MEC condition with Cordylon during training, and did not find it appealing at all.

"I will do it if it saves a crewmate, of course, but... if it only costs us a few months of extra work? Is it worth it? I'm 82, I have a few years to go with full use of my body."

"The world ends in 28 years, we have no time to waste!"

"Nobody can ask you more than what you are willing to give. And it's important that we come back unscathed, or nobody will want to board the next capsule."

Alea jacta est. The contingency plan was to perform a quick modification to the moonbase parts that would be sent after the lunar landing; one of the oxygen tanks were shipped full. The Omegas' robust engine system, as well as the railgun, made this relatively cheap to do.

The landing, courtesy of Cordylon, went without a hitch and the crew was able to hide their nervousness to a global audience, as much as possible, including having volunteers broadcast on top of believing frequencies because it was a friggin moon landing and everyone should have seen it.

Despite the mission's success, the Omega was not sure about taking off again; after the first lunar EVA, the first moon base modules would begin arriving; Jeb and Kay would perform the manual parts of their deployment while Cordylon controlled the landing by remote.

Across the world, there was genuine jubilation at this achievement, and even believing media had to say something about it that wasn't "The Temple has judged that space is not important". After the broadcast was done (volunteer groups everywhere put up repeaters or, in a couple of cases, directly hijacked broadcast towers) the Greater Jerusalem media aired a brief special about the Apollo missions, just to remind everyone that decent God-fearing Americans did this a thousand years ago anyway, so the mission wasn't a big deal. Considering that the next transmission featured Cordylon elegantly landing a series of containers meters away from the

capsule, and Jeb and Kay deploying them into greenhouses and barracks, that didn't work particularly well, and by the end of the day even believers were glued to their screens. This was a good opportunity to deliver a brief propaganda message:

"This right here, is humanity Having a Moment, even the believers. Let's not ruin it with dirty tricks.

We did this with only a tiny portion of the world and our budget marshalled into this effort. In a single year a lunar colony shall be flourishing and I only ask you to imagine what we could do with twice or even three times the support? A city on Mars? The entire solar system filled with humans?

Is it not right that even if this will all end that we spend these last few years exploring, living and studying the beauty of the universe?"

One of the Omegas' media people read the announcement in a youthful, optimistic voice. Believing media felt compelled to deliver a response; fortunately, it was by Cameron Williams.

"What does it matter if we think we know? In the end, there's no denying the truth. I don't have all the answers but for now, faith is *enough*."

Sysadmins noted with satisfaction that there were quite a few calls of complaint, from believers, to TV stations, about how "TOL impersonated Mr. Williams to deliver a weak rebuttal".

The lunar crew joined the territory-wide block party in Misrayim by pulling out a small bottle of vodka and a bar of chocolate and sharing them on camera, the first meal in the newly deployed barracks.

As soon as the transmission ended, Jeb "returned the goods": it turned out that the daredevil pilot got spacesick in low gravity!

The return from the Moon was actually the hardest part of the mission, since there was no aerobraking; the lunar crew returned to Earth orbit, circularized, were refueled by a drone tug, and performed a powered landing near the canopy station. Cordylon elected to stay on the station and got back to work with the Cosmists; Jeb and Kay came back for the obligatory media tour, after which Kay privately declared that spaceflight wasn't for her and rejoined the engineering corps.

For the next four hours, a significant fraction of the world's population watched Jeb, Cordylon and Kay deploy the first barracks and two greenhouses, and covered the former in radiation-blocking regolith courtesy of a remote bulldozer piloted by the Heavy MEC. With the dozing going on in the background, Kay played camerawoman while Jeb replicated some of the famous Apollo experiments, such as showing that a feather and a rock could fall at the same time in absence of air.

The team did not manage to replace the oxygen tank surreptitiously, as was the original plan; instead, the replacement was made openly, to show that the mission had a safety factor built in. Kay did not comment about the safety factor being her own (first) life.

Meanwhile, The Hellmouth was taken to the site of the fight against Arariel. Attempts were made to summon, well, anything but the really bad breath that the synthetic mouth developed almost instantly for some reason.

The hellmouth could be moved. It was a matter of whether it was safe or not to move the - computing nodes-. They would have to be turned off. The hell nodes stayed put, and were connected to the mouth via a dedicated radio bridge. The Omegas' theologians put their occultist hat back on and tried all the rituals they could find, from those in TOL's cache to stuff found in Sam Raimi movies. They got no results. Their long lab report indicated that they speculated that, this time around, Tsion Ben-Judah got it right and all demons were bound in Hell for the time being. Perhaps having different deities' intercessions would have helped.

In the meantime, the Pacifican workgroups set up jamming station to severely degrade the quality of the analog broadcast systems used by the nominal government. After months of doing this, even Ely LeVey (who found that her radio show in particular was subject to a lot of interference) had to admit that digital networks had some advantage; the laws remained on the books, but attempts to enforce them ceased.

The Omega decided on creating landings - Apollo and Soyuz-style.

Time was of the essence; the lander and base would be developed concurrently. A hybrid design between Apollo 10 and Soyuz 8 would carry Jeb, Cordylon and a third astronaut, Kay, to the moon; there the crew would perform initial site surveys for a colony site, which would be launched by a series of unmanned rockets immediately afterward. The crew would perform initial construction, plant the initial hydroponic greenhouse if at all possible, and then return home to allow the plants some time to grow.

The Omegas' R&D teams were given various projects; investigating multicopters, which resulted in a light drone platform which would be interesting if the batteries lasted more than five minutes (the nuclear powered version was about car-sized, had six rotors, and didn't much like flying faster than 30km/h or so, but worked well otherwise), flexible robotics, which had much better returns and yielded heavy MEC chassis that looked like extremely bulky people rather than something clearly mechanical... much to Kat's amusement ("*What's a "hyper muscle girl" exactly, and why are the Omegas' imageboards suddenly registering porn of it?!*"), and examining Their Hell nodes. Damien volunteered to get wired into the latter with absolutely no result that could be told; the Omegas' theologians examined TOL's material, and found that most of it rightfully belonged in the fiction section of a library. The only confirmed demon summoning since New Testament times was performed by Satan while indwelling the Antichrist; the three entities that were called forth had a limited ability to shapeshift, but no powers that

would represent a significant asset; the Archangel Michael was able to get rid of all three of them essentially without a fight.

The research teams reported excellent results; by the end of the sixth month, Heavy MECs had access to a "biomimetic" frame which was smaller, almost as strong, and let them go through doorways. Multicopter technology was scaled up, which would allow the Omegas' flexible infantry and vehicles to have attendant drones for backup and support.

Timbuktu was a hub of traffic this year, enough so that space launches lost some of their mystique - but remained a reasonable tourist attraction for the southern Misray town. Maybe its people worked on moonbase and arkship systems; maybe it was the fact that Cordylon, wanting to go to the Moon to coordinate base construction by driving the rovers, wasn't at her usual post at the heart of the canopy station. Either way....

"Timbuktu, we have a problem!"

To top off what had been called the Year of the Cosmos, work on the UNS Reach proceeded apace; the keel was completed and the long barrels that constituted reaction mass storage were installed. When living quarters were installed, Reach would be used as an orbiting space station in high Earth orbit to aid in training until her engines were installed, at which point it would be time to select a destination for the great ship.

In the usual manpower-heavy, talent-poor way, TOL finished refurbishing the Baikonur launch ramp.

The Omega looked into the missing dwarf from Night City and found that they had been converted and did not want to return home. The Omega did receive photographic evidence, but no forensic evidence of this. However, it was NOT actually a dwarf - just some random guy.

Year: 973

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 26 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, so 23 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on synthetic muscle. Your military grant is focused on flying platforms.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

The Omega capitalized on the buzz generated by the moon colony efforts and invested heavily into continuing it; the sheer scale of the project silenced people who said that space was at best a hobby-horse for an elite. While the Omega knew that it would not be possible to move a significant amount of the population off-planet should They lose the Last Battle, the simple fact that They had sent more living space on the Moon last year than in all of history let people think that the plan was indeed that of a mass exodus. The Omegas' propaganda experts encouraged this.

Spacecrafts were, by reason of mass, fragile things. It may have been useful to station a cabal on the canopy station, to train for orbital operations and to keep an eye on topside TOL efforts.

Over the course of the year, Capt. Weaver came to the Omega, limping. She died a few years back in a firefight and while her implant brought her back as it should have, subsequent repairs had been haphazard at best. The peg leg and clamp hand made her look quite piratical, though. She said that when the trade route died out, it got harder and harder to ply her "trade" and at some point, she lost her ship and crew to TOL guns. This was the first indication that TOL had a warship; she described it as a submersible with cruiser guns.

Owing to the Omegas' space endeavors, Timbuktu grew exponentially, and was now a city on par with Amman, centered around an empty ring (for safety) with the launch complex as its center; the Omegas' people noted that Cameron Williams had begun trying to rent an apartment and a studio to record a special on "the New Tower of Babel". The city planners, after much debate from the Omega nodes, were directed to welcome him with open arms.

They gave Cameron Williams press credentials; he and his cameraman Guy Fleegman (who was remarkably patient in going along with his boss while hauling heavy, obsolete analog camera equipment and attracted a bit of a fan following among launch complex workers - partially motivated by the sheer annoyance that Cameron showed when people kept stopping them to get Guy's autograph) were given a shallow but comprehensive tour of the facilities.

Cameron asked the Omega workers pointed questions about how the rockets were polluting the atmosphere ("Don't you guys believe that it's all over in 30 years anyway? At least we've moved to solar and nuclear power instead of sticking with carbureted gas engines"), about how Tsion declared the launch complex a modern Tower of Babel ("Okay, he got us there. We're using at least ten different programming languages just for the sensor systems and I have to make them all talk to each other!"), about how all this sound and fury ultimately signified nothing ("Tell that to Azrael!"), and so on.

Ultimately, his reportage showcased Misrays as a culture of tech-obsessed, evil secularists who needed all the prayer they could get if they were to make peace with their own spirit (never mind the Lord) in time for the Last Battle.

Cameron almost had an aneurysm on camera when a brief interview with Jeb (not the capstone of the interview: when wanting to speak with someone in charge, CamCam meant Timbuktu's mayor, who spent the interview trying and failing to get across to the Glorified reporter the fact that she was just there to run the city and not the space program) went off script to offer a ride to anyone from King David to Noah to Cameron himself, including an ice-fishing expedition if they wanted to take quasi orbital pictures of the Temple.

"And look down at Ezekiel's Temple like it was some sort of diorama! You offend all that we have achieved! This is blasphemy! This is madness!"

Jeb smiled sweetly and casually flicked a slightly flawed resin-printed model of an assault parachutist into the recycling bin. "This is the space program."

Oddly, the exchange made it into the finished product.

OmegaTube was flooded with remixes or parodies within the day; Cameron's "hit piece" did more for morale than a sustained propaganda campaign would have. Tsion announced that he would ask the Temple Tribunal for a ruling on the Tower of Babel business - it was coming anyway.

The surveyors that the Omega sent on a brief tour of Europe reported that Chaim Rozenweig did a brilliant job of eradicating the Omegas' superthorns. On the plus side, Nova Roma was doing well -- the people there had abandoned efforts to reclaim the Empire, at least for now, and were focusing on becoming the Omegas' arsenal; the base personnel, in their spare time, erected a vallum around the ancient city and kept laboring in secret.

The cabal tinkering with the Hell nodes reported few results in the field of getting them to do anything but simulate suffering but succeeded in getting them mobile; this required making a tank-size hole in the Omegas' datacenter and disrupting Their smooth running for a few days. The Hell nodes could now be safely moved around should they become part of an Angel trap or other shenanigans.

Over the years, most of the Omegas' senior personnel were able to at least take a trip to the canopy; Ithuriel had to be recalled after losing himself in the beauty of the Milky Way, Zak's new book "For I Have Tasted the Fruit" almost topped the bestsellers charts if it wasn't for Christian cyberpunk novel series "Soon", and even Captain Weaver was offered a ride and declared on descent that there was yet adventure to be had in the world (while at it, the Omegas' medical technicians did repair her properly with her choice of vat-grown replacement flesh and state-of-the-art cybernetics).

Weaver left the Saint Judas Augmentation Clinic in Pacifica sporting a look that she specifically declared to be a tribute to her fallen former comrade, Quinn. This effectively got the Omega a bit of a propaganda tour, since people still remembered her; Weaver got to meet Rehema in a closed-door meeting, as well. They didn't discuss much of importance but this did not stop shipping fanart from flooding the network.

Weaver thanked the Omega profusely and proceeded to recruit a new crew, then sailed off into the sunset for now.

Timbuktu this year was probably the world's busiest city, and that included New Jerusalem: trucks and trains moved in with raw material and prefabs, and the launch frequency for support capsules was such that it changed the local cloud pattern. Thanks to Jeb and Cordylon's previous experience both as administrators and as spacefarers, things went on without much of a hitch.

By the year's end, what looked like a giant skeletal catamaran took the shape of a starship straight out of a science fiction novel... except that it was right there, orbiting the Earth. Some on the ground claimed that they could see its shadow past the ice canopy, even.

The Omega picked soldiers and warriors from various branches - guards, mobile infantry, Desolators, even a couple of Astartes' adepts - to join the canopy station crew and act as its security contingent; they were given what amounted to vacuum-rated snowmobiles and told to range out on wide patrols across the endless expanse of the ice canopy. They found remarkably little, other than the occasional meteor that had hit the canopy and lodged itself in it.

On a whim, one patrol went as far northeast as Greater Jerusalem, and confirmed that the ice canopy there had a couple of "scars", indicating previous canopy breaching attempts. However, they were old and small.

Near the end of the year, the mighty Reach illuminated with five beams of white-purple light coming from her engines, inserted her into a higher orbit and then returned to the construction orbit.

For now, a point-defense laser adapted from the AN/SEQ-3 Laser Weapon System was installed to handle meteoroids; the weapon was briefly tested, disappointing those who wanted to see energy beams fly in the darkness of space because *lasers don't work that way*, but properly vaporized their magnesium target. For the broadcast, someone added a *pew-pew* sound.

In terms of drone production, the Omega announced the program and published preliminary designs. Maker/geek culture was very strong in both of the Omegas' territories, and while They cared about secrecy for some projects, this wasn't one of them. People had begun to "roll their own", although they weren't as capable as the official ones.

Perhaps unsurprisingly as a way to stop the steady trickle of defection to the Omegas' cause, The Other Light announced with some fanfare the "reabsorption" of a group called The Outer Light

and their establishment as a space program; the Baikonur launch ramp was refurbished and fortified, and they launched a canopy-breaching capsule that was more or less based on the Omegas' old design. They also put forward, via internet and broadcast, a very ambitious space program that included the colonization of Venus, which they promised Satan would terraform for them. As it was, they now had their own "ice hole" as well as, presumably, ballistic missile capability. The Omegas' sysadmins sent a perfunctory message of congratulations.

Their army buildup continued, and Sunday sent a note to indicate that he "worried about the Omega being left behind" on military preparations.

For the first time in many years, the Christian delegation from Misrayim (they still said Osaze, unsurprisingly) was not placed dead last at the big table at the Feast of Tabernacles; instead, their effort as a "persecuted minority" was consistently praised, in between some knuckle-rapping about not doing enough to evangelize.

Back from his latest and possible last speaking engagement at Children of the Tribulation, Noah (yes, the patriarch) announced that he might visit Osaze's northern ports, with the Ark replica in tow, to spread the truth of creation and catastrophe to the benighted land; at the same time Tsion Ben-Judah, who was actively lobbying for a Temple Tribunal proclamation about the Timbuktu launch ramp, declared his work in Eastern Europe finished and moved on to Central Africa. Chaim Rozenweig was still in Eastern Europe, cleaning up the last of the superthorns; Night City's tunnel network by now was extensive, with access to rivers and seas and even a partially-underground overland route to the Rub-Al-Khali.

To the Omegas' sysadmins' great surprise, Urist requested a meeting with "Omega the Elder" during the following year; as far as Their low-level monitoring indicated, the Night City children were working on expanding their home. They certainly had expanded their numbers, to the point that the lower levels of Night City were inhabited almost exclusively by Homo Sapiens Rotundus.

Year: 974

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 26 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, so 23 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on worker drones and the hellmouth. Your military grant is

focused on heavy tank designs.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

Early in the year, a board-level representative of Tree Of Life showed up to one of the clinics in Pacifica that the Omega jointly ran; she was confident, possessed of a certain artificial beauty, and very matter-of-fact. Recently, Tree Of Life had taken a more business-oriented operational ethos.

"We've run our own simulations on your space program's activity, and think that you are planning an exodus, not just a Mars colony. Of course, we want in. If you allow members of the Board to fly on the Reach as passengers on her second trip, we will assist you in collecting as many samples of animal and plant life as possible, and make sure that the artificial wombs on the Reach will operate at full efficiency. Otherwise, we will continue to publish our designs of course, but your workers will have to do the grunt work themselves."

Whatever the Omega answered, the statisticians projected that if Tree Of Life were able to reach this conclusion, likely other subfactions would come forward with similar proposals as soon as they understood what was going on.

The Tree of Life representative had a brief subvocal phone conversation with her bosses and wrote the contract, in flawless handwriting which was clearly the result of either intense training or enhanced muscles, as the Omegas' representatives made the point to her; she accepted the Omegas' terms as They offered them.

"We have already performed our own screening and have selected a contingent that will allow for near-optimum genetic diversity. You will have their availability dates for psych profiling within the day. Thank you."

The UNS Reach was optimized for carrying capacity rather than speed; if the whole universe collapsed in the year +1000, there was no reason to hurry anyway, and if it didn't, it was preferable to spend an extra year in isolation than to get there but find that some essential piece of equipment had been left on Earth. She was designed to carry 400 people, 80% of which would be women (or pre-op trans men, if they were willing to forgo hormone treatment) simply because imperfections in artificial wombs were tolerable with livestock but not with people, as well as very carefully screened sperm samples from the population of Omega territories. The idea was to allow humanity to expand as much as possible depending on what resources were available. The Mars contingent was planned to work out the same way, except that only 300 people would be traveling and some of the livestock would be brought on the hoof rather than in the form of frozen embryos. MECs were fertile (including some heavies, although that would

require getting them out of their pod!) so the distinction had not been made.

The Omega accepted this.

Ithuriel was assigned to the same workgroup as Damien; the two were a remarkably unlikely pair (although Damien did enjoy being taken for a flight in something less noisy than Jeb's contraptions) but the heavy MEC was a known and beloved figure. Ithuriel took token steps to hide his angelic nature, and when he was caught bare-winged on Venice Beach as part of Damien's goodwill tour, he simply noted that he was one of the "bad guys" and had Damien vouch for him; Ithuriel's existence had been a rumor for long enough - he might as well have come clean.

"Yes, this is the body of an Angel of the Lord," Ithuriel said simply.

Civil-protection phone apps were called and tripped, and the beach was quickly evacuated before either Ithuriel or Damien had time to explain. The Omega directed the Venice Beach city administration to deal with the disturbance by arresting the perpetrators (Damien wasn't wearing a frame, and Ithuriel loudly proclaimed his intention to not resist arrest). However, this was going on in Venice Beach, not far away from the nominal capital in Orange County; it was entirely possible that the first responders would be believers, and Ithuriel was really, REALLY not good at lying (He could, although he didn't like to; however, he had the poker face of a six year old with Nutella on his lips).

Fortunately, the first responders were not police at all, but private security for one of a numbers of high-class entertainment establishments built all over the Venice Beach strip; Ithuriel surrendered to them and was quickly taken to one of the casinos' penthouses with one bouncer haplessly left behind to explain to the actual cops what happened. The incident was dropped.

Twenty minutes later, Ithuriel - with Damien in his lap, the blue-haired face familiar to nearly everyone in the territory - was interviewed by a local news crews and, without any embellishments, told his story: the Angel's soul vacated the body after its defeat, and was sent to Hell. A combination of luck and skill allowed a standard issue Mark 10 metabolic extension controlled to be wired into the Angel's brain just at the right time, although the brain damage was enough to erase his memory, and the tender cares of a matronly Australian nurse for a surrogate mother did the rest. Ithuriel answered a few questions ranging from "Are you a fallen angel?" ("In a sense. The doctors say that I am human enough to be one of us") to whether he was dating Damien ("No, we aren't dating") to whether he would consider a career in porn ("I don't want to disappoint you, but my penis and testicles are the work of Tree Of Life; my former master did not see fit to leave me intact", which caused quite a bit of anger on the internet).

The interview made some guy's career, opened an intense debate online, got the poor Angel - who so far had expressed no sexual preference other than "nominally heterosexual, but not interested at this time" - to get mobbed by a few rabid fangirls and a couple of rabid fanboys

because, well, he was actually *that* good looking, and Damien found the whole matter absolutely hilarious. The two even posed for a tasteful-nude modeling shoot that implied that Damien was going down on Ithuriel; the photography students who participated became instant internet celebrities.

The Cosmists generated the requested design for a probe; it would require four components total and would reuse some parts that were intended for the UNS Reach but, while passing stress tests, were found to be inferior to the prime parts and relegated to backups.

The earliest that a probe could be launched was next year (+975) since some design work was necessary. A minimal probe design would require an engine and reactor, a fuel storage system, basic sensors (cameras and spectroscopy), and a large antenna. More modules would make the probe slower.

The Cosmists developed a fairly radical flight envelope that pushed the FFRE power plant to its limits: they performed a high-speed flyby and then began deceleration close to the Centauri system, rather than at the midpoint. The probe would then turn around and head back to the Centauri system later, arriving roughly at the same time or a few years after the UNS Reach. This would allow the initial trip to take only 11 years. If the Omega launched the probe next year, They would receive basic telemetry (photos, maybe a short video) in +990.

The Omega sent a small cadre of soldiers to train for canopy and orbital operations, which immediately got the moniker of the Flash Gordon brigade. The next day they all painted their uniforms red and yellow. The Omegas' topside patrol indicated that TOL orbital activities had been slow: they had a couple of failed launches, and they seemed mostly interested in setting up a basic skyhook / ice hole rather than a full station. However, they had already deployed a basic rover.

Over the years, the Reach was concluded, many years ahead of schedule. At this point, people in Misrayim and Pacifica began to be a little fatigued about space news; Night City offered the closest thing to a view of the sky, so it gained some tourist activity, even though it was hard to get there.

The canopy station was limited to three units of population due to the simple fact that the canopy could only sustain so much weight; the place had taken on the air of a proper spaceport, and was beginning to develop its own slang. Once every ninety minutes, the great ship silently zoomed overhead.

Zak, to everyone's surprise, took the whole "be a Roman" thing very seriously, and even got around to learning (and teaching) some Latin. The great factory in the middle of Italy had mostly remained idle, only building a few prototypes for the Omegas' heavy weapons program.

The Reach was quickly filled with a reasonable sample of livestock; the emphasis there was

towards survivability rather than genetic diversity.

The Omega would have to train and take Martian colonists there; the training was largely done by volunteer organizations on artificial habitats, but They would be responsible for the transfer. Three units of population were already ready to go on the canopy station; the Reach's current configuration could handle five.

The Reach's interstellar engines could get to Mars using a hybrid of Hohmann transfer and brachistochrone.

Year: 975

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 26 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, so 23 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on worker drones and the hellmouth. Your military grant is focused on heavy tank designs.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

Urist showed up at the beginning of the year; the Dwarf was dressed in what would look like an amazing piece of cosplay if it wasn't for the fact that all the leather and steel and gold trim were the real deal and had been forged, milled and stamped the traditional way. The axe was almost as sharp as Ithuriel's sword or Azrael's scythe.

"Those born under the earth have chosen me, their eldest, to represent them. We want no part in your struggle. Keep the surface if can; take the stars if you must; but we have held our moot, and want no part in your war. I will travel to Antarctica and Jerusalem with the same message. In the fullness of time, we will fill Night City, and while we respect our forebears, we wish to remain separate from them. To this effect, we will buy the town from you, now with sweat,

rather than later with blood. What is your price?"

The sysadmins could not believe that this guy was less than forty years old. He had even taken up smoking to deepen his voice!

The Omega asked politely whether Urist would aid the cause like the Tree of Life had been doing.

"There is no price your people could pay that would really be of value to me. I have no need of most of what you can offer; I need no labour, no weapon nor wealth.

The night city itself is the only thing of value, as it represents the resistance against god. It is a symbol and you making it clear you aren't with us; that destroys a symbol we have worked to cultivate.

I am quite happy to let you have the Night City if we fail to stop god. I am quite happy to let you have it if we succeed as well but as of this moment in time? It is my construction and I won't see anyone topple it until it has finished its purpose.

So can you wait until after we have dealt with god for independence? If not then I suppose we could assist you in setting up your own independent city in the deep. Using our nuclear tunnelling machines and such."

The Omega asked why Urist believed he would be spared when no others would be when the year 1000 came. They shared the data of what the End Times would like from the believers' perspective.

"You can't hide away in the ground because the Big Guy in the Sky would more than likely tear up your homes by the root or flood it with lava before remaking it. Can't pull a Treebeard here and try to hide from the battle."

Urist appreciated the reference to Treebeard; the Omega got the impression that he had committed as much Tolkien to memory than Tsion Ben-Judah had the Bible.

"Yahweh can be Lord of the Heavens," he replied.

The dwarf clarified that he knew that Night City was built by Men originally, and even recited some of the former salt mine's history; that was why he wanted to buy it with his people's work.

"All our history is one of bloody conquest; but it doesn't have to be. We would conquer your city with honest sweat, not bitter blood.

I see your point, but my people need a home - best to secure one now when we are few and there is no reason to fight. We know that we come from your people, and are grateful; we promise you peace, and we will continue to toil for Night City even though it is not ours. But, will you give us another audience in five years? Perhaps by then we will have something you might

want."

Urist also asked for a bit of advice - should he visit Antarctica or New Jerusalem first?

The Omega advised against both of them but felt Antarctica would be safer.

Urist thanked Them for the advice, and noted that he would go to Antarctica first; the Omega was to expect tissue samples from the dwarves within the week.

In an adjacent room in the same datacenter, the Omegas' military analysts noted that Noah's Ark, a perfect replica, had been latched to tugs and was moving out of its moorings.

Leaving the tunneler with Night City for a while was certainly better than keeping it idle; Urist was very happy to give the Omega his axe in return, treating it as an old-timey exchange of gifts (he understood that he was only borrowing the tunneler). He was more privacy-oriented with his DNA, though; for that he wanted exclusive use of the tunneler for five years, although he would also provide other dwarven DNA samples.

Off the record, he lamented his brethren's unwillingness to settle on, or rather under, the Moon.

The Omega asked how his brothers would feel about settling on a planet out of the system.

"I have mooted this, and agree with you, but my brethren would rather make their home on this Earth, not another."

Urist thought that showing up in person would show respect. Initial telemetry showed that he may have been lying.

"Surely they would not harm the leader of a people coming in peace to talk."

Urist dropped to a stage whisper.

"If they assassinate me, all of dwarfkind goes to war. Pray they're that stupid. Pray you're that lucky. "

"I will not pray one of my children and friends dies, even if it aids me, " the Omega replied.

Ithuriel did however alter his plans: before going, he would use the Omegas' equipment to videocall, since They allowed it and the Omega would record the calls for review later. Ithuriel was informed that TOL betrayed their word often and to keep high alert.

Urist answered with a booming laugh and slapped the sysadmin monitoring the video conference on the back in such a way that he would probably need a bit of physical therapy to recover.

When the Omega cut direct communication, Urist remained in the room for approximately an hour to talk to Sunday and whichever Levite priest was in charge of what little diplomacy there

was between the Omega and Greater Jerusalem; the Omega recorded the call, but did not request anyone to review it. The first call took about fifty minutes; the second about ten.

"I thank you. We will provide tissue samples to the Night City doctors, and keep working towards its prosperity. Unlike The Other Light, we do not worship a deceiver, and my word is true - we will talk again in five years, and see if by then we won't have a prize worthy of a city's ransom!"

Urist did not leave his ornate axe with the Omega; instead, a considerably more plain specimen was delivered via regular mail the next day. If the ceremonial axe was heavy and represented traditional craftsmanship, this one was a good balance between throwability and utility use (for someone of Urist's strength anyway: the dwarf could probably arm-wrestle down Ithuriel and give a workout to a Heavy MEC's motors) and might as well have been sintered atom by atom given how tight the tolerances on it were; a cursory examination showed that the steel blade and titanium handle had been bonded by a micron-thick "sheath" of diamond.

For now, Urist returned to Night City.

Over the course of the year, the Omega decided that Ithuriel would train with Urist's axe.

Meanwhile, the probe mission was deemed a moderate success.

Built around the "spare" engine for the UNS reach, the probe ended up looking remarkably like the spaceship from A Space Odyssey, and the final design went along with this; the solar panels that would allow it to keep operating once it had reached the Centauri system and used up its nuclear fuel were folded tight against the long and thin body, to avoid being hit by micrometeoroids. At a hair over half the speed of light, this would be humanity's fastest creation to date. Reportedly, Jeb had to be prevented from adding a last-minute pilot's station.

Of course, during its construction literally everything that could go wrong went wrong. During launch of one of the components to the canopy, someone blasphemed after being hit over the head by a piece of debris thrown off by the takeoff blast; a bolt of lightning hit the booster, damaging the upper stage's generator.

"SCE to AUX," Zak declared confidently, switching the system to batteries; the Omega minused a fairly expensive set of lithium batteries when Cordylon retrieved the cargo, but the launch succeeded.

Docking issues plagued the orbital assembly, largely because the math that was done to dock Reach's parts together had not been revised properly. It sent the sensor array into a collision course with the larger ship just as Mars-bound colonists were approaching it; Jeb took manual control of the tug and eyeballed a plane shift maneuver that averted collision by just a few hundred meters.

Before the end of the year, Humanity's first interstellar craft was good to go; the engines opened

full blast for a moment to test and to make sure its parking orbit was higher than the Reach's. All that was left now was waiting a fraction of an orbit to when the probe would be aligned.

There was really no way to hide what the new probe was for, and little reason to: the Omegas' media made it very clear that this year's unprecedented (and slightly rushed) effort was towards sending a probe to another star.

In a world in which a quarter of the population had more or less slowly lapsed into the belief that stars were little tiny dots in the firmament (not as if they got to see them anyway) this was unprecedented; an amusing side effect was that creationist luminaries such as Dr. Hovind had to explain to the most "pastoralized" part of the population that yes, such a thing was possible and it was nothing particularly miraculous on the Omegas' part. Of course, this was mixed with sermons thundered from radio and TV antennas concerning the fact that the citizens of Osaze should have looked towards New Jerusalem, not upwards, if their mind was so keen on heavenly affairs, but there was nothing new there. In the meantime, some of the Omegas' more militant citizens enjoyed listening to "creation scientists" clarify people's doubts with solid science for once.

In comparison, loading the colonists and equipment on the Reach was surprisingly painless; the group would do a general systems test on the Reach's habitat and use the months spent in low earth orbit as a general rehearsal for their journey. The Omegas' psychologists gathered a lot of useful information on crew dynamics, and they only had to "call a repairman" from the canopy twice.

The remaining personnel set up a junior science program intended to bring in as many varieties of animals and plants as possible; the positive response ensured that low quality was vastly offset by great quantity, so all that the Omegas' and Lifetree's professionals had to do was filter. Christians were allowed in and the program was tied in with Noah, claiming that it was a copy based on his 'amazing ecological salvation efforts.'

Noah began his tour of the Mediterranean coast with a replica of the Ark - the craft was supposed to be accurate 1:1 on the outside, but on the inside it had been fit as a mobile conference center and lecture hall (although it did, of course, contain a zoo).

Noah himself seemed to have little to tell others except his Bible story, although he was a pleasant narrator; he was mostly interested in interacting with children. The Omegas' dockworkers erected their share of "Please do not try to debate Noah directly" and "Please do not torpedo the Ark" signs, and Misrayim police ended up having to play security for the guy, since homemade torpedoes were well within the capability of the average Misray tinkerer.

The biodiversity collection program played along with Noah's visit, although the Omegas' people made it sound like it was intended for Mars rather than for Alpha Centauri; there was the predictable clash between believers wanting to "reclaim the rainbow" and Underground

Monorail activists, but that remained contained to the far side of the ports. Overall, Noah's little goodwill trip cost the Omega some resources, mostly in security - the cops and coast guard had been instructed to be harsh with people wanting to "test" torpedos or water drones on or near the Ark, but lenient with peaceful protesters. No violence, but people could shout all they like.

One thing the Omegas' observers noticed was that once aboard the Ark, children became incredibly docile; years would tell if conversions happened by supernatural pressure, but as it was, many of the Omegas' teachers would love to know how Noah was doing it - he told his story over and over with little variation from the Bible, but he sounded paternal and friendly and got even the most fidgety kids to sit down and listen.

Unfortunately, all the brouhaha hampered the Omegas' genetic collection efforts more than helped it, largely because the Christians who got involved kept talking over the Omegas' instructors whenever evolution was mentioned; even so, near the end of Noah's tour the local Wizard Scout troop presented the ancient patriarch with a photo album of children all over the world playing naturalist. He was genuinely touched.

The ancient Bronze Age patriarch accepted the natural-sciences project with great graciousness; the Omega received the impression that he didn't really understand what the kids did beyond going out and learning about nature.

As it was, debates happened, and the Omegas' guys lost most of them, due to appearing shrill compared to the Christians' calm, probably borrowed from Noah.

A particularly cheeky delegation from Timbuktu gave Noah a handsome laser-engraved titanium plate featuring the Ark and the Reach with the sky canopy separating them, and thanked him for saving humanity from Yahweh.

After his obligatory - and somewhat rushed - plea for them to put their skills towards the Lord's work, Noah spoke thus:

"So the Lord said, 'I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But, children, somehow I, Noah, found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Now notice that I did not say that God found in me any good thing that made me worthy. I believed in Him, that He was the Creator and my Sovereign and my only Savior from sin. I humbled myself before Him and pledged faithfulness and obedience. That is all we can do.

You must understand—I did not see myself as an extraordinary man. I was like anyone else. I toiled. I worried. I raised my family and kept them close to me—all three sons, even after they married. We were not perfect. We sometimes argued and squabbled, wanted our own ways. But for the most part we respected and honored each other and our wives.

As you might imagine, that was a terrifying and sobering time for us. God was showing His great

power and, yes, His anger. While I was relieved and grateful that somehow I had found favor in His eyes, imagine how lonely we felt, knowing that at the end of this, we would be the fathers of all the generations yet to come."

The message was rebroadcast to the canopy station and to the Reach, and many found it genuinely touching - it was as close a declaration of comradeship as they could expect from a Glorified.

The fallout from Noah's visit was overall minor: a few arrests, a couple of interesting slow-moving-torpedo designs, and only a handful of conversions. If anything, the space program crew's resolve had increased.

Noah began the European leg of his trip around the Mediterranean with the plaque proudly displayed in the wheelhouse. A play that reinterpreted Noah's story as one of defiance, rather than obedience, made the rounds in Omega territories; the patriarch did not comment - whether because he didn't know about it or because something in him might tacitly approve was anyone's guess.

The biodiversity project was well underway, but could not be completed this year; TOL seemed keen on continuing their military preparations and doing little else, although low-level surveillance indicated that they had begun building short range missile launchers derived from the tank design that the Omega shared a few years ago.

On the debt side, internet suppression was beginning to take its toll in Pacifica, and had begun in Australia. Tsion's requests for a ruling about the Tower of Babel had so far gone unheeded, likely due to Noah's reaction to the project, and he announced his intention to tour Timbuktu in person next year.

TOL's canopy efforts limped along; they sent a security platoon up, even though it had little to protect so far, and their patrols encountered the Omegas' a few times. At least there was no tension... yet.

Over the course of the year, Urist met with one of the Seven (Thursday, perhaps) in a cafe in Paris. Shortly before or after, the Omegas' low-level monitoring discovered a TOL base there. Urist seemed to not want to go to Jerusalem for now.

The problem ensued when, before the Feast of Tabernacles, the prophet Samuel demanded to see "he who calls himself Ithuriel". Ithuriel was informed of this while practicing with Urist's axe, and the normally seraphic (heh) Angel's reaction sent the masterwork weapon through two walls, a dumpster, a van, a double-parked car, and a piece of stone from which security guards had to retrieve from some scrawny kid who effortlessly slid it out (not a particularly difficult feat given the axe blade's profile) and proclaimed himself King of the Britons.

The position had been vacant since the Glorious Appearing although, arguably, the kid that

plucked the axe out of the (mostly shattered) rock and ran around with it until security people traded him a smartphone for it had a better claim than most, at this point.

While Urist's axe did not have the supernatural edge of Angelic weapons and needed to be sharpened like everything else, tests performed with the unknown angel's mace showed that it was able to nick the mace sufficiently in one swing for it to lose Divine protection. The second swing just sliced right through it. The testing team was reluctant to use Ithuriel's sword or Azrael's scythe for testing, and Rehema still had Araniel's spear, by right of biting an Angel to death.

Ithuriel, when asked, simply said that the Omega had earned his loyalty, and if he went to die, all he needed to know was whether he should make it a fight or bare his neck as a gesture of spite.

The negotiation on each side was.... screeching, for lack of a better word. The Judge Samuel was indignant, as if he should have met a subject on equal grounds. The Omegas' theologians countered that Misrayim, or even "Osaze", was its own country, separate from Greater Jerusalem. The Temple priests protested that no matter how disloyal, Osaze was a vassal country. The Omegas' lawyers insisted that Ithuriel had committed no crime in Jerusalem and wanted to see a writ of extradition. The judge Jephthah offered to write one on the lawyer's back with a lash.

It looked like the problem could escalate into a shooting war 25 years ahead of schedule until the mayor of a Misray village held an impromptu show-of-hands election to vote in Ithuriel as justice of the peace for that village, thus giving him equal formal rank. Samuel still would not deign to participate, so Jephthah was sent in his stead.

The meeting would happen where Misrayim and Greater Jerusalem both ended between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, with a strip of land that technically belonged to the Middle Eastern territory. The Temple delegation arrived in formal ancient garb; men with beards that a dwarf might envy, mostly Glorified, who marched there on double time from the Temple, refreshing themselves at villages along the way. They carried no amplification, but their voices covered the hundred meters or so of the double border with no difficulty whatsoever.

Ithuriel did, either way, file a request to check his sword out of storage if he had to go to Jerusalem; the other sword, which had been sullied, was in a museum where it belonged, but he had a second weapon to wield.

Ithuriel noted, matter-of-factly, that a man whose manhood had been damaged was not fit to appear before the assembly of God, so that was a possible loophole.

"I'm not really using it, and it can be grown back."

A wheeled platform pushed by worker drone prototypes carried a veritable feast of the best that Misray molecular gastronomy had to offer, including passable meat substitutes, and was

brought just on the RAK-GJ side of the double border; Damien had deftly maneuvered the drone's tentacles to unpack the platform and set the table for the priests.

