

Corporate Godhood

Kallidora Rho

As the glass anti-grav elevator carried Kika Zip silently up past floor after floor of the jagged needle skyscraper, the activist found that she could watch in real time as the corporate hierarchy of the Babylon Conglomerate unfolded before her eyes. Each atrium they passed was more luxurious than the last, and Kika's experience being black-bagged and roughed up by the two implants-for-brains security goons flanking her had not robbed her of her ability to be outraged by the sheer, sneering decadence of it all. Leather couches and gold-plated doors, marble floors and glass walls covered in pieces of corporate holo-art that were as soulless as they were priceless. Even the middle floors attested to a state of sacrosanct wealth unthinkable to the mere mortals walking around outside, beneath the smog; as the elevator ascended to the building's upper reaches, Kika was greeted by a level of opulence she could only associate with one of those crumbling old-world cathedrals. It was absurd—and disgusting.

And they were still climbing. All the way to the very top.

Eventually the elevator came to rest, and the doors opened with a faint hiss to reveal a huge room that left even Kika lost for words. The walls and ceiling were made of wood—real wood!—with figuring that was stained almost vantablack with some kind of dye, whilst the floor beneath their feet was a single pane of impossible glass so clean and clear it was all but invisible. Projected against its underside was a hologram of the night sky with each Babylon mining colony picked out and lit up. The effect was so vivid it made Kika feel that she was in danger of falling straight down into the fathomless black expanse. The cosmos inverted—an impression not helped by the large waterfalls lining the room like columns, each one held under the sway of an unseen antigrav generator so that the water flowed up

instead of down.

“Welcome,” came the amused voice of the room’s sovereign. “You must be the irritating little gnat who’s cost my company a small fortune.”

From behind her desk, Lilix Madison, President of the Babylon Conglomerate, uncoiled with the unhurried grace of a serpent still digesting its meal as she rose to greet Kika. The woman matched her surroundings perfectly in both scale and opulence. Dark of eyes and hair, she wore a short, scaleprint dress made of slick rubber and, above it, a designer blazer that evinced the latest fashions, carefully sculpted to accentuate the corpo’s wide shoulders. The whole outfit was belted tight to her unapologetically fat, plumpened figure without any attempt to hide it or flatten it away—after all, what did Lilix Madison have to be ashamed of? At her fingertips, she wielded all the wealth and might of the largest of the Big Five. She was as proud of what she consumed as what she produced. And if anyone did look at her askance, she could buy their life and ruin it with a snap of her fingers.

Kika stared daggers at the corpo, but smiled as she worked up a huge wad of saliva in one of her cheeks and spat it onto the ground.

“Charming,” Madison sniffed. “Give her some room. I trust she’s been disarmed.”

Her security guards responded with such instant, unquestioning obedience that, if she hadn’t known better, Kika would have wondered if they had been brainwashed by the shiny neuroimplants showing at their temples. It was the kind of thing Lilix Madison would love to do to her people given half a chance—but it was said to be fundamentally impossible, no matter the technology. Some aspects of humanity would always remain sacred, even from her.

“It was you, yes?” The rap of Madison’s heels on the ground as she began peacocking and pontificating was instantly annoying. “The so-called activist who’s been running sabotage on my mining operation in the Taurus Mountains? Alias: Kika Zip. Legal name: Eli Spencer.”

“Fuck you,” Kika growled at the mention of her deadname. Tasteless, even for a corpo. Lilix Madison should have known better. No solidarity between sisters.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes,’” Madison smirked. “You and your little group of deadbeats have made yourselves quite the irritations. Breaching dams, slashing tires, hacking machines—all very expensive. But I’m afraid that’s all over now.”

"If you believe that, you're even dumber than the average corpo," Kika spat back, matching her smirk for smirk. She knew what was likely in store for her—debt-mitigated personhood, indentured corporate servitude, transportation off-world to disappear into some hellhole asteroid mine—but she also knew that the only way to deal with an over-privileged shit-stain like Madison was with a shit-eating grin on your face. "There's a dozen of us out there, and I'm the only one who messed up hard enough to get scooped."

"That's true." Madison was just a few paces from Kika now. It was so tempting to simply lunge at her, but with her security guards still watching, Kika knew better. She already had plenty of bruises. Instead, she simply drew herself up and tried to match Madison's presence. Not easy, given her scrawny build, lopsided, dyed hair, and ratty streetwear. "Fortunately for me, you're going to tell me exactly where I can find them."

That merited nothing more than a scornful laugh. "Let me tell you a little something about solidarity," Kika mocked. "Something a greedy, lean-in assimilationist like you might not know. Us dolls have been hiding out in the hills and the slums for months. We're like family. We're like an army. I'd die for any one of them. I won't tell you a damn thing, and I don't care what you have to offer."

"Cute!" Madison giggled. "It's cute that you think those mangy friends of yours are worth dying for. Solidarity? Please! If anything, you should be thanking me for blazing a trail." Kika hissed at her; Madison effortlessly ignored it. "And it's cute that you think you have a choice in the matter."

