

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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ROBERT RUNTÉ

"Dr. Willett?" came the voice in his earbud. "We have a problem."

Willett sighed. *Seriously? A guy can't even take a crap without something going wrong?* He finished up, carefully collecting everything in his biohazard Ziploc to keep from contaminating the scene with germs not of this time, and tucked it into the hidden pocket of his scratchy homespun robe. Willett took another moment to restore his dignity and his in-charge expression before stepping out from behind the screen of Terebinth trees.

Mannheim, Chair of Religious Studies, was waiting for him a dozen meters directly ahead. Willett shot him a *what-is-it-this-time?* look, and Mannheim nodded towards the clearing.

And there, between them and the clearing, was a donkey cart piled high with crude pottery. Its enormous plank wheels were half the height of the driver, and the cart itself rose another three or four feet above that.

Willett turned to trace the line of sight from the cart back to the main blind. *Damn!* The cart was smack in their way.

Willett dampened his emotions, got control of his expression before re-establishing eye contact with Mannheim. He gave Mannheim a little shake of the head to say, *Never mind, not a problem.*

Mannheim looked incredulous, gestured dramatically towards the cart with both hands as if to say, *Are you not seeing this?*

Willett reached up as if to scratch an itch under his *keffiyeh*, activated his hidden headphone. “Relax! He’s just selling a pot to that guy. Then he’ll move on.”

“Not so much,” Mannheim’s voice said in his ear.

Willett turned back, watched in growing horror as the driver set chucks on either side of the oversized wheel, unhitched the donkey, and started systematically setting out pots on either side of the cart.

Damn it! Again, Willett had to force himself to take a deep breath. *Right. Leadership. Why I’m here.*

“Where’s our linguist?” Willett asked. “What’s-his-name, that new post-doc?”

“With the crew running the drones,” Mannheim replied.

“Get him up here, talk to the guy. See if he can get him to move.”

By the time the weedy young post-doc appeared, the potter had the last of his pots set up, and was hawking to passersby. The linguist immediately engaged the potter in animated conversation.

“This isn’t going to work,” Mannheim said. “He’s babbling on about being sent by his village to find a potter, everyone in the village looking to buy a pot. Even if the guy believed him, why would he leave? *All* the villages are on their way here today.”

“Seven thousand must seem like the crowd of a lifetime,” Willett agreed. “Like getting the concession at the local coliseum.” He wiped the sweat off his neck as he tried to think of something. “No time for subtlety. Get a couple of the grad students up here and just push the damn thing out of the way.”

“That could be reactive,” Mannheim cautioned.

“Of course it will be reactive,” Willett snapped. “But it’s that or a three-hour video of a guy selling pots.”

“You’re the Field Director,” Mannheim said, reaching up into his own *keffiyeh* to switch to the grad students’ channel.

Willett continued staring intently at the cart as if he could move it out of the way by the application of will alone. No one would care about Willett’s methods, as long as they got the footage they’d come for.

Willett was distracted when the potter drove a punch into the linguist’s face. So much for talking! Not that he hadn’t wanted to smack that pissant upstart himself on more than one occasion.

What was taking those students so long?

And then, there was one of the grad students—Davies, was it?—stepping in to take out the potter. A couple more students materialized out of the passing pedestrian flow to grab hold of the cart and begin pulling.

Pull the wheel chucks away first, Willett thought at them furiously, as the cart rose three inches and then stopped all forward motion. The youngsters continued to strain against the load, oblivious to the problem of the chucks. *Ivory tower idiots*. He should have insisted on bringing a couple of his engineering students with him.

The last two grad students appeared at the front of the cart, grabbed the donkey's yoke poles, and added their strength against the chucks, and the cart was suddenly up and over. As the cart jumped forward, the two grads at the back began tossing vases back into the cart.