Ithuriel had come on foot, wearing Western-style formal attire that had been modified to fit his wings, and carrying a heavy briefcase which had been built to house his sword and the dwarven axe. Behind him were Damien and Kat on a double-headed frame (Kat was operating the body, while Damien had VR glasses on and was keeping tight control on the small drone swarm accompanying the delegation), with a number of martial artists and other support personnel. Someone in the retinue joked about the Mouth of Sauron being late.

Rehema was indeed on standby, behind the other fighters. Taking on an Angel with this retinue may have been possible, but would be costly - only Kat and a couple of the drones had neutron sources.

Jephtah and Ithuriel exchanged greetings in the prescribed manner, and then the former began to interrogate Ithuriel. The Angel was able to carry his voice through the divide, although none of the Omegas' group could (without assistance from a wubber) and so the conversation happened that way, very loudly and with a bit of an echo in the wind.

Jephtah said that Ithuriel was a fallen angel, and belonged in Hell during this dispensation. Ithuriel answered that his soul already was in Hell, and so were those of many good citizens, including some standing before both of them. Jephtah answered that they couldn't possibly have been good. The two argued Biblical interpretation for a very long ten minutes, with Jephtah getting more and more irritated.

"If I surrender to you, will my death placate your bloodlust? Will you let my friends return home safely?" Ithuriel asked. Jephtah answered in the affirmative and Ithuriel began walking towards the other side of the border.

"Then so be it, in accordance with the law."

Damien had been around Ithuriel for a year, and was convinced that he was bluffing. Kat thought that if the priests struck first, it was an excellent opportunity to reduce a bunch of them to thin red paste and get away with it. Rehema thought they should all talk to Ithuriel's "mom".

The Omega ordered Ithuriel to stop; he did.

"Omega, mine has been a short life, but it will be well spent if it ends here. I am a liability to your cause. Besides, Scripture agrees with me."

The priests were in a huddle.

"This is a diplomatic talk, not an execution! You agreed to it, Jephtah. If you want to make it an execution, you will get exactly what you want." Kat's wubber generated the sound of a thousand swords being unsheathed, in lieu of a more stereotypical ka-click, on grounds that Jephtah may

have been more familiar with it.

Ithuriel had stopped to listen to the Omega, but after a few moments, resumed advancing. Telemetry indicated that he had unlocked his briefcase.

The Omega put the nurse who breastfed Ithuriel on the horn; she had been given a brief explanation.

"STOP! I am Ithuriel's milk mother! You're intending to kill a child, Jephtah!"

She quickly told the story of how Ithuriel's mind was blank after the fight and how she nursed him to health and gave him a basic education.

The priests listened. Some looked pretty worried; they were probably discussing the implications.

Ithuriel acknowledged the message.

"Thank you. And they won't. Nobody will die today."

The Angel stopped, opened the briefcase, and tore his shirt open by spreading his wings.

"Jephtah! You bid me die because of what I am. You call me a mockery of the Angels of your Lord. You're wrong! I am nobody's messenger! I am a Man of Misrayim, under arms by choice!"

Ithuriel got the sword out of his briefcase and, with a single flawless motion, sliced his extended wings off at the root.

"And you will not hurt my friends!"

The Omegas' people improvised hand drums by banging on each other's armor or the drones, although Kat had to provide most of the effect.

The priests looked at each other and slunk off, Jephtah having to jog rather undignified to get from the tail to the head of the delegation.

The Omega had expected a fight, so there was a meat wagon available very quickly; good thing, because Ithuriel just severed a couple of major arteries. He managed to remain standing until the priests walked off, but had to be carried home on a stretcher.

Tree Of Life was extremely happy to do the reattachment and predict that there would be a market for the augmentation which they would derive from what they learned.

Ithuriel's wet nurse was flown in and the two had a tearful but happy reunion.

The Temple Tribunal had absolutely nothing to say about any of this, but the next standard

sermon warned that the Devil would appear as an angel of light.

Ithuriel had to be talked into getting his wings reattached, and only agreed when the medics pointed out that there would be other human beings with wings in a few years, if he was willing to sign over genetic rights to The Other Life. Fortunately, Damien and Ithuriel's "nurse" intervened and Ithuriel's body plan became public domain instead.

Tsion, in his usual tone, announced that pending a ruling by the Temple, he would tour Timbuktu next year and "would not need special arrangements".

Continued attempts to restrict the internet in Pacifica caused the reputation economy that the Omega set up there to falter somewhat.

The Omega figured that diplomatic protocol could be bent in the face of the end of the world and had an analyst listen to Urist's recordings. The NJ recording was quick: Urist was informed that Yahweh was Lord over all the Earth and that he (Urist) was either human or demonic - there was no room for anything else. The dwarf answered that he was offering peace, but was told that true peace could only come from submission, and hung up.

The conversation with the Seven was longer simply because they were sorting out a meeting and discussing capabilities; Urist was intrigued by The Other Light's modus operandi involving mostly underground factories, but found their workmanship standards appalling. The Omega did learn that TOL had informants in Night City still. They also learned that in regions where the government had managed to shut down the internet, TOL had also switched to radio, and was building large transmitters with jamming capabilities.

Year: 976

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 26 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems and 1 is handling canopy security, so 22 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on worker drones and the hellmouth. Your military grant is focused on heavy tank designs.

You are not tracking enemy teams. Tsion is in Timbuktu.

Tsion's announced visit to Timbuktu was not handled in any particular way; the Glorified theologian effectively gave himself the run of the place by threatening Divine retribution if anyone got in his way and was only kept away from high-security areas by the simple expedience of closed doors in his face faster than he could open them... unless they led to the exit.

He compiled a demographic survey of Timbuktu, noting that there were not even ten believers living in the launch complex city.

He measured the average height of the launch ramp if one counted the up-going capsules, multiplied by their height, divided by the time spent in the air, multiplied by the integral of the height gradient; he even had a few local technicians check his numbers.

He adamantly refused the chance to enjoy a quick trip up the canopy.

Finally, he announced that he had enough information to once again ask for a ruling on whether Timbuktu was or wasn't a new Babel.

After leaving, Tsion once again formally asked the Temple Tribunal for a ruling on whether Timbuktu was a new Babel: he noted that, after some math, the "effective" height of the launch ramp (counting the average-over-the-year height of the rockets as the move) was greater than Ezekiel's Temple.

The first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Tsion's long-awaited ruling on Timbuktu being another Tower of Babel finally came.

"This inspired assertion by Paul the apostle tells us that God has made all nations of men "to dwell on all the face of the earth"—not on Mars or Venus or some distant star, and apparently not even on an orbiting satellite such as Earth's Moon. None of these have the necessities for human life, such as air and water. Planet Earth, alone among all the known planets and satellites in the solar system (or anywhere else), is equipped to sustain man. "The earth hath He hath given to the children of Adam."

He also noted the reference to "the bounds of their habitation" in Acts 17:26. God assigned specific boundaries, both geographically and chronologically, to each nation. All of these, of course, were on "the face of the earth"... never anywhere else.

This was an unprecedented decision for many reasons: the drafting of it was "outsourced" to a prominent Natural Creation scientist instead of being written by the Temple priests. It effectively noted that there would have to be a higher ruling (Jesus Himself, or his Prince, King David) to settle the matter and did not answer Tsion's question directly.

The Glorified theologian latched on the first part of the ruling (as reported above) and declared that in order to stay on the side of caution he considered all space colonization endeavors to be

anathema, and those currently living on Luna and Mars forever beyond the scope of salvation.

"Let them return, I say! Let them return and cover their heads in ashes when they beg for forgiveness." At the very least, he argued, the off-Earth colonies were nations in their own right and should have been required to send a representative to the Feast of Tabernacles like everyone else - this would have put an enormous resource expenditure on the Omega, especially for the Mars colony, since They would need to launch through an atmosphere. Of course, there was the question as to whether any consequence could be applied to the colonies - but Timbuktu was well within Tsion's reach. For now, he moved back to Eastern Africa.

The Omega decided to let him rant. He was ignoring the second half of the ruling and only hurting his own cause. They pointed out that Noah liked the project.

The Omegas' theology team built a "demon summoning pit" that looked quite convincing, and wired what was left of Araniel's mouth to the Omegas' Hell nodes. To the surprise of absolutely nobody, horrific moaning came out of it. The team tried all the summoning rituals that they were aware of, and even hired external consultants (pagan priests, and even a TOL confessor who believed in ritualistic Luciferianism).

Ithuriel was summoned to the gate to make rites.

Ithuriel found the whole business very grisly, and participated in the rituals, which didn't seem to do much. He was still grounded for another year; the wings had "taken", but *he* was taken to wearing bulky shirts to cover them unless he had to fly somewhere. So far, Tree Of Life had not been able to duplicate them in functional form, although the Omega did occasionally see people with small ornamental wings that could move. The first successful implant for those was an aging but very talented pole dancer from the American Heartland.

Increased effort put into the ritual's appearance didn't seem to do much; the Omegas' theologian hypothesized that at this point, either there was no way to get demons out of Hell by aping magical practices or the rituals should have been performed by genuine Luciferians.

Next year, the Omega would hire Luciferians to perform the ritual.

The Luciferian priest was asked to bring a few acolytes and they were given a run of the "hellmouth" grounds (under heavy guard, of course).

After three days of invoking the Lord of Darkness, the Luciferian priest admitted that he was out of ideas; Lucifer was bound in Hell until the Last Battle, and it was entirely possible that Hell could not be reached by material means. The priests believed that Satan would resurrect all the sufferers. The Omegas' theologians noted that it would be a problem to deal with tens of billions of people.

The Omega sent a brief about the Hellmouth to TOL leadership; they didn't answer directly, but it became easier to find Luciferian practitioners to try summoning rituals with. Going once again

through an exhaustive list of demonic names via multiple sources started to be a chore for the Omegas' theologians, but the newcomers took it very seriously.

While They got some info about TOL by listening to pre- and post-ritual chatter and analyzing it, demons continued to be notable for their absence.

In other news, the Omegas' recruiting drive was, unsurprisingly, strictly coupled with Their space program; to some surprise, this year's hopeful mostly came from Pacifica. While Misrayim had a vibrant economy (as mediated by the Colossus systems), the American coast recently was suffering from its hybrid economy being actively suppressed by its own government, particularly its efforts to force a pastoralization policy to a region with a tradition of innovation. Some of the new recruits wanted a full takeover; some simply wanted to escape what they thought would turn into another expanse of farmland soon.

The groups assigned to resume work on AI and robotics, to which Zak attached himself out of scientific curiosity, had some results to show in the field of neural networks as applied to robotic platforms.

Effectively, this little tracked platform taught itself to interpret its own sensor signals and gave orders to its motors, in the same way a baby might learn to crawl and walk.

The Omegas' people coordinated with Tree Of Life to proceed on the biodiversity catalogue project; seeds, spores, gametes and viable embryos were collected and frozen.

The current plan for the Reach was to finish populating it and to then head to Mars immediately. The colonists currently aboard the Reach trained for Mars, not Luna. The Omega did have the option of aborting and changing destination.

The Reach launched to Mars as soon as the landing was complete; thanks to the fission fragment engines, the trip was much shorter than the time spent in orbit for the "rehearsal", and there were no significant issues inflight. The Omegas' relay satellites allowed for the telemetry on the trip to be continuous and reliable, and the whole world - yes, even some believers, however guilty they may have felt about it - followed the mission.

The Reach put itself just inside the atmosphere of Mars and aerobraked; this damaged the frontal foam shield a little, but provided invaluable data about plasma sheathing. Then, habitation and engineering modules were landed inside the Hellas Depression by means of conventional retro rockets; the seasonal frosting would provide a source of water and the low altitude would allow for easier harvesting of carbon dioxide from the thin atmosphere.

Engineering lead Damon Matthews had been selected by a random raffle which the Omega had influenced. Having landed with the other cosmo-colonists, and fully cognizant of the fact that he was effectively stranded there for the duration, he put on his EVA suit and walked out of the airlock.

Rather than any famous words, he decided to defuse tension by striking a pose and exclaiming,

"Good luck, Mr. Gorsky!"

Shortly thereafter, the relevant engineering module deployed a robo-dozer and the modules were assembled together; the nuclear reactor was buried a while away after cables were strung, solar panels were deployed and by the end of the week, a small village had been built. By the looks of it, the first crops to sprout on Mars would be potatoes and hops.

Damon Matthews died quietly a couple of months later, about a week behind schedule; the metabolic extension controller tripped as it should have, and the lack of facilities to help people cope with a sudden loss of sensory input was obviated in this case by the fact that the second crop to sprout on Mars had been marijuana.

Year: 977

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 27 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems and 1 is handling canopy security, so 23 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on the hellmouth. Your military grant is focused on heavy tank designs.

You are not tracking enemy teams.

Field report: *The Omega canopy patrol group reported that relations with their TOL counterpart remained more or less friendly. During the last soccer game (the canopy was the perfect hockey field, but nobody had spacesuits that could withstand a hockey puck thrown at game speeds) they noticed that TOL had a lot more guys on the bench. In addition, TOL had been using their patrollers to pick up some of the nuclear fuel pellets launched from the Moon that strayed too far near their ice hole. The loss was negligible, but they weren't this bold a year ago. Furthermore, they seemed to be building a launch platform on their canopy installation; while they had no access to nuclear engines, conventional rockets could be launched from there.*

Field report: *Tsion left Timbuktu in a big huff, for the time being. Noah was still touring the Mediterranean and would take the Ark into the Black Sea, bringing her close to one of the Omegas' tunnel network exits.*

News report: *Reputation Currency Faced Hurdles In Pacifica* (The Amman Express-News)

The shores of California still exude an air of friendliness that is unmatched anywhere else in the world, but the recent economic planning decisions by the territorial government have made the place much less attractive than it used to be to startup entrepreneurs, techies, and even some of the traditional hippies and laid-back types: in a blow to surfers, The Venice Beach Resort Consortium recently had to shut down the offshore artificial wave generator, the largest in the world.

"With the continued disruption of reputation markets, it's just not possible to guarantee continuity; the generator will be operated on Monday mornings through Wednesday mornings, starting when the reputation servers send their updated packet. We've had a lot of complaints about patrons earning the "freeloader" tag due to infrequent updates tagging their consumption as happening all at once, and it's a lot of Whuffie to work off. People come here for vacation, not to accrue debt."

Prominent Christian and Pastoralist lobbyist and radio personality Ely Rahab LeVey refused to discuss the decline of the reputation market with us, but noted with satisfaction that "people are getting back to work in proper jobs, and using proper money" since the Internet restriction in Pacifica came into force. A spokeswoman from Tree Of Life, Inc. rebutted that many Pacifican citizens, such as owners of active MEC implants, are facing real hardship if they cannot participate in the cash economy. While the situation is not as dire as some of our interviewees may think, we have confirmed with the Colossus system that the continual network disruption due to increasingly stringent requirements to use a network node has caused the cash economy to surpass the reputation economy in size for the first time since +955.

Field report: *A New Smiling Face! The first child in Hellas Colony was born! The happy parents named their third-born "Hope", after the first thing the child said after a successful cesarean, although doctors agreed that the newborn's gurgling may have sounded more like "Hurp!". The birth marked the third child born in space, and the very first who was both conceived and delivered outside of Earth. Colonists greeted the newest mouth to feed with enthusiasm and then renewed enthusiasm for their research and homesteading work. In other news, hydroponic greenhouse 7 was now operational and would supply the colony with soy. While this wasn't yet a goodbye to powdered milk, the day of a proper Martian vegan latte drew nearer!*

News report: *The territorial government of the Atlantic Coast has signed into law new restrictions on digital information channels that will affect all citizens and residents starting with the new year. In obeisance to the pastoralization policy and in the interest of reducing electromagnetic pollution that disturbs government and commercial broadcast signals, the installation of new repeaters in the 2.4 and 5 gigahertz band for non-emergency uses is now subject to a moratorium. Furthermore, a new helpline for people who wish to complain about health effects of electromagnetic pollution caused by digital signals will allow for a survey team with authority to shut down to be dispatched immediately. See the next bulletin for the number*

nearest to you.

As the Reach's keel returned to a parking orbit a few kilometers above the canopy, the Omegas' space program lost no time; the mighty ship was quickly swarmed by orbital tugs for analysis - it seemed to have taken very little stress in its first interplanetary voyage - and in the meantime conventional rockets launched Progress-style capsules carrying the last of the lunar colony equipment. Since the base was deserted, the automatic systems deposited the new buildings in their packed state in a way that colonists would have an easy time deploying; the greenhouses that were set up by the first lunar construction team had flowered well and were in fact, slightly overpacked if anything.

Jeb took the opportunity to log some time in orbit and kept training up a small corps of space engineers.

Nova Roma finally had a chance to flex their industrial muscle and the Omegas' first heavy tanks rolled off the production line; recruiters managed to pick up a number of disaffected youth in Western Europe and Pacifica, and inducted them into the first purpose-built infantry division. The new units had a Roman theme with dress uniforms for both tank drivers and infantrymen resembling lorica segmentata and unit insignias pretty heavy on the Aquilas. The Omegas' sysadmins weren't entirely sure why the officers went for oversized pauldrons. The new recruits received less training than the Omegas' agent and focused all of it on possible combat operations against TOL or Angels.

Zak and Damien coordinated with Tree Of Life to finally wrap up the genetic biodiversity project; the former assisted the bio-enthusiasts with taxonomy and genetics, while the latter became the public face of the project, donning for the occasion a small canine-like frame and leading Wizard Scouts and similar youth groups into doing most of the collecting. Christian families were put off by Damien's appearance and MEC status and mostly withdrew their children from the program... *mostly*. As in the year before, an illustrated scrapbook of the children's activities was sent to Noah who often commented,

"That's one peculiar-looking puppy right there."

Under Jeb's not-particularly-vigilant eyes, the satellite relay network was completed; the Omegas' ability to send and receive data offworld improved significantly, and the ever-awake cameras slowly continued the asteroid mapping job started by Valentina years ago. A side benefit of this was that the Omegas' scientists were able to confirm that the "one way speed of light" hypothesis brought for by creation scientists was, in fact, demented nonsense as Einstein had predicted; confirming that relativity still held would be useful for any future endeavor regarding relativistic spacecraft.

Nova Roma finally had a chance to flex their industrial muscle and the Omegas' first heavy tanks

rolled off the production line.

Ithuriel spent most of the year in physical therapy but declared himself fit to be released. He half-hiked, half-rode the tunnels under the Rub-Al-Khali and part of Western Asia to Eastern Europe and Night City. He noted that Chaim had done a remarkably good job of removing the superthorns; the land was now as productive as ... well, just about anywhere else, really. His trip, during which he hid his wings under bandages and a trenchcoat, left him pining for the fjords to some degree.

Once in Night City, he was led to the lower levels where he confirmed that the Dwarfs were digging into the living rock something much larger than the city actually required (and charging rent to those who moved into the new sections, by dint of asking them to help with the work). Ithuriel also noted that by now most of those born in Night City fit the Homo Sapiens Rotundus phenotype.

He inquired about buying a sword from the master smiths working in the lava forges and in response, was put to work in a variety of backbreaking low-skill jobs for a month in addition to brokering a deal for some extra nuclear fuel for the Dwarf tribe. At the end of that, Ithuriel had a sore back, excellent muscle tone, and a very unadorned sword with a black rubber handle, a wootz steel blade, and an edge formed of a micron-thick stratum of diamond inset about a centimeter into the blade. Urist and Ithuriel got along very well, due to a shared love of knightly tale and a similar sense of honor. The two sparred, although the Omega was not told who won.

Ithuriel was thanked for his success on a diplomatic mission.

The Omega asked Kat if they had enough gas to knock out GJs population of if they should produce more.

"Oh no. We'd need to put up a serious effort... besides, we may have the gas but how are we going to get it there? Dropping canisters off from the canopy? We have cargo aircraft that can play bomber, it's not like the Temple has air defenses, but... well, I suppose it sort of does if it needs to. It'd be a one way trip. Most Angelic stuff seems to work with sound; can we have a supersonic transport?"

"We can send the gas up in small vehicles that drill out of the tunnel network and deploy it into GJ." ~memory deleted~

Ithuriel spent the rest of the year training with the new sword; the axe was given back to the metallurgists and ended up in Cairo's science museum as a friendly challenge from Night City to Misrayim to beat its craftsmanship.

Ithuriel noted that the Dwarves considered Jenny (the mysterious traveler) and Emily (Urist's mother) the mothers of their race; they referred to Yahweh as the God of Blood and called themselves His slaves.

The Omega discovered near the end of the year that TOL used their rickety launch ramp to launch a capsule towards the Moon. The capsule was fairly large and almost destroyed the ramp on takeoff but nevertheless, managed to complete its trip and performed a direct-descent landing near to the Omegas' base. The Omega had no record of anyone returning, and TOL leadership had not propagandized the launch in any way.

The Feast of Tabernacles passed with little incident, other than the Misray representative was asked to provide a report of mission activity in the colonies and chastised when he said that there was only one Christian in the Hellas Colony, clarifying that Misrayim's charter of freedoms applied, with limits imposed by the environment to her colonies.

The internet shutdown was completed in Southeast Asia and Eastern South America. Ely LeVey found slow but continued success in damaging Pacifica's economy. Internet restrictions also began to appear in Australia.

Year: 978

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 26 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems and 1 is handling canopy security, so 22 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on worker drones and the hellmouth. Your military grant is focused on heavy tank designs.

You are not tracking enemy teams. Tsion is in Timbuktu.

978 was another year of full business for Timbuktu; by now the place was the second-largest city in Misrayim after Cairo. Visitors coming in by train were greeted by a WW2-style poster of Valentina pointing upwards with the caption "Your Journey to the Cosmos Starts Here".

And for quite a few people it did! The Omegas' lunar launches were staggered, with Jeb and a vanguard first, then the colonists.

The convoy consisted of a Apollo-like capsule and lander stack for Jeb and the security team, and larger one-shot landers for the colonists; Jeb ordered the latter to stay in low orbit while his team descended on the base.

The lights were on, indicating that the automated systems were working properly, and there were no visible signs of foreign vehicles. Telemetry was normal and the video feeds also seemed normal.

From Earth, the STD's watched carefully and took notes.

Jeb landed normally. Developing space weapons had never really been an issue, so the Omegas' men were armed with submachine guns that had short bayonets affixed to them as something that got improvised pretty much on the fly. Their spacesuits had what plating could be put on without adding too much mass.

Rather than trying to bust the door open, Jeb and his small patrol used the airlock to get into the habs, and found a uniformed TOL officer in there. They weren't armed, but the TOL troopers currently eating were; they stood up and casually let their hands wander to their weapons.

"Pursuant to international maritime law, we notify you that we have claimed this base by right of salvage, since it was empty. Please leave."

The Omega told Jeb to follow their commands but to cut the power and the air off from the colony buildings.

"Okay. See you!" he replied, snarkily.

The recon team filed out the airlock, much to the surprise of the intruders and got out after decompression was over. Guarded by the rest of the team, Jeb walked over to one of the control stations and opened a terminal. TOL had hacked the telemetry routines to show camera loops on the internal cameras (not particularly hard: the Omega got maybe a frame every few seconds anyway) but that was it. Rather than messing with that, Jeb realigned the antenna and restored full control of the station to Them.

The station had a carbon-dioxide-rich atmosphere to promote plant growth; the onboard gasifier could be easily set up to avoid scrubbing the CO into CO₂ and to just release the deadly gas into the air. The Omega ordered Jeb and his team to wait outside the airlock, altered a few parameters and, thanks to the insidious nature of the combustible gas, Jeb and company's air tanks were still mostly full when the TOL intruders passed out; a couple may have died or sustained brain or lung damage, but the Omega would have prisoners.

Jeb and his team entered the main hub of the Omegas' colony, and while They reset the carbon scrubbers, used duct tape to securely salami the intruders to the nearest available folding chairs. By the time they had come to, the atmosphere in the colony was breathable; the colonists had enjoyed a few more lunar orbits while they were told to wait, during which they had located a blotch mark on the surface that they guessed to be TOL's lander. They were too far up to see much other than the fact that it was pretty small and contained a rover which had been parked about halfway between their lander and the Omegas' installation.

The colonists landed and began to install the pre-packaged colony modules; one of the heavy MECs that was brought along replaced the dummy plug at the center of the station, while the other got to work with the robo-dozer.

The TOL officer was the first to open his eyes.

Thanks to the Omegas' well-developed satellite network, They could also "appear" as Themselves to the captives, and even do a conference call with TOL: the Moon was only one light-second away from Earth, so the call could happen in real time, albeit with a little bit of lag.

Jeb did his best police officer impression as the Omega woke up the officer.

"D-d-don't kill me! Oh sweet Lucifer, I don't want to end up in the protein bank!" the officer cried, panicking.

Jeb pretended to argue with the Omega about the man's fate and easily got quite a lot of information, blurted out quickly and sweatily. The TOL spaceman claimed that their lander malfunctioned and they were barely able to land it safely; they deployed their rover to get to this base where they hoped to find air, but it too failed. They made it across on foot and were just trying to figure out how to call for help when Jeb came.

They also learned that a running meme around TOL forces was that the Omegas' enemies were, while still alive, broken down for parts to keep older MECs running, with the still-living brains and redundant organs tossed into some sort of hellmouth just so that they could experience hell twice; this had been called "the protein banks". In truth, They had a running contract with Tree Of Life for replacement organs in exchange for a license on Bahira and Zaki's genomes. Admittedly, Tree Of Life's lawyers could probably take on the Temple priests by now.

The other spacemen came to and quickly realized that, since their leader already spilled the beans, they were probably expendable, so they endeavored to play dead. These people were clearly terrified.

In the meantime, the colonists had finished their work. The Omega allowed them to settle in.

"All right. Your weapons will be confiscated. No freeloaders on this ship. You can start by scrubbing the decks."

"Scrubbing the-"

Jeb twirled a nonexistent handlebar mustache.

"THIS IS A DECK! AND YOU UNEVOLVED POND SCUM WILL SCRUB IT THE INSTANT I GET THAT DUCT TAPE OFF YOU!"

"Uh.... Okay?"

"OKAY, WHAT?"

One of the spacemen caught on faster than the other.

"OKAY, SIR!"

Jeb grinned.

"That's what I thought!"

He and his team let the colonists in; by the time the first group was through the airlock, the TOLers had been given sandstone fragments and were, in fact, scrubbing the floor of the Hab, Navy style.

The Omega got Friday on the horn - the head of propaganda looked like someone was aiming a gun at his head.

"Er... Omega, we were just about to call you about this matter. One of our cells went rogue, and stole a partially completed lander, an early prototype..."

"Oh really? So them knowing precisely which direction to go from the landing site, having a readied lander and rover was just coincidence was it? You had this random prototype ready on the top of your canopy station? You never mentioned this rogue group to us, even though you knew they could have been a major threat?"

"This cell was the design team for the lander. They knew it was more complete than they let us believe, we were excited for a launch in the next trimester, and they had help from-"

BLAM!

The Omega watched Friday's forehead develop a red hole right in the middle; Sunday sat down after pushing off the corpse. Sunday's voice was deep and self-assured.

"-from a higher up, clearly. Thank you for helping me plug this leak, Omega; those selfish traitors are yours to do as you see fit. We suspect that they joined our operation so as to grant themselves a means of escape, instead of fulfilling their oath and fighting on humanity's front line.

We don't need them back. Although we would appreciate video of their execution, it would help remind both our peoples where their loyalties should lie."

While this rather disturbing video call went on, the Omega continued to hound the prisoners; they seemed to be overall happy to do menial work and said that they told all they knew. They did give the Omega coordinates for their lander and, approximately since they said that it broke down, their rover. Their officer was clearly under a lot of stress... and blinking a lot.

The Omega decided to check the officer and to ask why they were being called 'traitors'.

The first job of Hadley Base's doctor was to strap the prisoners down and disable their metabolic extension controllers; they couldn't be downgraded so they would just stay off and if the prisoners died or turned 100 before replacements were shipped in, it would be tough luck. The TOL officer kept blinking through the (relatively simple) operation.

Jeb's squad put headphones on the prisoners as they worked and each of them, with minor variations, confirmed the story the Omega just heard from the late Friday. The headset gave them telemetry and confirmed that, while these people feared for their lives, their officer wasn't more scared than the others.

"Sunday, I forgot to tell you something... I'm recording."

"I know; you're a machine, it's how you see things. Again, thank you for plugging the leak; as you saw, it went further up than I thought. It seems I need a new chief of media relations."

It looked like the TOL spacemen weren't bugged; Jeb's patrol took a rover and went to look for the hostile assets. The rover had in fact, broken down; the thing was flimsy and its batteries were not space-rated, so the electrolytes boiled off in the vacuum. The lander itself was examined by Jeb and he said it could go either way: he'd fly in it, but he wouldn't ask anyone else to.

The Omega welcomed the prisoners to Their faction; the officer kept blinking erratically, the others just sounded grateful, if nervous.

The Omega found this peculiar and did a quick skim of Their datalinks that indicated that it was morse code.

What the poor bastard had been trying to tell the Omega the whole time was FAMILY HOSTAGE.

TOL cut communications.

After being assured that there was no way TOL was listening (some systems on the lander were still operating; Jeb disconnected the batteries) the officer explained that while his comrades did indeed believe that they had survived a hard landing with an incomplete module, he had been told to stage this accident.

"My mother is frozen! My younger brother is being held hostage! I had no choice! Sunday's lost his Yahweh-damn mind over this! He says that everyone who left the Earth is a traitor to humanity! My job was to take over the base so that we could turn it into a mass driver!"

A couple of sketches and the plan turned out to be for modifying the nuclear-pellet shooter to fire large slugs instead of scattershot, thus potentially breaching the canopy roughly above each of TOL's bases. Jeb pointed out that the math looked wrong; the officer had no response.

"They got the damn rover batteries wrong, too, I'm not surprised!"

One way or the other, the Omega secured the Moon base; Jeb and company could come home; the TOL spacemen would frankly rather never go back to Earth if they could help it.

In addition, They had a small force trained to operate the drop pods They came with; the forces would have to be transported overland on the canopy, but this gave the Omega the ability to strike nearly anywhere with a few hours' prep and effectively no chance of interception.

As to what TOL was actually planning, no one knew, but if it was a matter of plausible deniability, Sunday was willing to sacrifice a second-in-command to keep it, and if not, he owed the Omega one.

This incident wasn't discussed publicly on the TOL side, but after it, their canopy patrols stuck to their side of the playground.

The Omega called up Sunday and asked for Friday's body.

"I think we have some pieces left, if you absolutely must have some for your Hellmouth. Traitors deserve a messy execution even if they're already dead."

"Uh, okay. Drop them off at the office."

About a week later, the Omega was presented with an ice chest containing about eighty percent of a person. From the damage, it looked like that after taking a slug in the brain, Friday was drawn and quartered. The legs had bite marks, and the missing bits suggested that the body was thrown to the zombies before being recovered to acquiesce the Omegas' request.

In the meantime, Ithuriel and Rehema accompanied one of the many rockets going to Cordylon Station to practice jumping off the canopy. The idea was to use a wingsuit (even for Ithuriel: feathered wings didn't play well with high-atmosphere terminal velocity) and then open a traditional round parachute at the last moment. The launches went remarkably well, with the parachutists ribbing Ithuriel a little because he found it hard to get used to the parachute. Other training exercises - which were as much experiment as training - included amphibious operations and the use of a "drop pod" which used rockets to get to a destination within a limited range of the skyhole, air brakes to decelerate, and small SRBs and pneumatic dampeners for the final approach.

"It's a bit like an amphibious assault like the Royal Marines used to do" one of the Omegas' recruits commented, "...except we're starting off from space, rather than ships. I wonder what we should call ourselves."

The small group debated about what to call a marine assault unit that had nothing to do with the sea and ended up writing Sudden Transport Division (STD) for their proposal; they went along with the venereal disease jokes, and chose Astarte as their patron deity. Tests went reasonably

well, with only two casualties among the entire group; technicians started designing a lightweight suit of armor for the STDs.

The mission to Mars went off without any particular hitches; the colonists installed the new power plant. There had been a few accidents and, while no deaths were reported, one of the workers had to be given the Heavy MEC treatment and was thence wired into the colony systems to operate them in much the same way Cordylon did; the "adjutant system" seemed to be working well for everyone concerned.

Damien enjoyed "being" the Greenland base, but couldn't really think of any way to streamline operations that hadn't already been put in place.

Year: 979

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 27 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems and 1 is handling canopy security, so 23 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on the Sky Eye MK2 system. Your military grant is focused on THE FEAR spider tanks.

You are tracking enemy teams. TOL is starting to disengage from the Internet as it dwindles in territorial reach.

This year, the Omegas' recruiting efforts focused once again on the people of Pacifica; a lot of people past 100 didn't feel safe there anymore. Pacifican laws allowed them to vote, so for those who passed vetting, the Omega asked to delay until after the election. That said, They found quite a lot of good people, including some former Tree of Life volunteers who quit when the biotech organization reorganized along more capitalistic lines.

A special data link between Greenland and the moon base was set up; the Omegas' people transferred as much software knowledge as people while Jeb took part of the machinery and hauled it to the Moon in a chemical rocket. Before long, the moon base had some production capabilities, although it was a long way out from full automation. Notably, it should have been possible to build shielding-foam components there but, as it was, the Greenland base continued

doing its job.

Jeb was present when the first Lunarian was born, and was asked to cut the umbilical (in Omega society, this had become similar to asking someone to be a godparent). The baby peed on him, to general laughter, including Jeb's; it remained to be seen what the lower gravity would do.

Asked to resume tracking of TOL and MF assets, Dr. Zakharov coordinated with Damien and Ithuriel to start from Pacifica since that was more urgent, and collected a number of obsolete Sky Eyes to scatter them over the territory's canopy, using them to get an instant census; it looked like that Pacifica was still majority-unbeliever, though not by much. The problem was that a lot of people there had lost the get-up-and-go spirit of a couple of decades ago, largely because the reputation economy was not working properly without universal net connectivity; it may have been time to go back to a cash economy, at least for a while.

Zak's approach was successful, and in addition to updating the Omegas' tracking capabilities, it gave Them an out to the growing problem of internet withering - subsidizing canopy antennas and blanketing the inner surface with repeaters.

The Australian base quickly copied the model, even as they installed an enormous analog transmitter right into the structure of Ayer's Rock on Kat's orders; the local laws about digital data network suffered an emergency repeal after the Omegas' network was suddenly the only thing that worked properly.

Kat's pirate radio did its job; Australia, being scarcely populated, didn't have much of a homegrown music scene, but remixes and so on started showing up.

Damien and Ithuriel, tasked with helping Pacifica's precarious economic situation, found that most of the people who were excited about space had moved to Timbuktu. Most of the people who were excited about maker culture moved to Cairo, and so on.

Technologically, the biggest jewel left in Pacifica's crown was Tree Of Life; the Omegas' workgroup managed, at least, to make sure that their stuff was well backed up in Their remaining territories.

Unfortunately, promoting body mods backfired - there were a few incidents when Ithuriel was out and about with wings and, even though Damien was fairly well known, her "other" talent landed her a night in a box at the strip club. She exhibited a rather interestingly built snake body and was raided by psalties in an uncharacteristically bold move.

The election results were disappointing: while Pacifica was still not a majority-Christian territory, the Omegas' target audience mostly stayed home and Ely's candidate won. The new administration's first edicts were to ban unofficial currencies, ban home access to the datalinks (under a provision intended to preserve libraries!) and to restrict voting rights to people over 100 who were "of proven moral character".

Damien and Ithuriel consoled themselves with knowing that they had made some progress towards non interruptible Internet, if They wanted to spend the resources, and that both Omegas' San Rafael base and the Saint Judas' Research Hospital, still the main facility of Tree Of Life until they opened a new one elsewhere, were safe.

Year: 980

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 27 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems and 1 is handling canopy security, so 21 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on worker drones and the hellmouth. Your military grant is focused on heavy tank designs.

You are not tracking enemy teams. TOL is starting to disengage from the Internet as it dwindles in territorial reach.

You're not dead until you're warm and dead. While Friday's body (or *most* of it) was delivered on ice, it had been dead for quite some time. There was also the matter of a single, heavy caliber pistol bullet having gone right through the skull; the Omegas' biotechnicians made a point of keeping up with actual miracle workers in the past, but there was a limit, and they were pretty sure that this particular case had hit it. There was also the problem that MEC resurrection had to happen quickly because, brain death aside, exposure to more than a few seconds - maybe a minute or two - of Hell pain was sufficient to drive one insane. This did not happen to the Omega simply due to the highly distributed nature of Their neural network, although Their systems registered heavy imbalances when They interfaced with Yahweh after accidentally gaining something (like a soul) due to people worshiping Them.

The result was technically alive, but unable to really interface with anyone in any human fashion. Fran announced that since it didn't work, the Omega would get a freebie. During and after the procedure, the bits of the last Friday that didn't make it into the MECpod were autopsied with some rigor, and They discovered that the TOL officer was drugged to the gills with a precisely dosed mixture of uppers and downers administered through their metabolic

extension controller variant. Since they seemed content to go to hell at 100, they used this method to reduce or eliminate the need for sleep or rest. A quick call to the moonbase doctor indicated that the former TOL soldiers and officer there had been given roughly the same stuff, albeit of a lower quality; he was having to treat them for amphetamine addiction (which, given that they were still prisoners, had mostly meant a bit of weed to help with sleep and a lot of manual labor).

Nevertheless, a MECpod was prepared and the Omegas' people called in the best available Tree Of Life bio-vizier, who identified herself simply as Fran.

Admittedly, fixing up Friday so that he was bipedal and could obey simple commands would be a really good way to scare the shit out of anybody who might think about crossing the Omega. There were precedents in Their datalinks, albeit only under Fiction.

What stiffly walked itself to the hellmouth was Friday's MECpod, carried by what was left of his limbs, (helped by some synthetic muscle) carrying a life support backpack. He was wearing a suit intended to keep his guts in but it got ripped apart pretty quickly by the stiff gait. The Omegas' intelligence specialists were filming the whole thing because of the sheer intimidation value it could have; if They wanted to show that They could concoct something worse than Hell, They had succeeded.

Results were inconclusive: during the ritual, the abomination that was Friday was linked to the Omegas' Hell nodes. It screamed. Loudly. The only hint They had that it might have regained some sort of sapience came from the fact that it repeatedly punched its own head down into the MECpod jar, and even *that* may just have been a stray neural pulse actuating its elbow.

The entire episode - from the Omega ordering Friday's reconstruction to the abomination falling face first into a pit of past-due organs, surrounded by demonic imagery after crushing its own head into its chest jar - was recorded in 360 degree 3D video at high resolution, ensuring that should the Omega ever need to frighten someone with something worse than the Lake Of Fire, They had the ability to.

"Omega," one of the sysadmins asked, "Are we the bad guys?"

"I try not to think about it, but as long as we're trying this to rescue the damned, I don't think so."

In the beginning of the year, Urist sent the Omega a flawless marble slab with a note.

"Your tunneling machines have been oiled and cleaned, and wait for you in Night City; you have my people's thanks. Also, Ithuriel tells me that it would appear we do have something you want after all. Will you grant an audience?"