"Take your best shot," Kika challenged. "I fried all the locator circuits in my implants long ago. I'm off the grid. You can't get anything from my wires. Torture? Take your best shot. The rest of my cell will be long gone before you're done chasing false leads."

Lilix Madison simply threw back her head and laughed.

"Such loyalty!" she cackled as her mirth died away. "Not something I'm accustomed to, in my present social circle. Yes, as soon as I read your interrogation transcripts, I knew you were perfect for my first."

At that, Kika froze. "Your... first?" Grim scenes flashed before her eyes. Madison seemed to notice her distress, and relish it. She turned away and began to walk slowly back to her desk.

"Do you know what we were actually digging for, in those mining operations you so gleefully sabotaged?" the businesswoman asked.

“Oil?” Kika shrugged warily. “I don’t really care. If it’s good for you, it’s bad for the planet. You were ripping up the mountains and the people who lived in them, and poisoning the air. That’s good enough for us.”

“Typical small-minded slum-rat logic.” Kika didn’t need to see Madison’s face to know the corpo was rolling her eyes. “Instead of accepting what trickles down from on high, you attempt to tear down your betters—bringing the wreckage down on your heads in the process. Riots. Sabotage. Terrorism. Anti-corporate violence of all kinds is getting worse by the quarter.”

“Good,” Kika sneered. “It’s been a long time coming.”

Madison ignored her. “It’s a flaw of human nature that the splendid rationality of competition and profit does not command the same respect as mankind’s older masters,” she declared. “Once, little people like you knew their place. Held in check by kings—and gods.”

She reached her desk and opened a heavy-looking metal briefcase Kika hadn’t bothered to take notice of. Against her will, Kika found herself craning her neck for a peek.

“We weren’t digging for oil under those mountains,” Madison told her, voice swelling with glee. “Something much older. Only the tiniest specks of the metal survive, but despite your best efforts, we were able to recover enough from the ruins of the first city to begin production. You should feel very, very privileged, you know.” She turned back to Kika to reveal that, in her hands, she was now holding a large ring of perfect, white metal. “Outside of this company, you’re the first person in ten thousand years to set eyes on an angel’s halo.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Madison arched a displeased eyebrow as Kika’s face oscillated between incredulity and anger. She couldn’t believe she was about to die for something this stupid. “Did all the anti-grav up here boil your brain or something? You’re talking about angels, yeah? Like in those old religious books?”

Kika had known a few believers in her time. Some good, some not. They were a dying breed, and Kika had never had much time for it herself. These days, you were more likely to hear about angels from a movie or a video game than from anyone who actually thought they were real—and even most of them had nothing on the kind of delusion Lilix Madison was spouting.

“So little faith!” Madison remarked, amused. “We’ll see about that.”

The corpo reached for something else from the case—a long set of tongs that reminded Kika of the ones she regularly saw scrapforgers use to handle hot metal. Madison took hold of the metal ring in its jaws and held it out away from her at a safe distance, then took up the dataslate resting on her desk and tapped a few symbols.

The white metal ring started to glow.

Its light was like none Kika had ever seen before. Certainly nothing like the bright neon lights and flashing billboards that adorned every street of every city she'd ever lived in. It seemed special, somehow—more precious, more tangible, and Kika couldn't decide whether the ring was glowing hot or cold. The closest thing it reminded her of was the sun itself, on those rare days in the mountains when both clouds and smog cleared. Too bright to stare at, too bright to ignore.

She still didn't believe it was an angel's halo. That was impossible. But when Madison suddenly advanced on her, Kika started to back away.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she demanded. "Stay away from me!"

"Stay still," Lilix Madison retorted. "I want to do this myself. Don't make me have them hold you down."

"What are you doing?" Kika repeated. As Madison got closer and closer, she began to feel a strange, tingling sensation washing over her body. It was gentle, in a way, but that provided little comfort. "I-is that thing radioactive? Or—"

Kika was torn between conflicting instincts. Sensing danger, her gut told her to run. But facing down a corpo piece of shit, her heart told her to stand her ground. To not back down. That was how she'd always lived her life—with her head held high.

It proved her undoing.

Once close enough, Lilix Madison surged forward with surprising alacrity. Kika made to duck under the blow, but faltered when she realized that it was already going high. Madison wasn't trying to hit her. She was aiming for a spot several inches above Kika's head. The last thing Kika saw before she froze was the one, single blemish on the glowing ring's surface. The corporate logo of the Babylon Conglomerate.

Madison opened the tongs and stepped away. The ring stayed exactly

where it was, floating in the air. Kika leapt backwards. The ring followed her.

Then the sensation caught up with her, and Kika felt as though her very soul was being touched by lightning.