Willett winced at the distant sound of breaking pottery. He didn't care particularly about the cost to the potter—what was the fate of one potter weighed against this moment in history—but they were beginning to attract attention. Before he could say anything to Mannheim, he realized that the two men now holding the back of the cart had their heels dug in and were trying to *stop* it.

Those aren't our grad students!

Davies must have realized it at the same moment, because she exploded into ninja-like action, taking out the man on the left in a blur of speed; but the man on the right blocked her strike, twirled, and kicked out with his own foot to take Davies squarely in the jaw. Davies was down!

The next thing Willett knew, the cart was the center of a melee, more of the locals piling on against the graduate students as they fought to keep the cart moving. The linguist, on the other hand, struggled to his feet and ran for it. Typical.

As the clamour around the cart grew, both Mannheim and the weedy linguist converged on Willett.

"This is way over the top!" Mannheim complained. "How is this not reactive? We need to abort."

"To hell with that!" Willett hissed. "And keep your voice down!"

"Sirs!" the linguist wheezed, clearly out of breath after trotting the short distance from the cart. "Need to talk!"

“We’re well past talking, I should think.” Willett couldn’t keep the condescension out of his voice. Seriously? Talking with the locals? When there was a full-fledged riot over there?

But the linguist was shaking his head, pulling on Willett’s arm. “Need... talk to you!”

Siding with Mannheim, eh? Well, this is between tenured faculty, and none of your concern. The last thing I needed is interference from some pompous little post-doc.

“Don’t you understand what is at stake?” Mannheim continued. “Something this reactive could change all of history!”

“Rubbish! Why would some argument over a potter’s cart be remembered by anyone even ten minutes later?”

“Speaking Aramaic—” the linguist interjected, practically shaking Willett now.

Willett yanked the idiot’s hand off his arm and shoved him away. *For Christ’s sake, I don’t have time for this!*

“—with—” the linguist persisted, “—an Italian accent.”

“Latin, I think you mean,” Willett said, openly counting coup. *What was the Linguistics Department coming to? ‘Golden Boy’ my ass!*

But the linguist was shaking his head emphatically. “No, *not* Latin. Not Romans. *Italian*. What I’m trying to tell you. The vowel sounds are all wrong.”

“Italian?” Willett turned back to the scene at the cart, now partly obscured by the surrounding crowd. But now that he was looking for it... those two ‘locals’ facing off against Davies were bouncing on their toes in a Tae Kwon Do stance. Not locals at all! “They’re bloody Papists!”

“I thought the Pope had signed off on this,” Mannheim protested.

“Not our Pope,” the linguist said. “The vowel sounds are shifted way beyond us. These guys are from the *future*. I mean, not the one we’re from; one at least a century after us.”

“That must mean we failed,” Mannheim said.

Willett rolled his eyes.

Mannheim spread his hands for emphasis. “Why else send a team back themselves? If we’d already brought footage back decades earlier?”

“Lost or stolen, maybe,” the linguist suggested. “Contested version? Accusations of censorship, key material being edited out of the officially released version? Or even that we faked the whole thing, like the moon landings.”

“None of that matters,” Willett insisted. “We’ve got a job to do, and we’re going to complete it.” He jabbed Mannheim’s chest to get him focused and moving. “Start the cameras *now* so we can document this papal interference. And tell the students to stop messing about and break out the Tasers.”

“They’re way ahead of you,” the linguist said, gesturing towards the cart. Davies was closing in on the last of her opponents, who was backing away through the crowd, apparently fixated on the left sleeve of Davies’ robe. The crowd was already dispersing, but slowly as if people had lost interest, not panicked, as they would have been had they suspected anything other than a fist up Davies’ sleeve.

Willett nodded in satisfaction. Apparently no one suspected a thing.

Good thing the papist hadn’t been similarly armed.

Wait, what?

“Why weren’t they armed?” Willett muttered aloud.

“They must not have known about us,” Mannheim pointed out. “That’s proof we never made it back.”