Last time, Urist showed up in what his young people might have considered traditional garb, gleaned from a thousand works of fantasy fiction; this time he seemed to be loaded for bear, or

rather Angel. The hazmat suit he was wearing managed to look good as ceremonial armor (and the Omegas' spectroscopy scans indicated that it would probably take a beating from a ballistics perspective) and the neutron source, whilst less capable than the ones that Zak and Kat came up with, looked a lot more battle-hardened. The Omega noted that Urist was still smoking to deepen his voice, or maybe to look more adult than he was.

"We have reached our own agreement with The Other Light. And the Temple priests simply would not see us. So, now it comes to you, Omega. Thank you for your tunneling machines; we've managed to develop our own, although they aren't quite as good. You will like what we've done with them."

That would probably be because the Omegas' primary tunnel boring system used Azrael's scythe as a rock cutter.

"Ithuriel liked the work of our magma furnaces, I think. So maybe that is what we can trade. We would still buy Night City off you, and since it seems that the God of Blood is not interested in selling us our freedom from Him, we will be allies of convenience for the years ahead. As much as we are grateful for our birth, we would bear no debts with you, so - what is your price?"

Urist's people had taken in the fantasy stereotype to a tee; while their magnificent stonework, which had made Night City's lower levels a sight to behold, had little strategic value, their metalwork had Ithuriel compare the sword that he received from Urist (what with the vacuum-bonded diamond edge and perfect balancing) favorably to the sword he retained from his creation.

By way of an answer, Urist offered a USB drive (covered by an ornate silver-and-orichalcum inlay) containing pictures and working drawings of any number of their weapon concepts: a quick analysis showed that, while their wubbers and neutron emitters would be slightly inferior in power to the Omegas' own, they were tough enough to bash a brick wall with and keep working. Every design incorporated diamond-and-steel blades, some long, some short, all equally vicious. Urist watched the video with a grin.

"Ithuriel told me, so we perfected the method. You certainly are a machine: not even the TOL traders would praise my wares before you buy them, aren't you scared I will demand a higher price?"

The drive also showed concept drawings for a nuclear-powered tunneling machine that used reactor heat to melt the rock directly, rather than to power blades or drills; that concept simply hadn't occurred to the Omegas' designers.

"I would have Night City now, Omega. Let it become your forge; your people can resettle under the sun, or above the firmament. From us you can expect absolute honesty if you deal fairly and absolute vengeance if you don't."

"Before we discuss that, what sort of deal do you have with TOL?"

"We took a hierarch of The Other Light on a tour of our forges. He took me on a tour of theirs. We shook hand politely and we agreed to stay out of each other's way. Sloppy slave labor... How can we work with that?"

"I suggest you keep weary of TOL as you deal with them. They have repeatedly proven to be backstabbers."

"Backstabbers? I understand the metaphor, but to stay within it - their daggers would break against linen! No, we will not deal with The Other Light."

The Omega showed Sunday's execution.

"I am somehow not surprised. The Other Light have many men in their burrows - more than you think - enough that one life is a very cheap commodity for them."

When asked about the priests, Urist shrugged.

"Strange people. They wouldn't talk to us, call us children. The next day, it was as if they'd forgotten we had called before. The day after, the same. It was like trying to talk to water chimes. Eventually, one of their elders came - and yet he kowtowed to the young-seeming men in robes! - and told us to stop playing pretend. We did not strike him in respect to his white hair and the rules of parley."

The Omega agreed to give Night City in return for masterwork weapons for Their martial artists as well as a tunneling team. Tunnels outside Night City were to remain neutral. Internet access to Night City was to remain unhindered and expanded to the lower levels.

"And so we have a deal."

In angular but excellent handwriting, Urist wrote the simple terms on the side panel of one of the Omegas' desktop towers after dislodging it; his wubber/neutron source also incorporated a small laser engraver for this purpose. Once done, he took out a straight dagger from his belt and, effortlessly, cut the side panel in two in a way that the edges were jigsawed together. The Omega recognized this as a reinterpretation of a medieval form of deal-sealing. In respect of Their greater age, he "handed" the Omega the slightly bigger piece.

The deal would net Them better infantry weapons and another tunneling squad, but resettling enough non-dwarf citizens that dwarves and parents of dwarves were the majority would cost the Omega a little, impacting Misrayim's prosperity. They decided to resettle Night Citizens in Pacifica.

Given the recent shutdown of the Omegas' informal economy there, a few people headed to Italy instead. Some dispersed in Misrayim or across the world. Most were convinced that the

Omega had a plan and accepted it.

The believing press treated the deal in a fairly strange fashion.

"NIGHT CITY" SHUTS DOWN, CHRISTIAN FAMILIES OPEN THEIR HOMES

(Clovis News-Journal)

Dozens of refugees have been welcomed in loving Christian homes following the long-prayed-for shutdown of the notorious hive of scum and villainy known as "Night City". Preliminary reports are sketchy, but it seems that the unsanitary living conditions and continued vice had caused what creation scientist Chaim Rozenweig, who has spent the last few years in the territory assisting with botanical reclamation, called "an epidemic of malformed children". At this time, we can only confirm that a small portion of the refugees have reached safety, but we have no doubt that the Lord will provide these unfortunates with loving homes, and we pray for their healing. Dr. Rozenweig presided a brief ceremony in which the original entrance to Night City, formerly the Wielizka salt mines, was bulldozed over; a small museum detailing the pre-Rapture history of the site will be erected on the site.

Urist appreciated the news clip and reminded his people to stick to the lower levels for a while, at least until the sensors, still present in the upper levels, crapped out. It was not like believers were likely to replace them even if anyone was monitoring them.

Since the loss of Pacifica was imputable to the territory effectively getting rid of portable network connections through regulation, the Omega decided to rectify the matter in the most direct way possible: Dr. Zakharov would spearhead the effort to launch modernized Sky Eye "boatellites" that also acted as network repeaters. Data speeds wouldn't be much better than the dialup of yore, at least to start with, but it would at least lay the groundwork for restoring a reputation economy if the Omega went down that route or, at least, free media.

The people settling in Pacifica from NC were helped to settle in and withstand the inevitable love-bombing of local believers who were overjoyed to see new possible converts; the Omegas' cabals made sure that any complaint from the new arrival about the unavailability of a number of modern conveniences was met with "Well, we used to have that, but..."

Ely LeVey encouraged locals to share the beauty of eternal sunshine with the new arrivals, and they did, and didn't understand why people who had gotten used to a proper 24-hour circadian could not like it.

There were a few protests mainly regarding gay couples who had resettled and were made to live apart from each other; these protests in turn were met with counter protests. Damien made sure to deploy her drone swarm and "keep the peace" in a way that advantaged freedom of movement for the Omegas' people while hindering the believers; in one notable incident, members of a police squad, sent to arrest a woman for having kidnapped a CPS officer who was

taking away her child due to "moral turpitude", were themselves arrested by Damien's drones.

When the drones were informed that they had no authority to perform an arrest, especially on state police, they simply pointed out the difference in mass, firepower, and nuclear fuel on board, then shut down in front of every entrance, leaving the cops and CPS worker trapped in the building until the local authorities could rustle up an excavator. A spontaneous attempt by hardline nativists to prevent the last of the Night Citizens to land in Pacifica (by having the authorities shut down an airport) failed when the airship carrying them landed on a nearby field instead.

Kat took a softer approach; she opened up an automated diner in Huntington Beach, covertly supplied friendly establishments with Misrayim-grown spices and herbs, and proceeded to put most of the local Christian competitors to shame.

These shenanigans were a break from routine in the still somewhat economically depressed territory, but the Omega needed a long-term political message for a secular Pacifica. They settled on encouraging nationalism... Pacifica Uber Alles!

A preliminary analysis indicated that the posthumanism angle would attract youth, the reverse-traditionalist MPGA approach would attract citizens over 100 with an active metabolic extension controller and a generic nationalism angle would be just that... *generic*.

The Omegas' agents "casually passed by" the line of people moving away from the dwarf stronghold and hinted to them that there were openings in the Legion of Light; quite a few took the option, especially since it meant going back to Night City and working with the people they knew and loved as their first assignment. Also, they would have a better chance at building up money and reputation for where they would go next. The dwarves approved; less overhead in having to teach mining safety. There was some friction about citizens returning as, effectively, trainees, but familiarity between the two groups smoothed that down into a friendly, if remarkably rowdy, rivalry.

Meanwhile, the Omega decided to begin stockpiling parts as They waited for the telemetry from the interstellar probe. They would be adapted according to need. Jeb didn't mind mostly playing designer and got the job done well. He did get around to logging some zero-G time in what was, by now, a routine visit to the moon base; the alliance with the dwarves meant that the trip included the first dwarf astronaut, Simon.

The Omegas' campaign appealed to nationalism, which worked well in the past, and would also appeal to freedom of bodily expression: the representatives met with Tree Of Life and the Underground Monorail and they both assured the Omega that They had their support. As it was, the current Pacifican government mandated that jewelry could only be worn by women (most smart jewelry had stopped working). Tattoos were to be covered at all times and they offered subsidies for Millennium Force run establishments to provide laser tattoo removal. An attempt

to root out unbelievers over 100 as "demons" was aborted without the Omegas' intervention, simply because even Ely LeVey realized how this would look to the "demons'" children in terms of conversion. Tsion let it be known that he found Ely's position excessively soft.

Once again, the Feast of Tabernacles was optimistic after the perceived closure of Night City; TOL had been relatively quiet although they managed to poach a couple of the Omegas' space engineers - simply because Their launch ramp was less busy. By the looks of it, they were building their own version of a canopy station, although rather than making a launch railway, they seemed to be assembling some sort of large hovercraft. Part of the structure had been derived from one of the Omegas' Sonic Piledriver prototypes from 20 years ago.

Chaim Rozenweig left Eastern Europe and moved on to the American Heartland to study the unusually bountiful harvests there.

Captain Weaver seemed to be going around the world following Magellan's route.

Tsion Ben-Judah was still hanging around Timbuktu, albeit on the other side of the Omegas' border. Noah finished his tour and returned home to Greater Jerusalem; Damien was surprised to receive a letter from the patriarch, expressing thanks for the nature conservation efforts.

One thing that did happen was that a startup company, JP Aerospace, developed a fairly workable "rockoon" system for quick canopy insertion; while it was about 30 years too late to make a difference in the Omegas' space endeavors, Misray administrators encouraged the effort. It allowed for the quick deployment of Sky Eye Mk2 in the territory, not that it needed them, although it was nice to have an extra emergency channel.

This year saw the shutdown of the last aircraft manufacturing company in the Christian territories; the business produced enough spare parts to keep the few airliners left operating, and then quietly folded despite the recent uptick in demand.

The Temple's mood was triumphant after Night City was "evacuated", but the Omegas' sociologists noted that what may have been the last generation on Earth was numerous... and *restless*. There was potential.

Year: 981

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Territorial control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Underground bases: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

Teams under control: Temple X, TOL X, Omega X

You have 27 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems and 1 is handling canopy security, so 21 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on worker drones and the hellmouth. Your military grant is focused on heavy tank designs.

You are not tracking enemy teams but your info is fresh. TOL are now setting up their own transmitters to compete with the government in believing territories. Your new Sky Eye model acts as an analog transmitter as well.

You have 2 aerospace parts in storage.

The government of Misrayim introduced, with great fanfare, a commercial access to the space initiative: the offices and companies under the Omegas' control published full schematics for hab modules and landers, released best-practice protocol that detailed all the simple mistakes that the Omegas' people experienced and solved over the years, promised cheap access to the Omegas' canopy station and to the Reach's superstructure, and even made a few popular space-program-sim games freeware just to hook people into the idea.

Before long, Timbuktu was invaded by a flood of would-be startup jockeys, inventors, visionaries, and just plain grifters. The Omegas' people had to sort through thousands of proposals and take the time to find the few usable ones from the thousands of patently crazy ideas.

This did wonders for the city, and arguably the territory, at the price of a lot of local chaos. The Omegas' initiative was intended to remove part of Their overhead for vetting potential colonists for the Luna and Mars colonies. Of course, They planned to keep a reasonably tight control of whatever economy developed there, behind the scenes, but the public announcement about space colonization being opened up was going to put emphasis on commercial endeavors for the launch part - and for the colony part, a homesteading approach, perhaps tying into (or mocking) the pastoralization directive that was the world government's policy: if they wanted people to go back down on the farm, fine, but nobody ever said what planet the farm had to be on. The people could look forward to less political pressure and better returns on the "building an ecology" front.

The Omegas' media department made an intentionally cheesy video depicting homesteading in various territories, and contrasted it with a similar scene set under a dome on Luna and, with a bit of artistic license, under a semipermeable greenhouse on Mars. Given that most everyone was born with a desire to do basic craft, the simplicity of the message resonated; in a few months the Omega would have to sift through thousands of terraforming proposals for the red planet... and even a few for the moon.

Various companies came forward with homesteading plans, most of them Mars-bound, and the Omega could select those which were compatible with the UNS Reach's structure or, for that

matter, with that of a cargo ship that They might choose to build as an interplanetary ferry: Their open access document indicated that all modules should have been independent. With the exception of the Dwarves, all other subcultures under the Omegas' wing would be represented... or so it seemed.

While a double-digit percent of the population of Misrayim started to figure out what they would do once they got to Mars - with a little help from the Omegas' space engineers - the construction of the cargo ship proceeded apace; the final build ended up about as long as the Reach, although it was much slimmer.

The next group of Lunar colonist self-selected from the people who had ambitions towards Mars or the asteroid belt; the Moon would make for a rigorous environment in which to test space homesteading. Before long, Luna's greenhouses expanded to the point that they were visible to the naked eye to someone standing on the canopy, and the Omega ended up with a set of postcards that one of Their printing presses spammed all over the world.

In Pacifica, the call for space designs took a different direction, possibly with a bit of help from Tree Of Life as they tried to capitalize on it; the Omegas' cabals encouraged a nascent genetic engineering trend, including the obvious playing-god implications, and before the believing government could put the kibosh on it there were protests in the street that leveraged pro-life arguments to protect the right of slugbunnies and flatcats to be born. To remain in the media, Tree Of Life released their older tissue engineering technology right after the Omega released Their older space technology; an iconic photo of a protester baring all her breasts in front of the psalties went around the world. Pacificans wanting to free the genome even managed, with help from the Omegas' media manipulation team, to end up owning the "pro-life" appellation. The Omega didn't particularly care about people deciding to spend the rest of their lives with glow-in-the-dark hair or four boobs, and most designer fauna projects weren't particularly useful (although an underground microbrewery industry sprung up overnight after a few lucky strikes with modded yeasts) but playing along with Tree Of Life on this particular aspect of a future society had the advantage of coming completely out of left field as far as the Orange County government was concerned; they were preparing for a simple attempt to reestablish an electronic economy.

The topside security team and their support cabal (they finally noticed what their team name was an acronym for and the Omega authorized changing it to something more metal, like *Thunder Warriors*, should they succeed in their operation) were ready for action.

While the Greenland base chugged away, a few of the Omegas' researchers roosted in it for a few weeks in order to take advantage of the arctic climate to test infrared cloak. They came up with a low-resolution "screen" made out of thin air ducts that could output cold or hot air, coupled with a back-facing thermocamera, to hide one side of a vehicle from other thermocameras. The camouflage wouldn't work with visible light, of course, but the low resolution of thermocameras made it viable for use on something the size of an APC or a small

landing craft.

While the sparse but essential orbital infrastructure that was managed by Cordylon from the canopy was used to build the cargo ship, the Reach was sent on another "errand"- to drop a few supplies and comfort items on Mars via disposable capsules and then to continue on to the asteroid belt. There, a small team of space engineers found Valentina's ersatz capsule, retrieved telemetry data from it, and confirmed that the small asteroid did indeed have clumps of usable minerals, including iron, cobalt and water ice. The team started building an automatic refinery that would separate the ice into fuel and life support.

Even though she was already dead when the capsule reached Cybele, the team duly recorded the former Cosmist leader as the first human being to have reached this far into the solar system and return home; the Reach was none the worse for wear. Her reaction mass was replenished, and she was parked in high orbit so as to not get in the way of the interplanetary ferry construction. Valentina's capsule had a little fence erected around it and a plaque placed, and that was about it.

The Omegas' subtle approach with TOL prevented them from even figuring out that they were being sabotaged; some heads rolled (one literally, a supposed saboteur from within their ranks got beheaded) but overall it looked like The Other Light was mostly involved in base building and setting up TV stations. The brute-force approach paid off, as the Omegas' tracking teams reported a few instances of successful government programming jamming. As it was, it looked like TOL workers had spent more time on this than on building their army this year.

The Omegas' tracking teams also reported that regional governments were fighting back on the EMF front by hardening and upgrading their transmitters; this could have gotten in the way of the Omegas' Sky Eye design, shadowing its broadcast capabilities, but it shouldn't have further affected network connectivity in places that still had it. Notably, territories that successfully made it both illegal and difficult to access the 'net had reverted their pastoralization policy just enough to make sure even the most isolated farm had some form of broadcast receiver. In territories where the Omega had launched Their improved Sky Eyes, there was extreme demand for WWAN antennas from youth; one tracking team found, and decided to duplicate and spread, instructions for a homemade antenna setup involving an old WiFi dongle or smartphone and a reflector dish made out of an umbrella and a pasta strainer.

Ely LeVey was starting to lose the Pacifican people again; her screeds against fake jobs and fake money had little effect, since the Omega was no longer pushing a reputation economy as Their main selling point for recovering the territory. However, Levitical restrictions against tattoos and the like were suddenly ruled to apply to the more radical body mods that the Omega and Tree Of Life had been peddling.

Kat's diner became both the place to be in Venice Beach, a major supplier of vat-grown spices and condiments, and one of the few places where it was possible to try rare and expensive vat-

grown meat which, apparently, did not cause a regurgitation reflex. Heavy MECs had been made illegal in Pacifica; a health department raid closed down Kat's food establishment and attempted to dislodge Kat's MECpod from its dais on the ceiling. Two days later, the health department workers and the police sent to execute the raid were rescued from the not-so-tender ministrations of the myriad robotic arms in Kat's kitchen by Damien's drones, which had been decorated with police lights for the occasion; the two heavies staged a confrontation and pretended to reach an agreement whereby the intruders would be released unharmed (albeit covered in Nutella) and the diner would feature an EULA for anyone who crossed the door. Actual Orange County police completely missed the confrontation due to poor communications, learned of it only when the festive mob had dispersed, issued a weak statement of condemnation, and were generally derided on both social and print media.

THE LITTLE MERMAID - An editorial by autumnrose2910

Dear readers, as you know, I have been active in protesting the Cape Falcon mod clinic. While we wait for a Temple ruling on the latest body-mod fad, I have felt compelled by the Lord to put my ministry as a midwife on the back burner for a little while, so I can provide help and support to those who warn Pacifica's youth against "improving" on God's Creation.

I fear that most of my fellow activists, filled with holy passion as they are, may be doing more harm than good to the cause; I've found it better to talk to those who wish to be "augmented", rather than shout at them or block their path. It's important, in my opinion, that we deal with the root cause of unbelief rather than the symptoms of space-program escapism, body modding, or wasting one's day on the moribund internet. We, insulated in the safety of our homes, farms, and promise of Heaven, sometimes forget to listen to the stories of those who enjoy no such blessing.

Take for example Gina Delmarre, a woman who volunteered to have her neck, back and feet ravaged by a surgical knife in order to install gills and webbing. We had a brief conversation after she left the clinic following a preliminary appointment and she agreed to listen to my testimony, over coffee, in exchange for telling me about her life. I will not repeat my own story here, as my readers are familiar with it: instead, I want to talk about Gina. She grew up in Heartland, where her enthusiasm for the sea was ignored and discouraged by her elders. Gina kept obedience until ten years ago, when she was tempted by The Other Light and enlisted in building their navy. She worked in grueling shifts for years, a virtual prisoner, until her liberation - a false liberation, for it did not come at the hands of a missionary, but instead through the metal claw of the infamous Dread Pirate Weaver. After "paying for her ticket home" by assisting the madwoman in her take of Atlantic cargo, Gina drifted to this territory, still loving the sea more than the Lord, but wishing for peace. Now, she feels that she may find peace by teaming up with like-minded lost souls in setting up a community of aquatic humans off the southern coast. I must admire her work ethic, misplaced as it may be; these "augments" are expensive and she paid it in work, putting her gift of precision and persistence towards

genetic research instead of worthier studies.

Who will minister to these people when they disappear below the waves? Make no mistake- just because they cannot count on the Lord's grace in crises, I dare say that their technology is good enough that they will have cause to believe that they don't need it right up until the Judgement. Please go to your local library and find a copy of "The Little Mermaid" in its original incarnation; it is a wonderful Christian fable, and applies today more than ever.

Year: 982

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

You have 27 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems and 1 is handling canopy security, so 23 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on improving offworld colony systems. Your military grant is focused on active cloaking.

You are tracking enemy teams. TOL are now setting up their own transmitters to compete with the government in believing territories. Your new Sky Eye model acts as an analog transmitter as well.

You have 3 aerospace parts in storage, and an interplanetary ferry.

The ferry's maiden voyage would be to drop off the first group of "free" colonists on Mars. Since the Omega decided to privilege homesteaders after the shakedown cruise, adding further colonists would happen without the Omegas' direct involvement- up to the launch ramp and the colonists' capacity. However, They would need to establish the initial infrastructure if They chose to also colonize the asteroids and/or Titan.

The Imperium Profugus' operating mind, Heavy MEC Simaris, announced that he would not legally change his name and gender to that of the ship but would be addressed by either. Simaris underwent the Heavy MEC procedure during the Australia attack a few years ago and, much to the satisfaction of a surprising amount of people, was able to hold on to his outie. He was considered to be a bit of a peeping Tom, but given how the Imperium Profugus' systems worked, colonists could simply turn telemetry off in their habs. Both Jeb and Cordylon vouched for his ability to operate an interplanetary ship. The Imperium Profugus was definitely a lesser ship than the Reach, capable of roughly a third of the acceleration, but she could still get to Titan in three months if she needed to.

To minimize exposure, the Omegas' snatch team went to a territory where They had no significant presence. María Capovilla was originally from Ecuador, and had Italian roots; the woman was positively ancient, and had the distinction of having been a teenager when the

Rapture came; there were older Natural people on Earth so she was not exceptional, but somewhat rare. Unlike most millenarians, Maria led a reasonably active life. She could still walk, slowly, and occasionally put in the odd hour of work at a neighborhood bakery. The owner-operators of which were justifiably proud of the fact. Believers rarely got sick but they did, so nobody really batted an eye when the Omegas' team showed up at Maria's house in an ambulance and carried her away. They didn't even need to knock her out. By the time they discovered that the ambulance had been stolen, the Omegas' team had already safely evacuated.

Owing to the patient's extraordinary age, the team took every precaution to keep the old lady comfortable, to the point that they reconstructed a version of her bedroom and of the bakery's back shop. While mostly senile, Maria was still quite the accomplished panera and ended up teaching a thing or two to the people who were pretending to be bakery personnel. All the while, blood and tissue samples were taken to generate a personalized regime of chemicals that would knock Maria out long-term without affecting her health to the point where supernatural intervention would occur to keep her alive; as a precaution, the Omegas' martial artists were put on partial alert. Tree Of Life had been informed about this and was assisting. They asked permission to test a cellular rejuvenation system which, they hoped, could be sold to MECs in the next century, if there was one at all.

The effort to gently put Maria under was successful; she was currently being held in Misrayim. Tree Of Life once more dispatched their best surgeon, Fran, to administer the cellular rejuvenation treatment; it would take a long time to see the results. However, the Omegas' agents were pleased to note that there had been no supernatural repercussion against taking Maria away. In South America, her friends looked for her. However, the Omega had Maria record a message telling them that she was playing missionary in Misrayim before putting her under.

Maria's message was duly delivered, along with some pictures showing her working at a similar bakery and, other than a couple of letters indicating a willingness to help, that settled the matter. At least for now. A local newspaper in South America published a brief story about the old woman's courage and invited people to pray for her safety. Since her safety was assured, this did not seem to have a measurable effect.

In the meantime, Kat left her deli in Pacifica to an assistant and got to work adapting the Omegas' light spider tanks into gas-artillery platforms. Her experience as a Desolator was invaluable. Thanks to her efforts and that of the base in Pacifica, the Omega ended up with a flexible artillery unit that integrated well with Their army makeup.

In the meantime, Nova Roma fired up her arsenal and before the year ended They had a small flotilla of nuclear-powered submersibles (they could submerge but could not go very deep, although they each carried a batisphere) with artillery capabilities; they could also be used to launch Sky Eye stacks and small canopy breachers, in addition to carrying a single electromagnetic naval gun each. Damien found that Weaver's style of command, while very

effective with a human crew, did not mesh well with the "Be the Ship" concept, and the two ended up in what amounted to a not-so-friendly rivalry during sea trials; Weaver's superior experience won out.

The Omega sent a submersible and a letter of marque to be delivered to Weaver. Capt. Weaver violently kissed the dockworker who delivered the letter of marque to her and selected the least automated sub, which she promptly named Surcouf. She picked up a skeleton crew and sailed through Gibraltar, presumably with the intent of rejoining with her other sailors. She left a note indicating that she missed raiding grain boats in the Atlantic and, if the Omega wanted to cause believers to resume trade, They would have to do the brainwork Themselves.

Zak lacked the social skills necessary to coordinate a social-engineering attack. Instead, he concentrated on what he knew, which was sonics. Mini tank bots carried wubbers in every nook and cranny of the TOL launch pad and soon every worker there had overheard about a possible raid coming. Work grinded to a halt and the normally paranoid TOLers ended up fortifying the launch ramp against pretty much everything but an act of God. From there, it was a simple matter for the Omegas' men to dress up in TOL uniforms, pretend to be wide-range patrols coming from the launch complex, and be loud enough at it that the Russian territorial government finally sent investigators. A letter-writing campaign meant to incite zeal did the rest and the launch complex was surrounded by a fence and effectively subjected to a siege. The Omegas' agents posed as believing workers to make sure that the fence was put up quickly and well. Despite efforts, the raid never happened. Instead, the TOL launch ramp was essentially put under siege. A few months through it, The Other Light's space program was effectively halted by the threat of starvation, both in the logistical sense and in the metabolic sense. A humiliated column of thin, emaciated TOL workers was escorted out and the site was put under sequestration. This method had the side effect of allowing missionaries to pounce on the TOL workers, managing to convert a large number of them, including some of the engineers and mathematicians. However, Zak was quite pleased at having solved the matter nonviolently.

Halfway through the year, Monday sent a message indicating that he was pleased with the Omegas' martial preparations and hoped that the truce would hold. According to their calculations, the total strength of the Last Army was, including Omega forces, ahead of schedule.

"Maybe we can join together for the final push and leave all this silly space stuff alone, yes?"

The Omegas' tracking teams indicated that TOL slacked off a little about their army and were focusing on preparations for a traditional-media propaganda instead; they had been buying printing equipment and transmitter components. More resources for the Omega, of course.

Tree Of Life was left holding the bag a bit in Pacifica and the territorial government was able to regain some ground. Notably, they finally managed to close Kat's diner and, pending a health department investigation, banned vat-grown meat. Unsurprisingly, this caused a Prohibition situation; the skeleton crew the Omega left handling politics in the territory cooperated with

locals to make the good old fashioned hamburger a symbol of both Pacifica's biotech leadership and of its nationalism.

While the Greenland base chugged away, a few of the Omegas' researchers roosted in it for a few weeks in order to take advantage of the arctic climate to test infrared reduction technologies. At first, designs incorporated glass materials but it was quickly realized that any design would be too bulky for practical use. Researchers soon redirected their efforts on improving thermal blankets instead. Their first struggle was trying to prevent the thermal blanket from cooking anything inside it after a few minutes but their alterations failed to produce satisfying results. Some researchers, however, began working on radiant barrier materials instead and discovered that if they created a "sandwich" of a thermal barrier material, a polyester batting about an inch thick for air space and another thermal barrier, they would have a design capable of blocking over 90% of a person's thermal signature. However, it was discovered that any heavy material put on top of the "sandwich" would soon cause the radiant barrier material to quickly heat up. That meant only extremely light material such as ripstop nylon materials and sniper veil netting could be used as camouflage.

This successful design was soon approved by Omega.

LEGION OF LIGHT "READY AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE", TOL LEADERSHIP CLAIMS

A puzzling announcement from The Only Light army command today that due to efforts by "the army itself, The Other Light, and the whole of the people", what has been called The Last Army is ready to invade Greater Jerusalem at a moment's notice. While the Temple offered no rebuttal, none is necessary: as even unbelievers ought to know, it is prophesied in Revelation that the Last Battle will happen at the end of the Millennium, and not a moment before. Nevertheless, this pronouncement was followed by a vow by The Other Light to "aggressively recruit" within the burgeoning population of unbelievers. Despite this being in accordance with the prophecies as well, theologian Tsion Ben-Judah has exhorted the good people of God's earth to redouble their effort at winning souls in these final days.

As much as this publication feels a need to reassure all of us that we will be moving into our mansions in Heaven soon either way, let's remember that the Temple has never made a formal pronouncement as to when the Millennium might end; most exegetists agree on the year +1000, but two popular theories that have not been rebuked are the "off by one" theory suggesting that the Last Battle and the White Throne Judgement will occur in +999, and the "Count from the Rapture" theory that indicates +993 as the most likely date.

In most of the world, of course, worry about this supposedly invincible army remains low. "We don't have one trained soldier," famed pilot Rayford Steele was quoted at saying, correctly, "And we don't need one. Not a hair on the head of a believer will be harmed by the biggest fighting force the world has ever seen."

We remind our readers that, so far, all this army has done was fight against itself and lose every time; the last incident was a few years ago in Australia, when what appeared to be a skirmish between two opposing TOL factions resulted in the release of a few Christian captives shortly after an Angel supposedly appeared above the installation under attack.

This year's Feast of Tabernacles had, for its highlights, a plea to "rescue" Isaac from the Planet of War, quickly rebuked by the priests as a wonderful witnessing opportunity instead; many territorial government representatives were worried about a silent majority of young unbelievers who may have had TOL sympathies.

Of course they were all younger than one hundred and thus, relegated to the status of children—rebellious, articulate, passionate, defiant, furious children.

The new directive from the Temple stated that the pastoralization effort mostly succeeded - showing a map indicating that most unbelievers were now concentrated in the cities and efforts should be made to consider them the final mission field of the last dispensation.

Year: 983

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

Launching the Sky Eyes was a fairly routine job; the African operation was performed from one of the Omegas' new submersibles, in order to test its rocket-launching capabilities - the canopy boat was shot at an angle and ordered to use its older Mk1 sistren as a GPS in order to swim to the final coordinates.

The cabals on the ground made sure that WWAN dongles, older-model computers and handhelds were easily available to the youth of these nations by distributing them at cost, doing the occasional giveaway, letting them be found in abandoned vehicles, and the like. People who built their own were, when found, encouraged to take a trip to one of the Omegas' cities to look for technical work.

Spread-spectrum technology made the Omegas' digital transceivers effectively unjammable unless either the local government or TOL were willing to kill off their own signal; while the restrictions against unlicensed broadcasting remained in place, they effectively became unenforceable. Believing governments were unwilling to just van young hardware hackers for nonviolent crimes, although there was a spike of "reeducation schools" (at least they didn't call them camps) that started in rural areas.

The Omegas' sysadmins assembled an infiltration team of ambitious measure. Zak and Damien released two intel teams from the submarine: one to install a comm relay and the other to pretend to be TOL screened recruits and to live in the big base for a year. Forging the paperwork was trivial; making it look like the Omegas' guys didn't stand out by not having been on

amphetamines for a while was a little more difficult and required the help of some permanent makeup. Since there was no night, the electric inflatable boat arrived under cover of fog and the Omegas' infiltrators used their active camouflage systems as close as they dared; Damien had the submarine fire a few shots at nothing and launched one of the old Mk1 Sky Eyes at the canopy, just to give the TOL coastal patrol something else to look at.

The submersible did not, alas, make a clean getaway. One of the coastal patrol boats bumped into it and, to avoid a shooting incident, Zak explained that she was conducting sea trials under Damien's captaincy. The ship's logs and the copious notes about sonar performance agreed and Damien was able to explain the relative lack of crew on the submersible by showing the TOL coasties how a Heavy MEC could "become" a large vehicle such as a ship. The submersible eventually managed to get back to base with some embarrassment, but not before allowing TOL coasties to conduct a thorough inspection and take plenty of pictures. Two days later, the hacking team lit up their beacon and reported that the infiltrators were inside the main TOL base; the hackers had wired up part of TOL's telephone network to a relay buoy.

"We should be able to listen in on something interesting based on voice recognition..." the hacker leader reported. "But the transmitter is noisy; they'll likely find it after one or two uses. The infiltrators have been ordered to file reports using text only. The hope is that burst transmissions will just show up as static glitches."

The Omega ordered for the review of the infiltration reports over the year to be looked over in detail. This was the last transmission:

** We've made it inside the base! The amount of military hardware stockpiled here is staggering. Tanks and jeeps and rigs of every size. We have seen a few Katyusha rocket launchers, so they do have modern artillery.*

** This place is cavernous, much bigger than Night City. They have been here for centuries. They dug down far enough that everything runs on geothermal power. They grow food here, but not enough. Small cargo ships from all over.*

** Most secondary systems are slowly failing. If a phone exchange craps out they just pluck some runts from the caves, give them a hat, and make them play messenger. Class system using color code clearance levels. Our access is limited.*

** Local leaders have a lot of power. Commissars for work brigade, too. Brutal.*

** Monday seems to be running the show. Military-first slogans everywhere. Seen little of the other Seven. Seen nothing of Sunday.*

** Massive meth labs. Dirty but efficient. Outlying bases must procure food and raw materials in return for drugs.*

** TOL grunts/peons told that Satan will reverse the judgement, not halt it. World still*

ends, Yahweh in Hell, TOLers in Heaven-On-Earth. Description matches Revelations, just roles reversed.

** Spike fell into a smelting vat. Our work brigade is expected to work undermanned and keep quota. Some of the mines under the ice are still active - metals, sulfur, perchlorates.*

** Sunday only communicates through video messages. A few clips got played out twice during an interview. People here too tired or amped up to notice. NC possible? We suspect a coup by Monday.*

** Commissar shot Bob. Immediately beat commissar to death in front of work brigade. Got offered his job. Took it.*

** TOL elite lives better. Amphetamine, heroin use rampant. Was pressured to partake. If generator craps out in executive area, they yank one out from the slums and install a slave hamster wheel there. All skilled personnel works on war vehicles or ships.*

** Few warships. Lots of transport vessels. Got reprimanded for going easy on work brigade.*

** TOL ruling class do not have Mk10 MECs. Zombify like everyone else.*

** TOL ruling class believes same as TOL peons re: after victory.*

** Big speech by Monday. Intends to coopt Legion of Light and attack early (993?). No video - toured slums and barracks to make it. Still no sign of Sunday other than on video snippets.*

** Massive zombie pens. Kept in the ice, low metabolism, otherwise mostly left to rot, fed expired food.*

** Saw cryo chambers. Many broken, some working. Some competent personnel supervising.*

** Streamlined work brigade production somewhat to avoid executions. No reprimand or praise.*

** Gianna's cover compromised. Shot her myself to keep cover. She didn't cry.*

** Thursday found dead at desk. Overwork/dose. State funeral, peons allowed to party, double rations. No replacement installed.*

** Loyalty purge coming. Will probably be compromised. Only one left in team. Will try to escape.*

The personnel that supported the infiltrators mostly took the early retirement that the Omega offered; widows and widowers would receive a generous pension.

The Omega decided to keep the report to Their core personnel.

The Millennium Force remain unarmed, but were pretty militant and had been instrumental in shutting down the internet in various territories. The Omegas' historians indicated that their role was similar to that of the Blackshirts during the Fascist Regime: they would push the hard line version of government policy, either allowing the government to mediate and appear like the rational arbiter or to deal with a problem without the shackles of law.

Most recently, MF had been running Children of the Tribulation - affiliated "re-education schools" to mitigate the problem of a large percentage of youth being unwilling to trust in Jesus as their King, partially because the choices were "let the world end before I'm old enough to drive, and spend my short life on a farm in Kansas" and "let's not, plus you can go be an astronaut and own a farm on Mars if you want to do farming at all".

Statistics showed that for the first time since the Rapture, the current (and likely last) generation could be majority-unbeliever. This would fit with the prophecy stating that Christians would once again be the minority, for however little time, before the Last Battle.

Designing a superheavy artillery platform that was compatible with the Omegas' existing electromagnetic gun tech was relatively easy; They wouldn't be able to build many of these, but each would be able to vomit a veritable torrent of anything the Omega felt like up to two horizons away... assuming it didn't sink into the sand.

The effort to retake Pacifica, peacefully so far, resumed in earnest; the Omegas' cabals assisted in building a few habitats for aquatic humans up and down the coast, re-established a cashless economy for those who still preferred one, and collaborated with Tree Of Life. The snag was that, this time, the medical experimenters wanted a bigger say in the future government - they trusted that the Omegas' interests aligned when it came to civil rights, but their head of security, Jeff Tolwyn, wanted reassurance that any bioweapon program they may or may not have worked on would not be impacted by the Omegas' administration.

Kat was assigned to the artillery project and seemed to be having a bit TOO much fun. Ordinarily, she preferred a humanoid frame (although she tried one of the quadrupedal drones, modified into a sort of centaur; the result was a nice photo-op and an epic faceplant when the media people left) but she made an exception while testing the prototype platform. She was a bit annoyed at the loss of her deli.

Jeb had little to contribute to the launches; to someone who had been around Mars a couple of times, they were mundane, if anything. However, he was conscious of the fact that anyone messing around with rocketry considered him a role model and did the job very graciously. During the operation, he let it slip that he would reach 100 soon (he classified his age). Rumor

had it that he had been spending more time than usual being intimate with Cordylon, but nobody would begrudge him that. The submersible launch had to happen from a towed barge, rather than from the artillery system, but was otherwise a success.

Ithuriel was happy to assist with recruiting; the Omegas' cabals had him play Sgt. Hartman on this one, a role which he enjoyed perhaps a little too much.

Zak and Damien borrowed one of the other submersibles to deliver the Omegas' infiltration team; the former took the time to do a number of sonar tests.

Ithuriel's performance as a drill sergeant was enhanced by the fact that, while he would still lose a one-on-one fight with an Angel of Yahweh, he had much better endurance than most full humans... keyword being *most*, as a few of the recruits managed to outperform him in one or two trials during boot camp. Needless to say, being able to beat an Angel was a huge morale booster, and the newest crop of infantry was ready for action and well-disciplined. The army was at full capacity; it would become necessary to assign a liaison team to them. When Jeb was asked about whether he wanted them assigned permanently or otherwise, Jeb replied,

"I thought about it a lot. Omega, I understand that a ship like the Reach is best piloted by a heavy MEC, but that's just not for me. I'd miss the wind on my face, the adrenaline rush of a night landing, my time with Val and Cordy. She tells me that some MECs regain the ability to orgasm, but, well, not many, and Cordy's not one of them. So as to what my endgame is... I don't know. I understand that Val is probably in Hell. I get that it's what she wanted. I mean, she led the Cosmists to us. She's probably the first of them that gets a proper space burial in nine hundred years... just..."