In her time on the streets, Kika had jacked herself into the wirenet unprotected and tried every rat-piss stimchem under the sun. What the ring made her feel was like none of it. It was a hundred times more fundamental. Like some kind of unearthly magnet, it bonded to a part of her so deep and so essential, she'd never actually realized it was there. Kika became suddenly and overwhelmingly aware that, buried within her, there was a nameless presence, a thing that made her *her*—and that now, it was in danger. It was being transformed.

Panic seized her, but lasted no more than a heartbeat. She heard a sound like the harmonious ringing of some vast, distant, celestial bell—and with that, Kika was calm. She couldn't explain it, but she was. Her panic and fear had already become distant and detached from her. A memory, not an emotion she was actually feeling. Kika tried to claw her way back to it, but her ability to concentrate on anything at all was being dashed by the endless barrage of inexplicable sensations assailing her. Sunlight on her skin. Feathers brushing against her back. An aura of pure white that made her eyes throb. And in her ears, the distant singing of a beautiful choir.

"W-w-what... the f-... the f-..." Despite her best efforts, all that came out of Kika's throat was a weak, strangled sound. Somehow, horrifyingly, she knew why. She could no longer swear. "Oh g-god!"

Tears were welling up in her eyes. But peering past their foggy veil, Kika could just about see something even more nauseating.

Lilix Madison's leering, grinning face.

"Fascinating," the corpo purred. "I already can't get enough of this. You have the most amazing expression, you know."

"S-s-shut... u-up!" Even that took everything Kika could. She could feel unfamiliar words rising in the back of her throat, threatening to bend her tongue to their shape. As her legs turned weak beneath her, she stumbled to and fro, but the halo was inescapable. It was part of her now.

"It's no good," Madison explained gleefully. "A halo needs an angel, and there hasn't been an angel in the world in thousands of years. It's going to make do with the closest raw material it can find: you. The part of you that's divine, more specifically. Your soul."

“Nngnnoooo,” Kika groaned. She could feel tears staining her cheeks and drool staining her chin. There was no sense in denying what Madison was saying, not when she could feel it happening to her. Souls were real, and hers was being chiseled away at piece by piece, carefully sculpted into something perfect—and inhuman. If her supposed flaws were already disappearing, her colorful tongue would be far from the last casualty. “Sss-sstop!”

“No stopping it now.” Madison licked her lips. Her eyes flickered upward to the halo. “Look at that!”

Kika glanced up, and her eyes widened as she saw that the glowing disk above her head was secreting droplets of a strange, white fluid. As she watched, a drop fell and broke against her cheek, leaving it stained with a strange, white-pearlescent tint. More droplets soon followed, streaking across her head and shoulders.

“W-w-w-what iiiisss t... this?” Kika bleated.

“I’m not sure.” Madison sounded the furthest thing from afraid. Awestruck, perhaps. “Angel milk? Could be a new product line.”

She laughed at her own joke, then plucked a latex glove from her pocket, fitted it over her hand, and reached out to touch Kika. The activist couldn’t seem to find it in herself to recoil, not even when Madison ran her fingertips through her hair and guided a few locks in front of her face.

“My goodness,” she whispered malevolently. “I have a feeling you’re going to clean up very nicely.”

Kika twitched from shock. The strange liquid was washing the red dye out of her hair, leaving it a perfect, pristine white.

Such a visceral symbol of her unmaking spurred her resolve. Kika knew she had to do something. She couldn’t throw Madison off, but maybe she could start by throwing a few choice words in her face, in defiance of the weird, angelic programming coursing through her being.

Kika reached down deep within herself, searching for the fire of defiance that had moved her for her entire life. She brought it to her lips and spat it from her tongue, bringing all of her willpower to bear against the strange mental wall that kept her from profanity.

“Go f-f-f-f-fu... f-fuck!” Pronouncing the word made Kika’s heart rate surge jubilantly, even as it curdled something fathomless that was taking root

inside her soul. “Go f-fuck yourself you corporate-”

She heard it again; the ringing of a mighty bell. She felt it anew: the light of a nameless heaven warming her skin. Kika tried to go on, but after just a few words an irresistible compulsion wrested her tongue and filled her lungs with an eager fanaticism the likes of which she had never felt before.

“I... you s-should just go f-f-f- PRAISE THE LORD PRAISE HIM FROM THE HEAVENS PRAISE HIS ANGELS AND HIS HOSTS FOR WE HAVE COME PRAISE THE SUN AND THE MOON AND ALL THE SHINING STARS FOR THEY SPEAK HIS NAME PRAISE HIM PRAISE HIM!”

Once Kika found the strength to shut her mouth and bring an end to the strange ejaculation of faith that had forced its way past her lips, she slumped like the strings holding her up had been cut. As Madison peered at her with unwholesome interest, Kika’s eyes bulged wildly.

Those... those prayers. They were still curdling behind her clenched teeth, itching to force her tongue into their shape. Kika wasn’t sure she could open her mouth without them spewing forth again, flowing through her in a torrent she wasn’t sure she’d be able to stop for a second time. It was like trying to choke back on vomit.