“Then why set up the cart precisely there, if not to block our cameras? If not to deliberately replace *our* footage with *theirs*?”

The whiz-kid linguist rubbed his jaw as he considered, a gesture Willett would have found pretentious even in tenured faculty. “I don’t think so,” the linguist said. “I only got a glimpse, but the layer of hay in the cart was way thicker than needed for pots. I think the cart is their blind.”

“And they just *happened* to park it right in our way?” Willett shook his head.

“They would have chosen the same sight lines as us, only they managed to be closer in,” the linguist speculated. “We should have thought of a cart. That’s actually pretty good.”

“Still no weapons,” Mannheim pointed out. “If they knew about us, they’d have come armed.”

“Not necessarily,” the linguist argued. “They can’t risk deadly force against anyone from this time, because there is no way to predict

the repercussions of disrupting some random lineage.”

“They could still shoot *us*,” Mannheim persisted. “We’d be fair game, since we don’t belong to this time either...”

But the linguist was shaking his head again. “Doesn’t matter. They can’t risk shooting us either, because we’re still from *their* past. Any one of us—or more likely, one of our descendants—might turn out to be important.”

“They wouldn’t need to kill us,” Mannheim said. “Don’t tell me they won’t have invented something by then that could knock us out without contaminating the scene or ruining the timeline—had they known they’d encounter us. Ergo, they didn’t know about us; ergo, we don’t make it back.”

“Or,” the linguist speculated, “since we’re both here now, and they arrived after us, they must have left on their mission while we are still in the middle of ours. Since we’re still here, their timeline hasn’t changed yet to reflect that we brought back the video decades before they left.”

“What?” Willett gave his head a shake to clear it. “Never mind all that. You two go help with the cart. I’m going back to the blind.”

Mannheim trotted off smartly, the scrawny linguist trailing along behind. As Willett turned to go the other direction, the hairs on the back of his neck registered that *something* wasn’t quite right. He turned back to discover the linguist had stopped to blatantly stare at some guy in the crowd. *What the hell? Could he be more conspicuous?*

Apparently the answer was *yes*, because the moron started walking *backwards* to keep pace with the stream of locals heading for the clearing, still staring at the guy full on. Willett wanted to strangle the little twerp. Was he *trying* to pick a fight with another local?

Before Willett could reach into his *keffiyeh*, the fool suddenly skirted around the guy he’d been staring at, and ran full tilt back to Willett.

“What’s up?” Mannheim’s voice whispered in Willett’s earbud.

How the hell should I know? He’s still 200 metres away. But what he said out loud was, “You’d better tune into this.”

Arriving, the linguist wheezed out, “That guy... has a... scimi... scimitar!”

Why couldn’t we have had Olsen? Olsen was a sound fellow, not prone to random panic. Willett could have worked with Olsen. This

weenie, on the other hand...

"He has a *scimitar* under his robe," the linguist repeated, as if saying something significant.

"It's a rough age," Willett explained as patiently as he could. "Merchants go armed."

"Scimitars are Ottoman Empire!"

"What?"

"Early adopter?" came Mannheim's suggestion through their earbuds.

"First known occurrence is 9th century," the linguist insisted.

"Damn," Willett swore as he threw himself into action. "Mannheim: rally the grad students!"

Passersby turned to stare as Willett pelted past them, but there was nothing for it. The target turned at the sound of Willett pounding up behind him, so Willett leaped the last two meters to tackle him before he could draw his weapon.

Having the element of surprise, Willett had the intruder pinned in seconds; he could hear Mannheim and Davies run up.

"Get off me, you fool! We're here to help!" the pseudo-trader complained.

"We?" Willett demanded.

"Caught that," Mannheim said, and turned away to order the grad students to fan out checking for other scimitar-wielding intruders.

"We're from the University! We're here to stop them!" Willett's captive seemed more exasperated than combative.

"What?"

"Let me up! We think we got here ahead of them, but they could be here any second!"