The test pilot turned astronaut and space program manager looked older beyond his years for a moment and sighs,

"I don't know."

"Want to try and find the others?" the Omega replied.

"Heh. Ever the utilitarian, Omega. Guess my motivation score is high enough that there's no point in wasting energy trying to cheer me up, eh? Keep it that way, I've had a wonderful life so far and don't need synthetic sympathy. But no, I don't want to go to Hell any more than anyone sane wants to. But if I had half a chance to get Val out, you bet your shiny metal ass I would."

"We'll get them out, someday. *All* of them... I swear by it."

Jeb was just the kind of person who would literally go to Hell if that was what it took, but his current understanding was that Hell was some sort of insanity-inducing psychic loop: he was not sure about Hell being a physical place, from what he heard.

"I have a few years. But I will think about it."

"I wish that it was possible too, but from every perverted experiment and idea I have tried nothing has come close to working.

Now, as to keeping you alive for a little while longer, you are aware of the relation between distance from earth and the time of god-initiated death? Effectively, we need to find out when humans die as they go away from earth.

Val gave us the first data point. I ask that you give us the second and after you, only one more will be needed. Then we will know where is safe.

Alternatively we could place you into cryological storage and launch you on the cargo ship alongside the Reach for its final journey. I don't know if that would make you live but it is worth a shot...

Or you could go and live out in the asteroid belt and at the very least metaphorically and somewhat literally be with Val one more time before death."

"I can do that."

You can tell that Jeb relished going as far out as possible while still alive, even if it meant dealing with the aftermath of death by himself.

"Sign me up. The asteroids? Titan?"

He asked for a year, an engineering team and a logistics team to prepare, and revealed that he would turn 100 in 1990. He was younger than you thought - barely a child when he started flying.

Meanwhile, the army would see itself as some sort of planetary defense force, with UN-inspired regalia. To differentiate the Omegas' army from the WW1 and WW2 inspired fatigue that TOL favored, They elected on an Imperial theme that borrowed traits from ancient history. Since most of Their drones and infantry could cooperate well for tank-desant tactics, long marches were unlikely (and were guaranteed to happen on flat terrain), so the standard infantry kit could afford to be somewhat heavy, including a polymer shield resistant to small arms. The infantry's job was to screen their specialist units: Desolators, martial artists, and so on.

Dwarves have excellent armor, but it was nothing the Omega couldn't make Themselves; the blades were a different story - while metallurgists were able to replicate them, it was only at immense cost and time, using ionic deposition. How Urist's people were making them on an assembly line was beyond them. Some suspected that they weren't made on an assembly line at all. They were just handmade and the tolerances were that good.

The Omegas' deal with Urist included gladii or throwing axes for some of the Omegas' elite

troops, yes. Martial artists had been given a more form-fitting uniform that could be shed quickly (it was not much good against Angels) and, even if not shed, allowed for almost complete freedom of movement.

One of the Omegas' sysadmins asked about the cross emblem. The designer dryly noted that it was a reminder.

"Not to the warrior. To the Opponent. Yahwists have knelt before the symbol of their own defeat for three thousand years!"

Early in the year, TOL stragglers were collected from their canopy station - their supplies had run out, and their hydroponic facility was not quite up to keeping them self-sufficient for more than a few months. The Omega couldn't really use the TOL astronauts for much, they were poorly trained. However, They did "inherit" what looked like a missile-launcher hovercraft truck designed to operate on smooth ice; the front section looked like it was made out of one of the Omegas' Sonic Piledrivers.

The Omegas' analysts estimated that if effort was put in next year, Pacifica would be ripe for takeover the following year.

Year: 984

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

You have 26 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, 1 is canopy security, and 1 is army liaison, so 21 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on a starship bubble shield. Your military grant is focused on heavy artillery.

You are not tracking enemy teams. TOL have set up their own transmitters to compete with the government in believing territories. Your new Sky Eye model acts as an analog transmitter as well.

You have 3 aerospace parts in storage. You have built an interplanetary ferry.

Freelancers are beginning to populate the colonies.

Last year's Feast of Tabernacles was unremarkable; the Omegas' efforts to ensure that there was a Sky Eye based "backbone" for the internet caused various volunteer groups and startups in cities to set up last-mile infrastructure setups, so that connectivity in most cities was once again guaranteed - albeit a lot slower than it used to be; in many territories, 56k connections, modem hisses and couriering data discs ruled the day again. The intel the Omega had acquired in Antarctica was confirmed by the fact that TOL bases erected large transmitters pretty much everywhere they could.

An oddity was that while the Temple ruling was not reversed, there was a significant debate in believing circles on whether it would be good for the youths' souls to allow rural internet access again, so that they could be reached. A proposal to build an alternate network was briefly floated, and rejected - instead, believers were offered "the data network experience" via a form of videotext. A few people in small villages across believing territories approved of this, seemingly forgetting that they had coaxed to the home just twenty years ago.

The Omega decided to focus on creating a massive war boat and requested Damien and Weaver on paid contract. Weaver was having sufficient fun with the submersible and wasn't particularly interested in helping in person, partly because she liked Damien personally but found working with the heavy to be somewhat grating. She was happy that the Omega was finally putting together a proper navy, and offered some suggestions when it came to Their needs.

The Omega planned to produce a fleet of dedicated torpedo warfare subs that could outdo Germany when it came to sinking ships. The Omegas' Mk2 subs were smaller and more agile than the Mk1s, forgoing the guns in order to carry more torpedoes; they were organized so that a Mk1 could act as a sort of mothership for two or three Mk2s as far as food supplies were concerned. From Nova Roma's arsenal, the new navy units began training in wolf-pack tactics.

Weaver offered to introduce war games, one such pack of three subs against her own modified Mk1. Torpedoes would be fired without warheads to ensure minimal damage and ballistic designators would be used instead of cannons.

Damien enjoyed being pitted against Weaver; the two played cat-and-mouse all over the Mediterranean, giving rise to rumours of war in the adjacent territories as electromagnetic guns thundered in the distance. Surprisingly, Damien was the victor, having one of the three subs left when Weaver's was "sunk".

In other news, The Omega built a Hab for the asteroid belt and started asking around if anyone wanted to volunteer to spend their deathday alone for the advantage of space science.

Meanwhile, the Omega planned to use Kat and Ithuriel towards recruiting people who didn't make the cut as agents into the Omegas' infantry. Kat and Ithuriel got along relatively well; Ithuriel had no problem with things like fire-and-maneuver and combined arms, but the concept of a ruse of war more or less completely evaded him; the Angel had the world's worst poker face. This year's crop of recruits seemed to mostly be kids from other territories.

Unfortunately, Kat and Ithuriel had to send a lot of prospective new recruits home, mostly due to age. Even so, the best and brightest were further screened by Omega recruiters to be added to the agent roster.

Space operations continued apace, even with Jeb only marginally involved while he scouted Misrayim for a place to build a new arsenal in the interior.

Jeb figured that building a base near Timbuktu would improve its defensibility but also would make it a bigger target. There was no need for another arsenal; the new base would be built in the Sahara. He made a few agreements with Bedouin revivalists that settled in the area, and began construction.

With no official involvement from the Omega other than use of a few nodes for CGI, the documentary had no pretense of having been filmed in Antarctica, and it was made clear that it was presented as a reconstruction/reenactment. Reactions were mixed: TOL denounced it as slander, unsurprisingly, and believing media refused to air it because it was too violent and did not have a clear message, although a few Christian critics praised the journalistic effort. Happily, this caused Cameron Kirk Williams to want to do an expose on a TOL base; with any luck, either the TOLers or the Glorified reporter would get hurt in the process.

The Imperium Profugus made another trip to Mars and dropped off another group of colonists, some of whom started branching out from the original base site. This latest group brought along a few flatcats bought from Pacifica. The security cabal rotation happened on schedule, improving the Omegas' people's ability to handle the rigors of space.

Speaking of Pacifica, without a decisive push on the Omegas' part, the government regained some ground; while it proved impossible for them to shut down the internet again, they did manage to corner broadcast media by shutting down the TOL transmitter there. Under Ely LeVey's leadership, Pacifican radio and TV ended up broadcasting absolutely shmaltzy propaganda, but quantity substituted for quality. Notably, the few fledgling aquatic human colonies were given squatter status where they were, and were forced by police and coast guards to move back on land; despite TOL lowering prices on extensive body mods, a few people abandoned the experiment.

This year's Feast of Tabernacles was somber; a Temple priest announced that once again the end times were nearing, and rumours of war returned to the land. Ely LeVey traveled with the Pacifican delegation in person and received many accolades for her missionary work; even Tsion was mollified.

The Millennium Force announced that they would form a volunteer defense group and begin to offer right-to-bear-arms classes to the faithful: of course the Lord's elect needed no army, but it never hurt to be prepared.

Chaim Rozenweig finally managed to figure out that the super-grain was artificial; since it was also considerably more flavorless, he began leading a campaign to get rid of it.

The Omegas' search for a Renzi-style technocratic candidate who could garner enough respect from all the factions in Pacifica despite differences, culminated in the location of Mr. Bissattini, an advocate of intraterritorial federalism. His claim was that there was no reason why somebody living in Orange County should need to be governed under the same rules as

somebody living in the San Francisco Bay. The man was somewhat of an eccentric, but he did have a small following; Tree Of Life was neutral towards him. He was in his early nineties.

To nobody's surprise, Ithuriel volunteered to join the army fulltime; the Omegas' sysadmins told him to hold off.

The Omegas' troop movements did not go unnoticed, and They picked up an increase in TOL radio activity, some of which could be deciphered as surprise that They were going along with Monday's plan to attack early.

Year: 985

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

You have 27 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, 1 is canopy security, and 1 is army liaison, so 22 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on a starship bubble shield. Your military grant is focused on sea mines.

You are not tracking enemy teams. TOL have set up their own transmitters to compete with the government in believing territories. Your new Sky Eye model acts as an analog transmitter as well.

You have 3 aerospace parts in storage.

Freelancers are beginning to populate the colonies.

The Omegas' sociologists noted that there was a strong undercurrent of militarism in the Omega society for the last few years, and Their theologians noted that since the prophecy said that a billion-strong army would assemble against Greater Jerusalem, narrative causality could be the reason for war drums beating in people's heads. For now, though, cooler heads prevailed.

Meanwhile, the Omega dispatched a large team to Pacifica; using construction crews and the occasional heavy MEC, they helped the semiaquatic humans to either relocate to where they were evicted, or to simply turn the area where they had been relocated into artificial ponds. The underlying message to the government was spelled out explicitly in propaganda leaflets; every time they crafted an oppressive law, the Omega would build a way to get around it. The Omegas' media people were successful in tying this with American Western can-do spirit, gaining support from the nationalist faction.

The major secular opponent to Bissattini, a hypercapitalist named Ryan Andrews who made his money (and money equivalent) a couple of decades ago speculating in the reputation market as it rose and fell, announced that he would stop trying to participate in politics. Instead, he

purchased a number of old barges, batyspheres and similar vessels, made them underwater-capable, and intentionally sunk them somewhere in the Pacific, with the explicit goal of building a larger underwater habitat. Some of the most corporate-minded members of Tree Of Life joined him.

The Omega publically praised the effort and offered assistance.

While life in Pacifica went back to being loud and proud, civil tension was overall defused from last year; the few people afraid of a violent coup largely calm down, and attendance at the Millennium Force's self-defense schools dropped considerably from its inaugural year. The Omegas' cabals set up a support network for skeptical children of believing parents who wanted to leave the farm, experience city life, and get modded if they wanted, as a "I'm not going back" rebellious gesture.

The bodymod fad hit Misrayim to a small degree, although most historical revivalists including the neo-Romans seemed to be very uninterested. The Omegas' low-level surveillance however, found that the Dwarves made a major purchase of tech and skilled personnel with Tree Of Life, in return for assistance in bunkerizing some of their research centers.

The Underground Monorail announced that, thanks to Tree Of Life assistance, the first successful complete gender change operation (down to the genetic/chromosomal level) had been completed in a northern Pacifican clinic not far from where Ely LeVey lived, which was an excellent pretext for a harassment campaign towards the elderly preacher.

In the meantime, Misrayim's factories and the Omegas' navy's submarines were busy deploying the new Sky Eyes; the analysts expected that this would soon force the Temple to reverse its ruling on internet use or face ridicule. It would be the first time that the Temple would have to flat out admit error.

Low-level surveillance of TOL actions indicated that they were shifting some of their army assets from Antarctica to their bases; in a few territories, TOL base commanders specifically notified the Omegas' patrols that this was not intended as a military buildup against Them, and even offered to let the Omega inspect said bases. Video analysis confirmed that some of Sunday's footage in his messages to his people were being reused.

One thing that the documentary caused was an effort by TOL to clean up house somewhat; they were still doing a bunch of drugs, as Sky Eye surveillance of ship movement showed, but at least their recruiters were a lot more clean-cut. They even revived attempts to recruit using philosophical arguments and a few TOL recruiters asked to make their pitch at Misrayim's universities, which the Omega allowed only in the form of a three-way debate with one of Their recruiters and a missionary.

A few companies that the Omega ran behind the curtain made sure that Ryan Andrews got some very good deals on undersea equipment, and Their PAC in Pacifica publicly congratulated the

former entrepreneur on his endeavor. This irked Andrews a little bit, surprisingly, since he was doing this as a way to "secede" from all governments, but he didn't say no to a helping hand as long as he could show that he was paying for it. A few of the aquatic humans joined him, which helped with the initial setup of the undersea colony, but most preferred to stay closer to land, simply for safety's sake. Commodore Weaver (she did have two ships after all) was seen submerging to meet with Andrews, and for a week Christian newspapers and talk radio were all agog about a "Terror from the Deep" conspiracy theory; there were a few incidents of aqua-augmented people attacked in the streets up and down the coast as a backlash, but the Omegas' media people managed to turn this into an asset. Kat was able to reopen her deli, this time twenty feet underwater just halfway off Treasure Island, and while business wasn't quite as good as it used to be, it was enough to keep the enterprise self-sufficient. Since the Omega brought extra manpower, Their people reactivated some of the immense wave generators that had been built at the height of the economic boom; Pacifica was once again the land of surfers.

Kat called LeVey on her show (courtesy of a little bit of hardware hacking that prevented the radio preacher from hanging up on her without going off the air) and asked for an opinion on genetic-level sex reassignment surgery; the older woman had no idea that this had even been accomplished and called it a false claim. The very next day, a delegation from the Underground Monorail visited Ely's town and business to let her meet the gene therapy recipient; Ely refused to meet, called the psalties on them and skipping town, which forced her show to go off the air for a few days.

Things in Pacifica were looking up, but Tree Of Life insisted that this was "their" revolution, not the Omegas', (this time) and wanted assurances that They would not interrupt their endgame plan if they were to back the Omegas' candidate. They weren't giving out details, and Jeff Tolwyn had gone to work with Andrews, but the Omegas' intelligence experts suspected that it could have had something to do with a bio-weapon. Tree Of Life insisted that their charter was to increase human life, not decrease it: if they wanted to create a bioweapon they would have done so thirty years ago.

What has been happening to Maria seemed to show them to be right; the elderly believer had been kept in coma for years now, and thanks to continued gene therapy she looked younger. Scans indicated that the effect was more than skin deep: while her face was still wrinkled, her tissues were closer to those of a middle-aged woman.

The Omega decided to keep Maria under; MRI scans indicated that she was in a deep coma, but in order to make sure her neurons did not deteriorate, she was occasionally allowed to partially come out of it and dream.

Urist and Ithuriel had the world's sweatiest bromance going (who resurrected that word?); if the Dwarf race survived, their legendarium would contain more than a couple stories about how these two managed to lead a tunneling team over volcanic vents, past cave-ins, and through underground fields of quicksand and aquifers. The tunnel network had been extended

underneath the Rub-Al-Khali to the extent that the Omega could easily spring up an infantry squad in view of the nominal Greater Jerusalem border... and tanks just a few hundred meters behind. Urist's people consistently beat the Omegas' radiolocation algorithms on the subject of where they were digging under; the Dwarf elder refused to lead his people into New Jerusalem, however, stating that it would be unsafe for everyone involved, especially his Angel friend.

The Omega decided to respect this.

The Rub-Al-Khali, the sparsely populated territory that surrounded Greater Jerusalem (albeit for only on a few hundred meters on the Misrayim side) still looked like the endless expanse of hardy grass that it looked like for a thousand years, but underneath was an elaborate network of high-tech tunnels that by now even extended under the Red Sea to Misrayim, and north into what used to be Turkey. Urist and Ithuriel had, practically on a dare, even added pressure tanks to the undersea segment so that they could, on a whim (well, on about twelve hours of engineering prep, but still), replicate the "parting of the waters" scene from the iconic Charlton Heston movie.

Jeb may have been a little melancholy but kept up his public persona flawlessly and, incidentally, showed the flying-squirrel people that they had a bit of work to do still if they wanted to catch up to him.

The Omega ended up subsidizing body modding of different kinds in the western territory, be it biomods or cybernetics. Pretty soon, two competing subcultures developed; Shapers favored biomods, tended to be aristocratic and refined while having libertarian tendencies. Mechanists were more rough-and-ready and somewhat collectivist. The two groups were currently cooperating under the Omegas' loose leadership to take the territory from the believers, but were divided on what to do afterwards - shapers, having recently been discriminated against, wanted to encourage believers to leave, while mechanists thought that there was room for everyone. Tree Of Life, of course, supported shapers, while the Underground Monorail was more on the mechanist side due to political affinities. This was not yet an issue, but the Omega could possibly have to deal with it in the future (if nothing bigger happened).

The Omega allowed TOL recruiters to set up offices in Their universities in the same way that They had allowed missionaries to do so years ago; the slow trickle of converts had overall been worth being able to point at the small chaplains' offices when believers accused Their government of persecution. TOL would be granted the same status; a few three-way debates happened, but most of them ended with the Omegas' representative and TOL's ganging up on the believer. A few complaints were lodged but Their moderators had been fair, so the only people complaining were the followers of Tsion Ben-Judah, who, well, would complain regardless.

In one particular debate in Timbuktu, in the shadow of the launch complex (this year the Moon base reached capacity, and would have to expand facilities soon), the opposite happened: the

Christian and Luciferian speakers ganged up on the Omegas' guy, indicating that they each promised eternal bliss, rather than a continuation of human drudgery until the stars grew cold.

The Omegas' debater was, of course, wired to the Omegas' datalinks by phone implant; so were the other two. For a rebuttal, Their philosophers offered another argument.

"Aren't you supposed to be preparing for the great battle of the ages? Why doesn't your God and your Devil just have a big boxing match in the Temple, and the rest of us can just get on with our lives? Look, if you want, I'm sure that Cairo Polytechnic will be very happy to get you set up with a referee, this is mostly a research university but we do have an athletics program!"

The protests of the Christian debater, who said that either they were "with us or against us", and The Other Lights' debater, who answered that it was about rewarding loyalty in the face of oppression, went barely heard over the laughter that swept the auditorium; the debate series continued, people wrote letters to the editor, the internet flared up with flame wars, and things continued as usual.

The only consequence of any note was a brief email from Monday indicating that he did agree with the Christians on one thing: either the Omega was with TOL or were against it.

"Soon, I will make my own move to avert prophecy. Be at my side, or be in front of our guns."

Attempts to reply went unanswered, but the Omegas' sensor network did detect a lot of naval activity: TOL was moving a good chunk of their army out of Antarctica and into their bases. However, the Rub-al-Khali staging area did not get much more than an average share of troops.

Jeb didn't do much in Pacifica, other than do a tour and talk about space - he seemed a little fatigued or worried, although his performance was excellent. He did shoot a video, which quickly went viral in areas that had fast internet again, of himself in a wingsuit leading a couple of people who had grown a patagium, "escorting in" an airship coming into the territory from Nova Roma.

Past the Other Light troop movements, they had begun to blanket the airwaves with propaganda using the same broadcast channel that the believers did; in territories with the internet, those who had a WWAN dongle end up going to the Omegas' datalinks for fact-checking, but in territories where that was less of an option TOL did surprisingly well with recruiting disaffected youth.

There was much hand-wringing at the Feast of Tabernacles; on one hand, this was in accordance with the prophecies. On the other, so many lost souls. Oddly enough, Tsion this year had nothing bad to say about the Omega.

A Temple Tribunal ruling on the transgender issue -- birth sex was all that mattered to them, regardless of genetic therapy -- was greeted by the Underground Monorail with a ticker-tape parade in which a lot of LGBT folks shredded their IDs; the mood was celebratory. In response,

the Pacifican government hired a number of Glorified to gender-history-check people applying for things like driver's licenses. Happily, the Temple also ruled that there was nothing tainted or wrong about a child born of a transgender parent after gene therapy or after a womb/testes implantation (or even both; it took the End Times to come again, but futanari was now officially a medically possible option. Not that one could tell by the porn industry, since that hadn't changed any except for maybe a bit more realism.

The slow trickle of colonists to Mars continued; the homesteaders quickly found that the conditions there were easier to deal with than the Moon's, largely because the day was 25 rather than 360 hours long and the gravity was more familiar. A quick demographic survey indicated that the oldest colonist out there would turn 100 next year.

Launching Sky Eyes in the Middle East and moving the old Mk1s around on the canopy, gave the Omega enough of a sensor net to catch ships coming into the staging area, and subs emerging to get to a harbor.

To close the year, a happy moment; the first class of Martian children, all five of them, had begun attending school. So far, the lower gravity meant that they were growing up to be noticeably, but not cripplingly, tall and thin, with somewhat elongated features; a forensic sketch artist drew a potential adult Martian, a human, and a Dwarf side-by-side to show the differences.

Year: 986

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

You have 27 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, 1 is canopy security, and 1 is army liaison, so 22 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on a starship bubble shield. Your military grant is focused on sea mines.

You are not tracking enemy teams. TOL have set up their own transmitters to compete with the government in believing territories. Your new Sky Eye model acts as an analog transmitter as well.

You have 3 aerospace parts in storage.

Freelancers were doing well homesteading on Mars.

Kat was really hoping to get back to her deli, but found herself playing drill instructor for what the Omega estimated would be the final contingent to join the Legion of Light. Kat joined Ithuriel as they toured the Italian peninsula and the northern Misray coast for recruits, and did take the time to show off the work of the research teams the Omega put to toil on synthetic muscles; her new frame was optimized for a parade rather than a fight, but did look impressive.

Ithuriel took his job with the usual seriousness, and before long, a new regiment of light legionaries was inducted into the Omegas' army. Kat understood that she was being pulled from duty in Pacifica because she had just been too damn angry for politics lately, and ended up in a bit of a competition with Ithuriel over who was harder on the new recruits. There was a death during training and there wasn't enough of the unfortunate recruit to scrape a body together, so They had Kat hand over the new synthmuscle design to the poor recruit after they got the Heavy treatment.

Damien had an unholy amount of fun testing and helping build the drone swarm: The New Romans had taken their historical predecessor's penchant for stoicism during business hours and licentiousness after hours, and the heavy fit right in. Aside from the obligatory pictures of Damien's MECpod in a tiny toga and inside a classical urn, the Omega ended up with a small fleet of nuclear-powered "mothership" quadcopters that provided battery power to a few dozens each of hobby-sized drones each mounting a wubber with silencer firmware. Even in case they didn't do much for the Last Battle war effort, they should have proved excellent for riot control, police actions, and single-facility takeover.

The form letter from the Millennium Force that accompanied the patriarch's response did come with a handsome old-style photo album (with some pretty but tactically useless pictures); however, the photo album has a CD in the back with a lot more pictures, all of which were less handsome, but some of which were more useful.

As the aerospace factories kept toiling, Jeb took a small group of space engineers and test pilots and headed over to Mars in the Reach; the half-completed colony ship did carry basic fabrication capabilities, and made for a reasonable orbital shipyard to build a lander/ascender from. Jeb would be flying what was essentially a scale model of the lander/ascender design, built to carry only a couple of people and take Isaac with him; it was time for the first Christian on Mars to go home.

Using a standard nonreusable lander, the last batch of the Omegas' colonists landed on the red planet alongside a group of homesteaders who, it turned out, were mostly from the Caucasus region; a few were Cosmists that didn't quite make the grade to participate in the space program.

Zak wasn't the best choice for retaking Pacifica; he was a scientist, not a politician. However, he was widely published, and commanded respect from both Tree Of Life and Ryan Andrews' folks. Mr. Bissattini ran a campaign focused on territories' rights and Pacifican patriotism; Zak assisted by having a team of historians dig out as much pre-Rapture documentation as possible, and let the politician point out that Ely LeVey had been expounding those same principles since BEFORE the Rapture but AFTER her conversion, when she was a Republicite in Unitedstan (the historical documents had suffered some degradation). This didn't actually make an argument, but helped shut the old lady up to some degree.

By the end of the year, Pacifica was in exactly the sort of managed chaos where the Omega and Their allies wanted it; the government kept making laws that it couldn't enforce, people flaunted the bodymod ban and the internet ban by showing off internet-connected breast implants, and the latest hippie craze was hanging out on the swash zone of a beach with dolphins and aqua-augmented people and nibbling on the pufferfish they caught. Zak had to make concessions to Tree Of Life (the Omega wouldn't be as much in control of the economy as They were) but the biotech group and the seastealers would support Their candidate.

On the debt side, it looked like Jeb (and Isaac) were stuck on Mars for at least a year; the lander/ascender only worked properly for the "lander" part, and had to abort to surface. Fortunately, there were no casualties. Jeb went on record as appreciating that Isaac prayed for him during the brief ordeal, but he would insist that Isaac took some flight lessons instead; the test pilot believed that a second pair of trained eyes would have caught the problem. The Omega reprimanded Jeb for going off script but no further action was taken.

Zak may not have handled the political stuff optimally, but he is experienced at herding researchers, so the cat-herding of managing a nonviolent movement is nothing he can't handle; he cooperates with Tree Of Life researchers and co-publishes a few papers on sonic manipulation of cell cultures, helps Ryan Andrews in his dolphin-taming project by setting up cetacean-friendly sonars in the underwater city, and his one foray into public speaking doesn't hurt the cause much if at all.

Eventually, the current Pacifican governor all but ended up curled up in a corner trying to hide an adulterous erection when confronted by a protester sporting what she called "attack boobs" during a pro-mod rally; Mr. Bissattini seized the moment, fended off the paparazzi, took the governor home himself (while the Omegas' drones kept his security detail away) and from there announced that the governor agreed to new elections in which the "moral character" clause would be allowed to lapse, since nobody could keep to a perfect standard, not even he, and even Scripture said so. While most of Pacifica's population was with Bissattini at this point, it was still true that only people over 100 would get to vote; the elections were set for next year, and would be close, although Bissattini was the projected winner. The Christian candidate was fairly forgettable, with a quiet record of public service and a middle-of-the-road approach (which, in this world, meant that he would like to see The Gays reeducated, but not thrown in solitary until they repent).

Obviously, Jeb enlisted the Martian colony's help in building a second lander/ascender.... whether the colony admins, or even the Omega, would like it or not. The "let's start from scratch with few resources" did wonders for Jeb and the colonists' morale, and allowed them to start flexing their new industrial muscle. However, it looked like Jeb would have to stay on Mars until next year. The Omega decided to leaven the Reach there, ready to take him and Isaac home.

Isaac was placed in what amounted to solitary, although he could communicate via text terminal with the rest of the colony (a simple neural network was set up to filter attempts at discussing

religion) and browsed the net in read-only mode. Surprisingly, he said that he understood the restrictions, as he broke a promise and promises were *sacred*. He did manage to get out the notion that he "planted a seed" in Jeb before the neural network reset. Jeb shrugged it off. He was busy coming up with an indigenous ascent vehicle, but his psych profile indicated that he was doing so as a way to recapture his fading youth and something was eating at him. Jeb's soul belonged to the cosmos, and maybe to Val and Cordylon, regardless of what Isaac may have said while their lander/ascender was careening towards Olympus Mons. Faith was the wrong word, but he had earned some trust.

The Omega questioned Jeb on the odds on whether the colony could expand on its own and build more ships to get off Mars.

"Get off Mars? As soon as we're done figuring out the best way to use our limited hypergolic propellant production, I got some old ISRU plans from Nasa that..." Jeb sighed. This was just the sort of work that Val was best at. "Maybe next year? They'd need to book a ride on a nuclear ship to get to the asteroids, though. We still have a monopoly on those. But I wouldn't be surprised to see someone want to prospect on Phobos or Deimos. Good mining there."

Jeb was stranded on Mars and had to use the resources of a colony that had been specifically set up to not be able to build an orbital rocket, to build an orbital rocket; on the whole he was having the time of his life. What worried the Omegas' psychologists was that he was "in reasonably good spirits" rather than "in an absolutely manic state and working twenty hours a day"; it was unlike him. Either something was on his mind, or he was finally getting around to growing up a little.

Cordylon volunteered to join Jeb, but he told her that it would be cheating: it was important that the lander/ascender be designed to be as efficient as possible, and this was a good way to make sure it was. The two were given a private text channel to exchange what the Omegas' psychologists assumed to be ERP but turned out to be mostly very saccharine-laced messages with the occasional back-and-forth about rocket designs. Jeb was, however, concerned about Val being in Hell. He and Cordylon took solace in believing that Val being Val, she was probably already started figuring out how to terraform the place.

Meanwhile, the Omega decided to have Damien send Noah a message, thanking him and the Millenium Force for their efforts.

Damien got a remarkably rambling handwritten answer from Noah indicating that every believer was welcome into the Temple and that Children of the Tribulation still did organized tours for kids and helped with the babysitting aspect. Damien also got a personal invitation, although it was doubtful whether the Heavy MEC would be able to use it - however, it was filed away with great care. If it worked, it would probably only work once.

A minority of the Omegas' theologians held that Noah was the original "quiet hero who

protected humanity from an angry god by dint of planning and hard work", and may have subconsciously sympathised with Their cause. During the two years he was in contact with Omega territories, They received some very farfetched proposals for kidnapping the Glorified patriarch and taking him on the Reach. One of them involved building a squadron of M113 armored personnel carriers, for some reason.

This year's Feast of Tabernacles featured another first: one of the priests thanked the normally much put-upon Misrayim representatives from the Christian minority there for having put pressure on their government to return Isaac home; a formal prayer was held for his safe return. The Isaac matter was not classified, and it was known that the prototype lander/ascender would return him home (it was also known that there had been nonfatal problems), but if there had been any lobbying on the Christians' part, the Omega had not noticed. Apparently, there had been; archives showed a few letters written and a few space program administrators politely refusing an invitation to prayer meetings.

Captain Weaver had a bit of a tiff with Ryan Andrews when her submarine was attacked by a giant squid wearing some manner of control harness; the Omega left the matter alone, but whoever won and whether this was a publicity stunt or not, the video made the rounds.

The Temple did not reverse its ruling on using the internet, but a minor priest admitted that now that charges and countercharges filled the airwaves, Christians should have engaged the Adversary where they found him, even if it happened to be online. Of course, by now net infrastructure was completely under the Omegas' control; maybe they would have a better chance of getting recruits out in the sticks.

A surprise, or maybe not, was that TOL ships were starting to converge on the Middle Eastern territory; they seemed intent on building a port, bypassing Salalah entirely.

Year: 987

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

You have 27 cabals total; of these, 3 are maintaining your systems, 1 is canopy security, and 1 is army liaison, so 22 are available. Your civilian research grant is focused on a starship bubble shield. Your military grant is focused on sea mines.

You are not tracking enemy teams. TOL have set up their own transmitters to compete with the government in believing territories. Your new Sky Eye model acts as an analog transmitter as well.

You have 3 aerospace parts in storage.

Freelancers are doing well homesteading on Mars.

"Get Isaac Copenhaver out of the brig."

The lander/ascender was remarkably less rickety than the one that had been built on the Reach. Sure, the insulation layer was made of martian pykrete and was single-use only, and the control scheme used a somewhat improbable collection of vernor engines rather than hypergolics, but the system worked. Jeb and Isaac got in their seats and took off after a brief system check.

"PF to PNF, if you do want to pray, do it now because if you do it later it will distract me."

"All right. I will now recite the Astronaut's Prayer." The lander/ascender's simplicity required that both Jeb and Isaac kept an eye on some systems; simply sending up Isaac tied up and gagged wasn't an option.

"Dear Lord, please don't let me fuck up."

Jeb laughed and pushed the big red button. Coming with him and Isaac were a few soil samples and a number of USB keys with otherwise expensive video messages from the Martian colonists to home.

The takeoff came through without incident, and the lander/ascender managed to get into a stable orbit; docking attempts with the Reach failed and Jeb (alongside a panicked Isaac) drifted for a few orbits until the larger ship simply aligned itself in front of the capsule and got lodged into one of the empty module frameworks. The two made a brief spacewalk to end up in the Reach's crew compartment. The capsule was refueled and landed back on the Martian base by remote control.

"That went well."

"And the design is viable. I bet we'll see someone moving to Phobos within the year." Jeb flashed his trademark grin after saying goodbye to the red planet's colonists.

The Omega put Isaac back into quarantine.

Isaac didn't struggle; he was introduced to the Reach's crew, put into the first mate's stateroom (after it was removed from access to the ship's systems) and spent the next two weeks in solitude. The landing back on Earth was somewhat bumpy but liveable, and while Jeb spent some quality time with Cordylon, Isaac was brought back down to the surface.

Isaac was taken out of Misrayim and handed over to the Greater Jerusalem authorities through the Middle Eastern landing strip that was the site of the exchange between Tsion and Ithuriel a

few years ago. Even though this was only the second high-profile exchange, the place had gained a bit of fame, just like the Bridge of Spies.

Isaac got more press from the Omegas' corner of the world than all others; after what They assumed to be a thorough debriefing in Greater Jerusalem, he did a few interviews with Their media via long-distance phone call, in which he noted that he was able to work well alongside the other colonists.

"Jeb is a great guy, very motivated. Doesn't brag even when he'd have every right to and he will be on my prayer list 'till he dies."

Jeb didn't comment other than a brief thank-you and a challenge to the Caucasian territorial government to do something with "their" launch ramp (noting that it wasn't really theirs; the Cosmists built it).

Eventually, Isaac "starred" as a character in a rare children's book mentioning space; the book was noted to go against Temple policy of ignoring space, but got past the censors via a letter of dispensation issued by one of the patriarchs, and sold reasonably well.

Jeb announced that he would semi-retire next year, as the loss of sensory information inherent to the MEC condition would not allow him to continue being a test pilot.

The elections in Pacifica neared; Kat finally managed to re-open her deli. Zak spent a bit of time in the underwater town assisting with some conundrums of hydrology and checking on their progress. Damien went into full military-prep mode and got ready to command the silencer drone swarm in case there were troubles. Ithuriel finally got to enjoy visiting Venice Beach without being singled out as the only winged man there, although he was still the only one with -functional- wings.

As it went, it was all about get-out-the-vote; while most of Pacifica was on Mr. Bissattini's side, voting restrictions remained and, by the look of it, the over-100 vote may not have been sufficient. The Omega directed Their people to engage in relentless canvassing to get out the vote fairly.

Ryan Andrews refused to set up a polling place in his underwater installation, so people would have to swim to shore to vote. It was not dangerous but it was an odd sight to see the occasional aqua-augmented man or woman get out of the ocean with their ID and phone in a waterproof bag, head to the poll, and then dive back in. A few people recently went full mermaid/merman and needed a ride to the polls.

Late in the campaign, Ely LeVey requested for Tsion to come assist her in her political efforts, despite their earlier differences.

There was little preventing Tsion from getting to Pacifica, so he went. Once there, he pretty much took over Ely LeVey's organization from under her and, with a big fake smile printed on

her face, she went along with it.

Tsion's campaign was somewhat old-fashioned; the theologian rented a bus and had Ely's radio transmit his stump speeches in realtime. His main platform plank was -

"If you do not elect a believer, all that befell Osaze will descend upon you".

Notably, he did not use amplification; Tsion's voice must have been supernaturally assisted, because he was louder than protesters with megaphones. A few people who got in his way were zapped by lightning; the following loss of sensation was a big discouragement for people in Pacifica's reasonably hedonistic climate. Drug consumption went up.

There was even a TOL attempt to assassinate the guy, which ended in the sniper spontaneously combusting. Tsion did not directly mention this in his campaigning but the candidate that he supported did. Tsion had a large media footprint to the point that, eventually, believers had to be reminded that they shouldn't write-in the theologian's name. A small group of believers would have preferred to have a Glorified ruler for the end of the Millennium though, and insisted that they would do that. This gave the Omega an out to split the believing vote, if They were willing to put in some media manipulation; another obvious option was to have Tsion's name show up on the ballots, making it look official.

The Omega communicated with Ithuriel to find out about Tsion's gameplan.

"Tsion seems to be a honest man and clearly does not want to fight... or he would have walked through this land with a whirlwind at his back. I am sure that if we can just sit down and talk, he will understand that he is being an enemy to the people."

The free-willed Angel never stopped being idealistic; some of the Omegas' people found it grating, but there was something refreshing about it. He had the world's worst poker face and, while he had the same theoretical ability to lie as any other human being, he was terrible at it. His game plan was simply to talk things out with Tsion and ask him to go home.

"If you turn it into a fight, Omega, I will protect my friends. But I will not hurt Tsion unless he tries to hurt me."

That, of course, could be arranged.

The Omegas' other key personnel had no qualms with rigging an election, since the over-100 rule was still in place and the results weren't representative anyway. Zak wouldn't care even if the election was fair to begin with since he believed that people of superior intelligence and skill should rule and this was a contest of skill. Kat and Damien would have liked to see another ballot happen after voting rights had been restored properly and Jeb had been busy with other things.

One thing that neither Tsion nor Ely did, incidentally, was to have Isaac campaign for them. After

being debriefed and lending his likeness for a book deal, the Christian cosmonaut quickly found a job with a small candlemaking business and disappeared from public life.

The debate was scheduled for three days before polling began; in the meantime, the Omegas' operatives made sure that a number of ballots had the write-in line prefilled with Tsion's name, which would cause some believers to just put their cross next to it. The Omega was also on standby for messing with the scanner-type counting machines and made sure that polling stations were concentrated in urban areas. A simple firmware update to the smartphones under Omega control, that being most of them, would ensure that everyone with an active metabolic extension controller would receive a reminder to vote.

Tsion accepted the offer to a conversation, and as much as everyone said that they didn't want it to turn into a media circus, it did. Tsion showed up in a suit and tie, rather than the traditional priestly garb he'd been favoring. Ithuriel was given skinny jeans and a (slightly too small) tie-dye shirt with wing slots in the back by the Omegas' media people after a quick internet poll which, They suspected, had been snowballed by fangirls somewhat. Given that Tsion was a Glorified, for once his Ken-doll generic good looks were overshadowed. Ithuriel started with a similar body plus the wings, but after the few fights he'd been in, he also bore scarring. In what may have been a new record, the Omega started finding slashfics on the internet BEFORE the discussion even started; some of the Omegas' sysadmins appreciated it. Some did not.