Except instead of disgusting, it felt divine.

The torrent of devotion tasted like honey and nectar in her mouth. It came from on high, and as it flowed through her, Kika was filled with the unspeakable euphoria of being part of something greater. In the rush, all of her petty flaws and inadequacies were swept aside. She was whole, and full of a beautiful purpose. All she had to do was embrace it—embrace being a conduit, a vessel, an instrument of HIS glory and HIS light and-

Kika had to dig her fingernails into her skin to make it stop. Even her thoughts weren’t safe. And Lilix Madison was still there, gloating at her.

“Go on,” the corpo jeered. “Give in.”

The retort rose to Kika’s lips before she could think better of it. “Ssshhutt up corpo, I-I-I’ll neverrr- PRAISE THE HEAVENS ABOVE AND THE WATERS BENEATH FOR HE COMMANDED AND THEY WERE CREATED LET HIS WILL BE DONE FOREVER AND EVER UNTIL THE TRUMPET SOUNDS AND-“

This time, Kika only managed to stop once she had expended all the air in her lungs, once her chest ached and her head throbbed. She bent double to

catch her breath, and felt her humanity slipping further away by the moment. As she gasped, a droplet of the halo's strange secretions made its way into her mouth. Kika tried to throw it up, but felt it snake its way down her gullet and begin to paint her insides white.

She was turning into an angel.

"Give in already," Lilix Madison drawled, as Kika confronted the horror of her transformation. "I bet it feels good, doesn't it? To be part of something big and powerful for the first time in your miserable little life? Why fight it? You're going to be beautiful and strong, Kika. Let it happen. Be my angel."

"I'll nnnever give iiii to... to- HOLY HOLY HOLY THE LORD OF HOSTS PROCLAIMS HIS-" Light flashed before Kika's eyes as she spoke, and she felt herself drawn into it. Subsumed by it. She had to bite down on her cheek hard enough to draw blood to snap herself from the reverie. "I'd rather dddiee than g-give... give- GIVE YOURSELF TO HIS WILL MAKE OF YOURSELF HIS VESSEL AND LET HIS COMMANDMENTS BIND YOU UNTIL THE-"

Kika broke down coughing and choking. Something rose from her throat and fell out of her mouth. When she opened her eyes, she expected to see blood, but instead, the strange lump was drenched in white fluid. All the same, it looked like an organ.

"What's that, blessed one?" Madison jeered. "One more time. Let it all out."

Kika shook her head mutely, although she knew that refusing would do her no good. She could feel that it was only a matter of time before that strange chanting burst out of her again. Her own sense of resistance to what was happening to her was dwindling. Madison was dead on the mark. Becoming an angel felt too right, and too righteous.

The more she dwelt on that feeling, the more she felt its flame grow within her, the more Kika started to wonder if Madison was right. Maybe she should just give in.

Maybe that was the only way she was going to get her revenge.

Kika immediately found that there was nothing easier than opening herself to the endless torrent of will and divinity cascading down through her from her halo. Once she was no longer fighting it, the droplets of white fluid she lapped from her cheeks tasted finer than any food she'd ever had. Kika stood straight and tall, and, as her body swelled with strength, her

transformation overtaking her, the dwindling remains of her ebbing humanity were still able to take a little petty pleasure in the way that Lilix Madison's expression curdled from smug satisfaction to fear.

"AFTER THE GREAT TRIBULATION THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED AND HE WILL SOUND OUT HIS ANGELS TO GATHER THE ELECT WITH A GREAT TRUMPET CALL." Kika let it flow out of her willingly, even once her throat bled and blackened from the way her hallowed words scorched the air. "WORTHY IS THE LAMB WHO IS SLAIN BUT FOR THE RICH MAN IT IS EASIER TO PASS THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE YOU HAVE NOT KEPT HIS COMMANDMENTS SACRED YOU WHO HAVE NOT BEEN RIGHTEOUS YOU SHALL KNOW HIS FLAMING SWORD AS IT FALLS UPON THE EARTH."

Kika had never believed in the kind, forgiving god that religious types often preached about. Now that she could feel god inside her, she was learning that god wasn't so forgiving at all. Not to everyone.

"YOU HAVE BLACKENED THE SKY WITH YOUR SMOKE AND YOU HAVE POISONED THE WATERS WITH YOUR WASTE," Kika shouted, advancing on the corpo. Watching Lilix Madison retreat before her was an indescribable rush, equally satisfying to the shrinking part of her that craved revenge and the growing part that craved divine justice. "YOU HAVE DEFILED THE TEMPLES WITH YOUR ACQUISITION AND YOU HAVE CORRUPTED THE PEOPLE WITH YOUR GREED THUS DO I NAME THEE A SINNER AND THUS DO I CARRY OUT THY SENTENCE."