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"The New Caliphate!" When Willett didn't respond, he continued, "From after your time, apparently. Fanatics. They think that by stopping it at its source, they can end Christendom's early domination, open up all of history for the Prophet."

"And you're here to stop them?" Willett was no racist, but this guy profiled as Muslim.

"The New Caliphate aren't legitimate Sunnis!" his captive exclaimed. "They're heretics! They seek to tamper with the Holy Word of the Qur'an!"

“Tamper?”

“Christ is one of the prior prophets cited in the Qur’an,” the linguist explained, having finally caught up to Willett.

“They have to be stopped! Let me up before it’s too late!”

“How do I know you’re one of the good guys?” Willett persisted

“And why scimitars? You had to know they were anachronistic,” the linguist said.

“They broke in during the night,” their captive answered, addressing the linguist. “We hadn’t realized our security had been breached until hours later. We had only minutes if we were to get here before them. We just grabbed what we could find in the university’s museum. It was either scimitars and bows, or modern blasters.”

Willett’s left eyebrow went up at ‘blasters’, but before he could ask when they were from, the linguist broke in again with, “What do you mean, ‘only minutes’? It’s time travel. You can arrive whenever you want.”

“You’re from before Parma’s Parallax Principle? My god, who are you people? Of course you can travel anywhen, but only within a few hours parallel to launch events in your own timeline. Everyone knows that.”

“Who are you exactly?” Willett asked again.

“Professor Moshtaf, Cairo. I’m here with Professors Aadan and Little. And what few grad students we could grab that early in the morning.”

“Let him up,” the linguist said. “He’s obviously a scholar, not an assassin.”

Willett had already come to that conclusion, but it irked him that it might look like he was taking direction from a mere post-doc. He reluctantly got off Professor Moshtaf; formally introduced himself and Mannheim, then tagged the post-doc dismissively as ‘our linguist’, so there’d be no mistaking who was in charge. Not that Willett could actually recall the post-doc’s name.

As Moshtaf stood and started brushing himself off, Willett scanned the crowd around them for anything suspicious. A few people had been watching the confrontation, but most were studiously ignoring any troubles not their own.

“Do you know how they’re disguised?”

Professor Moshtaf snorted. “What disguise? They’re not trying

to blend in. They're *trying* to be disruptive. The more intrusive the better."

"Damn!" Willett recognized the obvious, once Moshtaf said it. He scanned the crowd again, this time looking for blatant terrorists. "Mannheim, you copy all that?"

"Yes. I'm setting grad students as spotters around the clearing's perimeter. I could use more bodies, though. Can I pull some off cameras?"

"No," Willett said, thinking fast. It wasn't just that he still hoped to complete their original fieldwork. "We might need the video to deconstruct events, should things go south."

"Understood."

Moshtaf shook his head. "That won't work. Once a timeline's disrupted, it's gone. You can't go further back to get a do-over."

"Because," the linguist posited, "if it's a significant enough change, your line isn't there any longer to come back from."

"Precisely," Moshtaf agreed. "If we can't stop the New Caliphate before they change history, only a team from the newly established timeline could come back—and why would they?"

"And even if someone in the new line wanted to change things back to how they were," the linguist reasoned, "how would they know to come *here*? Once they erase this line, there's no reason to come back to this precise spot, at this precise moment, because nothing significant will have been recorded as happening here."

"We're here, though," Mannheim said in their earbuds. "So that means everything's okay, right? That our timeline stays as *the* timeline, because otherwise we never would have existed and wouldn't be here now."

"That just means they haven't changed the future, *yet*," the linguist said.

"He's asking about Parma's Parallax Principle now, yes?" Moshtaf said, guessing at the part of the conversation he couldn't hear. He took on the demeanor of a professor repeating a painfully obvious question posed by a first-year student. "'How is it possible to change one's past without altering the timeline such that you yourself may no longer exist, thus cancelling out the possibility of your having gone back to effect that change?' A classic paradox that was only addressed by Parma's application of the parallax principle."