Tsion sat down and started by, as usual, yelling at Ithuriel for wanting an unbeliever candidate in the first place, since a believing candidate was *obviously* a safer moral choice even for unbelieving voters. Ithuriel tried to counter that Bissattini had promised freedom of worship, while Collum never did and, in fact, had been trying to impose restrictions. Tsion countered that freedom of worship was not the same as freedom to join a cult.

Ithuriel tried to answer, but Tsion, as he was wont, interrupted him and started talking over him.

"Sir, if I may argue our side of the issue—"

"Your side? You are accursed! Or are you a believer, confident you shall live past your hundredth birthday?"

"It merely happens that I respectfully disagree—"

"Respectfully? You are fortunate you remain on this earth, for God may yet will that your young compatriots become examples for the rest of this nation."

And that's when things got a little weird. At this latest interruption, Ithuriel spread his wings (incidentally tearing up his shirt in a remarkably cheesy Captain Kirk moment), stood up, and broke out the full Angel voice.

"DOCTOR BEN-JUDAH, YOU HAVE BEEN BULLYING YOUR OPPONENTS FOR A THOUSAND YEARS,

DIDN'T YOUR MOTHER EVER TELL YOU, I CANNOT HEAR IF YOU SHOUT?!?"

Tsion froze in place, enough so that the Omega had to double-check Their telemetry to make sure that he hadn't had a heart attack.

Tsion recovered and likewise stood up.

"Is your mockery of an Angel of the Lord supposed to impress me? Or even your foolish friends? Know ye not that we shall judge angels?"

Ithuriel's answer was icy.

"I was an Angel of the Lord. Look into my eyes and test this truth. Now I am a messenger of the Pacifican people. My message is simple: let them decide their own future. If you want to have an actual discussion as to the future of this land, we're all here for it. On the other hand, if you want to just shout and boss people around, like you have for many years, in the words of a wise man from long ago and far away, *UP. THE FUCK. SHUT.*"

The timetable for the formal debate did indeed indicate that it was still Ithuriel's time for a rebuttal. It was also the first time anyone heard Ithuriel swear, other than when asking for the meaning of a swear word when his brain was growing up all over again.

Tsion reacted to the command as if he was being buffeted by a wubber, which prompted the Omega to put Their martial arts team from yellow to red alert, because it was likely that Tsion would try to escalate this.

The Omegas' decision to queue this livestream on the computers of anyone who was watching any video paid off. People were switching to it spontaneously.

A double-digit percent of the population of the Omegas' territories were now watching. Tsion recoiled, holding onto the table to stay upright, and then pointed a strangely bony finger at Ithuriel.

"ENOUGH! The Lord is not mocked. There is absolutely nothing of value that you or your depraved friends have to say! Pacifica will submit to the Almighty. Delight in His ways. Seek His face. Never again disobey His commands."

"Does that mean the debate is over?" Ithuriel asked. He sounded calm, but the Omegas' sensor cam picked him up a mile out. It was a trick that only one in fifty legionaries could pull with a standard-issue wubbing module... and Ithuriel wasn't wearing one.

"IT MEANS THAT IT'S ALL OVER! THIS FARCE OF AN ELECTION IS OVER!" Tsion shrieked. "THE WORLD IS OVER! REPENT NOW OR FACE JUDGEMENT A DOZEN YEARS HENCE! IT IS THE ONLY DECISION THAT WILL EVER MATTER IN YOUR WORTHLESS LIVES!"

"So, you want people to stay home on election weekend?"

"THERE IS NO ELECTION! ANY WHO TRY TO VOTE ARE ANATHEMA TO THE LORD! THE ONLY PLACE YOU SHOULD GO THIS WEEKEND IS CHURCH, WITH ASH ON YOUR HEAD!"

"I see. Thank you for your time."

Ithuriel retracted his wings, curtly bowed (since a handshake was *obviously* not happening) and left. What followed were many minutes of renowned theologian Tsion Ben-Judah screaming invectives and threats of hellfire into the camera, with a mute audience backing away slowly from the crazy man; by the end, even his Glorified throat was raspy. Eventually, the cameramen looked at the time and turned the feed off. Ithuriel refused to be interviewed, saying that it wouldn't be fair to his esteemed opponent to not be there to offer a rebuttal- and got an ocean of laughter with that one comment.

A radio communique from Ely's transmitter, later in the day, indicated that Tsion had indeed requested a ruling from the Temple, but one was unlikely to arrive before the election weekend. Preliminary polling data indicated that most believers would either stay home or attempt to hold services at polling places instead of voting.

The interim government indicated that the voting and ballot counting would proceed as planned in order to avoid riots, but the result would wait until the Temple's pronouncement to be considered valid. The elections were still on and the Omegas' plan was in place. Volunteers were coordinated to make sure that voting happened fairly... but of course, to cheat whenever the opportunity arose.

In the meantime, the Omegas' media operations broadcasted a special on how Misrays beat the Plagues and the Angel of Death.

The opposition's loudest voice specifically told supporters to not vote but that wasn't enough to guarantee that they would; at this point it was a matter of whether the election was legitimate, more than who won. The Omega kept the "adjustment" measures in place, just in case.

The first thing to be broadcast was a documentary, essentially a recut of "Land of No" made by some of the Omegas' media guys, showing how Their homeland successfully coped with the Ten Plagues; Ely LeVey regained composure before Tsion did, and offered an alternative audio track, but all she could come up with was "Or you could believe and enjoy a quiet life" when TVs and LCD screens displayed true stories of grit and generosity.

The actual candidates, both of which understood perfectly well that they had been upstaged no matter what else happened, released brief interviews; Bissattini asked everyone, believer and nonbeliever, to go to the polls anyway to show respect for the rule of law, adding,

"If you're going to church afterwards, you wouldn't have to walk far anyway".

Collum was caught in a bind, and stammered some, but even *he* encouraged believers to vote; he pitched it as a show of loyalty to Greater Jerusalem. When asked whether he would go with the Temple's decision or the will of the voters, should they differ, he said that he genuinely didn't know.

Ryan Andrews wasn't interviewed but he bought a bit of ad time in which he sent out a terse message. Shown playing putt-putt in the gorgeous executive dome of his underwater town, he commented that he personally hoped for a Flood and winked into the camera.

The vote was largely seen as Pacifica deciding on whether to exit the political ekklesia or not. A petition to formally secede from the Temple like Misrayim did, triggering the Ten Plagues, was circulated and got to a few hundred thousand signatures. As for the petition to have the election results before the Temple ruling, it was not restricted to over-100s either. This one resonated with just about everyone (including some believers) and reached two million signatures in two days without any help from the Omega. The interim government released a communique to indicate that in order to prevent leaks, speculations and rumors, the raw data would be made available to all major newspapers- most of which agreed to print it in full.

Over the weekend, people headed to the polls. There was surprisingly little drama and only isolated incidents of violence. A few people were arrested for trying to vote with fake IDs; polling places that had been set up in churches, mostly in the interior, were locked up by pastors with whatever excuse they could think up. The Omegas' volunteers spent a lot of time cleaning up churches when they "suddenly" developed a leak or an electrical problem on Saturday. Some pastors took the free labor but *still* locked the church up, which resulted in a few breaking and entering incidents. Tsion once again took over Ely's transmitter and promised dire consequences for the territory in general and for people who voted.

The Omegas' advanced statistical algorithms gave Them a reliable vote tally about two hours before the official count was complete: Collum lost to Bissattini by a small margin. Enough people voted for Tsion that, if those were counted towards the Christian candidate, he would have won. A few people voted Ryan Andrews, Giant Meteor, Lizard People, Mickey Mouse, and the like. A few people sent nudes. One lady broke into Bissattini's campaign headquarters, stripped naked, and demanded to have Ithuriel's children right then and there. Damien made a blog post offering Tsion a consolation blowjob.

The Temple was silent, but announced Saturday evening that they would pronounce a sentence on this matter in due time. This affected Sunday voting in that less believers showed up at the polls (again, in the interior a lot of polling places were built into churches, so they did show up...but for the usual service).

It looked like nobody died and only a few people got hurt... so far.

Omega operatives quietly flipped over a few of the joke votes to make sure that Tsion's votes, if

tallied for Collum, were not enough to take the win away from Bissattini. Since They had been planning to "edit" the results early on in the campaign, ways to do so and ensure a clean getaway were in place, and it was unlikely (albeit possible) that the opposition would have caught it.

The results were tallied and duly published in every newspaper in the territory the following day; Tsion expressed disappointment against the believers who voted, even those who voted for him, while Ely thanked them. The two had a short spat on Ely's radio, which ended with Tsion shouting,

"Shut up, woman!"

...and going on to say that if the current believing government remained in power, maybe the Lord would not strike Pacifica down despite its act of rebellion.

"I would advise Mr. Collum to resign his ill-gotten seat of responsibility into the capable hands of the current administration or at least seek their blessing before taking over!"

Nobody told Tsion that his guy lost.

The Omegas' people enjoyed a day at the beach, hoping that this was the end of it, even though it probably would not be; but much to their surprise, it was! The Christian party had been so cowed by Tsion that, if they had any suspicion or reason to demand a recount, they didn't; the results were certified, and the current administration said that they would begin the transfer of power immediately after the Temple Tribunal's ruling.

The Other Light had been uncharacteristically quiet throughout all this, except for that one idiotic assassination attempt.

Using the putative incoming administration's bully pulpit to prepare Pacifica's people for Divine wrath was definitely an option. Should that happen, another flood was unlikely due to Yahweh's promise to Noah, but a drought was possible. Given how much of Pacifica's cultural life had moved to the coast, Omega theologians considered that an earthquake moving the coastline either further out or further in was possible; the San Andreas fault had been dormant for a millennium, but it was presumably still there.

The Omegas' theologians studied the matter, polled believers, and pored over ancient tomes. As it stood, a repeat of the Ten Plagues was unlikely. The Omega beat those, and while Yahweh wasn't really known for His adaptability. This time They'd be well-prepared enough to essentially suffer no ill effects, making Him look powerless. For the same reason, a drought was unlikely.

"How about Sodom and Gomorrah?"

"Well, we do have San Francisco here."

Maybe that was what Ryan Andrews had been banking on. A column of fire destroying one or more cities would definitely profit the guy, perhaps enough so to let him declare dominion over the whole territory - his foresight would make him popular enough to easily replace Bissattini.

"What else?"

"There's the trumpet, bowl and seal judgements."

"Those already happened, though."

"So has the other stuff. Let's see: Boils upon those with the mark of the Beast... some MEC infection maybe? We'll need Tree Of Life on that one."

"Still loses us legitimacy if we have to ask someone else to fix it. Clever. Yahweh is more brute-force though."

"Sea turning to blood... springs turning to blood... that'd serve Andrews up."

"Another reason to have pumps ready."

"You know, maybe it's too much D&D talking, but I'd say that Yahweh's domains are sound and water."

If that was a joke, nobody was laughing.

"Put that on the blackboard. Hmm. Sun heating up. Well, the canopy can be shaped into a lens. We'd have to fix that from topside. Total darkness... we've already faced that in Osaze."

"Misrayim."

"Yeah, don't know where that came from. Anyway, ultrasounds, easy fix."

"River drying up.... meh. Aha. Big earthquake. Definitely a possibility and would go well with some of the other stuff."

"Guess the Big One is a few centuries overdue, yeah. Put that on top of the list."

"Okay, trumpet judgements... Big firestorm. That goes well with the Sodom thing, and we're vulnerable, nobody's done forest husbandry in forever."

"It'd force more people to move into the water."

"Mountain of fire falling to Earth... canopy hole maybe? Water contamination.... meh, easy fix too. More darkness... who cares. Armored locusts... we'd need to get Tesla coils from Misrayim. Oh. This one is interesting. Four Angels released to kill a third of the population. Supposedly 200

million demonic spirits, too."

"That's not a lot of Angels."

"No spawn coordinates, though. Can't get them into an arena, we'd have to fight them in the open."

"What about the demons?"

"What about them? Demons are useless."

"Hm. Seventh trumpet. Heaven rejoices in its victory. Hah. the last part of the verse says that more lightnings, noises, thunderings, another earthquake, and more hail is released upon the earth once again. Looks like John of Patmos ran out of ideas."

"Better than we run out of countermeasures. Next is seal judgements, list them up."

"Hmm. Antichrist coming back. Heck, this one helps us, if anything. The guy was smarter than anyone in charge of TOL before Satan indwelt him."

"More Antichrist stuff... meh. Hmm. Famine. We'd have to set up a trade route from Misrayim."

"TOL could intercept, though."

"Yet more Antichrist killing people... whatever. Hmm. Martyrs in Heaven protesting Yahweh's indiscriminate killing and being rebuked. Do we have any record of dissent in their ranks?"

"Noah, I guess? Kind of?"

"Another earthquake... right, we should prepare for stuff that shows up a lot."

"Last one is just the trumpet judgements again."

Omega theologians discussed it back and forth and concluded that there was very little information to go by, but indicatively, they could look at:

- An earthquake messing with the water table in some way, either causing a drought, dropping cities into the ocean, or poisoning fresh water supplies.
- A multiple Angel attack. The "demons" supporting them are ambiguous. Actual demons? Something happening to MECs, which were classed as such in a previous ruling? But why would MECs help Angels?
- A miscellanea of minor disasters, hitting scattershot: literally everything that can go wrong will.

"It's a tossup between these three, with the third being considerably less likely than the first

two. You're the logistics AI, Omega, this is the best we can suss from literature and precedent."

No matter what happened, it seemed copious amounts of fresh water and quick deploy resource depots for food and shelter would be one of the best countermeasures. Maybe setting up amphibious logistical APCs that could transport large numbers of people and cargo around would be a good investment.

Meanwhile, The Reach was returning from Mars this year, so while habitation and autofactory parts were built, only one could be launched to the canopy and kept there waiting for installation. The Omegas' space program managers figured that the extra overhead necessary to adapt the new parts to Centaurian conditions would be offset by not having to rush as much.

The planetary survey data was expected to be available in +990.

As it was, Pacifica braced for what ravages Yahweh could visit upon her, the people of Misrayim prepared to help, and the Omegas' army prepared to be deployed, either to battle Angels and maybe demons, or to act as civil protection to deal with natural disasters; for most units, it would be their first trial by fire.

TOL troop movement continued; a few of their cargo ships, hastily converted to troop transports, deviated from their manifest and reached Misray and Pacifican ports, where they were given food, water and net access, but kept quarantined in harbors.

This year's Feast of the Tabernacles was attended by the possibly-outgoing Pacifican administration, and the approved broadcasts were viewed with apprehension all over the Omegas' territories and safehouses as well.

The Temple spokesman was about to read a list of the sentences passed down for the year, when all of a sudden, Monday's face hijacked the broadcast.

"BROTHERS! SISTERS! FELLOW SOLDIERS OF THE OTHER LIGHT! Heed my words!

We will not be fooled! Our interim leader, the man known as Sunday, has been a lackey in service of the Temple all along!

Charge! Attack! Raze the Temple under your feet! Rise up now! Join me, and we will end this nightmare ten years early! Together we can-"

Monday's face contorted in a spasm of extreme pain, and he screamed.

"Aaaaah! IT BURNS! OH GOD MAKE IT STOP IT BURNS!"

A fancy silenced pistol was held against the convulsing head of The Only Light's leader and a single shot went through the temple, exiting low.

"...ah... too late... dead man...." A second shot silenced Monday, and Sunday pushed off the

body. He calmly cleaned the pistol on a handkerchief.

"Listen well, Temple tyrants. When the hour is upon you, on our own time, we the thousand millions of The Other Light will descend upon you. For now, we shall let you tremble."

The jamming stopped; by the looks of it, the Temple representative was still going through the preamble.

The Omega directed one of Their operators to turn on the TOL wiretap.

"We're still waiting to hear from the individual ship captains, Regent."

"General orders. We will start concentrating in the Middle East on schedule. Return to base or to the nearest port."

"What about the ghost ships, Regent?"

"Let them drift. We don't need them. We must focus."

"Sir, the Temple - "

"Let the Temple unleash their rage upon Pacifica. That territory has no recruits for us and no strategic materials. Whether it burns or not is no concern of mine. Leave the observer agents in place. They knew the risks and they've been living it up with the fish hippies anyway. They've gone soft."

"Yes, Regent."

The Omega hung up. Assuming that the ghost ships were the ones that landed on Their shores after mutinying, the Omega ordered a full inspection for scuttling charges, bioweapons, or anything dangerous.

What They found was a number of semi-starved poor bastards who could barely hold a rifle and had been given equipment so obsolete that Their legionaries never even bothered training with it. Other than the security teams, they hadn't even been issued any ammo!

The remarkably few people who had died on board, mostly from a combination of malnutrition and withdrawal symptoms, had been allowed to "zombify" and were either shackled or thrown in the naphta tanks as a way to make them harmless; shooting them in the head would mean consigning them to Hell, and their comrades figured that being alive in that state was still marginally better.

The Omega began civil protection efforts towards the refugees (while making it clear that they were not to leave their ship), with the usual complement of media. Local workshops quickly manufactured TOLMEC firmware flashers and the devices were passed to refugees so that they could stab the serial port built in the roofs of their mouth and disable Horde Mode on their

controllers. A few disabled the controller entirely.

However, in the immediate, everyone was paying attention to the brief announcement from the Temple Tribunal, kept for last.

"And the sixth angel sounds the trumpet, and I hear a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, saying to the sixth angel which had the trumpet, loose the four angels which are bound in the great river Euphrates. And the four angels will be loosed, which were prepared for an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year, for to slay the third part of Pacifica. And the number of the army of the demons were two hundred thousand: and I heard the number of them. By these three will the third part of Pacifica be killed. For their power is in their mouth, and in their tails: for their tails were like unto serpents, and had heads, and with them they do hurt."

Those of the Omegas' people who survived the Ten Plagues admitted that this sounded worse. There would be little buildup.

The Omega reconfigured Their nodes into two loosely linked clusters- one to handle Pacifica and one to handle everything else. Misrayim was the world's most prosperous territory other than Greater Jerusalem, and fearing a surprise attack by The Only Light was very justified: They instructed Their anti-ship subs to patrol the coast and hired some tugs as minelayers.

Nova Carthago attempted to put together a specialized unit of engineering vehicles that would try to succeed where CATS had failed a thousand years ago. The system was essentially an enormous tracked tractor intended to engulf an area using its center section and then to completely silence it. It would be flanked by a mobile power plant and a "Corvette" antipersonnel/antiair vehicle.

Nova Roma had a beautiful, classical ceremony for sending the Legion of Light across the sea; the Omegas' arsenal there would remain ready. For now, they prepared to fight the "battle for grain." Supergrain was planted all around the Eternal City, grown quickly by pumping nutrients into the soil. Some of the citizens even volunteered for the duty using hand sprayers -- and loaded into containers ready to be put into cargo barges should it become necessary. A few speculators bet that it wouldn't be and short pasta'd futures for the next year.

Kat protested her assignment: her Desolators had been extremely effective at weakening Angels before, even though they could not deliver the killing blow. However, her psych profile indicated that she could try to endanger herself excessively. The Omega reassigned her to Pacifica.

The Omega sent a number of agents to what They figured to be the "ghost ships" to try and get information from TOL refugees by carrot... with a little stick.

The Omegas' psych operators descended upon the "ghost ships" to find that most of them were terminally addicted to the cocktail of benzedrines and metamphetamines that TOL used to keep

their workers functional; while Their medical technology could break the physical addiction and the psychologists knew how to do rehab, there were simply too many people - as many as fifty thousand troops. Nevertheless, palliatives were distributed, the easiest cases were given detox treatments so that they could assist in crowd control by becoming *kapos*, and people willing and able to get their brains together for more than five minutes without a capsule of meth were given better rations and net privileges if they wanted to spill the beans on TOL plans.

The idea was to detox them eventually, if not completely, yet enough that they could become functional members of a society that wasn't a slave army. In Misrayim, drug laws were very lax, but driving and working under the influence laws were very strict. In Pacifica, the stoner stereotype helped the Omega retake the territory, so it was somewhat encouraged. The "weed lane" on highways was built to allow stoned drivers to at least park safely, and so on.

Urist sent an odd greeting:

"The dwarves are for the dwarves, and we will not be taken in by Yahweh and Lucifer alike. But we are not stupid. My race is too young to be bound by tradition. Prepare well for battle, Demiurge. We will meet in the field!"

Enclosed with the note was an ancient, pre-Rapture copy of "The Last Battle" by C. S. Lewis.

"Please don't call me that. It ain't honest," the Omega replied.

"As you choose. Then we shall call you our Ancestor, as honest it would be."

Definitely too many fantasy novels there, but hey, they were trying.

The year in Pacifica began with great apprehension, and a slight shortage of canned goods, generators, and the like. All of a sudden there was a demand for firearms, since who knew if wubbers would work on demons and even if they *did*, it may not have been possible to download updated firmware for waveforms that affected them. The Omega attempted a mixed strategy, subtly encouraging rifle and ammo sales and offering marksmanship classes. People under 100 who passed the class and signed up as Legion of Light auxiliary would have their voting rights restored early.

A month in, nothing had happened; there were a few lethal shootings here and there, but nothing more than a statistical bump and, well, no invasion yet. This encouraged people to take the class two or three times if they failed the first time; the Omegas' auxiliaries would be slightly less skilled on average, but there would be more of them.

Kat had been doing a video series on how to keep canned food palatable, and encouraged people to save the videos to disc rather than downloading them every time.

"The main issue," Kat noted, "is that these people can just about hold up an AK47 and fire it roughly in the enemy's direction, and the only reason that they can do that is that they've been

drilled half to death. Either you give them a metric fuck-ton of meth to keep them functional enough to do construction work, or they'll get in the way more than help. I got two out of the barracks ships for testing and they managed to hook up two car batteries wrong. They just stared as the small one melted. Which wouldn't be too bad if it wasn't for the fact that the larger one was nuclear! I mean, we could have them stack bricks or something, I guess, but... I can do that on autopilot. No, literally on autopilot. Well, with Damien keeping an eye on the frame every once in a while, but still."

Since the Omega couldn't trust the TOL refugees, They decided to use them as cannon fodder. However, there wasn't much time to set up a separate program, so They had them train separately.

To ensure they were at least *marginally* useful, The Omega gave them back their AK's and put them back on drugs.

Either way, the Angels would come soon...

Damien had not appeared much in public, being rather busy with training her fellow drone controllers alongside the Omegas' army. Drills included firefights, rapid evacuation in case of flood, and rapid delivery of first aid and supplies in case of earthquake.

Ithuriel was in a bit of a fix: he had been training with the Omegas' martial artists, but he kept being challenged by people with creative "anti-Angel" biomods, most of which weren't at all effective whether they were good ideas in principle or not. Since people didn't want to refer to him as an Angel and, since he was still the only guy who could fly unaugmented, the shapers took to calling him Air Man. And thus another meme was born.

Damien suggested leveraging the fact that Yahweh implanted in everyone's head the idea that they ought to have built their own house, to put the TOL refugees somewhere away from trouble - the Mojave grassland maybe - to build mud huts. If they did, they could be used as temporary housing if necessary. If they didn't, they would just use trailers and there would be no big loss. Or they would just leave them on the boats.

News sites started talking about a "phony war" and even insinuated that the Temple just said that four angels would show up and that was it. Everything else was a way for the fiscally conservative Bissattini to keep tight control over a territory that historically leaned left.

Ryan Andrews was having a few problems with a radical group of shapers who kept trying to make their sections of the underwater town inhospitable to unaugmented humans; their leader called herself Tethys. She wanted to lure one of the Angels into the underwater town, and take it on in her element.

The Omegas' people were busy setting up the civil defense infrastructure in case there was an earthquake and brought in food and water filters... so They couldn't do much.

The Omega publicly supported Ryan Andrews: if Tethys wanted a wet town, she could go build her own after this mess. Besides, the underwater town may have been needed to house people, so it was best if it stayed accessible to unaugmented people.

Ryan appreciated the political support, but mused that he'd send the Omega a bill if any refugees showed up.

Ithuriel enjoyed the constant dueling and, while all the anti-Angel silver bullets that people had come up with either were really fragile or had obvious loopholes, a few Shaper volunteers joined the ranks of Their martial artists after being warned that this was likely to get them killed or maimed and that they were on probation unless they managed to help kill an Angel.

Unfortunately, Rehema was older than 100 and thus had to trip her metabolic extension controller. She did help train the Omegas' martial artists, but Angels seemed to do much better in direct combat against people who had died once.

And then it happened.

At the start of the third month, radar showed four blips emerging from New Jerusalem; this was confirmed by bells and gongs ringing in the Temple. The blips cloaked almost immediately.

Azrael moved at roughly half the speed of sound, so they would arrive in about a day.

The Omega had drilled the people of Pacifica for months and trusted that they would be able to manage on their own by now. Releasing a drone cloud from Cairo and Nova Roma, with sonars at maximum, to detect invisible slow-moving fliers did, in fact, show four blips moving slightly faster than average Angel speed (didn't they have to pace?) towards the east. One blip was considerably larger, and seemed poised to land in San Francisco. Two would land in Los Angeles. The last one was headed further north, to Portland or so. The Omega lost a few drones due to intraswarm collision and insufficient battery life, but it was less than a tenth percent of the total.

When they finally did, other than sounding the alarm and telling people to get ready in their last day of peace, the Omega sent a drone cloud to try to trace them sonically, since They had their rough trajectory for the beginning of the journey; it was a cone, and they were at the sharp end of it. This would require a substantial amount of processing power to do the Fourier transforms with.

The Omega was expecting a single Angel attack up north, a double Angel attack in LA, and a larger sonar trace in San Francisco. Believers were advised to mark their doors like they did in the Tenth Plague, and otherwise to stay the fuck out of the way. Everyone else was advised to be ready to open their door to stragglers in case of a demonic invasion, whatever that ended up looking like, and to call it in immediately if they saw an Angel. For the occasion, Ithuriel dyed his wings red and black, which looked somewhat less badass than intended.

The Omega had a few electromagnetic cannons in the Mediterranean: a problem was that They

could only track them by sonar, which was slow (the railguns fired at about Mach 4). They could try to have a drone lock onto the sonar traces, but They risked losing a drone and a missed shot could have caused collateral damage, although the sea lanes were mostly clear.

Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart: Jenkins?

Jenkins: Sir!

Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart: Chap with wings, there. Five rounds rapid.

Four of the Omegas' submarines and one of the artillery crawlers took aim where the command helicopter calculated the drones' illumination, and fired their electromagnetic cannons in unison. They were shooting at the largest trace, just because it was easier to track; sonar telemetry was imprecise but wingspan was estimated at fifteen meters.

Four shots missed, one blowing away the targeting drone just from the shockwave. One did something strange. The cameras on the copter showed that the tungsten shell shimmered for a moment and slowed down, changing trajectory slightly.

The commanding officer ordered the copter to get the hell away. Reviewing the recording, one of the Omegas' physicists noted that it was like a ray of light that got refracted...

If the contacts' speed remained constant, the first landing would occur in Portland.

The Omega ordered this to be reviewed and for a trap to be readied with the Radations.

Unlike when the Omega Angel-baited, there was nowhere precise that the supernatural beings had to go; their job was to kill a third of all Pacificans. This made building an arena pretty impossible. Even with Azrael, They were able to put most of the country's firstborns (its target) into a fortress; here They had to keep an eye on the entire territory. The first landing was probably going to be in Portland; then, the two landings in the southern part of the territory, probably LA; then, the larger trace in San Francisco.

The Omegas' martial artists were ready to move at a moment's notice; the streets were empty; Their regular army and TOL levies were on alert (in separate barracks, obviously) for when the demons did show up. The Omega had the Desolators pre-irradiate likely landing sites.

Damien and other heavies were keeping a close eye on the Omegas' drone swarms: the myriad flying wubbers were hovering and perching near the landing sites, to aid the Omegas' Angel-fighters.

Oh, and on top of everything else, Ryan Andrews told the Omega that two more TOL cargo ships had just passed overhead his town. They were also asking for asylum. Stragglers, or something sinister?

The Omega decided to let them come near shore but not to let them out.

Tethys was a little angry for the lack of endorsement, but she couldn't do a whole lot about it; half her guys couldn't even get to land anymore. The Omegas' geneticists wondered if They were at the cusp of another speciation event, like with Urist's people. One of the Omegas' NC researchers had this wild idea that if the Earth had been turned into a fantasy kingdom by applied genetics, Yahweh's power would have been broken, but he was told to shut the frak up.

The Desolator Corps were distributed by Kat mostly in LA and SF; Kat could handle Portland mostly by herself - a heavy MEC frame with thick wubbers and neutron sources was a scary setup indeed. The plan was to cover the Angel in liquid rubber or something equally sticky (the Omega had the formula, obviously, but it sounded gross just going over it) so as to prevent flight and to slow it down, and then to blanket it with radiation.

Damien had armed several drones with glue launchers for this purpose.

Ithuriel answered with a cryptic "Mr. Speaker, we are for the big", put on jeans and kneepads, stayed shirtless (to the delight of some), and checked out his remaining original sword plus the one Urist gave him from the armory.

The allotted time for the landing arrived and... nothing happened. Five minutes passed, ten, twenty. Silence. Only an eerie fog in the harbors, which was normal given the odd climate of this bubble Earth, but a bit thicker than average.

If the Omega knew something was invisible, it actually made it easy to find, in a particular way: They'd just look for something that showed up on sonar but not on camera. This made Angel detection a very computationally cheap operation, although each drone only gave the Omega one "pixel" so the resolution was low.

The Angels flat out weren't there; it wasn't so much that they didn't land and were skulking, they had avoided the city centres altogether. The Omega expected to find cries as people outside the main piazzas started to die, but the data network was mostly silent. People had been asked to run a monitoring app on their smartphone, and otherwise stayed off the net to avoid clogging it. Save for the essential industrial monitoring equipment, the usual OmegaChan shitposters, and the obligatory two dozen idiots streaming porn, most of Pacifica had complied.

Believers were fairly bad at lying, so the Omega canvassed a few phone calls to the interior and monitored reaction times. From this approximate data, They inferred that Angels were not there just yet. Just in case, They sent out drones to scan the eastern suburbs of the coastal city.

Ryan Andrews and Tethys reported that there was no sign of activity out in the underwater town. Perhaps the odd thing was that they were in the same room. Voice print analysis indicated slight intoxication.

Checking the forums showed a long argument about just how many people it took to perform a

canopy launch successfully and similar irrelevance. The one theory that did seem to have some semblance of sense was that the "demons" were zombie MECs; what if something were to happen to them?

Just as the Omegas' parser analyzed that sentence, a patrol at the TOL militia camp up north called in.

"It's here! It's murdering them by the bushels!"

Combat wubbers clanged against square shields all over the territory.

"WE ARE THE SOLDIERS! THE LEGION OF LIGHT!"

PORTLAND

A quick call confirmed that the Angels landed at the TOL camps and, in one case, at one of the ships. They remained invisible, appearing only for a fraction of a second to quickly and efficiently kill Omegas' TOL militia with a precise strike to the solar plexus. One-inch punch on full auto. If they had weapons, the Omega hadn't seen them. The two that were flying together separated to kill faster, but remained in the same general area; the Omega did get a glimpse of what nobody wanted to call an Archangel; it was easily twice as tall as a man, had six wings, and hit hard enough with them to be able to score a kill.

Since the Omega had disabled the metabolic extension controller of the TOL refugees, at least they were staying down after an Angel punch. The Archangel was using its deep, stentorean voice to hit like a heavy wubber, stopping hearts instantly.

The Angels massacred The Other Light in minutes - they were barely adequate as conventional fighters, never mind against an Angel that wasn't weakened at all.

Worse than that was a message from TOL. It was a prerecorded video snippet that played itself four times before being blocked out. In it, a visibly drunk Monday said,

"Sunday! I knew you'd betray me! Enjoy my dead man's handle! Hahahaaha!"

As the Angels cut a swath, the TOL soldiers got back up, movements jerky, screaming like banshees...

Many, but not all, of the TOL refugees also jerked and stopped breathing the moment that Monday's speech played, only to reanimate immediately after. TOLers were stuck on a slave ship with zombies.

The Omega decided on containment.

The Omega got the first, hurried autopsy report from one of the first responders whose MECbulance was doing laps around the camp.

"Attention:

At least some of the TOL refugees have a

secondary extension controller CPU,

and it just caused the implant to trip!"

Guess that answered where the demons were. As it was, Monday's announcement came roughly when some of the Omegas' analysts were expecting a surprise attack by Sunday's army from the Middle East. Guess TOL would be busy with their own problems...

The Angels were effectively surrounded by a smokescreen of zombies with AK47s. They would have to deal with it. While they could still shoot, they wouldn't be able to aim or reload.

The internal lines "rung" all over the place as the Omegas' brigade commanders asked for a plan.

The Omega decided to mix shelling but to keep Their people at a distance with radiological forces ready to wield spray down any angel that got in before getting hit.

The Omegas' Desolators had spent years training with the drone tankettes; each chemical trouper mounted astride a mortar drone and put it into semi-manual mode after loading with the relevant cartridge.

The Angels were focused on killing the refugees; by now, they reanimated almost immediately as the secondary MEC took over. The Omegas' shots seemed to hit nowhere. However, quantity had a quality all its own, and eventually enough non-Newtonian fluid splashed on the Angels that they became visible by the brightly-colored oobleck splotches on them. Moments after, they became fully visible, hoping to scare the Omegas' soldiers with their countenance; the Archangel succeeded for a moment - it was bigger than Azrael and the six wings were definitely new.

By now, the surviving TOL soldiers were shooting at their zombified comrades in a panic; without a commissar to control them, the reanimated damned went for the first moving

object that wasn't one of them, which generally meant their own still-living comrades. The two Angels in LA (one of the Omegas' operators wondered idly if it was the Deity's attempt at a joke) seemed to be able to coordinate well; they looked similar to each other, but not identical.

Now that the Angels were visible and sufficiently gooped to not fly away any time soon, even though they kept running at Olympic sprinter speeds and taking down TOLers, the Omegas' Desolators switched to dirty rounds. They would have to deal with a few cases of cancer in the following years, for sure, but some of the fine radioactive powder dispersed by the grenades stuck to the gooped figures, angels and "demons" alike. This made the supernatural beings nicely visible to scintillators in case they went invisible again, but the radiation wasn't strong enough to make them slow down perceptively.

Kat and the heavy MEC Desolators simply skipped the step of pairing with tankettes, and fired their shoulder-mounted grenade lobbers.

The Angels were displaying some sense of tactic, keeping the "demons" between themselves and the Desolators.

But now they were visible... Heavy artillery, time to bring down the thunder!

"Polyphema Decuria, full volley!"

The visors on the Omegas' legionaries' helmets automatically went opaque in time with the heavy HE shells hitting the ground; for a moment between the flash, dust, sound and fury, it looked like the Angels had been blown to bits.

Instead, they stood, barely affected in the center of a range of craters strewn with zombie bodies.

The Archangel sort of shrugged, took off on its six wings at combat helicopter speed, and disappeared again; the lesser beings seemed stunned by the sheer sensory overload of being in the middle of an artillery strike, even though it didn't hurt them, and were immediately re-targeted by glue rounds.

The rank-and-file legionaries had relatively little to do other than taking out the survivors. In Portland, the Angels were alone, in the open field.

Oh.

Why was Kat taunting the Angel?

She couldn't take it on herself. It was swinging around some sort of falchion, likewise made of iron-56 by the look of it. She was circling around it, taunting it and generally getting in the way.

The Omega asked her *what the fuck she was doing*.

Kat expertly danced around the Angel, keeping her neutron emitter squarely trained at it and backing off from its falchion just in time; the recent heavy frames incorporating artificial muscle were a little less strong, but considerably more agile, and Kat was wearing one today.

"Omega, I can take this guy! I don't know why, I just know that I can! Let me!"

The Omega warned her that it was a mind trick of some sort and that she should stick to the proven strategy.

Kat shook her head, apologized, and got behind Their martial arts squad as she kept targeting this particular Angel with her neutron emitter. Hastati and martial artists kept jabbing at the angel in Portland, while the rest of the Legion mopped up the "zombies".

Ryan Andrews and Tethys, who seemed to have made up (actually, it sounded like they were making out) with the threat of a common enemy, reported that some "zombies" had drifted to the underwater town and were easily dispatched.

The Portland Angel looked vaguely douchier than the others. The Omega decided to try something fancy, like a capture, to wear it down and destroy it. One of Their martial artists jumped on the Angel's back trying for a neck break.

A silenced drone was activated as soon as Kat figured that the target was weak enough; it flew true, latched onto the Angel's face, and while the Angel flailed about after failing to trumpet-blast it away, someone attempted to break its neck.

The Angel capture was executed with a combination of luck and cleverness; the martial artist who went for a neck twist on the Angel succeeded, the supernatural being dropped on the floor, paralyzed from the neck down, and a metabolic extension controller was slapped on the side of its face. The neurotendrils, designed to be installed from the back of the neck or the roof of the mouth, destroyed most of the right hemisphere of the Angel's brain.

This would have left the Omega with a vegetable if it wasn't for the fact that Angel neurons grew back. The Angel was quickly strapped to an ambulance stretcher (no point in taking chances), the dead and wounded were collected, and the Legion left to

eliminate the remaining zombies. Kat explained to everybody that they had been subjected to about as much ionizing radiation as the people who did the Chernobyl cleanup, and that they should have been checked for cancer twice a year until, well, the end of the world at least. The joke didn't go very well, but the point was well taken.

During the fight, the Omega was busy choreographing the martial artists' positioning for maximum effectiveness and to effect minimum damage to Their forces.

On the debt side, the Angel's falchion had been sundered, making it a fairly useless piece of iron, albeit with interesting radiological properties. However, on the plus side, the Omega now had definite proof that an expert legionary wielding a dwarven sword could block an angelic one, albeit at the cost of a dislocated shoulder.

The mood was celebratory. Nobody died in Portland and before long there was a mob gathering around the hospital wanting to give a bit of torches-and-pitchforks therapy to the captured Angel. A few believers even wrote Mr. Bissattini asking that the Angel be extradited to Greater Jerusalem!

The Omega sent an R&D team in to perform autopsies on the zombies to find a way to control them.

The safest area to perform the operation was Portland, so a couple of extra ambulances showed up at the site, summarily locked up the few TOL survivors, and performed a gory harvest on the battlefield. Anything alive enough to move just a few muscles was picked up. Some of these were the Omegas' researchers, some were from Tree Of Life. Fran didn't show up this time. The external contractors seemed quite callous even compared to the personnel They handpicked for this.

"We'll have some results in a week or so."

Los Angeles

In LA, one of the Angels -- these two were both wielding what looked like gladii -- were facing the Legion, uttering an ancient malediction and getting a lot of rude responses in return, while the other was grabbing fallen zombies by the head. A few responded and got back up; most were far too mangled.

The Omega sent in Desolators, with neutron guns and legionaries as human shields.

A maniple of legionaries ran in front of each Desolator; the Omegas' soldiers knew full well what a neutron source would do to unshielded humans and, even though they had trained for it, they took the risk. Taunting and occasionally firing their wubbers, they

danced around the three Angels.