The newborn angel felt powerful. The part of her that was still Kika rejoiced in the opportunity to carve her power into the world, in defiance of all those who'd spent a lifetime spitting on her. The part of her that was divine was grateful for each and every chance to enact the will of her heavenly lord. The angel knew no doubt and no hesitation. She did not have her heavenly raiments, but she had more than enough strength in her body to strike down the sinner standing before her and bring a premature end to the carnival of blasphemies Lilix Madison was planning. The corpo looked afraid as the angel advanced on her, unhurried, but before the angel could lay hands on her, something crueler and steelier emerged on her face. Madison hurriedly picked her dataslate back up and studied the screen.

"Our modification isn't working," she said to herself rapidly, tapping symbols. "But perhaps if I reboot the inhibitor... tweak the algorithm..."

Kika did not try to stop her. Nothing Lilix Madison could do could threaten her now. She was an instrument of the divine, however distant he might have grown in the millennia since creation, and armed by his will, no

weapon forged of mortal hands could-

A sound rang out. The ringing of that great bell—only discordant. As if it was being cracked in twain. The sound split Kika's soul too, leaving her frozen and filled with an unspeakable emptiness. The sense of loss was all-consuming. She shivered from the sudden, nameless cold, and the grief she felt was all the keener for the knowledge that her connection with something great and transcendent had come so late, and been so brief. Tears welled in her eyes. The world around her seemed gray and without meaning. She could not see the use in opening her mouth, or raising a hand, or marshaling her will, so Kika just stood there, swaying, empty, basking in her own abasement.

It lasted for no more than a moment. What came afterward was worse.

Kika's ego, swallowed up almost completely by the divine, sputtered back to life and expanded, however reluctantly, to fill the void. She felt like herself again, even if she'd never felt filthier or more alone. When she felt the dawning of a new light upon her soul, she could not help but hearken to it. But as its first tendrils caressed the stillborn angel, she heard not the beatific singing of a heavenly host. Instead, a catchy, grating, and all-too-familiar advertising jingle.

Ba-by-lon!

"W-w-what is that?" Kika yelled, alarmed. She glanced around for speakers, but she already knew that the tune was coming from inside herself. From the halo. "What... y-you..."

"On behalf of Babylon, I apologize for the minor calibration error." Lilix Madison had recovered her confident sneer without missing a beat. "But I assure you, it's nothing that can't be fixed. Now, you'll be a perfect fit for the Babylon family."

"B-but... but... b-b-but..." Kika spat, like a defective hologram. Her head was in turmoil, and words did not come to her easily. She groped blindly and desperately for the peerless conviction that had gripped her moments before; to her surprise, it was still close at hand—but when it possessed her again, the words that fell from her lips were anything but sacred. "B-but you're j-j-jjuuust BABYLON'S MOST SACRED PRESIDENT COMMITTED TO BESTOWING SHAREHOLDER VALUE UPON ALL INVESTORS AND SECURING QUARTER-ON-QUARTER GROWTH FOR EVER AND EVER."

Stopping herself made Kika feel like she was choking on bile, and the look of unspeakable, crowing glee on Madison's face only made matters

worse. What she had just said was exactly the kind of twisted, bullshit, self-interested corpo-speak Kika had spent her entire life railing against. Feeling it seep into her soul and slip out of her mouth with such audible enthusiasm made her a traitor against all she'd ever believed. It was nothing short of hell.

"That's right!" Madison cooed unwholesomely. "I'm glad even a punk like you can develop a healthy respect for corporate hierarchy."

"Fu... fuuu... fu-" Kika still couldn't swear. The mental wall was insurmountable, and when she pushed, she gave way before it did. "FfffTHE BOOK OF THE BABYLON EMPLOYEE PSALM FORTY-THREE VERSE SEVEN STIPULATES COMPANY ASSETS MAINTAIN A FAITHFUL AND WORSHIPFUL DEMEANOR AT ALL TIMES WHEN DEALING WITH THE HALLOWED HIGHER-UPS OR... O-OR..."

Kika's voice died away into a coughing wheeze, and while she slowly recovered her breath there was nothing for her to do but bask in the afterglow of words that, despite every value Kika had ever held dear, felt every bit as blissful and as sacred as anything she had ever spoken.

The pleasure was as involuntary as it was undeniable. Like before, each word brought with it a strange, irresistible euphoria. Like before, there was an unmistakable, throbbing fullness and purposefulness that came from serving as the conduit of a higher power—even if that higher power was merely the logo on the outside of the building Kika was standing in. Kika was disgusted, of course. The presence that had touched her through the halo before had been terrifying, yes. Foreign, yes. Strange, yes. But there had been a certain righteousness to it that Kika could willingly surrender herself to, if it meant giving Lilix Madison what she deserved. The presence Kika felt now was anything but righteous. It was greed personified.

Thanks to the halo, her soul couldn't tell the difference. It just felt good.