Willett closed his eyes and briefly massaged his forehead, trying to get a handle on things. Then he shook his questions off because none of it mattered.

“We don’t have time for this. You,” he said, pointing to the linguist, “go help Mannheim. You,” he said, addressing Professor Moshtaf, “come with me.”

“I hardly think so.”

“What?”

“I’m from a later period than you, so I am necessarily senior.”

Willett had had just about as much nonsense as he could take. As if Cairo could ever match the prestige of his own institution! “How exactly do you figure that?”

“Well, would you take orders from a Centurion if the Roman Guard gets involved? You’re as backward to me,” he said, pointing with his chin to a spot over Willett’s shoulder, “as those Romans are to you.”

Willett turned to see a group of three Roman guards approaching, no doubt dispatched as crowd control.

“I hardly think—” Willett started to say, but turning back, realized Moshtaf had vanished into the crowd. “Damn.”

“Willett?” Mannheim’s voice brought him back to matters at hand. Moshtaf’s group could look after themselves.

“Coming,” Willett answered and quickly joined Mannheim and the linguist in the center of the clearing. The linguist was deep in conversation with half a dozen of what looked like locals.

“They’re in,” the linguist said as Willett came up.

“What?” Willett demanded.

“The Catholics,” the linguist said, indicating the six individuals with him. “They understand the situation, and are willing to work with us.”

Willett scanned the group a second time, annoyed with himself for not initially noticing hands rubbing bruises, the general shakiness of the two hit with Tasers. Those two would be next to useless for hours yet. Still...

“Set ‘em up,” Willett told him, jerking his thumb towards Mannheim. The linguist introduced Mannheim to his charges, translated as Mannheim added them to his picket around the perimeter.

Willett had to admire Mannheim’s placement: close enough in

to be within eye contact with whomever was coordinating from the clearing, but far enough back that they would be *behind* where the terrorists would likely initiate their attack. Given the grad students had only Tasers, their only chance against opponents armed with these “blasters” would be to come up behind the assailants. Mannheim had even managed to get most of his people sheltered behind the massive boulders and outcrops that characterized the site.

He started a slow scan of the growing crowd—then suddenly felt the linguist’s hands clenching his arm.

“What now?” he asked, turning to regard his mistreated arm, the offending hands, then the linguist’s stricken expression; finally following along the post-doc’s line of sight to what he was staring at.

There stood a humbly dressed peasant, holding the bright red outline of a rectangle, which he was panning across the neat rows of the audience facing him. As Willett watched, a peasant woman rushed up and ordered the rectangle away, pushing it back into the folds of the offender’s robe. The man sat, clearly embarrassed, and the woman returned to her own seat at the end of the row.

“What the hell?” Willett murmured.

“Future iPad?” The linguist had let go of Willett’s arm, apparently in control of himself again. “He was scanning the crowd like he was recording.”

“Who’s the woman, then?”

“Tour guide?” the linguist ventured.

Willett suddenly saw the tidy rows of excited people lining the clearing in a new light. They were all dressed as peasants, but closer examination revealed they were all dressed as *identical* peasants: there was no variation from one garment to the next, meaning the clothing had been mass produced, not homespun at all. And beneath the identical *keffiyehs*, the haircuts were wrong, the personal grooming too good to be from this time.

As what he was seeing was still penetrating, two more neat rows of ‘locals’ arrived, led by a guide in a distinctive blue *keffiyeh*, holding a tiny flag of the same fabric above his head to make it easy for the others to follow. The guide showed them to their designated spot and they all sat.

“It’s busloads,” the linguist said. “I’m hearing eight, maybe nine different dialects so far.”

“Freaking hell! The future’s selling *tickets* to this?” Willett asked, incredulous.

“The cost of time travel must have come down,” the linguist agreed.