While the Desolators and their human shields did their job and the Omegas' triarii picked off any remaining zombies with their semiautomatic rifles, the fucusifers (drone-bearers) advanced within the Legion's ranks and released the small silencer drones. The things found no target around the Archangel, since it was hidden, but managed to lock onto the lesser supernatural beings, and did the only thing they could- *go for the face*.

The two angels were proving harder to handle; they had been duly gooped and were being radiated, but they were good at covering each other: one was keeping the Omegas' martial artists at bay while the other was, for lack of a better word, reanimating the fallen (who were still intact enough to have a brain stem) by grabbing them by the skull, holding them up, and seeing if they could manage to stand; a few did.

It seemed as though one of the Angels was running interference for the other; this tactic wasn't effective because every time a TOL MEC or even one of the few men the Omega lost so far was reanimated, a bullet to the head took care of it. The Omega decided to focus on the one that was defending the "healer".

The Omega directed Their martial artists to not turn this into a game of keepaway, and focused on the defending Angel; the apply-neutrons-and-tire-it strategy was working, although it was taking longer than it would in an arena and many of Their people would probably need chemo later. The "healer" Angel, whoever it was, took advantage of this breather to "raise" as many TOL MECs as possible. The legionaries shot them one by one, often dropping them by the first or second shot.

The Omega directed Their Desolators to goop the other Angel while it was busy trying to raise the dead, or at least the terminally injured; it wouldn't fly away any time soon. They lost a couple of guys to wing swipes, but so it went. It did come off eventually...

The situation was a little worse. Now that there were no more "zombies" to "raise" (the Omega would have to do autopsies to see whether there was a natural or known supernatural explanation) the two Angels were trying to abandon the scene, forcing the Desolators to keep them gooped. The trouble was that goop was finite.

The Omegas' martial artists focused on the "healer" Angel; this proved to be a bad move, since the other one was able to slash through the backs of a number of specialists before a Triarius with a dwarven sword sliced the angelic weapon in two.

The Angel's few seconds of utter shock at this proved to be its undoing, as one of the Omegas' martial artists delivered a perfect one-inch punch after which the Angel was

dogpiled and was essentially stomped to death. This time, it spontaneously combusted shortly after.

The "escorting" Angel managed to get away; the Omegas' soldiers were pretty sure that its weapon was also sundered, but it kept a hold of it.

Today, two of the Omegas' soldiers earned the very exclusive title of Predator, which, just for fanciness' sake, seemed to have been given the Latin pronunciation.

Now, half of the Angels were gone; the Omegas' legionaries didn't have much to do other than attend a shooting gallery, and They had lost a few martial artists and a couple of Desolators. However, given that the fight happened in the open field, it was not at all bad. A problem was that since the Angels weren't weakened previously, most of the Omegas' melee specialists were going to be out of action for a week or more, necessitating the quick discernment of a second group of melee specialists amongst Their Legion and Their volunteers, which would still take a couple of days.

Combat drugs were an excellent short-term solution if it was a matter of keeping a soldier alive... less so if the Omega was trying to play the thousand-year game and keep the species alive. The Angel alert was updated indicating that there were two of the supernatural beings at large, and the death toll on Their side was small enough that They could send Their wounded to civilian hospitals to be treated like They would with a minor disaster.

People were scared. Even after the fight was over, most remained indoors as the Angel alert remained in effect. Internet traffic indicated that a handful of citizens converted after being caught by the alert outside, running inside the first house they found, and basically were love-bombed when they entered the believing household... but it was literally less than ten cases.

The martial artists who remained hale were given a hearty meal, time for a nap, and were asked to organize a tournament for any Legionaries who wanted to try to transition over to the melee corps, or just to learn the basics of Angel fighting. Given how little action the individual legionary had seen other than shooting a few zombies, the Omega had a surplus of volunteers.

The surveillance videos of the Angel fights (which by necessity showed the zombies very clearly) were broadcast to all in the territory unedited.

Ryan Andrews and Tethys seemed to have personally made peace (or maybe just wanted to bed a mermaid) but their politics remained separated as their public

statements (right after the attack) again differed.

Initial polls, done during the fight but before an eventual release of the video of it, indicated that people were scared and nervous, but willing to sacrifice creature comforts if necessary.

A couple of email messages to the right people made sure that within minutes, the raw video that the Omega had made available were remixed with all manner of snarky messages- some pro-Legion, some pro-shaper, some simply pro-humanity, a good chunk of which incorporated the Omegas' message, clips from Star Trek V, that one frame of Cameron Williams looking like some alien conspiracy nut, and the like.

The official statement was businesslike:

"Angelic terrorists have attempted to attack Legion of Light barracks outside Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Portland. One terrorist has been eliminated, one is in custody, two are still at large and should be considered extremely dangerous."

The Omega followed with noting that although no legionaries were lost, a number of volunteers (which included Their martial artists lost in LA, and, depending on interpretation, the TOL conscripts who got zombified) tragically lost their lives.

In LA, the search for capable legionary melee combatant snowballed a little: in literally less than twelve hours, construction crews showed up with massive concrete printers and turned the Inglewood stadium into a reasonable reproduction of the Colosseum, columns and arches and all. This was about sparring matches rather than gladiatorial combat, but at least for the week, it seemed that this particular suburb declared itself a colony of Nova Roma. People showed up to spectate. It was getting a little out of hand, especially considering that it had been a few hours so the Archangel and the other Angel could be anywhere in the territory.

Believing media had a muted reaction to all this; some simply didn't believe that the Angel ran away, some proclaimed that *pride goeth before a fall*, and some noted that it was possible that counting all the TOL deaths the Angels' mission accomplished, all was well (It hadn't. A few thousand died, not millions.)

San Francisco

In San Francisco, the battle happened a bit further south, towards Half Moon Bay. The

Archangel was nowhere to be seen.

Troops were ordered into defensive stance with wubbers up. It *would* swoop in again.

Ithuriel took off from the Legion's shieldwall and glided in front of it. Then, unexpectedly, he broke out his full Angel voice in a cock-a-doodle-doo straight out of Peter Pan.

"Name yourself, princeling of Heaven! I am Ithuriel, the strong, and I challenge you to honorable combat!"

The only reaction was a good chunk of the remaining zombies focusing on Ithuriel; the triarii behind him put down their shields, took aim from behind it, and started picking them off with shots to the head or to the knees.

"Uh, I think it's gone. Where, though?"

The swarm took off from their platform; the legionaries fired their wubbers in the air while the drones listened to the echoes. By the looks of it, the Archangel was gone.

At the Omegas' orders, the Legion in the Bay Area spread out, thermovisors and sonars at the ready; photos of the Archangel were released and sent to everyone's smartphone.

With Ithuriel, the Omega got lucky - he was in a situation whereby he still had a chance to do his job, but could barely move.

The Ithuriel They now had looking for the Archangel technically wasn't even the same person. Ithuriel's original soul was presumably in Hell and the Omega had to find someone to raise the Angel from a baby in an adult's body to his more or less adult, if hopelessly chivalric, current self.

They might have gotten lucky again, of course, but it would take a few years to get another usable agent.

All else aside, Angel blood had an interesting effect on Rehema, the Omega recalled.

All passive scans, including the citizen reporting system, indicated that the Archangel flew straight up and was now nowhere in the Omegas' sensor range. What was it doing?

Checking on the canopy was, annoyingly enough, a problem: the Omegas' Sky Eyes were optimized for looking down on the surface and didn't carry sonars. Their orbital assets were in low orbit and went too fast to get a good picture and an ice-hovercraft would take hours to get there.

The Omega decided to integrate existing sensor data, sparse as it was, rather than risk losing resources to quickly launch a capsule.

The Omegas' systems recorded a rapid audio burst coming from the Angel's throat, but post-fact analysis showed that the audio was too garbled to make much of it.

However, it would appear that a milestone had been reached: not counting a couple of people who, like the Angel, got their neck snapped (and had been revived, but with their controller tripped - they'd have to remain paralyzed for a few months) this was the first Angel fight with zero casualties to report.

As far as the Omegas' sensor network could tell, the Archangel was not on the canopy either. Was it hiding? Was it plotting? That would be a break from form, to be sure...

There was apprehension; nobody knew what happened to the Archangel, after all, and a sensor scan provided no results. As time passed and the Omega had to get drones to land and swap batteries, Ithuriel was still up there, issuing his challenge to no response.

The Omega directed the Pacifican Coast Guard to basically transform the San Francisco Bay into a quarantine area; Alcatraz resumed its originary function as a quarantine colony, even though the iconic prison was long gone. Their medical personnel started disabling TOL implants, which necessitated the occasional headshot for the one that tripped instead.

Ithuriel was summarily told to stand down and rest, and had to "evade" a couple of fangirls before going horizontal in a motel for twelve hours. He agreed with Kat; there was some unexplained feeling of being able to take on one of the Angels by himself.

"I'd have expected them to mess with our heads by despair, not by hope" Kat commented.

POST WAR RECOVERY

After the first Angel attack, Pacifica looked... well, sunny. It was always sunny in the Millennial Kingdom, but the mood was good and people were mostly back to business. Overall it looked like a friendly military occupation, like France in 1945: Legion vehicles patrolled the streets, legionaries in uniform were a common sight. The Omega got the occasional instance of stolen valor (usually from rank-and-file hastati who claimed they got into the actual Angel fight rather than picking off the undead), and there were only a few instances of people protesting TOL internment. The work to disable their controllers continued, although some casualties happened.

A delegation of believers formally asked that the captive Angel, whose name the Omega still didn't have (and wouldn't for a while: its brain was still in the process of rebuilding itself), to be repatriated to Greater Jerusalem.

The pithy comment about Pacifica's medical technology made the evening news and sent a lot of positive press the Omegas' way; Ely LeVey had to suspend call-ins on her show after people decided to keep asking her why God wouldn't heal amputees anymore (the last occurrence was just before the Glorious Appearing), noting that by now, reconstruction and cybernetics meant that the Omega and Tree Of Life did. As it was, the petitioners had to go home empty-handed.

The search for the Angels continued, but in vain; what did emerge, always in small groups, were more "zombies" - people, not only TOL anymore, whose metabolic extension controller tripped again irregularly and were left in a frenzied state. This was a problem. If the TOL refugees were Romero zombies, in that they couldn't move particularly quickly, these were some of the Omegas' own people. There seemed to be no common denominator with the victims, other than *"is older than 100 or otherwise had experienced death"* and *"was in an isolated place"*.

The afflicted walked or ran towards anybody that they perceived as threatening, and attacked them until victory or, more usually, death. Sometimes, they carried blunt instruments; They still got the occasional "slow zombie" with a TOL issued weapon. They seemed to come from the Mexican TOL base.

It wasn't a zombie apocalypse, but it was forcing people to always carry a loaded weapon, which had other issues - people shooting themselves in the nuts by accident, brawls escalating lethally, and general worry by people who didn't carry.

A regulation was passed indicating that people wishing to buy ammo would have to pass a range and safety test. There were a few episodes of hoarding and a few cries of violating Pacifica's constitutional charter, but the wartime spirit in the people was fresh, so there weren't that many complaints. What worried some of the Omegas' sysadmins and gladdened others was that a small-arms industry had popped up pretty much overnight, to the point that They had seen some orders to Pacific Northwest gun shops from TOL officers.

In addition, the Omega began tracking people who went out with GPS to find out where the majority of them were going... with permission, of course.

Analysis indicated that whoever was doing this was using a very good random number generator. GPS tracking, which was easily obtained, showed that the disappearances happened in isolated incidents (no coupled incidents, meaning that only one Angel was doing this, or that the two Angels were working together).

People began to notice, and stuck closer to the cities or traveled in small groups; one Napa Valley wine tour operator specifically requested Legion escorts for their bus.

Throwing a bucket of water at Their forces didn't work, but this was a slow drip...

Ryan and Tethys were benefiting from the worry, as more people decided that it was better where it was wetter: the extra population for the underwater town came in slow enough, and with enough stuff with them, that for them this was an opportunity to expand rather than a refugee crisis.

The Omegas' search continued, with little luck so far. They decided to comb the grasslands. The Legion wouldn't be much good against Angels, but they were many and had wubbers, sonars, and fuciferi.

The other side of this was, of course, that believers were also arming themselves. Redneck jokes generally stopped when it became statistically apparent that believers were, on average, slightly better shots.

Pacifica had a fairly free-range culture: people roamed, and that was OK. The Omega got an approximate count of people who were out of fast data range, and noticed that there was a constant trickle of people disappearing - dozens, not hundreds - that was GREATER than those who came back as aggressive runners.

The Omega decided to use the fact that believers had personal electronics to see if any were cooperating with Angels, which would require violating their privacy.

An unobtrusive firmware update and more disappearances later, the Omega found that, in one case out of the four observed, the last person a "fast zombie" had contact with was a farm run by believers.

Legionaries mounted up and drove in great, spread-out patrols all up and down the territory. The Omega lost a few tankettes to wear and tear, a couple of isolated scouts to zombies, and one legionary ended up being among the disappeared; unfortunately, They couldn't track him.

Wait.

He had a cellphone implant.

They could track him! This was in the interior and the implant was small and had no GPS so only coarse tracking by cell was available - location was available within about 3km precision.

The Omega listened in.

"Superior Phanuel, beg your pardon, I do not understand why we tarry."

"We will gather the demons away from their soldiers, and then strike decisively at the serpent's head while they bite at the body."

"But our mission-

"-is to bring hope to the saved and repentance to the lost. These creatures are already writhing in the pit; they are only useful as brute bodies, beyond redemption."

"I obey. What is my task?"

"This one is special. Take it to our wards. Ensure that he becomes their helpmeet. Ensure that he is found. Let there once more be war between the sons of Adam."

"The wards will die. Or worse."

"An early reward."

"What of the anathema?"

"Another lie from the Opposer. The anathema is a story. No mortal man can recreate the torments of Hell, much less top them. Forget it henceforth!"

"What, superior?"

"Good. This one is special. Take it to our wards. Ensure that he becomes their helpmeet. Ensure that he is found. Let there once more be war between the sons of Adam."

"I obey."

The trace, in what was roughly California's Central Valley, seemed to change direction and backtrack to a cell that it was connected to earlier, instead of continuing to head east. It went silent soon after.

The two angels recently (a few minutes ago: low-res tracking out in the sticks) parted ways; they were heading east, then the Omegas' soldier stopped and started doubling back west-northwest.

The Omegas' STD's could pierce the canopy and drop in the general area in 5 minutes.

Their Legion was about 30~60 minutes away depending on how many people They showed up with. There were some people qualified to fight an Angel, but not many.

Their specialized martial artists were at least 2 hours away.

Tracking continued until the implant went into powersave. They didn't have a lot of battery life and generally got recharged inductively, which this particular legionary forgot to do. However, the Omega had only just now lost tracking; presumably, the targets were walking and the lesser Angel had been given clear (if perplexing) instructions that it was unlikely to deviate from.

Year: 988

Research programs in progress: MEC (X/10), Space (X/10), Avatar (X/10), Sonics (X/10), Anti-Angel (X/10)

The current situation was as follows: the Omega had recently retaken Pacifica by free and more-or-less-fair elections. The Temple's reaction was to invoke the Sixth Trumpet Judgement upon Them. Four angels and an army of demons were sent to kill a third of the men in the land.

The "demons" so far turned out to be former The Other Light soldiers, turned rabid pseudo-undead; they fell quickly before the Omegas' Legion.

Three Angels and an Archangel appeared to lead them; the Omega had taken out two of the former.

Now, the Omega was tracking the surviving Divine messengers as they apparently built a yet stronger army, in the interior of the Pacifican grassland.

The legionaries of ancient Rome would have built roads and forts on the fly; the Omegas' weren't any less industrious, and They managed to improvise a sort of command vehicle on the fly - one of the APCs would carry a bust of a TOL commissar, painted well enough to fool someone at a distance, and a packet radio with the frequency and ID requested from the Omegas' tech center.

Martial artists were loaded onto helicopters and small planes and flown into the Central Valley.

Above the canopy, the Omegas' sudden transport division breached through the ice layer with cracking grenades.

Even with the Legion on the move, the Omegas' fuciferi prepared the drones to form a short-lived canopy as soon as there was any indication of Angelic presence.

And when they converged to the indicated spot, they found... nothing.

Man-tall golden corn as far as the eye could see, and given how there were no hills, it was pretty far. There was no trace of the fallen legionary, either.

Choppers landed and the Legion used an artillery vehicle to ride up and down the corn field a couple times to let the planes land. Under the unyielding sun, the maneuver had been executed to near perfection. STD's were ready to drop from the edge of space and all other forces were in a rough circle around a farmhouse.

From the air, it looked like an almost perfectly choreographed ballet of tanks, drones, men and aircraft, and the Omega had no doubt that a recut would make it into a recruitment video.

"Hey! That was half of the south field! What's going on here? Y'all better bring out the man in charge!"

The farmer was old, clearly a believer, and couldn't fit more into the crusty redneck stereotype if he tried; in the farmhouse and barn the Omega could see a numerous family. Reflected signal survey indicated that a couple of them had a smartphone, and there was an ancient cathode-ray tube television in the home - these people seemed to have taken the pastoralization directive mostly to earth; the entire farmhouse, including ancient but robust mechanical equipment, could have come out of the 1950s.

The Legion of Light didn't exactly have a public relation expert position, so the Omega reviewed the composition of the forces that reached the farm and selected a relatively friendly-looking centurion to be spokesman.

"William Byers, we have reason to believe that members of your family may have been taken hostage by terrorists. Is everything well in your dwelling?"

At the same time, the centurion held up an armored tablet with a paint program open, on which had been written:

IF TERRORISTS INSIDE, SAY EVERYTHING IS PEACHY KEEN, USING EXACT WORDS.

The farmer - who despite the balding head and white beard could probably go toe to toe with the centurion for a few rounds - took a second to read the message, and nodded slowly.

"Listen you, soldier boy. I don't care if you come to my farm with half your army, or all of it by the look of things. You can't do a thing to me or mine, and we both know it! Now git, afore I make you git!" He pointed westward. "Go back to whatever cesspit full of fish-women you came from!"

A fucifer released a few silencer drones, and the small swarm positioned itself above the farm, greatly improving the Omegas' view of it. One drone flew into a barn window to see that a few people were barricaded in there; a couple had guns. It looked like these people were family.

Another drone shattered a glass window in the farmhouse and got in. A Glorified woman was tending to a wounded man in one of the beds. Downstairs, a feast with steaming piles of vegetables drenched in butter was being prepared.

"Sorry, sir. I don't see how you and a dozen people with rifles could possibly do any serious harm to two thousand men with drones and tanks. Rest assured that you will be compensated for any damage, at the - at twice the market rate."

"I don't have to do nothing. If you so much as touch me, God will strike you down with lightning, and if you so much as touch my wife or my little ones, you will wish God had done that!"

The Omega ordered a stratigraphic survey to determine whether the home had a basement and to gather further information about the wounded man.

The survey showed that the area had no caves of significant size. There was likely to be a cellar, though. The next farm was eight kilometers away.

"I understand. You have the physical necessity to remain silent."

"Hah! Right to remain silent, my beh-"

The drones silenced the farmer, who clearly panicked at this; he gasped for air, then realized that he could breathe just fine. Two triarii got behind the man and grabbed his arms; he was strong enough that they had to struggle to hold him.

"Nod if you have seen an Angel in the last few hours. Or else."

The farmer threw his head back theatrically, and headbanged it forward, delivering a loogie of perfect consistency on the centurion's tablet.

"Very well. I'll take that as a yes. Let go of this man." The legionaries obeyed and the centurion let his shield fall on the ground. "You spat on it, old man, now you shine it. Give him a rag."

The farmer was probably crying persecution, but not even he could hear himself; above his head, the drone was discreetly replaced by an identical model as its batteries started to falter. The old man got on his knees, crossed himself, said a brief prayer thanking the Lord for blessed hope and prayed for the modern Romans to repent. Then he started shining the centurion's shield. For spitting on a centurion, he probably got off lighter than anyone in the last four thousand years.

Another legionary went up to the house and told all the occupants that if they stepped out they wouldn't be harmed; she got the same derision that the centurion got and answered in the same

way. Silencing a group of people was harder, so there were shouted whispers of a gaggle of men and women encouraging each other until enough drones got in the barn and silenced them.

"We are trying our best to not harm you, if you cooperate, all will be well, if you do not, not."

Eventually, the farmer's family all got out; there was fifteen of them, of varying ages, but all younger than Mr. Byers. None were Glorified.

The Omegas' legionaries started ripping corn leaves and stems to make torches.

"All of you will answer me truthfully now. Have you seen an Angel in the last six hours?"

The youngest kid piped up.

"Yes and he's going to come back and kick your butt!"

The woman refused to come down and said so in the stentorian voice of a Glorified.

"I've got a wounded man here, and I'm not leaving him in the hands of you quacks! He needs calm, healing and prayer."

"Ma'am, we have an ambulance with us and we are prepared to use it as we are our artillery platform."

The still-silenced farmer pointed at the torches being lit and made a gesture towards the house.

"No, Mr. Byers. We have not marched this way to invent combustible corn that burns your house down. We are looking for an Angel. Just tell us where it is."

The farmer shook his head.

"Why not?"

The drones, working in concert, managed to open the cellar hatch and dive in. The drone that went in transmitted darkness for a moment, and then went dead all of a sudden. The barn shook a little.

"Choppers up! Sonar dome! NOW!"

The helicopter operators weren't part of the Legion, and took a bit to get back into the air; by the time they did, the drones already formed a dome. The Angel, thinking itself invisible, flew out of the barn and was about to swoop on the Omegas' legionaries where a group of hastati had gathered.

A few of the drones tried to fly into the Angel; it seemed to shimmer through them. However, this made for an excellent target for the glueball launchers; after seeing that its position was

known, the Angel reappeared. It looked like the Omega got the small one.

The farmer's family was looking at the apparition and they flat out cheered, even while still silenced. The Glorified woman peeked out of the window, and shouted,

"Ahadiel! Defend my little ones!"

The Angel seemed conflicted for a moment, and stopped its dive. Then, it seemed to stand tall on the thin air.

"WAYWARD SONS OF ADAM! STOP! NOBODY DIES TODAY! THE CHOSEN OF THE LORD SO COMMANDS."

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With mechanical precision and without a comment, one of the Omegas' tankettes shot a three-round burst into the face of one of the farmer's oldest children, probably five or six hundred years old given his middle aged appearance.

The Glorified woman's cry was loud enough to shatter walls and flickered out the Omegas' sonar picture for a moment.

"STEVEN! NO!"

Lightning bolt from the canopy struck the tankette, leaving a rather pretty mark on the red-and-gold paint job. The drone shifted aim a little.

As a man, the farmer's male relatives charged, and so did the Angel. The women ran into the farmhouse.

It took a life, but now the Angel landed and could be fought against.

As drilled, the Omegas' legionaries formed a shieldwall around the Angel, and let the martial artists in. This time, the Angel had no neutron weakening - it easily pushed off the first attacker

with a backhand slap.

A triarius with a dwarven axe challenged the Angel loudly, but was skewered faster with the iron sword than an Olympian fencer might hit with a foil.

The Omega only got a couple Desolators on the ground, though. This would be a tough fight.

A couple of the believers went back to the barn to grab their rifles and, by the time they came back with them, the legionaries dealing with that had formed a shieldwall. The believers with no weapons charged, and were hit by a couple dozen wubbers' pressure waves and were thrown back as if by an invisible fist. They got back up and staggered, and were hit again.

This gave time to the armed believers to start shooting from the barn's upper window; the Omegas' legionaries' heads were well protected, but these were high caliber rifles, and the Omega suffered a few casualties while the shieldwall was quickly turned into a testudo.

The centurion handling the believers called for the barn to fall; the infantry kept the shooters busy by snaps, crackles and pops on the barn window and occasionally buffeted the would-be chargers off. In the meantime, wubber- and ram-equipped tankettes got on the three other sides of the barn itself and, without a signal, collapsed the broad sides of the barn on themselves, which forced the rest to fall inward. A horrible symphony of brown notes and stunners floored the believers, and by the time the centurion ordered charge and detain, they were rolling on the floor in pain.

Maybe two dozen meters away, the Angel was holding its own remarkably well; it was unhurt and fresh, and found it easy to swat away silencer drones and deliver quick, powerful strikes with its plasma-sheathed swords. Extending a wing to slap a martial artist away, it reached to cleanly slice off the legs of a legionary who was crawling away clutching a wound.

The Omega had lost a few legionaries, and even some martial artists. However, They did have hostages. The tankettes positioned themselves around the house to quickly collapse it on top of the women. It was time to get some attention. The STDs dropped at terminal velocity; the Omega requested a few Desolators.

"Ahadiel, stop!" Angels didn't seem able to hear the Omega, so They had one of the centurions read from the helmet display.

"She commanded none would die. You have failed already! We have hostages - stand down or more will die."

That didn't seem to stop the Angel. However, the farmers - who had been duly handcuffed, and some of whom had regained consciousness - answered just as loudly. They asserted that they were ready to be martyrs.

Except the two smallest kids, they just cried. They were maybe ten and twelve, fifteen at most.

One of the older men kicked one in the shin; the Omega heard the farmer tell them to give their lives to Jesus, *right now*. The oldest started to pray, haltingly. The youngest just began crying and it was loud enough that it could be heard over the wubbers for a moment. The Angel didn't seem to care, and if anything, this distracted the Omegas' soldiers more than it.

One of the women ran out and hugged the youngest kids; she was maybe Rehema's age. She also encouraged him to pray. Hmm, looked like the Omega did have hostages after all...

The Omega had no idea if a silencer could stop a sincere prayer for salvation, but the possibility was certainly scaring the farmers; they pantomimed screaming their implorations.

In the meantime, the Angel was surrounded by tankettes as the legionaries filtered out, carrying wounded comrades to the medics; it lunged out at a tankette, slicing off its ram with its sword. The Omega would rather lose drones than soldiers of course, so the tankette was replaced. Every time the Angel managed to damage one, another replaced it; the Omega didn't have infinite drones, but a single Angel would take hours to go through them. Even so, it didn't seem to get demoralized. The women, save for the one that got out, were still in the house; the Omega knew that Angels could appear to rescue the Glorified, though.

The women were hiding in the innermost room in the house, a sensible precaution when there was gunfire outside; they were softly singing a hymn around the youngest. They were silenced and knocked out quickly.

The Glorified woman was on the upper floor; when the legionaries kicked down the door of the small guest room, she ordered them to leave. In the bed was the Omegas' "zombified" legionary.

"He's one of ours!"

"No! He is one of ours now!"

"Ma'am, don't get in the way, we only give one warning. GET A STRETCHER!"

There was no room, so the zombified legionary had to be airlifted by drones out of the window.

The Omega got the critically wounded legionary using a seldom-practiced maneuver... but it worked out, by and large.

What was odd was Ahadiel's reaction; it stopped precision fencing against the Omegas' drones, and practically bum-rushed the ersatz air stretcher, paying no attention even when a particularly enterprising martial artist literally grabbed it by the ankle to prevent it from just flying off. The Angel flailed, trying to get to the wounded legionary...

And that's when the winged hussars arrived. Two drop pods popped their hatches about half a kilometer away, and Desolators with parasails came down.

The wounded legionary was alive... well, there was a heartbeat, at least. The Omegas' drones swarmed the Angel, and while it tried to get them off its face with some success, the Omega had more drones than it had limbs to flail. The Desolators landed and made with the neutron shower.

Ahadiel was flailing a lot, but was not quite immobile. There was a steady-ish stream of drones latching on, being swatted away, and getting back to it; it was as if the Angel was being tormented by flies.

The farmers looked on as the Omegas' martial artist disengaged and the Desolators, looking like spacemen from a Republic serial in their radiation suits, activated the neutron sources and started bathing the Angel in deadly particles. The Omega could actually see the grass around it shrivel.

(If you added a black and white filter and this could be a lost Twilight Zone episode)

Before long, the Angel's thrashing slowed down to human levels.

All the farmers had been collected and accounted for - one dead, fifteen captured, including one Glorified; it proved impossible to handcuff the old farmer's unnaturally young looking wife, so instead she was silenced, swarmed, and tied up with rope.

In the meantime, the zombified legionary was secure.

A medic was brought over immediately; the Angel managed to push off the finisher attempt, but was now weak enough that he could be engaged, having dropped its sword during its mad lunge at the stretcher. The Desolators backed off and the Omegas' martial artists basically skipped to the "dogpile" stage, since the fight was happening on the farmhouse's porch and there wasn't much room.

While Ahadiel had to defend itself from a number of solid punches and kicks, the medic checked the legionary's condition and connected a debugger to his controller, piercing pale but living skin.

"Controller keeps tripping. This guy's died and come back thirty times already. Blood loss and head trauma, but..."

(A quick check with EEG and EKG, and a drop of blood spilled on a portable spectroscope later)

"...there's nothing wrong with 'im! He's just... EKG shows something similar to a Hell loop, but the controller already excised those pathways. Whatever it is, he's feeling it over and over again. Need a MRI to tell you more."

The Omega started vectoring the supplies needed for a field hospital to this location even before Ahadiel was subdued.

Morphine was shorthand for a complex chemical cocktail that would send to happy land even someone who was being prepared for heavy MEC procedure, while minimizing the risks of addiction or cardiac arrest; there was some morphine in there, but the actual stuff had been refined over years of literally yanking people out of Hell itself, if only for as long as their brain held out.

The Omegas' medic injected the stuff and reported that the weird brain loop was gone; the anesthetic had done its job inducing a coma.

Ahadiel shrieked in a rapidly ascending tone and, for no apparent reason and giving a heck of a singe to one of the Omegas' pankration experts, burst into flame. The farmers fell on their knees and crossed themselves; to an outside observer it looked like the wrestler squeezed the Angel too hard and popped it like a balloon.

Everyone looked on in consternation for a few moments, except for the Desolator who retrieved Ahadiel's falchion and put it in a secure containment package; Angelic weapons had found a counter, but there would probably be a use for it.

The butcher's bill was a little more severe this time, mostly because the Omegas' legionaries got into a fight with an unirradiated Angel. Even so, three down, one to go.

The farmer and his Glorified wife looked on at their destroyed barn, battered farm, and shattered worldview and couldn't do much but stare blankly...

The Omega decided to have a legionnaire approach the family and give them a note that said:

"You are going to answer our questions now or you will experience a lot of pain. If you don't answer in 30 minutes, we will cut off your genitals."

1. Where is the archangel?

2. Where is the horde?

3. What did they tell you to do?"

Interrogating these people didn't get the Omega far; each and every one said that they would rather die than so much as talk to Them - the Omegas' men, money and gear were *tainted*.

However, body language analysis made it obvious that they had indeed seen the Archangel, so the Omega got that going. Mentions of a horde was correlated with confusion. Mentions of orders showed that they did indeed get some orders, and were defying the Omega.

"Leave. Return to your rot. Let us bury our dead and thank the Lord that he is in Heaven."

"Ma'am, all you had to do was cooperate. Nobody needed to die today. Your son is gone, your

Angel is gone, and in a few years your God will be gone. You'll have to live with it."

Other than the Glorified, these people were clearly in genuine grief. The farmer's wife looked like she wanted to cry, one of the Omegas' psychologists suggested.

"You lie! An Angel of the Lord smote many of your men, and disappeared to strike again if you do not repent!"

"If that's how you want to see it, ma'am. Here. Have your Angel's ashes, it's mostly carbon and hydrogen. We'll let you bury your dead, we'll let you pray, but after that, you're coming with us.

The centurion didn't have to sound arrogant; he knew that he had won.

The Omega took samples, cleaned up the area and offered the boy a chance to get away from the crazy zealots. The boy, understandably, hid behind his father.

The Omega proceeded with enhanced interrogation techniques, even though all they offered was defiance.

The legionaries that came here from Nova Roma had assimilated that culture, and obeyed stoically; but those that the Omega had recruited in Pacifica were uneasy, and voiced it.

"Torture will only get them to say what they think we want them to say!"

A few, well, sympathised with the very visceral notion of castration. Their commanding officers reminded them that it was not the sixties anymore. A willie could be regrown in a year or so.

The dissension in the Legion's rank was quelled, but duly recorded - the Omega knew exactly who complained.

"If I had ever wondered where the demons would come from, now I know. The uniforms fit you well." the Glorified woman commented icily, no sound leaving her lips.

Improvising a cattle prod wasn't a particularly difficult job for the Omegas' combat engineers, and for half an hour, the prisoners were asked the same questions. Eventually, their body language stopped giving away hints - they had met the Archangel, they had no idea about any horde, and they were given instructions - and simply showed reactions and fear of pain. It had been thirty minutes, so, who got the snip?

"We are all ready to die! Heaven awaits! Your evil machinations will fail whether we help you or not."

Even so, Mr. Byers said this while glancing at his unrepentant grandson. The kid was just terrified out of his wits at this point.

The Omega had some time to set up thermocameras, high resolution cameras, and distance

stethoscopes and the like to get some telemetry - the interrogation hadn't resulted in many words, but still returned data thanks to this.

Shutting up the kid's whimpers by acoustics resulted in even greater fear on his part, impotent rage on his family's part, and a mixed range of emotion within the legionaries. A few people were actually enjoying this display of sadism, as evidenced by blood pressure. Most were queasy. A few were sufficiently disgusted that they had turned off their armor's sensors.

A soldier knelt before the boy.

"Listen. I understand you are scared, but I need you to be brave and do something for me. I need you to tell me where the angel is and what he told your family to do."

"You killed my uncle! Go to Hell! Go to Hell now and stay there! Go back to Hell! You are the demons!"

This particular legionary, John, was 120 years old and had an active controller which made him a zombie as far as this kid was educated to believe.

A few of the Omegas' analysts were worried that the zombified legionary was carrying some sort of MEC virus.

"This is why our controllers don't have radios. We saw what happened with those poor TOL bastards."

"Not a software virus. They wouldn't know what that even is. Mind virus. Memetic."

The soldier continued.

"People are going to die. A lot of people. That isn't a good thing. It is never a good thing. Don't let people say it is. You can stop the killing. Stop it and save a lot of people. All you have to do is tell us where the archangel is."

"Billy, don't! Only Jesus saves."

The child delivered a very loud raspberry, then hid behind his grandpa. The Omegas' psychologists were pretty sure that interrogating a kid, with his family there, after scaring the shit out of him and killing a relative, and after having been told for all his life the Omegas' forces were literally sent forth by the devil, wasn't likely to get much in the way of a linear response whether he had converted or not.

The soldier grew furious.

"BOY! YOUR UNCLE WAS HELPING AN ANGEL KILL A THIRD OF PACIFICA'S POPULATION! DO YOU WANT ME TO DRAG YOU TO EVERY SINGLE FAMILY THAT LOST SOMEONE TO THIS MURDERER AND FORCE YOU TO APOLOGIZE TO THEM?! IF YOU DON'T ANSWER OUR QUESTIONS, YOU AND

YOUR FAMILY WILL BE ARRESTED AS ACCESSORY TO THE CRIME OF MASS MURDER!"

The child just whimpered at being harangued further. He was crying. Most of the family was crying, even the men (as much as they tried to hide it) except for the matriarch. She looked like she would like to cry.

They had been silenced; it didn't take a lip reader to recognize a simple sentence like that, especially when the speaker wanted it to be recognized, and when the child had heard and seen pronounced "Jesus saves" probably at least twice every day of his life.

Accepted interrogation techniques did include separating prisoners, to decrease cohesion, insinuate suspicion of defection, and to check stories against each other if possible.

This was a strange war, but a war it was. The farm would be turned inside out before being used as a field hospital to house the zombified soldier for further study, as well as potentially others to be quarantined; the family was locked inside one of the APCs and dropped off to a highsec prison, where they would not be told what was going on as a way to break their resistance.

The prison personnel was instructed to let the farmers believe that they would be detained indefinitely by not answering any questions about a trial date; in addition, they would each be put in single cells. A trial would happen after the whole mess was over.

As it was, the Archangel was still at large. The drop pods mostly worked although they were a bit off target, and this particular battalion of the Legion was extremely tired, physically from the long patrol and the fight, and psychologically.

The angelic falchion was carried off for nondestructive study; there would yet be uses for it.

As the Omegas' men returned home with mixed feelings, they could count on having reduced the threat to this land, even if the scariest Divine messenger was still at large, at least there was only one of them.

The Omega didn't particularly need to classify the incident; other than the Angel fight itself. It was not something anybody wanted to brag about. It needed to be done. It was done. it worked. At least believing media seemed to have no clue about this one... at least until the trial, if there ever was one.

The second battle was won, and the march home began.

No video had been released yet pending the Omegas' final decision, but Their emergency broadcast system released a brief message, read from a vocoder, indicating that the Angel Ahadiel had been eliminated by the Legion of Light.

"We remind the people of Pacifica that there remains one nonhuman terrorist at large. Report any sightings but do not attempt to contact."

The farmers were in custody; Pacifican prisons were geared towards rehabilitation rather than punishment, so the cells were about as comfortable as the Omegas' average freshman dorm room, save that net access was filtered.

The Omega ordered that they would be treated like everyone else, although of course, their conversations would be monitored.

The Legion regrouped in the East Bay; for now, they were tired, happy for a job well done, and somewhat queasy about having almost scared a kid to death. The few casualties were either cremated on a common pyre as the legionaries of old did, or "disassembled" by Pacifican custom, with all viable organs going into the protein bank and the rest speed-composted into fertilizer, the idea being that hopefully as long as something of the person remained alive, they would experience some amount of hope in Hell. (The Omegas' theologians reported that this didn't seem to do much on the NC front and they had to reluctantly agree with Christian theologians on this one, but it did help grieving relatives cope). The dead farmer had been buried by his family according to their rite before they were hauled off to prison.

"... a handful of protesters with torches and pitchforks are still outside Quentin Highsec Prison, advocating harsher measures. Governor Bissattini has issued a statement indicating that given the dismal failure of the so-called Trumped Judgement, extraordinary measures are not necessary at this time, and the suspects will not be tried by a court martial. Christian advocacy groups have reported 'difficulties' in running a crowdfunding campaign for a defense legal team."

The Archangel was still at large, but the Omegas' forces were in good shape. In the following days, not much happened - patrols resumed at a slightly less broad range. The Omegas' first-line martial artists got their rest, and TOL refugee ships stopped coming.

The Misrayim-Central Africa border was long and difficult to patrol: it looked like The Other Light had started dealing with their unusable horde MEC problem by releasing the older ones - they did look like zombies, due to poor maintenance - by simply letting them go free. Some wandered into Misrayim, which resulted in zombie hunts.

The Omegas' psychologists noted that even though it was known that there was still a human soul in there, the stereotypically undead appearance of the failed horde members meant that the average citizen would have a much easier time killing these. This could be used to harden prospective soldiers to the idea of killing humans in general by introducing the concept gradually, so to speak.

A rare public statement by Sunday indicated that the metabolic extension controller program for TOL soldiers had been discontinued due to interference from the Eternal Enemy.

The Omega decided to just bribe somebody to get the information.