"Psalm and verse... I suppose that's subsection forty-three, paragraph seven, from the employee handbook," Madison murmured, faintly impressed. "You know, you might be the only person alive who knows that off by heart. Frankly, there's plenty of junk in your new *scripture*—not that you'll care. It'll all sink in just the same."

The sheer horror of the prospect made Kika want to scream; the sound rose to her lips, she guessed even that was considered a breach of decorum.

No, not guessed.

Knew.

She could feel it happening, exactly as Madison had described. A hundred thousand words of rules and regulations pouring into her head, and more besides—slogans, financial statements, PR releases, corporate history. All kinds of nonsense—only it didn't feel like nonsense. Filtered through her strange, dripping halo, it felt like gospel. The information overload sent spasms through Kika's body. The transformation had resumed; her hair was now pure white, as were the tears that fell from her eyes, but what was happening inside her was far more distressing. Kika could feel that she was losing herself like before, and she knew that, this time, surrender would have no silver lining. All she could do was try to shut it out. To focus only on the incorruptible core of her convictions, and keep them fixed in her mind's eye.

"C-c-c-corporate s... sssss... types like y-y-you," Kika managed, "aare exactly whatsss wrong with t-t-this world! Killing the f... the ffff... the planet j-just for... god... just for p-PROFIT IS KING GREED IS GOOD BLESSED ARE THE JOBMAKERS BLESSED ARE THE SHAREHOLDERS BLESSED ARE WE WHO SERVE UNDER THEIR GUIDANCE AND DEVOTE OURSELVES TO THE ASCENDING LINE OF- nnnnooooo!"

Lilix Madison laughed as she watched Kika drown in her new, twisted faith. As Kika bent double and clawed at her own throat, the corpo drew closer to her and used a long, plump, manicured finger to guide Kika's eyes upwards.

"I think you're getting the picture," she cooed, face glowing with sadistic pleasure. "But tell me, angel: what do you think of me? Of your new master?"

It seemed like a trick question. Giving Kika something to bring her remaining, ebbing hatred to bear on felt like a lifeline—but as she answered, she realized just how far she had already fallen.

"I h-hate you!" Kika spat. "Y-you and everything you stand f- YOU ARE MY EMPLOYER AND MASTER AND I AM THY EMPLOYED HOST BLESSED BE THE OWNERS AND EXECUTIVES- nnnno, I don't... you're betraying society, betraying the entire planet, betra- PRAISE BE THE MESSIAH THE CHOSEN HERALD OF THE SAINTED BOARD-D Iiiii will n-never serve y-you! You're a disgrace to tra-AND THEY WILL SING OF HER THE FIRST TRANS SAINT OF CAPITAL SHE WHO SHATTERED THE CEILING OF GLASS AND LENT IN FOR ALL OUR SAKES PRAISE HER PRAISE LILIX MADISON DAUGHTER OF BABYLON!"

Kika failed to suppress the vile hagiography coursing through her. In the end, it came out of her mouth with unparalleled eagerness; her stomach curdled from the knowledge that the tears in her eyes were not grief, but

simply overwhelming, awestruck faith.

She believed what she was saying. Every word.

Kika didn't *want* to believe it—but as a street rat and a punk, she was no stranger to hard truths. At first, Lilix Madison's undeniable greatness seemed like yet another hard truth she had to accept, like the fact that corporations ran the world. Little by little, though, the hardness was melting from her heart.

Wasn't it true that Lilix Madison was breaking boundaries? Blazing a trail?

That had always sounded ridiculous to Kika—but not anymore. It just made sense. Who was more productive than Lilix Madison? More profitable? More wealthy? Everyone should aspire to be like her. Trans women especially.

It just made sense. No, better than that.

It was a matter of faith.

"How enthusiastic!" Madison purred. "I take it things are starting to sink in, yes?"

"M-Ms. Madison," Kika whimpered. Yet again she was lost for words—but this time, for the stupidest reason. She was tongue-tied by her sheer admiration for the woman standing before her.

"That's right." Madison licked her lips. "Welcome to the flock."

Kika trembled. Her hair was pure white now, and the strange fluid bleeding from her halo had even left her skin tinged an unnatural pale. The many tattoos that had been lovingly, painstakingly engraved across her body had faded completely.

In their place, Babylon's logo. One on the back of each wrist. Stigmata.

Kika found that she could not muster any anger—so she stopped trying. Her old self was falling away. She let herself feel what came so naturally to her now: joy. She was part of the flock. Suddenly, it was all she'd ever wanted. She could hear them again. The peals of the divine bells. The heavenly choir.

Ba-by-lon!

“THANK YOU,” Kika said slowly, her voice strangely redoubled. It was her own, but it echoed still with the strange, unearthly authority that had moved through her before. “THIS ONE IS PROUD TO BE A MEMBER OF THE BABYLON FAMILY.”

Madison laughed longer and louder than ever before, her plump body heaving beneath her expensive clothes with a mirth that was tinged by absurd mania. In her previous life, Kika would have mocked it as a supervillain’s laugh, but now it seemed to her immaculate. Beatific, just like everything else about Lilix Madison.