“That’s insane! How can you hope to hide this many people from the locals?”

The linguist winced. “I’m not sure there are any locals.”

“What!” Willett stared at the linguist, then spun around, taking in the whole clearing and the crowd that was assembling within it. He tried to spot genuine homespun, or a dirty face... and failed.

“But that means...”

“An audience of seven thousand, but none of them from now,” the linguist concluded. “The Catholics didn’t know about the tours either, so this lot must be from after. We’ll have to ask Professor Moshtaf if he knew. I’m guessing not.”

“We can’t video the audience.”

“Not if it shows you your great-great grandchildren. That’s got to be some kind of paradox.”

Not what had been worrying Willett. “The conspiracy nuts will be analyzing every frame we bring back. One stray shot of those tourist robes...”

“It’s sacrilege!” Mannheim squeaked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” the linguist said. “Gathering an audience from across time is kind of miraculous, if you look at it that way.”

Willett was no theologian, but this was nuts. “It feels... disrespectful somehow.”

The linguist shrugged. “Well, it is a timeless message.”

Once again, Willett shook it off. *Whatever*. “Focus on the terrorists. Nothing else matters until we—”

There was an eerie, oscillating whine.

Instantly recognizing that the sound must mean blasters, Willett ran towards the noise. He had to push his way through the panicking multitude, but arrived in time to see Moshtaf, scimitar held high, running directly at the terrorist from behind. The terrorist was firing indiscriminately into the fleeing crowd, a razor-thin line of superheated air tracking a slow, lazy circle of death among them. The terrorist’s back was almost completely turned to Moshtaf, but Moshtaf’s battle cry alerted him; he spun round, blaster still cutting a deadly swath

through whatever was in front of it, when there was a sudden thud. An arrow had sprouted out of the terrorist's neck, and he fell; first to his knees, then slumped slowly forward, his blaster burning a trench in the earth as his aim dropped. Burrowing deeply as the weapon was brought to bear directly downwards, the blaster dug a grave for the terrorist to tumble into as he finally released the trigger.

Moshtaf spared only a moment to confirm that the heretic was indeed dead, then signalled to the archer, who had stood up from behind some smouldering boulders, to go right, while Moshtaf himself trotted off to the left.

Willett debated stopping to dig out the blaster, then thought better of it as he got a closer look at the slag hardening around the sneaker-clad ankle sticking out of the freshly dug trench. He raced back towards the clearing.

Why in Christ hadn't they brought proper weapons? No one had anticipated facing blasters, of course, but a good automatic rifle could have matched it for distance and accuracy, if not for brute firepower.

He arrived in time to see Mannheim putting the boot to a Tasered terrorist.

The linguist showed up with Moshtaf in tow. "Professor Moshtaf says there's likely one more—they usually work in cells of three."

Willett acknowledged with a curt nod. "Given these two came in from 90 and 180, I'm guessing the third one is coming from 270, so they could get a surround."

"I'm on it," Mannheim agreed. "But can you and your Cairo friends check 360, in case they opted for the high ground?"

Willett bristled at 'Cairo friends', but now was not the time. "Roger that." Then to Moshtaf, "Let's check the high ground."

There was a *thwack* from the outcropping above them, and the third terrorist fell dead at their feet, the cross-bow fletches protruding from his back barely visible.

"I placed a couple of grad students up there when I first arrived, to spot anyone approaching," Moshtaf said, perhaps a little smugly.

But Willett was not the sort to begrudge credit where credit was due. "Well done. How sure are we that there were only the three?"

"Their energy usage allowed us to calculate the mass-displacement, indicating two or three individuals."

Willett nodded, looked around at the milling throng of tourists.

A woman clearly identifiable as a medic strode past, keeping pace with a stretcher that floated at shoulder height toward the scene of the carnage. Willett did a double take, then realized there were hundreds of emergency workers, troops in a variety of camouflages, mixing with the tourists. A man in a red *keffiyeh* and Asian features approached Willett, said something in Mandarin.