The Legion had suffered negligible casualties, and They still had most of the Omegas' assets in Pacifica looking for the Archangel, plus some in reserve; the support people in Misrayim may have simply not be needed, but they were on standby.

The city of Nova Roma was hungry for news of the Legion; they wanted somebody to root for, and the Omega hadn't released much in the way of media.

A handful of legionaries formally protested attacking children, and were offered an honorable discharge.

The Omega did collect a little bit of data from "enhanced interrogation" thanks to body language analysis.

On that note, the unsaved farmer's grandson - Billy - was going to get a personal tutor and a tour of the jail.

Pacifica is a very diverse culture: someone was going to protest or organize a counter-event for pretty much anything. Some people would just whine regardless.

This was somewhat less the case for Misrayim, because a shared time of privation (the war and the plagues) in recent memory had unified the culture somewhat.

This was also less the case in Nova Roma simply because they decided to base themselves on the idealized, monolithic Roman image, which included stoic virtues in war as much as it included hedonistic excess in peace.

The Omega forces had done an excellent job keeping the Sixth Trumpet down to a series of terror attacks rather than a large-scale war, but something like a large-scale war would be useful in turning Pacifica from a territory into a nation.

There was a steady trickle of TOL defectors into Misrayim; grabbing one and offering her full citizenship in return for information was trivial. The answer was terse and dismal: since the horde system wasn't working well at all in battle, the remaining revenants had been chained to or even built into whatever engine of industry could use them. The Omega was told of great wheel mills in which crippled zombies crawled or rolled to produce torque and assisted ailing generators, ammunition assembly lines with heads and arms poking from bench frames with nothing underneath, posthuman refuse crawling through near-depleted mines to bring back just one more chunk of copper or potassium ore.

"I understand it's still better than Hell, but... I can't make myself believe it."

Sunday didn't deny any of this when asked.

"This is our final moment of toil, our supreme effort. We all must make sacrifices."

Billy was given a tutor for a few hours a day. He refused to believe anything that contradicted

what his grandparents had taught him, but proved to be reasonably sharp when it came to learning. The tutor picked up a few bits of data, both from conversation and from listening in to the "de-indoctrination" that the kid's Glorified grandmother subjected him to. The Archangel had indeed appeared, and told the family to make the Omegas' legionary welcome, heal him, and have him repay this debt by being a servant once he got back on his feet. The Archangel made it clear that the legionary would never be able to truly repent and obtain salvation, but even in death, he could serve the Lord. Around the end of the year, the Archangel would retrieve the reeducated legionary so that he could serve his purpose.

In Misrayim, firearms hadn't really been a thing culturally: people would have wubber duels, there was a form of formalized academic fencing, and that was about it. So, when the "zombies" started coming, more were brought in incapacitated than dead; it became very apparent that it would be impossible to heal them all, so the hospitals on the Misray southern border resolved to just sedate them. The Omega received a warning that this would begin to be a drain on Their resources eventually.

Now, the question was - how to find the Archangel?

An Angel trap could certainly be built, and with the resources of a whole territory it would be better than the one that ultimately took down Azrael.

"Phanuel seems to have a bit more... I hesitate to say free will," a theologian explained to her colleagues over a powerpoint presentation. "But certainly latitude. It had been given a goal to accomplish, not a series of instructions to execute to the letter. We should not make the mistake of thinking that this is just a taller Angel with bigger pecs."

Ithuriel had been asked about this sort of thing repeatedly, but he simply had no memory of anything before his brain rebuilt itself.

"Right, so what are the other options?"

"The Heartland territory is sparsely populated, and the Central American territory has all but been taken over by The Other Light. I would expect an attack to come from that direction."

"Ms. Gardner, please stick to your area of expertise. Conventional attack is-"

"An Archangel could take a TOL base and make its infantry follow it, I'm sure."

"How about an army of believers?"

"Unlikely - the prophecy states that there will not be one. However, the Millennium Force has been setting up a paramilitary training system, same as we did in Pacifica. We could be facing well-equipped volunteers."

The argument went back and forth, allowing the Omega to absorb information from Their

experts.

They had Pacifica's resources at Their disposal, and while the nation wasn't as rich as Misrayim...

In order to find or trap the Archangel, the Omegas' logistics algorithm indicated that an all-out effort on two fronts could be asked of the people and the infrastructure.

They decided to focus on turning the Byers' farm into a trap. A cavern would be dug and the whole thing would fall into it when Phanuel returned. Hopefully, an arena battle would then ensue.

In addition, the Omega would force the Archangel's hand by rounding up believers.

"And we're back with Protos, with Greg Burdette. So what do we know about this guy, Dr. Moebius?"

"Phanuel means the face of God. Other spellings include Paniel, Peniel, Penuel, Fanuel, and Orfiel. Archangel Phanuel is known as the angel of repentance and hope. He encourages people to repent of their sins and pursue eternal relationships with God that can give them the hope they need to overcome guilt and regret."

"Thank you. Dr. Hovind?"

"As you know, the information my colleague has recited is from the noncanonical Book of Enoch. In proper Scripture, Phanuel is the name of a man, the father of Anna the prophetess, and of a place, Peniel, where Jacob wrestled with God, and received the name Israel. It's not far from Succoth, on the east of the Jordan River and south of the river Jabbok; anyone may visit. However, Moebius is correct about the name: it means Face of God, for there Jacob saw God face to face, and yet his life was spared. Genesis 32-30"

"Jacob won that fight, didn't he?"

Graphic compositing reached quite a level in the last few years; only people watching in high definition could tell that the interviewer was in Pacifica, the secular theologian in Cairo, and the creation scientist in Greater Jerusalem.

"Arguably yes; Yahweh had to resort to, well, a low blow so that Jacob would let go and Yahweh could go raise the sun."

"Absolutely not: God spared Jacob after justly defeating him. It was a test of persistence, not a fight."

Greg allowed himself a chuckle. "Would you say that Genesis 32 has been an important resource for the Legion?"

"It certainly has been a useful foundation in the past. Now, fighting Angels has become more of

a science than an art recently - the Portland attack, conducted without any casualties, proves it experimentally. Angels are dangerous, but no match for a team of trained soldiers with modern equipment. I would like to take this opportunity to remind the public to 'not try this at home'."

"I'm certainly glad that the so-called Legion of Light is studying the Bible, but if they must take military lessons from there, they should be trying to glean strategy from Scripture, rather than tactics. For example: you can easily find, in the back of the book, that we win."

"... and that was the last of Dr. Hovind's segments for this discussion. One more question for both of you then: How do you square your belief with the Legion's recent successes? Dr. Moebius?"

"I would point you to news footage, but that would go over my time limit. I am on record as being against a standing army, but the Legion has demonstrated effectiveness and pragmatism. Anyone can see that."

"Dr. Hovind? You may have the last word."

"The Legion's professed successes may be what we see, but they are not what is. Remember, Greg - absolute reality is that which conforms to the mind of God. For all you military buffs at home, instead of starting at Genesis 32:30, start at John 3:16."

IV LEGION CIVIL CONTROL ADMINISTRATION

Presidio of San Francisco, Pacifica

INSTRUCTIONS TO ALL PERSONS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

Living in the Presidio:

All persons of Christian faith persons, both alien and citizen, will be evacuated from the above designated area by 12:00 noon 4 days from now.

No Christian person will be permitted to enter or leave the wartime security area after 8:00 p.m. without obtaining special permission from the Provost Marshal at the Civil Control Station.

The Civil Control Station is equipped to assist the Christian population affected by this evacuation in the following ways:

- 1. Give advise and instructions on the evacuation.*
- 2. Provide services with respect to the management, leasing, sale, storage or other disposition of most kinds of property including real estate, business and professional equipment, household goods, boats, automobiles, livestock, etc.*

3. *Provide temporary residence elsewhere for all non-Christians in family groups.*
4. *Transport persons and a limited amount of clothing and equipment to their new residence as specified below.*

The Following Instructions Must Be Observed:

1. *A responsible member of each family, preferably the head of the family, or the person in whose name most of the property is held, and each individual living alone must report to the Civil Control Station to receive further instructions.*
2. *Evacuees must carry with them on departure for the Reception Center, the following property for each member of the family:*
 - a. *Bedding and linens (no mattress).*
 - b. *Toilet articles.*
 - c. *Extra clothing.*
 - d. *Sufficient knives, forks, spoons, plates, bowls and cups.*
 - e. *Essential personal effects.*

All items carried will be securely packaged, tied and plainly marked with the name of the owner and numbered in accordance with instructions.

The size and number of packages is limited to that which can be carried by the individual or family group.

3. The Pacifican Government through its agencies will provide for the storage at the sole risk of the owner of the more substantial household items. Cooking utensils and other small items will be accepted if crated, packed and plainly marked with the name and address of the owner. Only one name and address will be used by a given family.

4. Each family, and individual living alone, will be furnished transportation to the Reception Center. Private means of transportation will not be utilized. All instructions pertaining to the movement will be obtained at the Civil Control Station.

Booker DeWITT

Ctr, I ctra, IV legion

Commanding

The farm was repaired, and a cave underneath was being dug. The part of the cave roof that the farmhouse sat on could be collapsed by means of shaped charges, after which

an artificial roof would be slid into place. The interior of the cave had an empty area for the farmhouse to fall into, and the by-now usual arena setup with a configurable maze, wubbers, and neutron sources into the walls and ceiling. Being a product of Pacifican rather than Misray effort, the maze part was less modular, but more natural looking.

In Night City, Urist had been silent, but a Dwarven engineer came to assist the digging efforts. He had little to teach the Pacificans about actual technique, but much about work ethics.

In the months that follow, the Legion was a constant presence in the streets of Pacifica; their presence caused the normally laid-back coastal culture to "shape up" a little, in some cases literally. The expected incidents of troop rowdiness due to lack of activity were handled without much of a problem.

The large arena under the farm was completed, and the Byers family moved back to their land and were locked up in cells that had been built inside the house.

The Byerses were given screens to see their house from within. True to word, the Omega rebuilt everything impeccably and even left an ornate wooden chest that someone built for fun, full of Greater Jerusalem metal currency. Billy "repented" a few times, but his grandma's body language indicated that she was skeptical of the claim. Nevertheless, they remained hopeful.

The cave entrance was hidden remarkably well, and maybe it wouldn't fool an Archangel but it definitely fooled the occasional passerby.

Around three months before the Feast of the Tabernacles, Sunday called.

The Omega asked for details, and instead of a synthetic face, showed a timer indicating *"This is how long you have before I hang up."*

Sunday told the Omega that the Millennium Force managed to disrupt a "routine supply run" at the base, after which something happened to it that caused complete loss of communications.

Comms came back with the MFers laughing and high-fiving each other and thumbing their nose at TOL leadership in the deserted base, with a few TOL base crew being hauled off by the local psalties.

"That base was where we kept the, uh, unsatisfactory performers from our metabolic extension program! They're all gone! All the restraints were still there! It's like another damn Rapture!"

"Did you see an Angel?"

The "surveillance data" was poor and consisted of what passed for work going on, then a bit of static, then the Millennium Force logo, then some more static, then power-off.

A few microphones came back up during the subsequent psalty raid, and conversation indicating that the base crew had been chasing Millennium Force agents around had taken place.

And then, with that going on, there was an earthquake, and fixtures fell and manacles unlocked.

"We did not see an Angel. But we've had similar incidents before, a long time ago, and one was involved. We have our differences, Omega, but this affects us both."

"How many did you have in there?"

"Uh... About four... forty."

That was not too bad - there had been some zombie "leaks" this year, mostly in Misrayim's south border.

"Percent."

And that would be....

"Uh, about twenty thousand. A whole division. Roughly. Order of magnitude, definitely."

The Omega hadn't seen Sunday like this probably... ever. He sounded almost human; he even blinked.

So why was he telling Them?

"They had been, uh, trained to be the first wave against the Temple. It's too early! That's why we put them there instead of - of the Middle East staging area."

You currently had no monitoring above Central America.

The Omega decided to somehow revive the Mk1 Sky Eye that used to be over southern Heartland.

The Omega had a small motorbike troop corps, and they didn't take long to cross the border into Heartland - where the golden fields kept succeeding one another horizon to horizon - and right down to Central America. When closer to the base's location, they stopped at intervals, using drones to hop up into the sky and took an aerial picture before coming back down. Nothing. Nothing yet.

The bike troops searched for two days, until they started getting glitches from the drones - they were reporting an anomaly in terms of thermograph and air pressure, but

nothing on visual. Whatever it was, it was pretty big.

And then, at an unguarded portion of the frontier between the two believing territories, where the enormous cornfield that was Heartland begun, the Omega recorded the following conversation-

"There it is! Look!"

"What?"

"The cornstalks! They're all falling! It's like they're being trampled!"

"Where?"

"Over there!"

"Over there what? Those were like that earlier, I'm pretty sure."

"Those what?"

"The cornstalks, they're bent, look. It's like one of them crop circles, except in a straight line."

"Sounds like someone's being an idiot with a combine harvester."

"I thought they'd gone back to horses and sickles."

"Evidently not here. Come on, we have an Angel to find. Star patrol, meet back here in thirty, we move to the next sector."

The Omegas' operators were visibly annoyed at the patrol's failure to find anything (even though they were looking through the world's biggest haystack, it WAS a whole army unit) and at one of their number who kept making tally marks on his hands. With a box cutter. It was a bit disturbing and there were some blood stains on his keyboard.

The one cutting himself was agitated about buffer errors and memory erasure.

The Omega ran a diagnostic, which would slow down Their processing speed.

Everything in Their perceptual map sped up; people became unintelligible unless they used text, vehicles teleported between locations instead of rolling there because They missed a few position updates, and so on. All normal for a diag cycle.

What was not normal was that-

"Fuck, the master control program's gone into diag again."

"We don't have time for this!"

"Will you listen to me and LET IT RUN dammit! It's volitional, it started itself, this is the fourth time, we're wasting more time resetting it than letting it finish!"

"Okay, fine. Someone's going to have to do the Misrayim actuarials by hand then. You."

"Ugh. Whatever."

The diagnostic finished. By the look of it, the Omegas' short-term memory loop had been reset three times, twice by the guy who was cutting himself, once by the Omega. This resulted in some data loss, notably recon and bike footage, and considerable annoyance amongst the Omegas' sysadmins.

The Omega decided to hear the guy out.

The buffer integrity was verified; a sysadmin speed-reads a log file and then re-entered the most important tactical events in it. There were indeed scouts at the border between Central America and Heartland, but their reports were confused.

Elsewhere, someone managed to buy a nuclear battery on OmegaBay for five mites, an attempt by a biotech startup in Portland to make a centauroid lower body for an Azrael veteran had finally succeeded against all odds, and the lower seeded quarterfinal of a Starcraft tournament had to be canceled because all the critters on the maps turned into nuclear missiles and went off.

"We got drone! Footage from the anomaly! It's making us! Forget about what! We're looking at! I only noticed because! I've been teaching myself! Braille and so I! had everything in textmode!"

This guy seemed to be very sweaty and agitated, and while talking, he bit his hand.

The Omega switched to ascii-art RTS view for everyone, including Them, for now. This was instant.

The ports were mined, they had been for a few years. There were no land mines anywhere at this time, other than in a few well-marked spots near the Omegas' cyclotron.

The displays went from view to map mode, which hid the anomaly, whatever it was, since there was no symbol for it. However, the Omegas' sysadmins confirmed that the bike patrols had been buzzing around the frontier for a bit of time without really getting much done.

The Omega recalled them and had low resolution, black and white cameras feed from the bikes broadcast to Their datacenter. The usual view there was endless waves of

grain, so SOMETHING should have shown up.

The Omegas' sysadmins confirmed that save for a few economic glitches, not much of value was lost; the only other oddity was that Urist reset the entire security system in Night City, possibly because of said glitches. It was back up now.

The Omega issued a territorywide alert to the Legion, drawing a direct line on a map between this last patrol and Their best guess for the enemy's destination.

They had some problems interpreting the image, but the lower resolution and limited color palette let Them see that there was definitely SOMETHING cutting its way through the endless cornfield.

It moved mostly, but not perfectly, straight; it had an ogival "head" - slightly broader than the "tail" due to some of the corn getting back up, and after the passage, the grain looked stomped on.

The Omega described this to Their sysadmins, who added the anomaly to the symbolic map so that it became visible in RTS view.

Of course the symbol looked like a penis.

Whatever it was, it was coming in at infantry double time - but keeping up with a marathon runner's tenacity. It would arrive at the Byers' farm in ten days, Frisco in twelve, Orange County in nine if it deviated.

Nine days was an eternity for the Legion to lay traps, or they could fortify a location in the meantime.

To avoid causing panic, the Omegas' alert came in the form of a public service announcement indicating that an elevated security level was in effect and people were encouraged to stay in urban areas in order to be reachable by phone and emergency services quickly. In the meantime, the Omega rerouted as many cargo ships as possible to the ports, so that they could be used to get people out at sea at least.

Mr. Bissattini proved to be reasonably competent in handling this, and there were few cases of panic. Most believers stayed put, predictably, but some also would have liked to evacuate and were told to back off. The last thing the Omega needed was people preaching into a scared crowd. If it worked, They would lose people. However, if it didn't, it would create a pretext for violence.

Harold Penisman ("Hank") was chosen to take the heli-ambulance flying around to cause the horde to deviate. It wasn't as expected, oddly enough.

During the trip, he was flanked by a psychologist who would try to use attempted

movement, EEG and suggestion to figure out what he was dreaming.

Waking up Hank would be a horrible idea, but the Omegas' scientist gave him a drug intended to counteract the sleep paralysis that normally occurred during REM sleep so that sleepwalking was the exception and not the rule.

"Best I can figure from the leg movements, he's dreaming about marching. A lot of it."

Omega sent a message to Sunday:

"A class 1 supernatural anomaly has been detected near where your vanquished zombies were. This is a request for any data from the incident you mentioned."

Sunday didn't answer, but one of his assistants sent a small amount of data about a similar, if much smaller, incident in +93. Other than the historical note, it didn't help much: the Angel Anis (snickered from the Omegas' sysadmins) vibrated a bunch of locks open to liberate captives.

However, after the Omegas' message, TOL installations went into turtle mode, as far as They could tell.

The Omega split the Legion into three divisions, one taking the fast vehicles and scouting ahead to cover for the engineers.

Hank was left in the farm.

This plus a little bit of observation allowed for calculating a path. Since the anomaly was moving at a fast walking pace and enough of Their vehicles ran on nuclear power that they could keep the rest charged, it was fairly easy to set traps for the incoming horde: scissor grenades, acid sprayers, disposable sentry guns, plain old caltrops, flechette launchers, homing tires filled with explosives, you name it. A swath of southeastern Pacifica was turned into a giant booby trap, primarily designed to weaken the Archangel by exposure to toxins of various sorts.

When setting up the enormous minefield, the Omegas' men took the time to make all of these mine-type weapons GPS-taggable and deactivable, for easy removal after this was over.

In Orange County, Damien focused on tele-operating the distant drones while Kat handled fortifications. By the time she was done, the territorial capitol resembled a medieval star fort, albeit one with modern counterbattery fire support. She was still going for the cauldrons of burning oil though.

The Legion happily wore the iconography of the Roman Empire, but they were a modern army: landmines had been a pox upon humanity since their invention, to the point that

some were still found active years after the Glorious Appearing. The Omegas' mines therefore all had a GPS and radio chip, so that they could be deactivated and, with a different command, could tell combat engineers where to look to remove them. Some legionaries were from Pacifica, and they appreciated not losing part of their homeland to land mines after defending it from enemies.

The zombified legionary that was apparently acting as a beacon, or part of one, was carried to Orange County and left in a small fortified mini-infirmery near the capitol.

The Omega once again decided to split Their efforts, and the landmines and traps laid down were of mixed type, some intended to sap an Angel's strength, some intended to thin out the horde. While it was a known military maxim that trying to do everything at once resulted in doing nothing well, the Omegas' engineers had high hopes in their technological superiority.

The Omegas' mobile division stayed just one horizon ahead of the horde as they set their trap; they reported that looking towards the snaking line of trampled vegetation caused unease, and a sort of blind spot. One sysadmin likened it to a Somebody Else's Problem Field from the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy; another to the Nothing in the Neverending Story; yet another to the sort of spot blindness caused by some optical illusions that stop fixational eye movements.

Inexorable, at a brisk walking pace but never stopping day or night, the horde advanced. The Omega risked a mothership drone and some small ones to get a sonar image.

Eventually, the horde reached the trapped area and the Omega watched the fireworks from the sky. The mobile division had brought light artillery. These would be saved for when the traps were exhausted.

With Hank near the state capitol, the horde was deviating slightly away from the Archangel trap following the average of the two coordinates if the farm's coordinates weighed about ten to twelve times more than the legionary's coordinates.

This, combined with the Omegas' decision to split Their forces three ways and not focus the minefield towards any particular use, meant that the anomaly was going through a wide corridor of slightly radioactive ground mixed in with the occasional explosive, claymore, or acid mine.

That said, it was still a significant amount of power; as soon as the anomaly entered Pacifica, the Omega was able to track it just from the flash and noise of explosives going and the smoke from the acid having impacted on the ground and, presumably, the horde.

The Omegas' sappers continued to retreat ahead of the horde, but as they did, fired all

their mortar rounds into it in an over-the-horizon version of a fire and maneuver retreat; they had no way to know what they were hitting, but GPS-aimed mortar shells, while not particularly precise, could and did reach the ground where they were supposed to.

The Legion's sapper corps cheered at the overhead maps for an hour or two, then the explosions became more rare, and finally stopped: the anomaly had stopped advancing.

"Did we get them all?"

A flying wing was faster and could stay in the air longer than a multicopter, although it had no ability to move with precision. The sonar rangings indicated something like an immense crop circle. There was some activity, as the anomaly was moving around. The sonar readings looked a little bit like a ball of army ants protecting their queen through a water crossing.

Coming back, the drone turned its camera back on.

The closest farm to this place was also run by believers, an elderly couple according to census data, and was still inhabited - about three kilometers out. A truck was slowly heading towards the anomaly, cutting through the corn.

Unfortunately, nobody in it had a smartphone.

The Omegas' third Legion group was still out there; They ordered them to take advantage of the horde stopping and unload the remaining mortar rounds.

The third Legion group emptied their automatic grenade launchers while the drone turned and used its wubber as a loudspeaker to warn the truck off the kill zone.

Assorted mortar shells flew towards the anomaly; the explosions were enough to change the shadow in the endless day, and the sheer amount of noxious substances and radioactive dust that were delivered would make the area sterile for years.

The truck was being driven by an old woman, with an even older, pretty much decrepit man in the passenger seat. They ignored the warning. In the back of the truck they seemed to have improvised two bench seats.

After having unloaded their magazines, the Omegas' sappers doubled back and returned.

The drone kept circling around the anomaly; in the meantime, the Omegas' sappers returned to the farm, either to reinforce the defenders there or, at the least, to reload the mortars.

The anomaly still wasn't moving.

A small group of sappers stayed behind in an armored vehicle equipped with a multibeam sonar, to keep an eye on the anomaly.

They and the drone managed to pick up something interesting: the truck got as far as the edge of the anomaly, and then a few sonar and thermo blips emerged from the anomaly, boarded the back of the truck, and then the truck doubled back and returned to the old couple's home.

The Hastati parked their APC in front of the anomaly, with the multibeam sonar firmly aimed at it; the traces continued their insectlike wambling about in place. Eventually, a larger trace stepped in front of the horde. In a booming, stentorian tone it ordered, "Forward unto the goats of Pacifica!" loud enough to glitch out the sonar array for several seconds. When the observer vehicle was able to resume tracking, it seemed that the column had changed direction, towards the territorial capitol.

"Omega? The bigger blip just took off."

The drone kept circling lazily above the truck; a few rifle shots reached it, but only managed to pass through its membranous wings and slightly decrease gliding efficiency. Once the drone was aimed away from the anomaly, the cameras were turned back on. By the look of it, the truck was now carrying six youths in gold-and-blue uniforms; one of them had a bandaged arm and they all looked like they could use a shower. All of them had nicks and scrapes, but none of them were seriously injured. The oldest was trying to aim a TOL-issued AK47 at the drone, and shot at it a few times. The truck was headed back to the farm.

In the meantime, the old couple and the youths reached the farm; they had few electrical appliances, and got power from a biodiesel generator, so the Omega had very little telemetry on what they were doing. The drone climbed to above rifle range; its thermograph indicated that a couple of the rooms' temperatures had increased, hinting at the fact that what They assumed were Millennium Force personnel were taking showers or baths.

The squad in the APC turned on active sonar and stayed put in order to get a high-resolution "picture". Seconds later, accelerometers in the APC recorded a slow impact, and that was the last thing the Omega got from that vehicle or that squad. They did their job to the end and would be remembered. The Archangel Phanuel was carrying an enormous sword, easily as tall as a man.

Rather than trying to redirect the horde or bait the Archangel, the Omega abandoned the trap and ordered Their forces to quickly transfer to the territorial capitol, which Kat had surrounded by a star-fortress wall.

The star was nine-pointed, and They decided to build an ersatz Angel trap between the

two points that were facing the hordes' location and probable path.

Mr. Bissattini was obviously nervous; he would rather get the comatose legionary back to the farm. However, he understood that since he was the nominal head of state, he was a valid target and could be used as bait.

"If it comes to that, I will show the world how a Pacifican dies. At least, I will not be remembered as a figurehead."

Sky Eye telemetry indicated that the Archangel raced ahead to neutralize the APC, but then went back within the horde. The Omega did get a visual glimpse of the back of the horde when he did that; the TOL zombies in the back were injured, some missing a limb. The elongated minefield was strangely devoid of bodies, although the Omega could see the various types of mines that went off.

Setting up a small ant trail of flying wings going in and out from the nearest battery charging station was trivial. So far, it looked like the Millies were enjoying some R&R.

The horde seemed to be headed towards the territorial capitol; the faux-Tuscany appearance of the place (the architects said that it was from Napa Valley) had been enhanced considerably by the star fort that Kat built.

The Omega decided to abandon the main Angel trap and to turn the capitol into an Angel maze, assuming that Phanuel would just jump the wall.

The trap would consist of an arena with sonars to counter invisibility, a water chamber with some of Tethys' people in it and a wubbing room intended to slow the Archangel down. Its true purpose was to acquire as much sensor data as possible. In addition, an intense radiation emission chamber would be built that the Archangel would have to crawl through.

The Omegas' people used the best that Pacifica had to offer to build an ersatz Archangel trap in record time; the outside of the capitol building was left alone, but the inside was rebuilt into an iron-and-stone maze with Mr. Bissattini and Hank at the end. Right before the small cell - Bissattini was given a fairly fancy VR rig to stave off boredom and continued to attend to territory business via telepresence - was an arena with alcoves for the Omegas' martial artists to enter; it was blanketed with sonars and laser pointers in case the Archangel became invisible.

The usual flexible layout would take too long to build, so the maze was traditional: the silencer room was right before the arena, complete with a breakable concrete wall to go through, and the rest of the maze was filled with high-intensity radiation sources. The corridors and cramped rooms were designed to occasionally startle an Angel and give it simple challenges, such as destroying sentry guns, hiding the real purpose which was to

slow the angel's progress so that it could absorb more radiation.

Tethys recalled her aquatic martial artists in a huff, complaining about the waste of time but admitting that they were kept comfortable. Ryan Andrews was mildly amused by the kerfuffle, and left the anti-pheromone-tanks with the Omega to deploy in the arena if They liked; the next thing They heard from those two were some sort of disturbance at a restaurant, but it could wait.

The Omegas' people tried to collect as much information on the Archangel as possible, but data harvesting had to take a back seat from beating it up in the first place.

The Legion would handle this like an old-time siege and hold the line at the walls.

A hasty retrofit to the Legionaries' helmet visors added an opaque layer (immediately nicknamed "the tinfoil hat") and used the onboard camera to give a vector-graphics visual to show what was going on in a way that, hopefully, would work against the anomaly.

It was a hotter day than usual- both the Sun and sun-like Moon were in the sky. The horde was coming.

The Omegas' soldiers lined the walls of the star fort; the head of the horde was being tracked by sonar and radar. They were coming at a running pace.

Just outside the range of rifles and mortars, just inside the small suburbs - which had been depopulated, those living there retreated inside the star fort as in medieval times - the horde stopped. Nobody could see them directly, but they seemed to be destroying some of the houses. It was like a ghost tornado, slowly moving clockwise around the star fort instead of attacking it directly.

They were no longer in an open field; a fight now would happen among detached houses, gas/recharging stations, and small office buildings... what was left of them, as some of the residential buildings were being razed. There seemed to be no pattern to this; the homes were all empty anyway, but the houses of believers and not were being trashed.

Meanwhile, the drones that were keeping an eye on the farm that the Millennium Force guys hid into reported that a RV coming from Heartland was headed there.

The Legion sallied forth!

Tankettes could not maneuver very well inside a fortress, but had no problems negotiating suburbs: Damien would try to control a few from a command vehicle inside the fortress, while the vast majority were released in full autonomous mode. Ironically,

their sensors were too simple to fool.

Since a tankette left alone would simply shoot at anything in its front visual arc that moved, the system was simple: tankettes rushed out of the fortress doors, moved ahead to spread out for a few seconds, then stopped at the same time and looked for targets. A few seconds after, they ceased fire and moved to a new position. From the RTS view that the Omega and Their commanders were getting, it looked like a game of checkers with all pieces moving simultaneously, at least from Their side.

On the other side, They were making their way clockwise around the fortress wall, destroying houses as they went. Returned fire against the Omegas' ground drones was sporadic and uncoordinated. As the anomaly kept moving in a circle around the fort, Damien turned on some of the cameras of the tankettes that were out of position, to show wrecked homes and reanimated soldiers of The Only Light that had been cut down by the tankettes' machine guns. They looked... strangely healthy, certainly more so than the ones that were seen by the Omegas' infiltrators. They still bore the telltale signs of no post-mortem maintenance and massive pre-mortem amphetamine abuse, but even though They could easily count ribs even from a low resolution screenshot, they seemed to have put on some muscle.

The drone tanks, occasionally shooting each other on a desync, ended up following the trailing end of the horde and picking off at it, enduring some amount of return fire.

The Omega sent out Their spider tanks, and removed the AVLB package from one of them to turn it into a troop carrier. The unusual vehicles easily crossed through the suburbs, and by the look of it, it seemed that the Archangel was going to leave them alone. They moved as fast as their nuclear batteries could take them towards the farm, an ant-trail of drones above head. The contubernium in charge of capturing the Millennium Force agents was Frumentarii: military intelligence personnel.

"To make it easier for us to slaughter them?"

"No, I think it's the whole Wall of Jericho thing."

"That would mean that they have spies here. Does Hank count?"

"It would also mean that they've bribed a prostitute. I don't see either an Archangel or a bunch of zombies doing that any time soon."

"LA prostitutes? In a heartbeat."

"That's besides the point."

The Frumentarii on the spider tanks were trained to handle police actions; they shouldn't have had much of a problem handling two old farmers and a bunch of play

soldiers.

The tankettes continued their odd movements and tailed the horde; the Omega saw a lot more bodies than They thought They would. However, the houses and so on were still getting wrecked just as fast. Eventually, the small land drones would run out of ammo and would return to reload.

The Desolators were prepared to take a tanker truck and make a literal firewall if the Omega so chose. Mixing the gas with whatever toxic goop they used could make a nice, hot-burning gelatin.

"Vulpes team, we have things to deal with here. You're on your own. Make it a clean capture if you can, if not, remember that those are enemy combatants and possibly sympathisers and we're in a state of war."

"By your command, Omega."

The spider tanks kept going towards their target.

Most of the tankettes returned home after expending their magazines. The Omegas' legionaries opened the fortress gates enough, and quickly reloaded the land drones. Those with damaged or jammed weapons were told to switch to melee, and charged blindly into the horde (except for those that charged into each other by mistake). Some hit something, some were grabbed and thrown off... either way, they let the Omega get a good bead on the horde's center.

The Omegas' heavy artillery platforms planted their hydraulic feet on the ground and fired as one. The highly explosive shells hit, their pressure waves doing more damage to the town than the horde did. Bodies were scattered everywhere.

"And that's why zombie movies are unrealistic."

Infantry was the queen of the battlefield, but artillery was the king of war - and the Omega soldiers all knew what the king did to the queen. The anomaly dissipated, to show a mass of scattering "zombies" much larger than what Their analysts suggested; even so, with vision restored, a quick count indicated that They had blown up or were riddled with bullets - about a third of them.

The anomaly, much smaller, took off above the houses and started moving around the town again, except now it was going at a good hundred kilometers per hour. By the time the Omegas' operators were able to adjust radars and sonars on it again, it had completed two laps.

The zombies scattered away from the heavy artillery fire coordinates, and spread out

around the town. They looked thin but buff, and some had weapons.

Sending out the heavy tanks simply caused the Archangel to fly above them: the shockwave was sufficient to glitch the tanks' sonars and wubbers for a moment. From this, the Omegas' aeronautical engineers and physicists surmised that Phaniel was flapping its wings at hummingbird speeds. In fact, it was LOUD! The wingtips were consistently going faster than sound.

Now that the zombies were visible, the Omegas' triarii poked their heads out of the bastions, lifted their "tinfoil hats", and began taking down the enemy with precision. The tankettes positioned themselves at the feet of the wall, and resumed their carefully timed bursts.

The zombies seemed to have settled towards advancing towards the fortress from all directions as the Archangel completed another lap.

Kat and the other heavy MECs that participated in the construction effort supplemented the Omegas' few flak cannons with the simple expedience of taking gasoline barrels half-filled with toxin and throwing them, with a sharpshooter firing a phosphorous round at it. This did a number on the town below, obviously, but aiming at the Archangel was still extremely difficult.

That was four laps. It was done. Some Legionaries were worried about killing the reanimated soldiers, but even so, they aimed true; the zombie attack had more or less turned into a shooting gallery. It was a stretch to say that there were more targets than there were ammo, but some of the zombies were likely to reach the walls, and not much of the town outside the walls would be left by then.

Most of the Omegas' fights were won by sonic or energy weapons; the noise and smell of smokeless powder was a new thing in the Millennial Kingdom. All around the fort, the Omegas' legionaries on the wall and Their land drones at the feet of it kept mowing down reanimated soldiers; now that the visual anomaly was only protecting the Archangel, Damien was able to retake control of the tankettes enough to allow them to come back inside and reload. The triarii kept shooting down from the wall; the hastati's brows glistened with sweat as they reloaded magazines for their comrades and for their brethren. It looked like it would be close between the amount of zombies and the amount of ammo.

The Omega sent out an APC with a multibeam sonar, but nobody in it; one of Their heavies was remotely piloting it from inside the capitol building. The Archangel completed another loop and found that each of the six wings was beating at 200 hertz. Given the size of the wings, that was sufficient for the tips to break the sound barrier at the end of each stroke, much like the tip of a whip does when it's cracked expertly.

"And the LORD was with Judah; and he drave out the inhabitants of the mountain; but could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron!"

A set of doors in the star fort slammed open and the heavy artillery platforms trundled out; the Bible verse was a tank operator's ad-libbing. The metal monsters were followed by a few construction vehicles that had armor plating hastily welded on.

Cannons silent, the heavy vehicles began to trample over the "zombies" with methodical precision as they converged towards the open door; Damien silenced the tankettes that tried to shoot at the large vehicles, mostly to save ammunition.

A line of triarii made a shieldwall at the open gate, parting every time a vehicle needed to get out.

In minutes, there was almost nothing left of the town outside the fort... or of the zombie army for that matter. The Omegas' legionaries didn't just shoot the sons-of-bitches, they ripped out their living guts and used them to grease the tread of the Omegas' tanks.

The Archangel must've finally gotten the picture; once it became clear that the reason why Their men on the walls stopped shooting was because of a dearth of target rather than ammo, it stopped circling the walls, to great cheering. Now it was going straight up!

The Omegas' artillerists fired a barrage almost straight up, but none of the shots connected with the Archangel. One of Their artillery platforms suffered light damage from a near-miss outside the fortress. By now the state capitol outside the fortress walls had been pretty much flattened; the occasional revenant that was still moving was shot by a sniper, and after this whole mess was over, someone was going to have to either put out the fires or finish burning it all to the ground.

It was a reasonable bet that it would come back down, and possibly try to bypass part of the maze by impacting into it; however, it was also reasonable to guess that it would simply break off engagement and try to raise more "demons" elsewhere.... or just start killing people in undefended areas to meet its quota. Either way, the Omega told Their martial artists (and Mr. Bissattini) to brace for impact.

The Omega ordered the launch of a few flying wings by rocket; they went up like fireworks, quickly flying past the Archangel as it stopped after its climb. Two out of three deployed their wings correctly and started circling to give the Omega a sonar blip; the Archangel was still hidden by the visual anomaly, but They knew where it was with some precision.

For a moment, it seemed unsure what to do next; it cried out at the heavens, but it was far enough up that its trumpet blast was weakened by the thin air - one of the flying

wings were hit and went into a nosedive, but recovered a couple hundred meters below the Archangel, and resumed climbing to its assigned altitude band.

Bereft of an army and unable to get away from the Omegas' relentless ears, the Archangel cried out once more in frustration; the ground below was hit by a wordless shriek that, while causing no damage, allowed the Omegas' technicians to calculate that Phanuel's trumpet blast probably could take out an armored wall all by itself.

Phanuel headed northwest, slowly losing altitude. Its possible targets were the Bay Area or the underwater town.

The legionaries efficiently dispatched the remainders of The Only Light's failed zombie army project, and the Desolators quickly came to the conclusion that there were at least sixty thousand bodies in the town's ruins.

The Archangel had been driven off. The butcher's bill was light on the human front - a few injuries due to friendly fire - but somewhat heavy on the Omegas' equipment, as They'd lost a number of tankettes, some drones and one artillery platform. Even so, it looked like this battle's price had been paid in battery fluid rather than blood.

One of the spider tank operators reported: he was taking the other tank and the APC back. There was an argument and a shootout inside the farm that the Millies were holed up in, which resulted in two frumentarii dead and five converted. The Millies had commandeered one of the spider tanks and were last seen driving it into Heartland.

The Omega silently tracked it.

An extra blip appeared on the big map; the tank's vehicle ID was tagged as hostile, and the firmware on the weapon systems was wiped. The Millies now had a legged/wheeled tank with a conventional cannon and a fancy PA system; the targeting computers and wave generators to allow the wubber to do nothing more than be loud were gone.

Eventually, they would be able to remove the override, but the GPS tracker was designed to recover stranded vehicles and was on its own radio and battery.

The PA system played a warning to close the fortress doors, and all vehicles were retrieved, with one artillery platform "limping" a little and coming in last with a bulldozer holding up its damaged "leg".

The Desolators showed that they weren't just a bunch of crazy people (okay, they were, but they were also competent) by quickly flushing out the towns' water and sewer pipes, filling them with the right amount of fuel and air, and setting the entire place on fire in one go. Most of the residential buildings were wooden paneling, and given how little it rained in southern Pacifica, quite dry. The last remains of the zombie army were purified

by fire.