Such as the way she was drooling faintly. Such as the way her cheeks were utterly, ravishingly flushed.

Such as the way she was visibly, obviously hard.

“Proud,” Madison cooed, licking her lips. “Pride. That’s good. Not too proud, I hope. That’s a sin, right? But then again, we *dolls* always have been big on pride.”

“WE... YES MS. MADISON,” Kika was briefly overawed at the thought that she and Lilix Madison were of a kind—even if, in her old life, she had been nothing but a punk and an ingrate. She wasn’t sure what Madison meant by pride being a sin. There was nothing about that in the employee handbook. But if Madison said so, Kika was confident it was true. The warm buzz of her halo kept reminding her of that.

“God,” Madison scoffed, briefly tittering at the irony. “You really are just a brainfucked little angel puppet now, aren’t you?”

“YES MS. MADISON,” Kika replied, entirely happily.

“That’s so...” Again, the corpo licked her lips. “Hey, angel. Get down on your knees.”

“YES MS. MADISON.” Obedience was a fresh thrill. It sang through Kika as she lowered herself to the ground. She was being such a good employee.

“Oh yeah.” A distinct, breathy note entered Madison’s voice. “That’s amazing. I can’t believe someone you is kneeling to me, with that ridiculous, serene smile on your face. It’s like everything I ever dreamed it would be. Fuck! Hold on, I need to...”

Overcome, Lilix Madison hitched up her dress and fished out her cock.

Watching her rapidly pump her hand up and down along her shaft pierced Kika's veil of serenity. Her brow furrowed; her halo flickered. "MS. MADISON?" she ventured anxiously.

"Shut up," Madison barked, irritated. She was already breathing hard. It was clear that she was overcome. "I don't need you to talk for this. I just..." She reached out and touched her hand to Kika's halo, all caution forgotten. "Hey. How does this feel?" she asked, the question tinged with perversion.

"IT... FEELS..." Kika could not describe it. Madison's groping touched something inside her, soul-deep and sensitive. It made her breath hitch and her body twitch—but even that was not enough to make her forget her worries. "BUT MS. MADISON THIS ONE FEARS THAT IN THE HOLY TEXTS IT IS WRIT-"

"Oh, shut up already!" Madison moaned. One hand on her cock, the other working over Kika's halo. "Just be a good little angel and l-let me..."

"BUT MS. MADISON!" Disobeying Lilix Madison brought her something close to physical agony, but nonetheless, Kika felt moved to intervene. Madison was her messiah, but there was still a greater authority both of them were answerable to. It would not be right to let her fall from the true path "IN THE BOOK OF BABYLON PSALM FOURTEEN VERSE THIRTY-SEVEN IT IS WRIT THAT SEXUAL CONDUCT BETWEEN SUBORDINATE AND MANAGER WITHOUT WRIT FROM HR IS A GRAVE LIABILITY FOR-"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Madison grunted, displeased. "Are you that much of a goody two-shoes? You truly don't understand how all this really works?" When Kika replied with a dismayed stare, Madison reluctantly paused her masturbation so she could pick up her dataslate again. "I suppose an angel would be. No matter. I just need to feed you the training manual for our *executive productivity specialists*," she muttered, with a euphemistic wink. "The ones the public don't know about."

With a certain flourish, she tapped the screen one last time. An instant later, divine revelation fell upon Kika, and she sighed with the certain knowledge that all was right with the world.

"Better?" Madison prompted.

"YES MS. MADISON," Kika replied eagerly, composing her face into the manual-approved willing, submissive, open-mouthed smile. "THIS ONE APOLOGIZES FOR HER EARLIER STUPIDITY. YOUR SERVANT WOULD

BE HONORED TO SERVE UPON YOUR ALTAR AND PROMOTE SHAREHOLDER VALUE BY MINISTERING TO YOUR SEXUAL NEEDS AND ENHANCING YOUR PRODUCTIVITY.”

“Holy shit,” Madison cackled. “You know, you might be the only one of our girls who actually believes that.”

Kika bristled slightly at the suggestion of apostasy among the ranks of the faithful—but mostly, she just smiled. She could sense Madison’s pleasure, and that was more than enough.

“THIS ONE WOULD BE GRATEFUL TO OFFER THE MINISTRATIONS OF ITS MOUTH,” she suggested hopefully. The mere thought made her giddy.

“Yes,” Madison grunted impatiently, but her hand was already gripping her cock again, stroking it impatiently. “I mean... no, just talk.”

“TALK MS. MADISON?” Kika inquired.

Madison let out a moan, once again impatient for her climax. “P-praise me!”

Kika was happy to obey. Whatever service the messiah of capital demanded of her was the very definition of sacred. A fresh zeal washed over her and, with glowing, awestruck eyes, she prostrated herself on the ground beneath Lilix Madison’s cock and began to sing her praises.