“What the hell?” Willett complained.

“English?” the guide asked. Frowning, he pulled out a red rectangle, spoke to it in Mandarin, held it up to Willett as it said, “There are no Anglophone tours scheduled within this time launch. From what era are you?”

“Bugger off,” Willett said, knowing from his earlier conversation with Moshtaf how future generations were likely to view Willett and his team.

“We need to clear this area before the speaker and His party arrive,” the rectangle said, translating for the guide.

Willett just shook his head.

Moshtaf said something in Arabic, the red rectangle translated, and the Guide snorted, then went off to herd tourists out of the clearing.

“Whenever they’re from, this disaster must have been what ended the popularity of attending at focal events,” Moshtaf said. “We haven’t noticed tourists on our previous missions.”

“Provoked tighter regulation,” the linguist guessed. “At least all the dead and wounded seem to have been from that future, not anyone local to disrupt the timeline.”

As they stood there, the dead and wounded were whisked away. The surviving tourists were herded into colour-coded groups, protected and restrained by troops from different eras, as the guides sorted out who was going home, and who opting to stay on. Hoversleds hauled odd bubble-shaped equipment that erased the scars on the landscape left by the blaster. As the various machines finished, new groups of tourists entered the clearing to replace those who had fled back to their own times. Willett was startled to see a double row of bald-headed men in red robes file in to take their place in the clearing.

“Are those... Buddhists?” Willett demanded.

“You primitive Christians are so ethnocentric,” Moshtaf complained. “As if this sermon was of interest only to you. You think you have a monopoly on truth? On the Word of God?” He shook

his head in disdain and disappointment. “This sermon is part of the World’s heritage, a significant moment in our dialog with Allah.”

“Primitive?” Mannheim echoed, joining them on the central mound that would shortly serve as a stage.

“Excuse me,” Moshtaf said at once. “I of course meant ‘historic’. My English gets me in trouble sometimes.”

“You think the sermon is still going to happen?” the linguist asked. “That this cleanup is going to be sufficient?”

Moshtaf shrugged. “This or one of the others. Personally, I prefer the one where He repudiates the worst of the old laws; whereas I’m pretty sure this is the one that gives rise to Mathew 5: 17-20. But ultimately, it depends on whether any of the locals actually come, or if the noise and rumours of violence chased them all away. Has to be at least a few genuine locals to witness, of course, or there won’t be any record of the sermon.”

“One of the others?” Willett asked.

“Sorry, I keep forgetting you haven’t got to Parma’s Parallax Principle yet.”

“Which is?” the linguist asked.

“Never mind,” Moshtaf said. “If you don’t know, I certainly can’t tell you. Which reminds me, I need that blaster you took off the terrorist you felled.”

“Not a chance,” Mannheim said at once. “We captured it fair and square.”

“Hardly the issue,” Moshtaf said. “That blaster is from your future.”

“So?”

“Give him the blaster,” the linguist said, as if it were an order.

“You are not in charge,” Mannheim reminded him stiffly.

“You don’t think Director Willett will recognize the obvious paradox in your having a working model of a blaster before it’s been invented?” The linguist looked pained. “Please!”

Willett had indeed been contemplating the implications of having a working blaster before anyone else, but reluctantly put visions of fame and fortune aside when he worked through the linguist’s reference to ‘paradox’.

Moshtaf pointed at the linguist with a professorial, “he’s got the right answer” gesture. “Can you image the disruption to the timeline

if that weapon came into play decades earlier? How many lineages would be severed, how many descendants never born? Any pre-knowledge is dangerous, but a blaster in your world would be worse than—well, worse than when that Stuka Trumpet fell into the hands of Joshua at the siege of Jericho.”

Mannheim blinked. “What?”