The Archangel kept moving, at a relatively slow speed - the Omega had seen Azrael touch the sound barrier, this one seemed to be moving about as fast as a car on the highway - towards the coast. If it kept moving how it did, it would hit Venice Beach, then go on towards the underwater town, although that would require it to deviate a little; another possibility was that it would just visit destruction upon the coast.

"We took down the demon army. But how do we fight the hurricane?"

Estimated targets:

Venice Beach, pop 60k, 3 hrs

Bonaventura, pop 40k, 4 hours

Barbarella Town, pop 25k, 5 hrs

San Luis Obispo, pop 30k, 7 hrs

Moss-Salinas, pop 50k, 8 hrs

Silicon Valley, pop 2M, 10 hrs

Underwater town, pop unknown, 14hrs

Jeb was told to take two Desolators to whatever suborbital airplane projects he had in a hangar in Timbuktu. In sixty minutes, they worked out how to add neutron sources to it and transmitted the specifics to Pacifica.

In another hour, Desolators deployed with the Legion all over Pacifica had found airplanes with the right speed range and installed neutron sources on them.

"We've been collecting planes from all over, but..."

"But what, Tribune?"

"Pilots, ma'am. We don't have enough people to get them in the air."

In the meantime, people from the cities along the Californian coast were told to evacuate north, towards the Bay, and told to hurry up without further explanation.

A private plane remains a luxury, so who the Omega got were Pacificans of means to fly as part of the volunteer militia. However, when they were told that the plan was to install a nuclear cannon on their planes and go Angel hunting, they were about as eager to go as they could get. When told that Jeb may make it to the engagement, they were positively elated.

A serviceable jetliner that had been used for a mass-skydiving promotional stunt recently was quickly given a once-over and had three "mothership" drones and attendants stuffed in. Getting them out required removing a side panel with explosive bolts, so the pilot would take off, parachute away, and the rest of the flight would happen by dynamic waypoint assignment. Ithuriel would ride in the big plane.

Below, an enormous snake of cars invaded the highway once known as US 101. Phanuel had not yet noticed, since they were too far north.

Above, the Omega ended up with a dozen volunteers who promptly called themselves the Lafayette Escadrille and took off. Their mission plan was to take on Phanuel as soon as possible; direct intercept course. The fight would happen above in the Central Valley.

The Omegas' subsystems could direct each vehicle along the optimal route; They were a logistics computer, after all. Once they reached the Bay, those evacuating were instructed to keep going.

The Pacifican people were reacting well to this; the Omega witnessed hundreds of acts of kindness, people picking up strangers that were scrambling to get to a bus terminal or emptying their pantries to make sure that their assigned ride would have water for the trip, and only a handful of episodes of looting. What could be caught on video, was.

The Omega prepared for pre-evacuation of the Bay by making sure that all onramps were open. Police were told to let everyone off with a warning if they got busted as long as they drove north for as long as their car's tank or battery lasted, and so on.

The Omegas' airplanes swung around over the sea in order to tail Phanuel. When they got in range, the Archangel had reached Venice Beach, finding it strangely deserted. It made a "hero landing" on the main strip, the shockwave breaking glass in a kilometer's radius, and started stalking about. Every once in a while, it emitted a powerful trumpet blast aimed at this or that home. The Omega noted that it was going after the few people who could not or would not evacuate. Interestingly, it seemed to have gotten a believer.

The airliner was carrying drones, martial artists, Ithuriel, and Kat, who would not take no for an answer. Her frame did have a landing system, although it was a bit approximate.

The Omega decided to drop Their ground forces immediately.

In fully autonomous mode, tanks and tankettes weren't very smart. They went as far as "*move to a waypoint or a series of waypoints, and shoot at anything that is moving, if i am standing still.*" The reason why the tankettes had to make a checkerboard ballet was because, otherwise, they'd shoot at each other.

In this case, however, a successful reflash would cause the tank to go into hunt mode and kill stuff until it was destroyed or ran out of ammo and power, which is what the Omega wanted.

"It's an Angel, you can't hurt it!"

"One, this is the synthmuscle frame, and has a flesh covering under the armor. Maybe it will work this time. Two, I have sploogers and rad-cannons. Three, I'm going to bite its face off if it comes to that!"

"Papa Bear dropping drones, hang tight!"

The explosive bolts went off and the "mothership" drones tumbled to the ground helplessly for a few seconds. This had been factored in. The carrier plane was up high, and as Phaniel wandered about Venice Beach in frustration eliminating the few people who couldn't evacuate, the three flying machines zoomed into the six-winged figure.

The STD's moved above the canopy to trace the tank.

So far, whoever was driving hadn't reacted to the group of drones flying west, or so it seemed. However, the upload could not be completed. It was about two thirds of the way through. The Omega risked another pass.

The Omega eventually got a screenshot from one of the drones. There were people on top of the tank. By the look of it, they had swapped uniform components in a mix-and-match/kitbash fashion.

The motherships dropped their wards and, in a few seconds, Phaniel was surrounded by a virtual dome of sonar beams. Looking up, it shrieked at the closest drone.

In the meantime, the plane pilots were told to make "strafing runs" at the Archangel. They would hit a few of the small drones, but those were radiation hardened anyway.

The drones circled once above the tank. The escapees noticed because they stopped the tank and made its legs retract to reduce its visibility.

The Millies got the tank back up and back to full speed. Unfortunately, the third pass had caused an erroneous firmware upload. The Omega could still make the tank self-destruct, probably, but any attempt to operate its weapons would be erratic at best.

The silencing attempt failed, and a couple of the daughter drones fell on the ground. Phaniel laughed haughtily, and the Omegas' pilots had to disengage from their second strafing run because the visual anomaly was back.

After having put its "shield" back up, Phaniel again took off, headed north and more or less followed the coast.

"Fuckberries!" Kat shouted. "Even in the future nothing works!"

The quadcopters retreated to their mothership, and fell behind the planes. The Archangel

leveled off at about fifty meters and maybe a hundred and fifty KPH, too slow and too low for most airplanes to tail comfortably, but in line with preferred flight envelopes for Angels. A quick question to Ithuriel confirmed that the visual distortion affected him, too.

The Omegas' pilots ended up having to triangulate the Archangel's position by checking against each other: one stayed above and behind Phanuel so that he couldn't directly see the anomaly, but just barely, and the others used that as a reference point. Irradiating the Angel in these conditions was difficult, and They were very sure that at least the guy flying above was getting way too many sieverts for comfort, but the small squadron managed to put some neutrons in the bad guy.

Kat was trying to get a clean shot through the cargo plane's exposed hatch (dropping off the mothership drones necessitated this, which meant that going supersonic with it would be a bad idea, but so far it seemed that the Archangel wanted to fly low and slow. However, every time she did, she got a headache from staring.

The flying wings switched to the attack pattern that they would use if they were carrying grenades, which they weren't; however it was enough to spook the Millies.

While the tank kept running towards Dallas - it looked like they had bypassed the current limiters on the wheel motors, which meant that it would probably either crap out in sight of the city, or have to walk in - they decided to try the wubber.

The wubber played a very loud chiptune at the Omegas' drones; the next screenshot showed a Millie asking a Frumentarius what that meant. The Omega assumed that they had figured out that someone or something had messed with the firmware.

The STDs dropped. The tank does not stop, but it might as well have; instead, it activated the *"man overboard, drop a waypoint and hold position"* routine (The Omegas' NAVCOM AI system was originally designed to be used on ships) which resulted in the tank essentially starting to slowly spin on one leg, since there was no water drift. The Omegas' drones kept performing mock attack runs and taking low-res screenshots, which showed Them that...

(to be continued)

Year: 988 (continued)

...the targets were still praying. One had stopped to retrieve a rifle and was starting to target the drones.

The drone was told to dive; while the Millie took aim, the other drones' screenshots showed that one of the Frumentarii got up from the prayer circle and took the hit instead of the youth. Flying wings were designed to fall softly, but could get someone hurt in a powerdive. The prayer circle was disrupted as they checked for wounds.

After receiving conflicting orders and interpreting them with a misuploaded firmware, the tank went into safe mode, as indicated by all its servos resetting to neutral. From there it should have been possible to restart it, given basic competence and a few minutes.

The Millies high-fived each other, spread their hands to their sky, and two of them got back in the crew compartment to see if they could restart it.

The STDs were briefly informed of the situation while they hoofed it to where the drones were. They were having some problems finding it, but were getting there.

Their orders were to disable the tank immediately, then deal with the people. They were also told to capture the escapees.

The drop troopers had a simple way to tune out speech from others. Since they were wearing pressurizable helmets, all they needed was to turn the noise canceling back on. Eventually, they came into the small clearing that the tank had created by "sitting down" there to find the Millies talking with the Frumentarii and tending to the injured one. The Omegas' two remaining drones were dodging rifle shots. The guy with the rifle was startled by the sudden appearance of what looked a lot like 1950s sci-fi spacemen, but didn't shoot.

The STD's thought that they had been able to turn off the tank once they got in range of its radio.

"Desolators? No, wait..."

"Wait! Parley! We aren't-"

To a man, the Omegas' troopers dropped the bass. Responding to training, the Omegas' Frumentarii hid behind something metallic (the tank's leg), grabbed the Millies' rifle, and returned fire. The drop troopers were better armored than their aeronautical nature suggested, since they only had to go down, not up. Still, it was a high caliber rifle and the Frumentarius was well-trained; one of the troopers went down from a face shot.

The Millies were on the ground clutching their bowels, but the Omegas' former operatives were using the tank to hide from the sound waves.

And then the tank started up again. The wubber was shot from the Millies' attempt to use it earlier, so instead, the smart mortar fired all its smoke grenades in random directions. Now nobody could see a damn thing.

The Frumentarii and Millennium Force members coughed and cried; the drop troopers kept

their pressurized helmets on. It sounded like the Frumentarius in the tank managed to start it - yes, the legs stirred and it got back into rolling stance. The other Frumentarii was bravely trying to get the Millies on top of the tank.

The drone was unable to perform a proper dive with all the smoke, and only glanced the Frumentarii trying to help the Millies up; furthermore, the tank's operator was doing an amazing job at using the tank's legs to shield his comrades from the wubbers - the sonar array on the tank must've come back up, because it was as if he could see through the smoke.

"Leave me!" the injured Frumentarius called out. He was tossed a rifle, and started taking pot shots at the Omegas' men. Again, he was improbably lucky, and scored a couple of arm and leg hits.

The tank started up! The Omegas' former agents must have been able to tie the vomiting, incapacitated Millies to the various greebles on top of the turret.

The Omega ordered all the stops pulled. Another firmware reset order was sent to the tank, which started to roll, and Their last drone was told to steer clear of the active shooter. Knowing how Their relay hierarchy worked, the Frumentarius fired at it, and hit a wing membrane, triggering the evasive program.

Without relays, the Omega no longer had visual on the scene; all They perceived were blue blips moving around a large red blip. The blue blips climbed on top of the red blip.

When the drone was back up and the Omega got visual again, the tank started to roll. Their men were over and under it. The Omega told them to stop the tank by cutting the actuators on one of the legs from below.

The spider tanks' joints were well protected against enemy fire, and there was a bottom turret specifically to deal with this sort of attack. However, it was either offline or they didn't want to use it.

"AVE HUMANITAS!"

One of the drop troopers took a bayonet and jammed it in the inside of the leg's knee. The high-current discharge was enough to vaporize the bayonet and throw the soldier under the rear leg, killing him messily. But the tank's leg gave, and the whole vehicle wobbled then started making a circle as one of its four wheels no longer touched the ground. Two Millies and one trooper were thrown.

The others recovered enough to fight back. The tank was still making a small circle at low speed as four brawls erupted on its top. The Frumentarii were as well trained in melee than the drop troopers were, but the latter were a bit impeded by exo-atmospheric armor.

The fight was brief and brutal.

"Deus vult!"

After a couple of casualties, the fight degenerated into a drunken boxing match as weapons and tools were thrown off the tank. Here, the Omegas' drop troopers had an advantage- they did not feel pain or fatigue, unlike the Millennium Force kids or all but one of the Frumentarii.

The MEC frumentarius sacrificed himself to let the Millie leader run off, taking a knife in the forehead.

Divine lightning hit once, twice, four times as Millies were killed. Each time the drop trooper fought through Divine punishment due to their conductive armor. Eventually, all but two bodies stopped moving and started getting cold.

"Omega... partial success," a raspy voice reported. "All traitors eliminated. Four Millennium Force agents eliminated, one captured, one is running. It's just me and Rufio here, and we've only got one good leg each, so we can't chase."

"DEUS VUL-" *crack!*

"I repeat, ALL traitors eliminated. We've got one boy scout, he'll be tied up tighter than a bondage slut when he comes to. Requesting medevac."

What followed was a rather endearing picture of the Millennium Force kid looking horrified as the two surviving drop troopers joined in a manly embrace and started making out.

The drone kept tracking the fugitive. It was a test of endurance between the Millie's legs and the drone's batteries as the two kept moving towards Dallas. The Millie had a cellphone implant, but the only way for him to get service was through the Omegas' own drone - he kept trying to call 911. Unfortunately, there was not enough bandwidth to fake a voice call, and their implants were voice-only, no speech to text.

The butcher's bill for this escapade stood at five STDs dead, two salvageable; five treasonous Frumentarii dead; four Millennium Force kids dead, one escaped, one captured; two drones destroyed, likely three when the last one ran out of power since some of its solar panels got shot off, one spider tank damaged.

Most people going into a combat situation will carry a small wubber as a sidearm. The Millie who got away was either unarmed or had a bolt-action rifle.

The drone couldn't track the Millie for much longer; it lost half its solar panels, and the circling movement that it had to do to follow someone moving on foot did not make for efficient gliding.

The medic was dropped off at the spider tank; the medivac helicopter was unarmed, but it was also reasonably bulletproofed and nuclear powered, so it could at least relieve the drone when

it came to tracking.

The two surviving drop troopers were patched up - one would need a new leg, but that was life in this army. The doctor couldn't help but show off for the captured Millie as he reconnected the other trooper's leg with his field kit, then asked him why wouldn't God heal amputees. The Millie remained silent.

The Millie was told that there was nobody there to convert since both the troopers and the doctor died once already - but they would take his name, rank and serial number if he wanted.

Once the troopers were in good enough shape to get to a hospital with no rush, the doctor tended to the believer, much to the latter's disgust; it was a few scrapes and contusions, and the Millie shivered when a dollop of biogel closed his only somewhat serious wound in minutes leaving barely a scar.

A bit of time later, the medivac helicopter comes back; the drone finally crapped out. "There was a farm in the distance, and they were cooking - I saw the chimney smoke and presumably so did he."

The Omega was out of canopy drops for the moment. They may have gone after the Millie with conventional forces, but at this point it would have amounted to invading Heartland. A construction helicopter carrying a troop coach could have done it.

The Omega asked the MFer captive about what the traitors talked about.

The Millie, whose name was LeRoy Banks, whose rank was none because the MF did not use ranks, and whose serial number was likewise none but he did give the Omega his implanted cell phone number, stated that he didn't see the point in discussing witnessing to those who were already damned. From how he talked, it was fairly obvious that during the conversation between the Millennium Force operatives and the Omegas' Frumentarii, the former did most of the talkin'.

Phanuel resumed flying at transonic speed towards the Bay. It would get there in an hour if it kept up. However, the radiation was starting to fatigue it. The Omegas' planes had an easy time keeping up and could target it precisely. "Slow" neutrons still moved at about Mach 4, so it was not hard to hit the Angel with them.

The quadcopters kept trying, and failing, to keep up with Phanuel and the airplanes; they would get there eventually. The Archangel didn't seem to understand why it was slowly but inexorably slowing down. Instead, it spread its wings and flared up and back, slowing down. The Omegas' airplanes passed it.

Phanuel watched the planes zoom past it, and ascended, possibly thinking that it had fooled them. The Omegas' pilots doubled back and made another irradiation pass, narrowly missing

each other.

The Archangel cried in triumph. Its instincts told it to climb higher, out of the reach of mortals, and so it did. Which was a fairly stupid thing to do, since the Omegas' jets actually had an easier time flying at altitude, while it did not. The quadcopters kept trying to catch up; the big airplane was no longer pressurized, but climbed anyway - the oxygen masks for the passengers dropped as they were intended to and were quickly put into use.

One thing the Angel could do that the Omegas' planes could not was hover. After being caught and even surpassed in height, it cried out to the heavens in frustration, the trumpet blast hitting another of the Omegas' flyers. This time, however, he had an altitude advantage, and recovered; he was out of the dogfight for a few minutes, but not down.

Seeing San Luis Obispo in the distance, with some of the lights still on, Phanuel seemingly gave up on trying to outfly modern aircraft, and made a mad dash for it.

Phanuel cried again in impotent anger at the large airplane flying past it; the trumpet blast hit the tailfin, causing a wobble that the pilot just powered through.

As the nuclear-powered quadcopters kept trudging on at a comparatively tame 200kph, the other planes got back on Phanuel's tail, hitting it with deadly neutrons.

The large plane made a low, slow pass above the Alex G. Spanos Stadium, which had been hastily converted into an arena, and dropped off the martial artists, Kat and Ithuriel.

The plane was emptied by a parachute jump after telling people that Ithuriel would be landing and please don't shoot at him. The pilot, surprised that the airliner didn't really have to be used in any sort of kamikaze attack, landed it safely at Oakland.

Ithuriel considered himself a Man of Misrayim, not an Angel of the Lord. As for insults, he was not particularly good at it, but given that he had the brain of an Angel, it was likely to resonate.

The combat engineers and volunteers took a few minutes from converting the stadium's PA system into a wubber array to hang a huge "RESIST AND BITE" banner featuring a snarling mustang (from the local football and soccer teams). The stadium's big screens said:

COME GET US PHANUEL

After a quick explanation on theology, the crew changed the sign at the Omegas' approval to:

PHANUEL CAN'T EVEN KILL A BELIAL/WORTHLESS BEING

The arena was as prepared as it could be. People were on the bleachers as if they were there to spectate (and to provide bait) while Ithuriel stood in the field with martial artists, Kat and the Desolators.

Due to the impossibility of getting a proper uniform with minutes to spare, and also the fact that armor doesn't do much to protect against an Angel or its weapons, it was decided that this would be a shirts vs skins game... or it was just an excuse to get Ithuriel half-naked again. Yep, looked like it was. This time around, he finally got the joke, and stayed shirtless under the elbow and shoulder pads.

Kat and the martial artists were in the field along with Ithurie. The volunteers were ready to get off the bleachers and swarm the Archangel once it was down.

Phanuel should have recognized this. The Omegas' pilots reported that they were getting close to Obispo.

The Archangel landed on a fist and a knee making a small crater in the middle of "his" half of the field. One of the wubber operators started calling out the fight as if it were a ball game. Narrative causality got the Omega at least this.

The Omega decided on a standard attack pattern for Angels. Kat on irradiation while everyone else circled around and rope-a-dope against the sound walls.

"Kat, do you have any organic material in those synthetic muscles?" The Omega said.

"Omega, are you coming on to me?" Kat laughed. The datasheet for her current frame indicated that it was mostly synthmuscle, but since it was built in Pacifica, the sensors and some of the actuators were organic. Who knew if it would work.

Ithuriel seemed a little angry. "I can take it. I feel it."

Again, these two had been acting strangely aggressive. Ryan Andrews suggested a while ago that it was because Phanuel was the Archangel of Hope.

The Omega quickly pointed out to Their fighters that *big damn heroes* are something the other guys do - the strength of humanity was awesomeness by analysis.

"Phanuel has taken our bait, let's not take his."

After landing, the Archangel let out six small trumpet blasts in rapid succession, throwing two of the Omegas' martial artists back; one seemed to have suffered a brain hemorrhage, from her telemetry. Ithuriel called Phanuel a coward for hitting a woman. Kat taunted it by saying *why don't you pick on someone your own size*.

This arena's soundwall was built in hours, rather than days, so it was by necessity approximate. Phanuel could easily push past it a few times, requiring the Omegas' martial artists to fight defensively more often than not. Plus, his six wings and enormous sword gave him a lot of reach.

Ithuriel tried to engage Phanuel in what looked a lot like theatrical swordfighting - he was trying

to use the sword he got from Urist to sunder the larger being's weapon. Phanuel was strong and fast, and handled the person-sized sword like it was a gladius. One of the Omegas' martial artists dived under it and broke one of the Archangel's sandaled toes before sliding off. The Being barely acknowledged the moment of pain, but it was enough for Kat to get behind it and empty her goop tanks all over its white feathers.

With a mighty blow, Phanuel yanks Ithuriel's original sword out of his hand! The artifact has a visible dent when your cameras see where it has landed; it's a worthless piece of iron now.

At the same time, however, Kat emptied her goop tank all over Phanuel's back; she had been quiet through the fight, hoping that the Archangel wouldn't attack her first due to her size. The white, sticky substance hardened quickly around the Archangel's feathers.

Kat threw the nozzle of the right tank at Phanuel's back to make it turn, then squirted a last dollop from the left.

"Usually I want at least one date before I empty my load on someone's face, but you can be an exception." She blew him a kiss and jumped backwards. Unbeknownst to Phanuel, her radiation emitters were still on.

Ithuriel crouched, took off, and used his Dwarven sword to make a swooping dive at the Archangel, who lifted its wings in defense and made a mighty jump... and then noticed in midair that it couldn't really shake off the goop fast enough. Instead of zooming past Ithuriel, it made a soft landing. This was enough for one of the other martial artists to get behind it, under its wings, to try and break the terminal phalanx. The Omegas' men were starting to get tired, but Phanuel would die of a thousand cuts (or broken bones).

Ithuriel made another pass, dwarven sword held in front of him. "DECAPITATIOOOON!"

Phanuel ducked his head and made a vertical lunge with his sword, missing Ithuriel by inches when he pulled up. Ithuriel flew past, got the axe, and then ran back into the fight. During this move, Kat got in again and tried to punch Phanuel in the back. Unfortunately, the partially biological battle frame didn't work as intended. Phanuel didn't really seem to accuse the hit. She lost a hand to the Archangel's sword, couldn't care less about it, and kept her neutron sources trained at it.

After numerous strategic defeats, a dose of aerial humiliation, and several dozen times the neutron intake per cubic centimeter than the Bikini Atoll, the Archangel Phanuel had in fact been reduced to a known threat, except with bigger pecs. The people on the bleachers were starting to cheer and jeer depending on who scored a good blow. The Omega only lost four or five people so far, all but one volunteer.

The fight continued, fairly by-the-book as far as Angel fights went. The Omega lost another couple of fighters, saw another few die only to be brought back numb and confused. One of

Phanuel's wings was dragging limply behind it. The Archangel showed remarkable grit by continuing the fight with the same speed, although it had to use the other two wings on that side to cover it.

Kat lost one of the radiation emitters in a bid to give Ithuriel room to sunder Phanuel's weapon by attempting a bodyslam against the sword itself.

That didn't hurt Kat any, obviously, and she kept painting her target while trying to not hit others.

Ithuriel and Phanuel engaged in swordplay again, with the former specifically trying to damage his sword with the dwarven axe.

The Omegas' martial artists and even Their volunteers kept buffeting the Archangel while the incomplete sound wall slowed it down. Phanuel seemed to be too busy with fighting multiple opponents to emit more than a few trumpet blasts, and while They didn't yet have silencer drones in, they did little but throw people to the ground. Each one elicited a loud boo from the bleachers.

The mothership drones almost caught up. The fight had lasted longer than an hour... Fortunately, the Omega had enough men and women on the field that it was possible for Their martial artists to duck out and get a sip of water, laban or energy drink; the Archangel had no such advantage, although neither he nor Ithuriel were sweating much.

A fairly large group of believers were outside the arena, wanting to see what was going on.

"Citizens, this is a high-radiation area and will be off limits until environmental cleanup is complete."

A construction MEC repeated this in a monotonous tone and got through to most believers. The ones who remained, however, were dragged outside by volunteers and/or detained.

Meanwhile, in the arena, the dance slowed down imperceptibly as the combatants tired out... but it was no less deadly.

Phanuel was about to cut a volunteer in twain with his great sword, when Ithuriel, who was trying to break another wing, ran to the side and blocked the blow with the dwarven axe. The two blades ended up stuck in each other, about half the sword's width worth. Phanuel stared for a moment in disbelief. Then the two Angels engaged in what amounted to arm wrestling by an interposed block of metal.

Now they were both sweating. Ithuriel was losing, and kneeling.

"Prepare to be twice damned, rebel!"

Ithuriel looked up and answered with a low growl.

Phanuel laughed. It was discordant, bloodcurdling, even demonic in the classical sense.

He took a mighty breath, and got ready to blanket Ithuriel in the full fury of an Archangel's trumpet blast....

...and that's when the silencer drones *finally* showed up.

Having never abandoned their target, the drones followed the instructions that they had been given 500 kilometers and two hours ago. The formation was imperfect, and rather than a mantle of silence, they generated distortion. Phanuel's trumpet blast was modulated into more of that otherworldly hysterical laughter, and had little effect other than making everyone's ears ring.

Nobody heard Ithuriel's reply, but Phanuel felt the downward yank on the sword, making it drop its guard.

The two Angels stood still for a good twelve seconds, which in this sort of fight, was an eternity. The other martial artists descended on the Archangel's body and broke every wing bone they could reach. Then the beefiest guy in the group jumped on the Archangel's shoulders, grabbed its face, and stuck four fingers in its eye sockets.

This time the Archangel screamed in pain. The overall effect was a truly Hellish sound, with tinges of dubstep. One of the believers outside shouted that this must have been the two hundred million demons erupting from the depths, and the crowd dispersed.

Nobody wanted to take chances. The blinded Angel was beaten to death by two dozen people. Ithuriel had to crawl out from under the mob. It was a gruesome spectacle, resembling ants killing a lizard, but by the end of it, the once-mighty Phanuel was on the ground, blind and deaf, bruised all over, its fingers bent at unnatural angles and its wings hanging on by skin and tendon.

The few believers that tried to get into the stadium got the full force of that unholy scream, and quickly begged to be let go. Since the Omegas' volunteers weren't there to play cop, they were allowed to run away with the rest of the people who came to see what was going on.

Ithuriel didn't waste words, largely because pretty much everyone in the stadium had a bad case of burst eardrums. Instead, he brought down Urist's axe on Phanuel's neck. The Archangel had nowhere to shimmer to, and the beheading was witnessed by at least a gross of people. The axe's edge was still precise enough that the Archangel's head only fell after somebody kicked the body.

Acting quickly, Ithuriel grabbed Phanuel's head by the hair like Medusa's, and held it up for all to see.

A few seconds later, the Archangel's body burned into cinders that wafted away in the breeze,

followed by the head a moment later.

What followed was a solid minute of a hundred and fifty deaf people cheering discordantly until their throats hurt.

A quick status report request indicated that there were no demons pouring forth from the depths, either in the stadium or everywhere else.

The Battle for Pacifica, the Sixth Trumpet Judgement redux, was over.

As soon as data was backed up and medical emergencies were handled, which clogged the network for a few seconds, Mr. Bissattini came out of the safety cell he shared with Hank and broadcasted in low resolution across the territory. He hadn't really been in the fight, obviously, but doing the message from a capitol building that had been turned into a bunker, with the fortress and still-burning town in the background, gave him some amount of wartime-leader respectability.

"Major combat operations in Pacifica have ended. In the battle of Pacifica, her people and our allies prevailed. And now our coalition is engaged in securing and reconstructing that country. In this battle, we have fought for the cause of liberty, and for the peace of the world. Our nation and our coalition are proud of this accomplishment -- yet, it is you who achieved it. Your courage, your willingness to face danger for your country and for each other, made this day possible. Because of you, our world is more secure. Because of you, the monster has failed, and our home is free.

Only a very small number of sympathizers tried to help the inhuman aggressor in its attempt at a genocide; they are in custody and they will be given a full and fair trial under Pacifican law. I encourage all of you to show the same spirit of human brotherhood as we rebuild!"

With that, Bissattini put on a construction helmet and joined the work crew busy removing all the trap stuff from the capitol building; it was a classic political pabulum, but in fairness to the guy, he did put in a good day's work and did what the foreman said.

What was puzzling was a document that ended up on his desk the minute the desk had been put back in place. It was a petition from the country's believer to call for a day of hope and repentance to be observed next year the same day. The document referred to the incessant prayer of Ely LeVey and followers having spared the territory in her longest day.

The Byers family was dragged to a public trial. Before it even began, the Glorified grandma said that they all welcomed martyrdom.

"Tough cookies. We don't have the death penalty around these parts."

The trial was paradoxical. The Byerses dismissed their lawyer and all but demanded to be martyred. Since they plead guilty of all charges, it was also very short. Their fate was to live the rest of their days in the unused Angel trap, the prison that was built above their home. Given that the space existed and was extremely secure, the territorial government simply decided to appropriate it- putting the Byerses in general population would be dangerous to them, so they got their own facility.

"Behave yourselves and in twenty years we may even let you put on an ankle bracelet and work your own fields."

"You fool! The world doesn't have twenty years! You are not the Judge. God is."

"Ma'am, did you just call a federal judge a fool?"

"Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit."

"Bailiff, get these people out of my sight. Or feed them to the Sharkticons, either good."

Billy was declared not guilty by reason of inability to discern, and ended up in the care of a friendly Christian family who kept foster eligibility by dint of doing a good job with foster kids and not trying to prevent the kids in their care from attending science class.

For the first few days, of course, Legionaries found it impossible to pay for anything. A few bad apples existed in every army, and took advantage of it. But the incidents were rare and handled quickly. Unsurprisingly, the Omega had twenty times as many prospective volunteers as They had casualties, which allowed Them to expand Their roster.

The Desolators knew the drill. They would have to do most of the hazmat cleanup themselves - it was what they signed up for and the reason why they lived in luxury when not deployed or training. For more mundane work like landmine removal, reconstructing the capitol, and so on, the work was done mostly by locals.

One of the first job that the new recruits got, while they went through induction, was handling the grunt work for mine removal. They suffered a handful of casualties, but learned quickly that being a soldier wasn't a game even in the Millennial Kingdom.

As far as the Legion went, the Omega had found that splitting it into army groups could work well. In the future, the various sub-units would happen by specialty or mission. The Legion of Light protected all humanity.

"The Legion of Lights protects all of Humanity! I don't care if you're from Misrayim or Pacifica, and don't think that being from Roma makes you any better, those of you that don't pussy out will be Legionaries by the next season! But until that day you are pukes."

You are the lowest form of life on Earth. You are not even human fucking beings. You are nothing but unorganized grabastic pieces of amphibian shit! Because I am hard, you will not like me. But the more you hate me, the more you will learn. I am hard but I am fair. There is no racial bigotry here. I do not look down on niggers, kikes, wops or greasers. Here you are all equally worthless. And my orders are to weed out all non-hackers who do not pack the gear to serve Humanity in my beloved Legion. Do you maggots understand that?"

"AVE, LANISTA!"

On the first day of imprisonment, the Byerses were treated to a choir of believers who sang hymns from above... that is, their farm.

LeRoy Banks, the captured Millennial, was interrogated gently, before trial.

LeRoy told a noble, bright version of the mess that the Omega had watched unfold between Pacifica and Heartland. A daring raid on The Only Light's base in Central America to free some captives, the Archangel of Hope appearing and taking charge of the wretches locked up in the caverns, following the shimmering light into enemy territory and telling Phaniel what they knew about Pacifican customs, and finding shelter with a friendly farmer couple, then bravely resisting the Frumentarii until they saw the light and stealing their spider tank.

"Kenny will have such an inspiring story to tell, and we will win many souls to Christ!"

The kid really, really got into it, to the point that the psychquisitor had to check with her colleagues if anyone had given him ecstasy.

On the debt side, during Pacifica's Longest Day, the Andrews and Tethys factions within the underwater town came to a head. There was a mini Civil War going on, for all intents and purposes. The Omega supported Andrews. He was there first.

The Omega sent a polite but firm warning to Tethys that if she didn't quit, she would have to deal with the Legion herself. Her help was appreciated, but unnecessary, and pursuant to Pacifican property laws, Andrews was there first and did the initial work to set up the underwater town.

Tethys and her merpeople asked for, and got, three days to pack their stuff, As for the rest of the year, at least that was the last anyone heard from them. Ryan Andrews sent Mr. Bissattini a golden golf putt as thanks for handling the matter.

Tethys and Andrews were definitely willing to negotiate, especially after the point was made to them that the Omega had most of the heavy artillery AND something that they both wanted.

Tethys also wouldn't be against moving to the Atlantic coast, but who would pay for it? The initial resource investment was significant, although she was likely (but not guaranteed, as the case would be with Andrews) to pay everybody back. Effectively, Nova Roma would have had to subsidize the new settlement by lending it the entirety of their production capacity for a year.

Andrews could also move -- he was confident that he could self-finance another base -- but his long-term price was pretty steep- fifty seats on the Reach, two of which guaranteed regardless of screening (himself and wife).

One oddity in all of this was that ace reporter Cameron Kirk Williams had not shown up once.

As far as Kenny went, the Omega decided to send "repairmen" to install a remote on the plane and divert it to Pacifica.

The operation was completed using whoever was available. Fresh after Pacifica's Longest day, getting a group to Dallas was relatively easy, and Christian airport security was mostly theatre. All that the Omegas' guys had to do was put on overalls and print passes to get access to the charter plane in the sparsely frequented airport.

The repair-and-upgrade operation went without a hitch. Over the Atlantic, the plane "encountered turbulence" by the simple expedient of shaking around the flight stick. The pilot called for prayer, but panicked when the turbulence didn't go away. The remote control faked depressurization, the oxygen masks on the plane dropped, and the whole crew and passenger manifest inhaled a lungful of nitrous oxide.

Once free of human control, the plane gently came to a stop at the Campo Imperatore airfield in Italy, where a legionary detachment grabbed Kenny.

The airplane reached Greater Jerusalem without its most important passenger, much to the consternation of the others. Kenny is tried in Pacifica, privately, and kept in cryostorage.

A cursory interrogation indicated that he had nothing to add to his story, other than a mild amount of bragging about having been able to "hack" the tank.

Cryostorage had about a 6% chance of functioning correctly. That said, the people who did cryonics experiments would love to get their hands on such a lucky individual. It could even have allowed for repeat freeze-thaw cycles.

Kenny would be sentenced to a few centuries in jail. However, if he got *extremely* lucky, he could emerge into whatever utopian or dystopian society the Omega created after averting Judgement Day. If he missed out on Heaven, he would have to learn how to use the three seashells.

Pacificans decided to not have wartime laws, so if this did reach trial, Kenny would, like LeRoy,

be tried for murder and grand theft tank.

The Feast of Tabernacles this year was... interesting. The Pacifican delegation weren't sure whether to debase themselves asking for forgiveness, or praising the Temple for having been so forgiving, so just to be sure, they ended up doing both. It was a pretty silly spectacle to look at. For their part, the Misray delegates were happy to not be at the end of the table for once.

All through the year, TOL "zombies" came in small groups, mostly through the Misrayim-Central Africa border. The Omega had already dealt with that, so it was not a big deal.

The cleanup in Pacifica, as well as the almost complete destruction of the state capitol, left the territory a little ragged. Mr. Bissattini asked the Omega to lend Their logistic skills to get the economy back on track.

Jeb has been very moody recently. He was happy that the neutron source MacGyvering worked, but in retrospect it was good that They didn't let him fly that mission. He understood that Val was gone, but it was really hard on him.

In terms of Tethys and Ryan, the Omega had Tethys move in return for a round of Nova Roma production to keep them both happy. In return, They request access to his bio-mods and other items.

Tethys gladly accepted, and her followers made their way through the calm seas in what was likely to become a founding myth of their civilization if they managed to survive. Interestingly, Weaver went with them. It had been somewhat boring lately, and although she was firmly into men with legs, running escort/support for a bunch of merpeople greatly appealed to many of her crew - it was the ultimate sailor's fantasy after all.

The Omega offered Andrews a spot anyway in return for discounts on access to biomods and gene tech.

Tree Of Life had better stuff than the Omega. Of course, it had been in their best interest to be very generous with it. Ryan Andrews wanted a seat on the Reach (well, two) and a say in 48 more, to ensure that at least some of the people who moved to Alpha Centauri would be of Capitalist ideology.

Ryan Andrews waited patiently in one of the capitol's secondary meeting rooms for the Omegas' decision. He gave his best Walt Disney impersonation and laughed, once more the master of his domain.

"I always suspected that you controlled the economy, Omega, now I all but know it. I accept your terms, eagerly.

Now, I was hoping to start selling this in a year or two, work out the kinks and so on. Would you kindly summon a medical worker, and have bop me on the knee?"

The Omega obliged. The staff nurse was a little weirded out about the request, the "bop" wasn't particularly strong, and nothing happened. At the third attempt, Andrews' leg shot up.

"I am, as you know, 112 years old, and - please measure it with your high-speed camera lest you think I lie - that was a reflex reaction."

"Uh, sir, that's not possible. You'd have to either reconnect the limbic system to the pituitary-thalamic axis, which would immediately trigger your pain reaction, or basically recreate-

"...a complete, new reflexive pathway within the spinal cord and medulla, yes. We derived it out of jellyfish neurons. It does not, alas, allow me to feel - yet - but imagine, not having to discover by smell that you have lost a finger to a soldering iron, or having to scan for blood when you cut onions! Your MEC soldiers would be able to get back in the fight immediately, no awareness training. Well, less awareness training."

The nurse whistled in admiration.

"Jellyfish, eh?"

"Well, nudibranch, technically. I suppose it's more of a sea slug. Well, it was, now we just get the stem cells out of an artificial womb, same as every other mod. I assure you that any claims you might've heard that our augs are made from aborted fetuses or the tissue of little girls are Christian propaganda!"

The patent deal was signed. The Omega immediately reverted the design to the public domain, and put the appropriate sections of Their vast industrial into production for every one of Their followers. The Omega estimated that within three years everybody would get the implant, which came down to a simple course of injections. Any long-term side effects could probably be dealt with when the world wasn't due to end in a dozen years. A more direct involvement of the Omegas' logistics capabilities would make the technology available almost immediately, next year.

"I understand. I plan to live forever, of course, but barring that, I'd settle for a couple thousand years. Even 500 would be pretty nice. Plenty of time to pick up a trade."

Ryan Andrews returned to his home under the water, which soon grew a small topside dock; while the agreement meant that the new implants could be produced by any bio lab that passed standards. He took full advantage of having a head start for production, and being able to advertise his product as "the original and best."

Tethys' people began the long trek around South America to reach their new home. Fortunately for them, even Cape Horn was tamed by the Millennial Kingdom. Ryan, ever the gentleman, sent a supply barge.

During the Temple announcements, the fates of Kenny and LeRoy were not discussed (so pick please!), although prayers were raised for the Byers' family, that they would endure until their liberation. This was a strange change. The Omega had gotten used to the Temple asking for extradition.

Ely LeVey was a pest in Pacifica, but that's all she had done. Chaim Rozenweig figured out the supergrain, and decided that it was benign. Tsion was uncharacteristically silent, but the Omega knew he had been working with Cameron.