“BLESSED ARE YOU DAUGHTER OF BABYLON! YOU OF THE THIRD QUARTER MIRACLE AND THE HOT, LONG THICK, FAT BITCHBREAKER COCK.” In the angel’s head, ancient liturgy, imprinted deep on the halo’s metal, blended with the Madison-approved dirty talk from the executive productivity manual and flowed out of her lips in a senseless mixture of sacred and profane. “THIS ONE CANNOT WAIT TO TASTE YOUR FAT VIRILE LOAD AND YOUR DEDICATION TO PROVIDING AN IMPROVED RETURN ON INVESTMENT YEAR-ON-YEAR.”

Madison cackled madly, but it was clear that the absurd drivel pouring from the angel’s lips did nothing but hasten her towards orgasm.

“YOU SHALL BE RAISED UP ON HIGH!” Kika simpered. “YOU SHALL REIGN OVER ALL FOUR CORNERS OF THE EARTH AS ITS SAVIOUR AND PRESIDENT AND ALL THE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD WILL KNOW YOU AS THE VERY IMAGE OF CAPITAL AND COME TO WORSHIP YOUR PERFECT GORGEOUS BEAUTIFUL BODY.”

Lilix Madison twitched, maniacal ecstasy writ large across her flushed, breathless, contorted face. Her hand was pumping a furious rhythm along her shaft. It was obvious that the power and the praise got her off harder than any physical stimulation could, especially coming from someone who had been slinging insults in her face mere minutes before—obvious to Kika above all, and in her new state of mind, she was more than happy to pander to it.

“ALL WILL KNOW YOUR INTELLIGENCE YOUR PRUDENCE YOUR MARKET APTITUDE ALL WILL KNOW OF THE DIVIDENDS AND INNOVATION AND GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT YOU BRING THE WHOLE WORLD WILL SING THY NAME!” Kika proclaimed, before her voice switched from a resounding, angelic boom to a wicked, sultry whisper. “AND EVEN THE WORTHLESS PUNK TRANNIES LIKE THIS ONE WHO ALWAYS ACTED LIKE WE WERE SO MUCH BETTER AND NOBLER THAN YOU SHALL BEG FOR A CHANCE TO LICK YOUR FEET AND KISS YOUR COCK.”

That did it. Madison’s eyes bulged, and she came with a huge, orgiastic howl. Her orgasm sent a few rosey sprays of thin, watery cum across Kika, mostly catching on her halo and hanging from it in long, drooling loops. The sudden, wet sensation stirred something within Kika: a strange, atavistic memory that belonged, perhaps, to the halo, rather than to her—not that there was still a distinction. Holy water on her brow. The sign of the cross. A welcome. A baptism. Something chaste and pure and wonderful.

With a smile, Kika cupped her hands and let it all collect into her palms. “THE SAVIOR’S MILK,” she murmured blissfully, as she drained it down her throat, taking care not to miss a drop.

It was just as she remembered. A crown of pearls. A blessing.

The first of many to come.

* * *

Reiv pressed themselves into the shadows at the entrance to the abandoned factory, keeping a careful eye on the roads and the skies. The corpo security sweeps hadn’t let up in the weeks since the mining action, and so there was nothing for the activist group to do but stay huddled in their safehouse until they could scatter. It was getting claustrophobic and tempers were fraying, but discipline had to be maintained: stay put, stay quiet, and don’t fall asleep on your watch. The last thing they needed was anyone besides Kika getting scooped up.

That's what they all assumed had happened, anyway. Nobody had seen or heard from her in a week.

At the sound of footsteps, Reiv's head turned. Probably just some vagrant, maybe a curious scrapper, but it never paid to be too careful. Once Reiv trained their eyes, they saw a figure emerging set stark against the gloom of night. At that distance, it could have been anyone—except for the fact that they were illuminated by a strange, glowing ring floating a few inches above their head.

“HAIL TO THEE REIV REJOICE FOR THOU SHALT SOON FIND FAVOR IN THE EYES OF THE BOARD.”

The voice—familiar, however distorted by unnaturally fanaticism—sent shivers down Reiv's spine. The familiar face, too—not that Reiv recognized it at first. Too much was new. The expensive, corpo-style suit, perfectly-tailored and complete with branded cuff links. The hair, pure white and slicked back. The perfect, porcelain-pale skin, blemished only by, atrociously, corporate logos tattooed on their hands.

“Kika?” Reiv ventured disbelievingly. “I-is that you?”

“IT IS. BUT I HAVE BORN AGAIN.”

Too late, Reiv heard the sirens and the drones. Too late, they thought to raise the alarm. Too late, they noticed the large case in Kika's hands, and the strange, choral humming that seemed to emanate from it. Even once they did, their fear kept them rooted helplessly to the spot. This was abominable. Beyond a nightmare. But as ever, their trusted friend noticed their fear, and hastened to reassure them, a beatific smile on her ruined, perfect face.

“BE NOT AFRAID.”

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