“Get Moshtaf the blaster,” Willett commanded. “And get everyone to their places for videoing. It’s almost noon. He will be here any minute.”

“About the Parallax Principle...” the linguist began, following along behind.

“No,” Moshtaf said, with such finality that the linguist stopped in his tracks. As Moshtaf followed Mannheim back to get the blaster, the linguist spun on his heel and headed towards the outcropping where the third terrorist had been.

Willett personally saw to everyone getting to their assigned positions, including getting the papists’ cart set up in a mutually agreeable vantage point. Satisfied he had done what he could, he retreated to the main blind to await developments.

As Willett oversaw erasing everything that had happened up to now, and instructed the camera crews to focus on only His local entourage when scanning the crowds, he spotted the linguist still out there on the outcropping, in animated conversation with another non-local. *What is that idiot up to now?*

Willett activated his mike and roared at the linguist to get back to Camera Three at once. The linguist literally jumped, momentarily jolted out of his tête-à-tête. He gestured, *just a minute* in the general direction of the blind, and continued talking.

Willett, fuming, reiterated his warning, adding more graphic detail as to what would happen to the post-doc’s career prospects if he didn’t get out of camera shot this second.

The linguist ignored the order, starting back towards the main blind only when the other youngster broke off and left.

“What is he *doing?*” Willett asked no one in particular. “I told him Camera Three. Why is he coming here?”

They had already started filming the sermon when the twerp finally arrived back at the blind, having had to circle in from behind.

“You are so fired,” Willett said over his shoulder to acknowledge

the linguist's return.

"You don't understand," he said. "I got one of Moshtaf's grad students to explain the Parallax Principle to me."

"Umhum," Willett said, focused almost entirely on the events in front of the cameras.

"It's that the timeline has a certain elasticity. Major events are going to happen even if you mess with the details, because it's about the times, about unstoppable trends, not the individual. Going back to kill Hitler as a child doesn't stop the Holocaust because it turns out it was Himmler who became Führer."

"Will you stop talking!" Willett said, annoyed at the distraction. Couldn't this supposed genius see that the sermon had started? Had this moron no sense of history?

"Or maybe it *was* Himmler the first time, and somebody went back and stopped him attending the rally where he got picked to head the Nazi party, and so *we* ended up with Hitler."

"You're blathering," Mannheim said. "That wouldn't always apply. Like here and now."

"But that's precisely what I'm talking about. If you go back to the historical record, there are a half dozen possible nominees. We think we know which record applies to our guy out there, because His is the record that matches the closest, goes the farthest. But there're a dozen false starts, guys who were minor prophets who might have been Jesus, except, turned out they weren't."

"What are you on about?" Mannheim demanded. "There is only one true—"

"But don't you get it?" the linguist interrupted. "The more pivotal an event, the more attention it attracts from the future, and so the more likely someone's going to try to tamper with it. What if—just what if—all those other historical nominees weren't competing prophets, but the traces of previously truncated timelines? They're *all* him, all the same guy, just that the historical *records* place him in slightly different places doing slightly different things simultaneously, because the future keeps messing with us?"

No particular surprise to Willett, Mannheim clocked the linguist. Willett would have to censor Mannheim for hitting a post-doc, of course, but would note in his report that Mannheim had been provoked.

The linguist struggled to his feet, one arm pulling himself up

against the blind, the other hand holding his bleeding nose.

Willett sighed. "I'm putting you both on report."

"Me?" The weedy linguist was indignant. "I didn't do anything! *He hit me.*"

"Arguing religion now of all times is just completely irresponsible." Willett gestured towards the scene taking place in the clearing. "We're videoing the most important sermon in the history of mankind, so nobody cares about your stupid little theories. So can you just shut up for once?"

"But," the linguist said, "it's about—"

"You're fired," Willett interrupted. Much as he hated to admit he'd forgotten, Willett had no choice but to ask. "What was your name again?"

"Dr. Parma," the linguist answered. ■



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